IX

Starting the second day, my roommates give me the task to pour the water for washing, because they see I am not strong enough to carry the buckets or do other tasks. From the beginning, I am surprised to see how differently each man washes his hands or face, and I only needed a few days to recognize, just by looking at their hands, who was the one who washed himself, and even his character. One can “guess” by the washing of the hands.

When work is done, some people in the room begin to corner me with questions regarding what I said the previous day. “What is truth if not exactness?” “How can you say that being locked up and being free is the same thing?” (I had no intention to say this!) Only the doctor with whom I share a bed seems to be content with what I said. “It’s bad for everybody, so it’s good, all in order.” Other than him, I receive the approval of a young man without studies, on whose face you can see the wisdom of peasants. He declares that he does not understand too well what I said, but he feels that this is how things are.

I am saved from the duty of giving explanations only because it is “search” day. We are all taken out, in the corridor, and we are made to stay in a line, our faces to the wall, while our beds and belongings are checked. This scene, with the face to the wall, in the corridor, reminds me of something from a book. It’s just impossible to remember which one exactly; only after a quarter of hour, when we are back in the cell, I remember the book, and I smile.

“Why do you laugh, you there?” one of the guards asks me. He had remained by the door, to see how we put our beds and luggage back together.

“I don’t laugh, I smile,” I say, stupidly.
“But you laughed.”
“I only smiled.”
“You laughed!,” he thunders and wins the game, since I realize how absurd my resistance is on such a topic.
He starts again:
“Why did you laugh?”
I think I should avoid the risk of involving a colleague in this lamentable situation, and I say the truth.
“I remembered a similar scene from a book.”
“Which book?”
“Darkness at Noon by Arthur Koestler.”
“By whom?”
I repeat the name, which of course does not tell him anything.
“And what was in this book?”
I swallow and I sense that I cannot go back, nor invent something.
“It was a scene like the one before, with prisoners who had to face the wall, in the corridor.”
“So? What’s to laugh about this?”
“Nothing, just that the scene ends differently in the book.”
“How?”
This idiot bores me with his insistence. Let me tell him the truth and be done with it.
“In the book, the prisoners get a pistol in the back of their necks.”

The whole room froze. For a moment, the guard seems to be paralyzed as well. Then he lets out a howl: “Instigator!” and he jumps on me, pulling me by the coat until he gets it off me. Then he grabs me by the neck, yelling: “To the isolation with you!”
The “isolation” is a dark cell, which has some sort of table or stone bed and a hole for a wc. When you are in isolation, one day you do not get food, but only a bowl with warm water at noon, and one day you get half of the portion. As I am only in

* Noica mentions the title as it was translated into French: The Zero and the Infinite.
my shirt, I begin to do some exercises, to warm up. After half an hour, somebody else is thrown in, also in a shirt only.

“Now you can laugh together,” the guard says and locks us up.

I look at my suffering companion, and I see that he smiles indeed.

“It happens,” he says friendly.

“Why did they punish you?” I whisper.

“They found a pearl button during the search.”

“And?”

“You don’t know? With a pearl button on a string, you can produce a spark, and then you can light a cigarette or the fire in the stove, if it is quenched.”

He is already an expert, and he teaches me to sit on the stone bed, back to back, to warm up. He begins to tell me:

“I’ve been here for two years, and I still have three reasons for joy. We had meetings at my job — I was an economist — and we were getting bored, of course. We could not laugh even at the jokes told by the speaker coming from human resources — as you know, they had received the order to sprinkle the sandwiches’ they read with a joke. So I taught 2–3 colleagues to laugh heavily three times: ha-ha-ha, at every joke. Our laughter caught on, and the whole room adopted it. For a while, it was all good, but in the third or the fourth meeting, the politruk\* took notice. He investigated the case and ended up getting to me, since I was known as someone who enjoyed making jokes. Realizing that they wanted to arrest me, I ran away from home. I didn’t want to hide at a friend’s place because I did not want to get him into trouble, so I traveled by train all over the country for a couple of years. I got used to no longer pay for a ticket, and I felt at home in the train. Then I got bored, so I turned myself in. I was condemned as instigator and enemy of the popular order.

\* In the context, the term “sandwiches” refers to speeches.

† The person responsible with political education. Every institution had such a person with this role.
“In reality, I don’t only like to laugh, but I am also interested in the problem of laughter. I had begun to look into it even before prison. It’s quite something, laughter in humans. Reading and meditating about laughter, I noticed an aspect that we don’t always consider: man laughs especially, if not exclusively, about man. Laughter is social. But it is also something extremely personal, and I was particularly interested in this line, so that I could understand people. How does each laugh? I had begun keeping a list: there is Homeric laughter, out of all your heart laughter, laughing out loud, laughing from the tip of your lips, ironical or sardonic, sour, bitter, or yellow laughter; laughing in his beard, and laughing at someone’s beard, hysterical, idiotic, or intelligent laughter, clear or stuffy laughter, and so many more that deserve to be catalogued.”

“Of course,” he continues, “just as it is interesting to see about what people laugh, it is also interesting to see why. One can even arrange historical eras on this theme. The medieval man, as well as the ancient man, laughed at things different from us. When I began studying the problem, I fell upon the case of the ancient sage Parmeniskos, who realized at a certain moment that he could no longer laugh. He then went to the oracle to get back his laughter, but he did not. Only upon his return, seeing a clumsy wooden statue of Apollo’s great mother, he burst into laughter. I don’t even mention the goddess Demeter who, after the kidnapping of her daughter, Persephone, to Hades, wandered and no longer laughed, until she saw Baubo, the wife of her host, raising up her dress. There must be something in these legends, just as it remains a problem why yellow people laugh less than white people. But I did not go too far with my investigation; after all, the question of what people and eras laugh at is a problem of the history of human culture and nature, and it is beyond me.

“I am only interested in how people laugh. And not how they laugh in general, but each in particular. Since I imitate others well, I was making people laugh imitating the laughter of hu-

* The Romanian expression a râde cuiva în barbă is used for situations in which one fools you.
man types — the star, the idiot, the boss — or of colleagues and people of the day. Then I looked into how the main characters of books laugh, and I want to read again, when I am set free, Dickens or Balzac, to see how their heroes were laughing. This is how I got to the laughter of historical figures. I wondered how Napoleon or the Duke of Wellington laughed, or Henry VIII, or Philippo Nerri, that saint of whom people say he was joyful. I could imagine the laughter of Francis of Assisi, because it certainly was the natural laughter of the man pure at heart. But when I wondered how Jesus may have laughed, I stopped.

We were both silent for a while. There was something interesting in this easiness that ended in gravity. The man I was next to seemed to be a “free” man. In any case, he seemed to be detached from all things.

“How could you bear wandering on trains for so long?” I ask him.

“At the beginning it was wonderful. Just think about it, to have no roots, no fixed point, no home, job, nor any destination — such freedom! I felt that all people are just plants around me. I had saved a small sum of money, so I could leave in any direction, with the overcoat on one hand and the suitcase in another. Of course, I was choosing the trains with a long and cheap route. I was like a spirit flowing freely among the other travelers, who were heavy with matter, worries, and purpose, as they were. I noticed only then the full stupidity of the traveler, the stupidity of a boulder thrown into a running river. ‘Is this the train that goes to…?’ ‘Haven’t I missed the direction?’ ‘Where should I put my suitcase?’ He doesn’t know anything, he doesn’t understand anything, and his only human reaction is fear. Then, the boulder gets lighter, and it begins to roll as well, but it remains a boulder.* I was talking to people, finding out what was happening in the world and, at times, interesting things about them, but, after all, I was defying them with my freedom. They wanted to and had to arrive some place. They had a dependency; they were

---

* In Romanian, there is the expression “being as stupid as a boulder,” in the sense that a boulder does not move and does not have flexibility in thought.
Greeks.’ How terrified they were when the train was late, which was a blessing for me! I felt as if I had a personal airplane. I truly believe that man will not travel happily unless he has a personal airplane, just like the birds, and not in cages, as now, on railways, roads, or airways previously given.

“However, I cannot hide the fact that I was participating in the life of these non-flying animals that lack any gratuity: human beings. When there was some serious delay, I was making comments, gathering info, and ending by protesting with a greater indignation than that of the others. I had all the interest to delay; still, at times, I also felt the need to arrive precisely nowhere. At the end of the line, I was coming off the train, looking for a room close to the train station, recovering, and then going back on the road. Money was getting scarce. After a year or so, I started to travel without paying, pe blat,† as one says.”

“How do you travel pe blat?”

“There are two kinds of blat: one is arranged with the conductors, the other one at your own risk. If you want to risk it, without any arrangement, you can only do it on short distances. I had to prefer the arrangement. At the beginning of the trip, before departing, I was walking on the platform, carefully watching the conductors. Depending on their human type, I would decide whether I could try it or not. I used to travel in second class, which was filled with people. But sometimes, a conductor would let me sleep in first class for a small amount of money. He took tickets from those who were coming off the train and put one into my pocket. If there was an inspection, I could say that I fell asleep and forgot to get down at my stop. Others took my identity card with them, so that they could say to an inspector that they were about to write me a report. It was good when there were overcrowded trains, but this could not take place all the time. When we were many travelers, especially students, it was

---

* The ancient Greeks.
† I left here the Romanian expression, pe blat. When one travels pe blat, one does so without paying. Due to the explanation in the next paragraph, I considered that leaving the original may be more helpful.
calmer: the conductor let us know when the inspection came. If there was only one inspector, I could avoid it. It was harder when there was an inspection ‘in pincers,’ with two inspectors from each end of the train, who caught you in the middle. You would hear them ticketing, and you would run from one to the other. In despair, you would get up on the roof of the train car and get down further in the back. One time, someone caught me by the hand, when the train was about to leave. It was the inspector. Another time, I was next to a group of Soviet tourists. I pretended I was also a tourist, speaking with them in Russian as well as I could. They realized what I wanted, and they saved me. They told me that people were practicing this sport in their country as well, and they call the clandestine travelers ‘rabbits.’

“And, indeed, this is the bad aspect, that you feel like a rabbit. You need to have great awareness, and you cannot join longer conversations with anyone, you cannot read a book, you cannot lose yourself in thoughts. Even independently of the risks associated with traveling pe blat, my life had become a rabbit life. What did I still have of the freedom I have assumed? I only had the run. That’s all: I could run anywhere. After two years, I started to miss chairs, carpets, and people, other kinds of people than the spectral ones I was meeting in train. I was missing trees that would not move and grass. I gave myself in.”

“I don’t think you found many carpets here, in prison,” I say.

“No,” he answered (and I sensed he was doing it with a smile), “but I kept a magic carpet, the taste for flying. Even here, among people so heavy with so many troubles, I feel like a light being. I try to make people talk, dream. Haven’t you sensed how much and how well one can dream here?”

In three days, we were separated.

“Look for me when you get out,” he said. “My name is Ernest. Ask for Ernest at the City Hall, the Economic Services department; all know me.”

“How do you know they would take you back?”

“I’m sure of it. They need people like me; I am happy and I make people laugh. Their world is so sad…”