

The Wall

The Wall

Jean-Paul Sartre

Translated by Andrew Brown



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Introduction

According to Simone de Beauvoir, the young Sartre dreamt of being both Spinoza and Stendhal: simultaneously philosopher and artist, relentlessly systematic thinker and anecdotal observer, austere metaphysician and amorous adventurer. There is a sense in which, from his first novel *Nausea*, published in French in 1938, to the uncompleted tetralogy *The Roads to Freedom*, Sartre's fictional writings, not to mention his plays, his essays and his biographies (of Genet, Baudelaire and – another vast unfinished torso – Flaubert), do indeed examine a similar range of preoccupations to those tackled by his more discursive philosophical treatises (*Being and Nothingness*, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*). Those themes are well known: freedom; the alarming encounter between an unhoused and restless consciousness on the one hand and an uncannily inert world of objects on the other; the sense of anguish that results from this stand-off; extreme states of solitude and alienation; and the need (especially in the post-war writings) for commitment and some form of communal praxis. But there is also a sense in which the fictions, including these stories in the collection *The Wall*, which came out a year later than *Nausea*, stand by themselves. They can be illuminated by the philosophical terminology that Sartre developed in his more overtly argumentative works, but they can also ask to be read in a less directly Sartrean way, or even as already commenting on Sartre's evernascent philosophy, questioning it, maybe identifying weaknesses in it, testing its abstractions. Sartre was after all aware that even a concrete, practical, situation-bound philosophy such as existentialism was, *as philosophy*, necessarily prone to abstraction; his

stories set metaphysical generality against the specific, the local, the transitory. His narratives do not act as case studies designed to provide evidence for the validity of a philosophy, as is to some extent the case with the otherwise brilliant vignettes of *Being and Nothingness*, most famously the depiction of the café waiter whose bad faith consists in the way he allows his whole being to be exhausted by his social role as waiter, a role he camps up to the hilt. Rather, they constitute a much more open-ended exploration of certain limit situations faced by human beings at times of private and public crisis. True, these are stories that have designs on us – nothing that Sartre wrote was meant *just* for entertainment: there is a didactic pressure behind every line, and the prophetic fervour that produced Sartrean existentialism, with its attempt to *convert* us to a particular way of viewing the world, already imbues these short pieces with its dark glow. But the way we think about them is (as a highly individualist philosophy such as existentialism ought *also* to lead us to expect) a highly individual matter, one that relies on a certain freedom in the reader. Thus our view of the characters and situations in these stories can vary considerably each time we think about them. It may be mistaken to attempt to judge of the “authenticity” or otherwise of these fictional characters – a category mistake similar to that of trying to psychoanalyse Hamlet, or Oedipus – but it is difficult to avoid doing so.

The title story in the collection, ‘The Wall’, begins like a play by Beckett or a *pensée* by Pascal, or even like a particularly dramatic example of the *Geworfenheit* or “thrown-ness” and the *Sein-zum-Tode* or “being-towards-death” analysed by Heidegger, with whose early work Sartre had by this time acquired an at least cursory acquaintance: men shoved into a big room, blinded by the harsh light, to be told that they have been sentenced to death. We soon learn that its protagonist, Pablo Ibbieta, and his fellow prisoners are situated in a highly specific historical moment, the Spanish Civil War, and yet the narrative dwells less on political complexities

than on something more archetypal – the concentration of mind found, as Dr Johnson observed, in all those who know that they are to be executed the following morning. Archetypal, indeed, but evoked by Sartre with a keen eye for individual details: the cold, the sweat, the rumours of the bestial means of execution employed by the Falangists, the cool aloofness of the guards, the bureaucracy of the interrogations (scribble, scribble, scribble: so many death sentences). Even men who share a common fate can, in the few hours remaining to them, develop an acute dislike for one another. The one time the protagonist is forced to think about death is, almost by definition, the one time he can apparently do nothing to avoid it. There is a typically Sartrean mistrust of anyone (such as the Belgian doctor here) who seems to be on your side but in fact isn't. Sartre insisted on the chasm between even "good" bosses and their workers: imaginative sympathy – part of writing a fiction, after all – is just a first stage. Camus was later, in *L'Étranger*, to describe another man, solitary this time, awaiting execution in his cell: at the end of Camus's novel the hero evokes, with fierce lyricism, the sights and smells of the earth he is about to leave, the starlight on his face, the salty tang of night rising from the countryside, and for the first time in his life "opens up to the tender indifference of the world" and acknowledges its "fraternal" similarity to him. There is starlight in the cell of Sartre's hero Ibbieta too, and he briefly entertains memories of the Atlantic beaches and the Seville bars where he spent his youth, but there is much less lyricism, and no fraternizing between the world (whose objective meaning is simply "death") and the consciousness that stands over against it. And if there is a tang, it is that of sweat and urine, for concentration of mind leads to a loosening of bladders. 'The Wall' has a trick ending worthy of Maupassant, almost comical in its cynicism, but that is Sartre's point – all men are mortal, as the major premise in the schoolbook example of syllogistic reasoning has it, but everyone's

death is different, and death, to a consciousness that can always transcend any of its embodiments, seems not just like an arbitrary sentence, but something literally unimaginable, quite unnatural, an absurdity to which nobody can in good faith be reconciled.

‘The Bedroom’ begins in a different world, that of the Paris bourgeoisie and the cosseted existence of the neurasthenic Mme Darbédat, addicted to Turkish delight, a substance whose stickiness marks it out as belonging to the “viscous” aspects of existence (the clinging past, the lumpish, oozy body to which we are tied, the glutinous mucosity of relationships that have gone dead) that Sartre, the poet of slime, explored with such appalled fascination in *Being and Nothingness*. If the wall of the first story was, firstly, the wall against which the condemned men are probably going to be shot and, secondly, the wall of their prison cell (not to mention all the symbolic meanings, such as the wall between life and death), the wall here is that of *any* room, especially a bedroom: that in which Mme Darbédat takes comfortable shelter from the outside world and its demands, and that in which her son-in-law Pierre has hidden away to nurse his crazed visions. Sartre, who sometimes claimed that any act has as much (or as little) worth as any other, may here be suggesting an equation between the two types of reclusion, and yet there is something quite spectacularly haunting about Pierre’s hallucinations of “flying statues”, as if matter in its densest, most definitive form – the *in-itself* – could also whizz through the air with the volatility of consciousness or *for-itself*. In Sartre’s philosophy, all human acts – and even, as here, a withdrawal from action – are *chosen*: even madness is a choice. The reaction of Pierre’s wife Ève will be chosen too: whether to resist Pierre’s madness, or be lured into it. And yet here too *the wall* seems to make impossible what her freedom should make possible – for all the temptations of Pierre’s illness, and her desire to enter his state of mind and in a sense suffer his delusions with him, can she *really* “share” his visions any more

than the boss who claims to share the trials and tribulations of his workers, as in the last story, 'The Childhood of a Leader'? The end of the story, in a reprise of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, further raises the question of whether it would be better to kill the victim of a descent into madness rather than allow him to endure its extreme anguish: another choice for which there would seem, in Sartre's world, to be no generally acceptable criteria, just the torment of individual responsibility.

The hero of 'Herostratus' likes to look down on his fellow human beings, and it is sexual dominance that gives him the biggest kick: disdaining actual contact with another body, he prefers to take his pleasure by forcing a prostitute to parade naked before him at gunpoint. He calls his revolver, small, cool and sleek, "*the object*", as if it were the object par excellence: it can certainly objectify (by terrorizing them or killing them) other subjectivities and thereby place them at the disposal of the solitary, indeed solipsistic *for-itself* of Sartrean consciousness. The revolver is a much more reliable source of enjoyment than the penis, which is far too susceptible to the flabby unreliability of subjecthood, and prone to get gobbled up by voracious vaginas. All sorts of walls prevent any real human communication in this story: the wall of gender between men and women, the wall of lovelessness between the narrator and other human beings, but most of all, perhaps, the wall between the narrator and the "humanist" authors to whom he addresses the sour little screed that acts as a prefatory apology for the murders he is premeditating. In some ways the story seems to exist for this letter: the younger Sartre's hatred of "humanists", with their high-flown ideals, their oft-proclaimed and hypocritical "love of man" (in the abstract) and their flowery rhetoric, had already led him to create the (otherwise rather appealing) character of the "Autodidact" in *Nausea*, who spends his time in the local library of the grotty town of Bouville, reading the encyclopedia from A to Z in the hope of acquiring Universal

Knowledge, and taking his love of mankind so far as to fondle the bare knees of the schoolboys sitting next to him. In fact, Sartre's anti-humanism, at least in these early works, is less doctrinaire than visceral. A few years later he would give a popular lecture entitled 'Existentialism Is a Humanism' (the standard English translation calls it simply 'Existentialism and Humanism'), and his hostility to "human-ism" consisted mainly in pointing out its contradictions – abstract and universal philanthropy in theory, but complicity with an oppressive and exploitative social system in practice: love of mankind in general, but disdain for human life in all its concrete peculiarity, i.e. everything that Sartre found most bracing (men pissing themselves with fear, the seamier side of sex, dirty underpants). Humanism as a creed was for him never quite human enough. 'Herostratus', rather like 'The Wall', has something of a trick ending, but again, for Sartre, there is a certain trickery about *all* endings, which bestow a possibly false retrospective meaning on what has come before: no ending (except death, and even then...) is definitive, so long as the *for-itself* still exists to project itself forward and invent new meanings that transcend those it has already sloughed off.

'Intimacy' continues to explore the ever-fascinating terrain of *psychopathia sexualis*: husbands who can't (or, as Sartre would presumably say, won't) do it, and lovers who can, but leave a mess on the sheets. The sickly-sweet sensations of a bare leg encountering a snail-like trail of semen have rarely been described more brilliantly – Sartre, yet again, masterful in his oozy evocations of the slimier aspects of life. 'Intimacy', the story's title, is a negative word for Sartre: it implies nasty secrets hidden away, festering in bourgeois bedrooms or in the dark recesses of the psyche. He hated such notions, and his visceral disdain for, as it were, a visceral (or "digestive") psychology imbued his entire philosophy: consciousness does not absorb the world outside into itself; indeed nothing is ever *in* consciousness: everything – even

the self – is out there, in the world. So the self is not intimate even with itself. Still, the story seems more ambiguous than a mere assault on a philosophically erroneous view of subjectivity. Its basic situations (such as when Lulu locks Henri out on the balcony) border on bedroom farce. Sartre, after all, was always alert to the potentialities of “popular” genres and never averse to writing political melodrama, as here in ‘The Wall’ or in the later play *Les Mains sales*; he could also produce his own versions of *noir*, as in ‘Herostratus’, with its strange anticipatory similarity of tone to, say, *Taxi Driver*. We can apply Sartrean categories to the characters, pondering which of them is acting most in bad faith: but their opacity is not exhausted by such categories. The use of an interior monologue which at times becomes indistinct from the narrative suggests that Sartre has been reading Joyce, and Lulu, with her stream (or indeed steam) of consciousness, sounds like a Parisian Molly Bloom. Like Molly she is an adulteress; like Molly she is not entirely convinced about the merits of her lover, but doesn’t want to give him up entirely either. Rirette, who dispenses advice like a soubrette from Molière or Marivaux, gets left out and feels finally betrayed and alone. There is something strangely appealing about these characters (or is it just the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie weaving its pernicious spell?): maybe if there is an intimacy here (in a warmer sense than Sartre’s), it is that between Lulu and Henri, even though they are separated by the wall of sexual failure. Is Lulu’s final choice an authentic one, or an act of moral cowardice? Who is to judge?

The most substantial piece, almost a novella in its own right, is ‘The Childhood of a Leader’. ‘L’Enfance d’un chef’ is the French title: *chef* is “leader”, but also “boss”, and there are times when the latter might be a better translation. Lucien is clearly being trained up to follow in his father’s footsteps as a “captain of industry” (“captain” – is industry a form of warfare?). Although Sartre was not yet at this stage committed to the terminology of

Marxism, he was already alert to the phoney language used to perpetuate a cosy sense of togetherness between the classes of what was objectively a deeply divided society (see Lucien's father's paternalistic pomposities as he, so to speak, shows his son round the factory saying, "One day, my son, this will all be yours..."). Readers who know Sartre's superb autobiography *Words* will see all sorts of similarities between the young Sartre and Lucien: the well-heeled upbringing, the relationship with the mother, the fraught, tentative, exploratory relations with the world of objects and the alarm at the comparative evanescence, indeed nothingness of the self. But as the story progresses, we see the differences too. Sartre could easily have become another Lucien, but he chose not to: when faced with the historical crisis of the late 1930s, he jumped the other way. This is the most historically detailed of all the stories in *The Wall*: through the eyes of one single observer and participant, it seems to evoke the ideological polarizations, the growing unease and somnambulistic despair, the sense of doom and imminent apocalypse that paralysed the last years of the Third Republic, as they were filtered through to a young man of the time. How prescient Sartre was: already in 1939 he had here written the whole history of Vichy France with its motto "*Travail, Famille, Patrie*" – "Work, Family, Fatherland": all the values to which Lucien will eventually subscribe. But en route, Lucien is given many alternative potential trajectories: he is an intellectually alert, emotionally curious young man, wide open to experience, enjoying (at least to begin with) the vicissitudes of his inchoate identity as much as he is alarmed by them, not at all averse to broadening his horizons by succumbing to the blandishments of the somewhat Noël Coward-like Achille Bergère, in yet another scene of (comically) bad sex. The initials of the latter's name, and his liking for fashionable surrealist bric-a-brac, suggest that Sartre was here mocking André Breton – a nice touch, given Breton's notorious homophobia. The contortions of Sartre's own

views on homosexuality added some florid curlicues to the baroque psychology of *Being and Nothingness*: he took it as a given – realistically enough, considering his period – that homosexuality was something to hide, even from oneself. For a “homosexual” to deny being a homosexual was understandable but mendacious, but for him to claim that he *was* a homosexual was a way of allowing a mere label to exhaust his being, just like the café waiter who is happy to be a café waiter and nothing else besides – a form of bad faith. Sartre later tried to get away from this rather schematic view of identity politics. But then, the story holds up for our inspection many of the discourses by which in the 1930s people plotted their identities – surrealism, psychoanalysis, politics and even some of the types of language that would be important for Sartre himself, such as the jargon of existentialism, as when Lucien thinks of writing a *Treatise on Nothingness*, and characters bandy around the language of *désarroi* (emotional “disarray” or “despair”, not a million miles from Sartre’s own *angoisse* or anguish). And later on Lucien thinks, in ironic anticipation of Sartre’s philosophy of *engagement*, “I *must* make a commitment!”

But Lucien, who seems to share ninety per cent of Sartre’s make-up, soon starts to breathe in the miasma of anti-Semitism, and the novella turns into *A Portrait of the Fascist as a Young Man*. Again, how prescient Sartre was! He was writing before the Occupation, before the Jews were being rounded up in the Vél’ d’Hiv in Paris and put onto the trains heading east. Given the recrudescence of anti-Semitism today, this story has lost none of its timeliness. It contains a moment of almost unbearable poignancy: Lucien has already beaten up one Jew in the streets, and when he meets another, Weill, at a party, he refuses even to shake his hand. A little while later he feels the prickings of remorse, and in his imagination he sees again the wounded puzzlement in the eyes of Weill. (It is difficult for the reader at this point not to see, with the grim advantage of hindsight, the puzzlement in

more than six million pairs of eyes.) Surely he can go back and repair the situation ? A handshake: that's not very much. But no: "it was too late: his gesture was irreparable." His foreordained destiny seems clear: Action Française, marriage, a return to his roots in *la France profonde* far from the cosmopolitan corruptions of Paris, an identity as hard as a clenched fist, the self as statue. Even now, Sartre leaves the ending open: *probably* Lucien will become a collaborator, but we do not *know* that; only if he thinks that his gesture really is "irreparable" will it become so. For Sartre, at every minute you are free to change. Lucien, despite the tug of the barbaric reactionary forces that increasingly hold him in their thrall, despite having turned into a racist thug before our eyes, can still jump the other way, moustache or no moustache. But he will doubtless continue to wall himself in, shut himself off from the Other and affirm the prison house of solid bourgeois values, respectability and order, clean, hard power, ethnic purity and the essential self at home in its essential *patrie*: the values that, as Sartre could already sense, were to lead, so very freely, to hell.

– Andrew Brown

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*To Olga Kosakiewicz**

WE WERE SHOVED into a big white room and my eyes started to blink because the bright light hurt them. Then I saw a table and, behind the table, four men, civilians, looking through some papers. The other prisoners had been pushed together at the far end and we had to cross the whole room to join them. There were several I knew and others who must have been foreigners. The two in front of me were blond, with round heads; they looked just like each other – Frenchmen, I suppose. The smaller of the two kept hitching up his trousers, nervously.

It lasted almost three hours; I was worn out and my head was empty; but the room was well heated and I found it rather pleasant: for the past twenty-four hours we hadn't stopped shivering. The guards brought the prisoners up to the table one after the other. The four guys then asked them for their names and professions. Mostly, that was as far as they went – though sometimes they'd pop the odd question: "Did you take part in sabotaging the munitions?" or "Where were you on the morning of the 9th and what were you doing?" They didn't listen to the replies or at least they didn't seem to; they'd sit for a while in silence gazing straight ahead of them, and then they'd begin to write. They asked Tom if it was true he'd served in the International Brigade: Tom could hardly deny it, as they'd found the papers in his jacket. They didn't ask Juan anything, but after he'd told them his name they wrote for a long time.

“It’s my brother José who’s an anarchist,” said Juan. “You know he isn’t here any more. *I* don’t belong to any political party, I’ve never got involved in politics.”

They didn’t reply. Juan continued:

“I haven’t done anything. I don’t want to pay the price for others.”

His lips were trembling. A guard told him to shut up and took him away. It was my turn.

“You’re Pablo Ibbieta?”

“Yes.”

The guy looked at his papers and asked me:

“Where’s Ramón Gris?”

“I don’t know.”

“You hid him in your house from the 6th to the 19th.”

“No.”

They carried on writing for a while and the guards took me out. In the corridor, Tom and Juan were waiting between two guards. We set off.

Tom asked one of the guards, “Well?”

“Well what?” said the guard.

“Were we being questioned or sentenced?”

“Sentenced,” said the guard.

“And? What are they going to do with us?”

The guard drily replied, “The sentences will be communicated to you in your cells.”

In fact, what they were using as our cells were the hospital cellars. It was dreadfully cold there because of the draughts. We’d shivered all night long, and in daytime things weren’t much better. I’d spent the five previous days in a dungeon in the archbishop’s palace, a kind of oubliette that must have dated back to the Middle Ages: since there were a lot of prisoners and not very much room, the prisoners were locked up just anywhere. I didn’t miss my dungeon: I hadn’t suffered from the cold there, but I’d been all by

myself; after a while it gets on your nerves. In the cellar, at least, I had company. Juan wasn't very talkative; he was scared, and also he was too young to have anything much to say. But Tom was a smooth talker and he could speak Spanish very well.

In the cellar there was a bench and four straw mattresses. When they'd brought us back here, we sat down and waited in silence. After a while, Tom said, "We're screwed."

"I guess so," I said, "but I don't think they'll do anything to the kid."

"They haven't got a thing against him," said Tom. "He's the brother of a militant, that's all."

I looked at Juan: he didn't seem to grasp what we were saying. Tom continued, "You know what they do at Saragossa? They make the men lie on the road and they run them over in lorries. A Moroccan deserter told us that. They say it's so they can save on ammunition."

"But they don't save on petrol," I said.

I was annoyed with Tom: he shouldn't have said that.

"There are officers who saunter along the road," he continued, "keeping an eye on it all, hands in pockets, smoking cigarettes. You think they'd finish the men off. Not bloody likely. They let them howl. Sometimes for an hour. The Moroccan said that the first time it almost made him throw up."

"I don't think they do that here," I said. "Unless they really are running short of ammunition."

Daylight came in through four cellar windows and a round opening that had been cut into the ceiling, on the left, looking out at the sky. It was through this round hole, usually closed by a trapdoor, that they unloaded coal into the cellar. Just below the hole there was a big heap of coal dust; it had been put there to heat the hospital, but as soon as the war started, the patients were evacuated and the coal was still there, unused; sometimes it even got rained on, since they'd forgotten to close the trapdoor.

Tom started to shiver.

“Fucking hell, I’m shivering,” he said. “Here we go again.”

He got up and started doing exercises. Each time he stretched out his arms, his shirt opened and revealed his white, hairy chest. He lay on his back, lifted his legs in the air and started doing the scissors: I could see his fat bum shaking. Tom was tough, but a bit on the podgy side. I reflected that rifle bullets, or the points of bayonets, would soon be sinking into that mass of soft flesh as if it were a slab of butter. This thought affected me in a different way than if he’d been skinny.

I wasn’t exactly cold, but I’d lost all sensation in my arms and shoulders. From time to time I had the impression that something was missing, and I started looking all round me for my jacket, only to remember all of a sudden that they hadn’t given me a jacket. It was a real pain. They’d taken our clothes off us to give them to their soldiers, and they’d just left us with our shirts – and those canvas trousers that hospital patients wear in the heat of midsummer. After a while, Tom stood up, came over and sat down next to me, breathing heavily.

“Feeling warmer?”

“No, I bloody well am not. But I’m out of breath.”

At around eight o’clock in the evening, a major came in with two Falangists.* He had a sheet of paper in his hand. He asked the guard, “Those three – what are their names?”

“Steinbock, Ibbieta and Mirbal,” said the guard.

The major put on his glasses and looked at his list.

“Steinbock... Steinbock... Got it. You’ve been sentenced to death. You’ll be shot tomorrow morning.”

He looked further down the list.

“The two others as well,” he said.

“That can’t be possible,” said Juan. “Not me.”

The major looked at him in astonishment.

“What’s your name?”

“Juan Mirbal,” he replied.

“Well, your name’s on the list,” said the major. “You’ve been sentenced.”

“But I haven’t done anything,” said Juan.

The major shrugged and turned towards Tom and me.

“Are you Basques?”

“Nobody’s a Basque.”

He looked irritated.

“I was told there were three Basques. I don’t want to waste my time chasing after them. So you won’t be wanting a priest, of course?”

We didn’t even reply. He said, “A Belgian doctor will come along shortly. He’s authorized to spend the night with you.”

He saluted and left.

“What was I telling you,” said Tom. “We’re stuffed.”

“Yes,” I said, “it’s rotten bad luck for the youngster.”

I said that out of a sense of fairness, but I didn’t actually like the youngster. His face was too delicate, and fear and suffering had disfigured it, contorting all his features. Three days before he’d been a kid, a bit on the sappy side – which can be attractive enough; but right now he looked like an ageing queen and I reflected that he’d never get his youthful looks back, not even if they let him go. It would have been nice to have had a scrap of pity to show him, but pity disgusts me, and in fact he turned my stomach. He’d stopped talking, but he’d turned grey; his face and hands were grey. He sat down and stared round-eyed at the ground. Tom was a kindly soul: he tried to take him by the arm, but the youngster yanked it away, pulling a face.

“Just leave him,” I muttered. “You can see he’s going to start snivelling.”

Tom reluctantly obeyed; he would like to have comforted the youngster; it would have given him something to do and he wouldn’t have been tempted to think about himself. But it really

bugged me; I'd never thought about death because I'd never had any reason to do so, but now I did have a reason, and there was nothing else to do but think about it.

Tom began to talk.

"You bumped anyone off then?" he asked me.

I didn't reply. He started to tell me that he'd got rid of six since the beginning of August; he didn't realize the situation he was in and it was obvious to me that he didn't *want* to realize it. I still didn't fully realize it myself, I wondered if it hurt a lot, I thought about the bullets, I imagined the hail of bullets burning its way through my body. All this was quite beside the real question, but I was calm: we had all night long to understand. After a while Tom stopped talking and I took a sidelong glance at him; I saw that he'd gone grey too, and looked thoroughly miserable, and I said to myself, "Here we go." It was almost night, a dim light filtered through the cellar windows and the heap of coal and made a big patch under the sky; through the hole in the ceiling I could already see a star: the night would be pure and icy.

The door opened and two guards came in. They were followed by a man with blond hair, wearing a Belgian uniform. He saluted.

"I am the doctor," he said. "I am authorized to assist you in these painful circumstances."

He had a pleasant, distinguished voice. I asked him, "What are you here for?"

"I am at your disposal. I'll do all I can to make these few hours less difficult for you."

"But why've you come here to us? There are other guys out there, the hospital's full of them."

"They sent me here," he said vaguely. "Ah, you'd like a smoke, I bet?" he added hastily. "I've got some cigarettes – cigars even."

He offered us some English cigarettes and some puros, but we said no. I looked him in the eyes and he seemed embarrassed. I told him, "You're not here out of compassion. Anyway, I know

you. I saw you with the fascists out in the barrack square, the day I was arrested.”

I was about to continue, but suddenly something happened that surprised me: all at once, I completely lost interest in the presence of this doctor. Usually, when I'm on to a man, I don't let go. And yet, any desire to talk left me; I shrugged and looked away. A bit later, I looked up: he was observing me with a curious expression. The guards had sat down on a straw mattress. Pedro, the tall skinny one, was twiddling his thumbs, while the other gave his head a shake from time to time, so he wouldn't drop off to sleep.

“Would you like a bit of light?” Pedro suddenly asked the doctor. The latter nodded: I think he had about as much brains as a log of wood, but he probably wasn't the nasty sort. Looking at his big cold blue eyes, it struck me that his one big failing was a lack of imagination. Pedro went out and returned with a petrol lamp that he placed on the corner of the bench. It didn't give off much light, but it was better than nothing: the night before, they'd left us in total darkness. I gazed for quite a while at the circle of light the lamp shed on the ceiling. I was fascinated. And then, all of a sudden, I woke up, the circle of light vanished and I felt crushed beneath a huge weight. It wasn't the thought of death, nor was it fear: it was something anonymous. My cheekbones were burning and my skull hurt.

I shook myself and gazed at my two companions. Tom had buried his head in his hands, and I could only see the thick white nape of his neck. Young Juan was far and away the worst off; his mouth was hanging open and his nostrils were quivering. The doctor went over to him and placed his hand on his shoulder as if to buck him up: but his eyes stayed just as cold. Then I saw the Belgian's hand slide surreptitiously along Juan's arm down to the wrist. Juan didn't react and remained quite indifferent. The Belgian took his wrist between three fingers, with an absent-minded air, and at the same time he took a step backwards and stood so his

back was turned to me. But I leant back and saw him take out his watch and look at it for a moment without letting go of the youngster's wrist. After a while he let the inert hand drop and went to lean with his back to the wall; then, as if he had suddenly remembered something important that he needed to note down there and then, he pulled a notebook out of his pocket and jotted down a few lines. "Bastard," I thought angrily, "he'd better not come feeling *my* pulse – I'll punch his ugly mug in for him."

He didn't come over, but I sensed him staring at me. I looked up and stared back. He asked me, in an impersonal tone of voice, "Don't you think it's freezing in here?"

He looked cold; he'd turned purple.

"I'm not cold," I replied.

He continued to fix me with a hard stare. Suddenly I realized why, and brought my hands up to my face: I was drenched in sweat. In this cellar, in the middle of winter, despite all the draughts, I was sweating. I ran my fingers through my hair, which was matted by the sweat; at the same time, I noticed that my shirt was damp and sticking to my skin: sweat had been streaming down me for at least an hour and I hadn't felt a thing. But it hadn't escaped the attention of that swine of a Belgian; he'd seen the drops rolling down my cheeks and he'd thought, "That's the expression of an almost pathological state of terror," and he'd felt how normal he was, and proud of it, since he felt the cold. I was tempted to get up and go and smash his face in, but no sooner had I started to shake my fist than my shame and my anger evaporated; I dropped back onto the bench, feeling quite indifferent.

I contented myself with massaging my neck with my handkerchief as, now, I could feel the sweat dropping off my hair down the back of my neck, and this was rather unpleasant. In any case I soon stopped massaging my neck; it didn't have any effect: my handkerchief was already wringing wet and I was still sweating. I

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