Pray for Brother Alexander

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“It is of no importance,” I tell him.

He is 22 years old. We are both imprisoned in a cell for two people, with a shower and the water closet under the shower. When he takes a shower in the morning, I can see how well built he is, with long muscles. Sometimes, when the guard does not watch through the peephole in the door, my young man jumps and touches the ceiling. He used to be in the national volleyball team. They played in East Berlin, and a girl asked him if he wanted to see the other Berlin. He did not like it so much in the West because the authorities bored him with various interrogations. When he came back to East Berlin, he was well received at the beginning. Then, as he was returning back home… Now we are both under investigation.

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“It is of no importance,” I tell him.

“For you, perhaps,” he bursts out. “You are over 50. But for me it is! You see that ‘this thing’ puts you in prison. And then you say that it is of no importance?”

“It is very serious, but of no importance.”

“Look, you kind of bore me, sir! According to you…”

The door’s latch is moving.

“Take this and come,” the guard tells me while entering.

He gives me opaque glasses, made out of metal; we must put them on any time we come out of the cell. The bloke takes you by the arm and, at times, seeing that you wobble, makes fun of
you: “Careful, don’t step into water.” You hesitate to put your foot down, and he laughs. But what a gentle thing to walk like that, *guided* in the unknown! It is like in a ritual of initiation or like in a dream...

I return after two hours. The guard takes off my opaque glasses and closes the door loudly, locking it up. For a moment, I remain confused in the middle of the cell. I feel my cheeks slightly swollen, and my young man must have seen something as well, since he asks me, “They have beaten you, haven’t they?”

“Yes,” I finally consent after a hesitation, “but…”

“But it is of no importance, I know,” he completes the sentence. “Nevertheless, why did they beat you?”

“That’s what I wanted to say: they beat me without a reason.”

“How so, without a reason? That’s what they do?”

My young man is worried. The idea of being hit without being able to react probably offended his pride of a sportsman. Or perhaps he would react… I have to better explain to him the non-sense of everything that happens in our situation.

“I was beaten because I did not want to take a cigarette.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“But I assure you it was because of this. The guy who was interrogating me started by asking to whom I gave a book that I had received from abroad. I replied that the work had nothing problematic for the regime. ‘Scoundrel,’ he said, ‘you will see how things are with this book. Now tell me to whom you gave it.’ ‘I am not obligated to tell you,’ I said, ‘since this cannot be a criminal charge.’”

The young man interrupted my story: “This is the moment when he hit you.”

“No,” I answer, “the guy was more skillful. He took from his pocket the list with the names of the five or six friends who really had the book in their hands (the informant I feared had done his work fairly well). Then all of a sudden I had the idea that I could save my friends by paralyzing my interrogators with a cloud of names. ‘Ah,’ I said, ‘you were referring to these people? But there are tens of other people to whom I *could* have lent the book, or to whom I actually lent it.’ I was reckoning that
they could not arrest eighty or one hundred people who had a perfectly innocent book in their hands. So I say, ‘You have taken my agenda with addresses and phone numbers. Give it back to me for a moment, please, so that I could remember.’

‘They give me the agenda and I read absolutely all names from it. From time to time, the interrogator stops and says with satisfaction the first name of the person who is mentioned; at other times, he asks me who that person is. I follow how he puts down on paper name after name methodically, for around 45 minutes (They have a good stomach, I tell myself; they can handle any quantities). At the end, he offers me a cigarette.

‘At that moment I realized† what an idiot I had been, perhaps even criminal, for I had put under his eyes so many names from which he could have chosen whomever he wanted. I refused the cigarette. ‘Take it,’ he said. ‘No,’ I replied. ‘Take the cigarette!’ he shouted. ‘I won’t.’ ‘Take it or I’ll dislocate your jaw!’ he yelled, as if peeved.

‘I was afraid, of course, but a kind of ‘no’ came out from my lips. The next moment, I was surprised by a strong blow on the neck, with the side of the right palm (I had not known of such special blows), and then some slaps that shook my head quite seriously. I felt how my left eye was trying to come out of its socket. I thought of two things at the same time. First: so there is a concrete meaning for the expression ‘he hit him so hard that his eyes popped out.’ The second thought was totally different in kind: he hits me—I told myself—in order to check my strength in resisting. He probably wants to be sure that he can obtain from me whatever he wants, and in any case that I am not able to hide anything from him. The pretext with the cigarette is as good as any other; or, precisely because he has no other occasion to verify from the beginning my capacity to hide something, he uses this one. It is a simple question of technical skill or virtuosity—on my part or his part. What if I gave up,

* The switch from past tense to present tense takes place in the original here, and I decided to maintain this change.
† At this moment, the author changes back to past tense.
all of a sudden? It would be the best assurance for him that he dominates me totally, while for me it would be a chance to hide something from him another time…

“‘Take the cigarette,’ he shouts after he hits me.
“I took it.”
“Oh,” my young cellmate sighs.
“You see,” I try to explain to him or to justify myself, “it can be a tactic to show that you are weak…”
“But I would have never done this,” he exclaims disapprovingly. “After he hit me? Never…”

He looks at me. I probably have an uneasy air, in my incapacity to clarify the subtleties of my game; after all I am not certain about it either. His indignation stops all of a sudden, and the young man turns things around, changing his tone. He does not want to offend me, at least not entirely, in the conditions in which we find ourselves.

“You know why you took the cigarette?” he asks me.
“Why?”
“Because you felt like smoking,” he said.

My young sportsman is not stupid at all. In a way, he was right. The slaps I got had brought me to reality: nothing made any sense in that moment. I could smoke a cigarette.