

I DON'T KNOW what I'm here for, nor how I arrived. In a vehicle of some sort, I think, a van no doubt. Yet it could have been a car, who knows, even a sidecar. It could be that someone led me here on foot, I don't know. It could even be that I was carried here on horseback. But even here, where all seems feasible, instinct tells me not. I think I'd have remembered it, not with contentment, to be sure, for I'm no horse lover, but it would have stuck in the mind. Whatever, here I am, and it doesn't look like I'm here for the short haul.

Here. You couldn't, hand on heart, call it a room. More of a cell than a room. More of a cellar than a cell. But there's no wine, that should be obvious, at least not now. Better call it a cell then. Dimensions. It's difficult to tell in this blue-dark. Let's see. *See!* If I hold this old back of mine to the wall, in the corner, then stride for-

wards, I can take 1...2...3...*oof!*... three clear strides before I hit the other wall, hands outstretched. If I then rotate, don't rush, about 45° clockwise – no, 90° – and move backwards, a little bit, till this old back of mine leans once more on the cold wall, the other wall, or one of the other walls, then do the same manoeuvre once more, stride forward, hands outstretched, let's see...1...2...3...*oofff!*... same as before, more or less. The cellar then, or rather cell, is three strides and a bit in all directions. 10 ft x 10 ft, more or less.

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The warder has been in. Told me to end the sorties around the cell. Nice to know someone's on watch. He has a little hole he can observe the cell from, and he's been told to check on me. Check I don't move. I asked him what was so bad about a brief walk round the cell, it's not as if I was about to make a run for it. Orders, he said. I didn't answer back. I sat down on the bed. Knees at 90°, elbows on knees, head between hands. I've been sat like this for some time now. Daren't move.

All of a sudden it struck me how odd it was that the warder could see me in here *at all* when he observed me from his little hole. I can't even see the wall on the other side of the cell, and I must be used to the dark. It's rare, so it is, dedication like that. Years of hard work, then in the end one can detect the merest twitch

in total and absolute darkness. You'd think it would be easier to switch on a torch, but. Ours to reason it out. Is it to economise? Economise, black out the skies. Or could it be, on the other hand, that he has one of those infra-red devices? It's the hi-tech era, after all. He releases the catch over his little hole, sees a human-like blob of red strut about the room, arms outstretched, as it makes a beeline for the solid stone wall. To do him credit, he could have felt inclined to do it for humanitarian reasons alone. Concern for the health of the inmate. After all, I wasn't hit, but told to end the sorties around the cell, that's all. Polite about it too. Whatever, looks like these sorties are out the window from now on. Have to devise some other amusements. Unless I can find a trick to tell when I'm watched. When not watched.

Where was I? That's it. Here for more than the *short haul*. But here where? No idea. No idea, either, for what reason I was taken here in the first instance. One minute I was free, the next? *Blam!* World out at the flick of a switch. After a while one starts to wonder what it's all about. After the initial shock. I was furnished with several accounts, or rather met with various accusations, which amounts to the same in the end, but none of it made much sense. I was taken down various dark and sinuous corridors into a room where a little man sat behind a wide table with an enormous book. He was flanked with two others, fatter and musclier than him. One of them he addressed as the Colonel, the other as

the Lieutenant. It was this lot who furnished the accounts, made the accusations. The first was that I had crossed the border without authorisation. When I asked them which border the Lieutenant hit me across the face. I didn't ask a second time. Then the Colonel tied me to the chair, arms twisted into a knot round the back, and blindfolded me. The Colonel made further accusations, that I was a terrorist, a mole, a news columnist. I denied it all, as a matter of course. Besides, the Colonel was mistaken. One of them shouted at me – "*Whore! Slut!*" he shouted, his lexicon was rather limited – then another of them hit me across the face once more, but not as hard as on the first occasion, or so it seemed to me at the time. It could be that I was now so used to it all I didn't notice so much. I don't know. What's that maxim? Pain lessens with time? No, but that sort of idea. Pain lessens strain? No, but don't fret. Back on to that later, lock it in the store for when it rains. I know what I mean. Truth is there isn't a lot of rain to be seen here, nor a lot of sun either, in fact none whatsoever. Just a constant moisture in the air, and the smell of mould.

Later the Colonel came in with a document, and handed me a biro. Your confession, he said. I didn't read it. I couldn't. I still had the blindfold on. And even if I hadn't I don't think I would have read it. Whatever it said I was determined not to add a name to it. When I told them so the Colonel acted with calm. He could wait. It was academic, to tell the truth, he added. But I

was threatened with torture if I continued to resist. If it was called for, the Lieutenant added, he could make me curse the hour I was born. He didn't indicate how. Just left it at that. For me to chew on, I think. Curse the hour I was born. That's how he couched it. Not what I'd call a clear statement of intent. Then I was led back here.

Time here moves in slow motion. There is little to see, no one to talk to, and nowhere to take off to. If I could knuckle down to some translation it would be the ideal time. But then I'd need a desk, some means to illuminate the cell, smokes, some food, a bottle of nice wine. What would I choose, now? A nice Chablis, that would do for a start. Don't want a wine that's too full-bodied. One to work with. Back at home, in the sun, I'm forever after the time to buckle down to some serious work, and all too often it's a battle I don't win, while here I have all the time in the world. I'd need a text too, of course. To translate. Oh, and some dictionaries, of course. Wouldn't do much without those. That manual for sailors I translated once. Such odd words! Some of them I'd never heard of before. What was it? The scutters. Is that it? No, that's from that round about drunken sailors. The one we used to chant in the car, on the road to Cornwall over the school vacation.

*Put im in the scutters with a hose full on im
Put im in the scutters with a hose full on im
Put im in the scutters with a hose full on im
Earlie in the morrrn-in'!*

Of course, I could translate the dimensions of the room. Into French, for instance. *Trois mètres carrés*. Not hard. What I need is some verse. A difficult verse. One from Yeats, for instance. William Butler. But I don't remember much but the sentimental ones, those he'd read on the radio in that loud, melodic voice of his.

*I will arise and row now
And roooooow to Innisfreeee
And a small cabin builld there
Of dum-de-dum and wattle maaaade*

Can't even remember sufficient to make it worthwhile. And it wasn't "row there" I don't think. Print is such a Fascist at times. It drives out all memories till the brain's a *tabula rasa*. Even if mine wasn't all that fantastic in the first instance. I don't think the silence does much for it either. The darkness. Kind of smothers the mind. Like amnesia at times. There was that bit about the bee loud shade too, was that it? How did that run? Yes. *And live alooone in the bee loud shade*. Nice line that.

The time. From dawn to dusk. When the sun traverses the earth. Helios's chariot. It moves in slow motion. I must have said that before. Yet it is marked with a number of distinct events, nonetheless. The first event is at dawn, if we start with the dawn, which we need not do, but somehow it seems natural, even here,

where nature has otherwise been abandoned. At dawn, then, the first event is when the coffee comes round. Not that the thin and flavourless brew that's dished out here much resembles what would be called coffee in the outside world. *Coffee. Coffee.* Doesn't fit somehow. The usual words don't work here, let's face it. But I have to make use of them all the same. It's all I have. The warder comes to a halt in front of the door and hammers on it with a metal cane. The noise is ferocious. *Krrraannnn! Krrraannnn!* This is the moment for me to fetch the mess tin, which is attached to a chain on the end of the bed. The man, for from the sound of his voice I think he must be a man, then uses a little hatch in the bottom of the door. I hear it click back, or slide back, one of the two, it doesn't much matter which. Soon as I can I make a beeline towards it and shove the tin out the other side of the hole. If I can find it. The hole, that is. There's a little shelf that sticks out on this side, near the base of the door, which facilitates this. I can feel it with an outstretched foot in the dark and once I've found it it's a doddle to locate the hole. Yet I can't dawdle. If I do he hammers on the door once more, and shouts at me. *Move it woman! Move that fat arse over here now!* That's what he shouts. Quite affectionate, I think. Once I've located the hole I shove the mess tin out and he fills it with coffee. The mess tin, not the hole. Then he sets it back on the shelf, from where I can retrieve it with ease. I think he must visit other cells before mine, for when the coffee reaches me it's more often than not cold. Yet

of course, it could be deliberate. Just to show me who's boss. That wouldn't be unlike them. Whatever, I tend to drink it at once, for it fills the hole, the hole in the stomach, and it lines the aforementioned for the flavourless cooked oats which follow, cold, on its heels. Besides, if I didn't drink it I wouldn't have a vessel to stick the oat concoction in. For that's what's odd about the breakfast routine here, if I can call it a breakfast. Or a routine. That there isn't one vessel for the coffee, and another for the oats, but one vessel for both. So that no sooner have I located the hatch, shoved the mess tin in, had it filled with coffee, retrieved it and consumed it, the coffee not the mess tin, than I have to start the whole business over from the start. So as to have the mess tin filled with oats. And then when it reaches me at last, for the second time, the oats are stone cold. Perchance I've said that before. Taste of stale coffee too.

Then that's it till noon, when the broth ration comes round and is distributed in much the same fashion. The broth is most often lettuce and water, on the thin side, and like the coffee, when it reaches me it is more or less cold. Most often, it comes with a hunk of stale and mildewed bread. After this follow the interminable hours of the afternoon, tea, which most often consists of some kind of stew, and then the hours of dusk, with bed to follow. The hours between dawn and dusk are thus broken into two halves, that's how I see it at least, the end of the first half marked with the arrival

of the broth. So far I can't tell which half is the most difficult to endure. Both have their bad and not so bad bits. The first half, which starts at dawn, finds me ravenous at the outset, but at least it has a clear and useful end. Dusk comes in on a relieved stomach, if not a full one, but its end is indistinct and therefore more remote.

Just started to scratch the old nose. Pick it, to call a shovel a shovel. It's difficult to do otherwise without a handkerchief at hand. I could blow it on a loose corner of these trousers, of course, but then I'd have to bend over, double in two more or less, and I could become stuck like that. Whatever, I started to scratch it, I know what I mean, and I was shocked to find how coarse the skin had become, round the corneal area above all, if that's the correct word. You could well wonder what made me feel round the corneal area, if I was minded to scratch the nose. So do I, now I mention it, but I was. There it is. Truth is odder than fiction, as it's often remarked. Well, I noticed that the skin had started to become rather coarse, like sandstone. Covered in hairs too, as if, like a man, I'd started to cultivate facial hair after all these barren decades. I don't think I'd be the first, however. What was the name of that Dutch noblewoman forced to tie the matrimonial knot when she had no desire to do so who willed herself to cultivate a beard? Power of the will. I could do with some of that. What should I cultivate? Mole-hands, to burrow out of the cell, burrow a tunnel

under the earth then come out in the middle of a deserted field, miles from here. What was her name? Catherine? Isabella? Don't fret, I can't remember. I'd started to cultivate facial hair, like a man, that's what I'd started to think, when all of a sudden it occurred to me how daft I was. I still had the blindfold on. With both hands I eased it off, slow as I could, over the ears, over the nose, down over the chin, till it rested, loose, about the neck, like a scarf, or a noose. I felt the tired skin round the cornea with nervous hands. It was warm, smooth but for a few wrinkles, hairless.

Without the blindfold the room is still dark, but I can see it much better, nonetheless. What little illumination there is seems to come from a small and distant window fixed in the roof. It is black with filth, or soot, or ink, so that the illumination that infiltrates it has a dull, used, second-hand look about it. Yet it is sufficient for me to be able to make out a small sink, a foldable table without a chair, and a lone bucket that sits in the corner. The floor is hard and coarse, concrete I think, but it seems to have been laid in an uneven and hurried manner. It is cold and dank underfoot, fissured here and there with minute cracks, which start near the centre, then broaden and increase in size on their course towards one or other of the four walls, where these cracks come to a sudden halt. Some of the cracks, here, are of sufficient breadth to admit the entrance of a mouse, or a rat.

Peradventure it's in order to ward off such visitors that some of the cracks, where these meet the wall, have been stuffed with bits of old broadsheets, cloth, or hessian sacks. Yet it could also be to block off the entrance of air currents. Who shoved these materials into the cracks in the first instance, I wonder? If it was the warders, wouldn't it have been easier to have more concrete smoothed in? Would that not be at once more effective and more durable? Indeed, the overall unevenness of the concrete on the floor would lead one to think that this had been done before, several times even, and on cracks much wider than those now in evidence. Yet of course, one can't rule out the likelihood that their routine is to stuff the smaller cracks with old broadsheets, or bits of cloth, or hessian sacks, or whatever else is at hand, as a kind of interim measure, and then not until these become so broad as to render this means of renovation ineffective, to come back with the concrete. Which, after all, could have hidden costs and take a lot of time too.

Yet it could be that economics is not the sole factor at work here. It could even be that their aims are in some manner served via the use of these more makeshift means. To be sure, it adds to the sleaziness and overall sense of wretchedness. But then so would the rats, which in all likelihood these bits of old broadsheets, cloth and hessian sacks are there to ward off in the first instance.

Yet who can tell if the old broadsheets, cloth and hessian sacks were not left there with the intent to instil in the mind of the detainee, or in other minds, a *fear* of rats? For without a shadow of a doubt, it was when I saw these items, the old broadsheets, the cloth, the hessian sacks, that rats, or the idea of rats, first came to mind. For sure, I haven't seen or heard a sole rodent as it is. Devious. Well, if that's the case, then so be it. These arseholes can stuff their dumb tricks. And shove them into the inner recesses of their arses for all I care.

Yet what if it were a former inmate who for some reason or other had deemed it wise to stuff these holes with all this rubbish? For the rats, or for some other reason. Besides, it's hard to see how such rubbish would ward off rats, isn't it? Yet that wouldn't stand in the road of someone who wanted to have a bash. Would it? Where on earth would someone find the stuff in the first instance? To be sure, a fair amount of resourcefulness would be needed to find such stuff here. To find whatever kind of stuff here.

I've made a full search. There are no old broadsheets, cloth, or hessian sacks to be found. Save those hitherto stuffed in the cracks, of course. Which rules out the inmate theorem. Unless there were once old broadsheets and so on in the cell, and the inmate used it all in their endeavours. And it could be, with such limited resources, that the inmate felt inclined to stuff different cracks at different times. Such as for fluctuation of

air currents due to alternations in exterior wind direction. When due south all old broadsheets, cloth, and hessian sacks to the north wall. When due north all old broadsheets, cloth, and hessian sacks to the south wall. When due east all old broadsheets, cloth, and hessian sacks to the west wall. When due west all old broadsheets, cloth, and hessian sacks to the east wall. And so on for north-west, south-east, north-east, and south-west. Not to mention north-northeast, east-northeast, east-southeast, south-southeast and the other half-winds.

It's not difficult to become carried off on a train of ideas like this in here. Pointless ideas soon breed in one's mind till one can't see the wood for the trees. If I've learnt one fact in this hole it is this. That multifariousness is not the salt but the actual stuff of life. If the reach of our minds is confined all of a sudden, we are often inclined to take the few items which offer themselves and ask a whole list of absurdities about them. So we set in train a ridiculous flow of combinations and associations in our minds, the duration and abstruseness of which soon obscure their humble foundation. I drove all ideas of old broadsheets, cloth, hessian sacks and air currents from the mind. Then I laid down on the bed, stuck the blindfold back on. If I hadn't, the warder, without doubt, would have done the same himself. Sooner or later.

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Krrraannnn! Krrraannnn! That's the warder. It must be teatime. *Krrraannnn!* Quick as I can I crawl over to the door, before he starts to shout at me. Locate the shelf. Then the hole. Piece of cake, like I said. I shove the mess tin in. Then back it comes. Thin, tasteless stew, as usual. I bolt it down, as usual. Too much salt, for once. But no matter. A churl's feast is better than none at all.

I lie back in the dark, lids closed, hands at sides, limbs horizontal. Think about the situation. What it is. What the hazards are. How to better it. I know what these criminals are about. Or at least I think I do. I wasn't born last week. All their tricks are calculated to undermine one's free will. That's how I see it, as I lie back in the dark. Undermine one's free will. Get me to confess to some nonsense or other. That's what it's all about. I'm sure of it. 100%. Otherwise the bastards wouldn't do this to me. If there wasn't some hidden reason behind it all, let's face it, the Colonel could as well find me a room at the Ritz, or whatever else their nearest alternative is called, if there is one, the Rütz, the Rötz, the Rätz, whatever. I'd settle for a lot less, to be honest. A little illumination would be nice, to be sure, to fend off the darkness. And some music to ward off the silence, so as to remain in the land of the sane. Beethoven's trios, for instance. Deaf Beethoven. That's how he survived it all. Music. Could do it for me as well. And some modern stuff too, to alleviate the dullness. Some American music, for instance, like The Duke,

Thelonious Monk, those men, that would boost the morale a bit. As it is, all I have are these words. I daren't even voice them out loud, the warder would be in like a shot, and before I could mouth off a sentence he'd tie the muzzle back on. No. Don't want to risk that business all over. Mind, the warder could think I'd lost it in the end, think I was as mad as a hatter, and leave me to it. She's off on one this time, in there, he'd think, lost her marbles. First token of submission. Won't let them have the satisfaction. What is that maxim? Give him an inch and he'll take a mile. Well, he won't have even one of his inches out of me, that's for certain. Pinch an inch, that's another one, another remembrance. Where did I hear that? Pinch it from who? Or is it whom? Can't remember. Never mind. The words. These words. All I have now, and I can't even voice them out loud. Could be it's better like that, mine and mine alone. All mine. Freedom of the mind. Just hold them inside, let them run across the mind like water.

I'll soon run out of items to describe if I'm not careful. Still have the bed. The sink. Save them till later. Unless I'm moved to another cellar, another cell? That would be fun. Then I could run over it all for a second time. Dimensions, contents, materials, deliberations. Multifariousness. I need to introduce some multifariousness into life here. Some new hobbies. How did that character in Tolstoi do it? In that late tale about confinement. What was it called? He went on walks, walks of the mind, that was it. Made inventories of all he

knew. You never know, I could have a bash too, couldn't I? Didn't he invent his own dialects too? I could do the same. Invent a new vernacular. Pack code, bonds the members. That's what the social scientists reckon, isn't it? But then there's but the one of me. Never mind, I'll have to be the whole band of sisters, I think, if it comes to that, a one-sister band. What shall I start with? What would be best, now? Writers. A list of writers. A-Z. To set on the invented bookshelf. Next to the table. Beside the wall. Do it!

Aristotle

Balzac

Chekov

Dostoievski

But which one?

House of the Dead

Eliot

Faulkner

Gaskell

No, must be able to think
of someone better. I know.

Goethe

Hawthorne

Ionesco

James

Over nineteen stone he was.
Sizeable, like his novels.

Kafka

Lear

Nietzsche

Ovid

Plutarch

Quevedo