Сьцяна

The Wall

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Dedicated To Ryhor Baradulin

The wall was stone, sooty, and very old, like the entirety of this prison building, which was inherited by the dictator of our country from the previous dictator, who inherited it from even earlier dictators. Dictators have never been rid of in this country. At one time, here they celebrated bloody triznas, plotted conspiracies and other crimes -- against the government, against the people, against whoever had won in the endless struggle for power. Or whoever had lost. And now he sat here and those like him sat here. Others, perhaps, have sat here for a long time, but he got here just recently. His earlier years and months were spent in other places, places very similar to this. Therefore a change in place of incarceration didn't bother him very much -- both here and there there was a stone cell for him, damp and dark -- five paces long and three wide. A bolted iron door, a stinking latrine in the corner -- like everywhere else. The only thing that attracted his attention here was the wall. The one opposite the door.

No matter where he sat and for how long, he was always interested in the walls, in what they were made of and how they were made. And especially in what was on the other side, behind the wall. Usually on the other side was freedom, seductive and unreachable, about which he could not stop dreaming. But the walls were made as walls should be made, made how people used to be able to make them: stone, lime mortar, and brick -- everything solid and indestructible -- you cannot even scratch it. You cannot even knock on it. Even on the first day here, he tried knocking on the wall in the prison alphabet he has gotten familiar with, but he did not hear

any response. Maybe there was no-one behind the wall. That would mean that the stone of the prison ended there and freedom began there. Grass and blackthorn bushes grow green in the sun, the ancient trees of the stone castle's park abound, behind the wall...

Kneeling by his rags, he listened. But all was silent. The guard walked by the door not too long ago, but his footsteps were no longer heard. A weak electric lamp, under a very high, black ceiling, dissipated the darkness on the stone floor; it was a deafeningly silent prison night. And he slowly crawled along that wall opposite the door, and began to touch it, to inspect it -- investigate it.

There, it occurred to him, the wall was a bit softer. Of course, not to the extent that a chunk could be taken out of it. But if you worked hard...It was necessary, it was worth it to try.

The lower row of the large stone blocks was packed together tightly and immovably and did not absorb any of his knocks -- not with a knuckle joint, not with a fist. Same with the rows above. There were enough man-made scratches and markings, but they didn't tell him anything. Maybe there was something written there, but in the half-light it was not possible to make anything out. Although, he didn't want to try to make anything out. Why did he need a record of someone else's fate? He had had enough of his own fate: a painful fate, a miserable fate, a very unfortunate fate. It was hard to imagine anything else except his fate in that stone den. Perhaps, there will never be anything else, and here he will die. Without any hope.

But how he wanted something better, some kind of change! But what kind? Of course he understood perfectly that there were no grounds for hope, and it was necessary to reconcile with the worst. And, with that, to live out the term prescribed by God and the judges. He could not win everything with hope. But hope had stubbornly possessed him.

The wall was cold and hard. Very rough blocks of granite, lime petrified from age. In some places, though, soft pieces fell, made from shellstone. And only in the corner, in the damp and even wet corner, lower down... time, or perhaps moisture, has done something even to the stone or the lime binding -- there, it occurred to him, the wall was a bit softer. Of course, not to the extent that a chunk could be taken out of it. But if you worked hard... It was necessary, it was worth it to try.

And he tried. At first, he clawed with his nails, but he soon broke them on both hands. Then with his bare fingers. With fingers, of course, he didn't manage to do very much, and yet...

A hope appeared within him, a sort of grim life goal. He started remembering less about the past and started to think less negatively. He waited only until the footsteps of the guard became a little quieter behind the door, then threw himself to the corner and, squatting, he scraped, clawed, scratched. He almost never looked there, he didn't need light anymore, his fingers knew all of the details of the stone, too hard, seemingly resisting all of his efforts. But where the nook of the walls met

the floor, in the very corner, it seemed to be nicer - softer, or something. It was exactly there where all of his accumulated will and hope now converged.

He slept perhaps a couple of hours a day -- curled up on rags under the dry wall, forgetting himself until a faraway gong rang -- the signal to get up. He waited for breakfast, a bowl of lentil soup, which he ate within a minute. The rest of the time during the day and night he spent in the corner -- like a moth at a tree, grinding away the stone. The stone corner stood out clearly from the rest of the stone, perhaps it will be possible to try to claw through it first. Maybe it will yield a hole. Or at least the wall will weaken and sink. At least if there was some small hole -- he would crawl through. Like he did in childhood when he and his friends crawled through the fence into the neighbor's garden. The older kids sent him first because he was the thinnest, smallest, most energetic zheuzhyk, who crawled wherever it was possible to crawl. Even wherever it was not possible to crawl. He knew from those times that when the head can crawl through, the rest of his body can, too. He was a zheuzhyk like this. Until he grew up and took up politics. Politics was different. Sometimes no one could crawl through. He couldn't crawl through. That's why he's here.

He didn't count the days and didn't know how many had passed since he had started his neverending work. Time rotated between waking up, eating twice per day, the footsteps of the guard behind the door, back and forth. When this goal first arose, so did impatience. Sometimes it burned so terribly that he was afraid. He knew that the task was impossible. If something were to come of it, it would come about very slowly, through the difficult conquest of stone and time. It would require days, months, years. He needed to build up great endurance, build up the ability to conquer time itself. And he built up. He got used to the slowness, deliberation, unhurriedness. It was difficult to get used to this, to build up that unhurriedness, those devilish delays, to make it second nature. But he tried, because without it he would not have hope. Impatience destroys hope, he knew that for sure. Sometimes hope completely burned out, then flared up to impatience. Somehow, while scratching at the corner, he heard signs of life on the other side: like the chirp of a chick. He already envisioned a bird's nest there somewhere nearby, in a thicket of blackthorn, small yellow-faced chicks, and to him it seemed like a good sign. Impatience overtook him to despair. Cold logic was needed to cool it down. That chirping might have been not even a bird's at all, but a mouse's, for example. There might be a burrow there with disgusting prison rats. But a burrow must lead somewhere. Maybe also to freedom.

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One day at the end of a deafeningly silent night that had spent almost entirely without sleep, clawing in the dark corner, he felt that pieces of coal

seemed to be moving around under his fingers. Not too much, but his sensitive fingers felt a small movement -- up and down. This gave him an unusual energy. But he cooled down: he didn't need this today. Let today be like it always was. Perhaps you need to pull the coal-piece out at the beginning of a night, not at the end. At the beginning of a night, there's more time and opportunity. The guards come in the morning, after all.

Before the guards came, he was worried that they would notice some kind of hope in his face. Although the cell was dark, he knew that something about the expression might give him away -- every time they came by, they looked at his face. Out of interest or out of a sense of duty. He tried to make his expression as calm as possible, focusing inward on something sleepy and hidden from the outside. He had no idea how he did it, but it seems like the guards have not noticed anything yet. What luck! But he needed a lot of luck, he craved luck. First and foremost, luck in that damp corner.

And it's true, fate must have been merciful to him. He pulled out a stone shard -- narrow with sharp edges, but behind it, nothing opened up to him. Further through the hole was hard, rough, cold stone. The shard could be used as a tool sharpened between stones. So he began to sharpen it, breaking off pieces, grinding stone against stone. He couldn't hit it because he needed to make as little sound as possible so that nothing would be heard, neither behind the door, nor over there behind the wall. He still didn't know what was in store for him there -- freedom, or maybe a new prison. But hope drew him pictures of freedom -- his city, meeting with friends, meeting with her... He just needed to overcome this stone wall.

And he clawed quietly, carefully, while listening attentively to any sound behind the door. Sometimes he stood up and threw himself at his pile of rags in the other corner. But he didn't do this at night -- at night they don't look through the door, they come by and look in the evening. In the morning, the guards must be tired, because they walked by slower, and less often. One day he felt like it would be worth it to move his bed closer to the corner to do his work lying down, so it would be more inconspicuous. But how to do this? If the bedding moved by a meter, they would immediately notice. If little by little, how much per day? He did this. First by three inches, then by five, then more. When the guards came, he watched their eyes intently -- did they not notice? No, not yet. Or maybe they were just that good at hiding their suspicion? It would be awful for them to just wait, wanting to catch him at the very last moment. To grab his legs as his body tries to crawl out to freedom.

At the end of summer, he had moved his rags almost to the corner. He thought that summer had ended through the guards' warmer clothing. Sometimes they came right from outside, with autumn freshness billowing around them with raindrops on the shoulders of their uniforms. The cell always had the same temperature -- a bit cool for summer and a bit warm for winter. There was no kind of heating here.

After some time, he made a narrow hole between the stones, which fit four of his fingers. It turned out there really was a den or perhaps a mouse-hole -- narrow and seemingly deep. He poured the crumbled pieces of the wall in there that he had clawed away during the night, and they disappeared without a trace. In the morning, before the wake-up call, he carefully filled the hole with a stone shard, which fit well into its earlier place, and even up close, nothing looked suspicious.

Still absolutely terrified to believe his luck, he still almost lost his attentiveness and botched his efforts. It was his hands. Somehow, bringing food -- a bowl of lentil soup -- an older man with a sickly face, glanced at his hands. He noticed his gaze, but didn't have time to hide his hands -- his hands were grabbing the bowl. "What? A builder?" asked the guard, nodding at his hands. The builder answered as calmly as he could, even though his soul was suddenly overcome with fear: couldn't you guess? But he didn't guess, even saying as if with sympathy: I used to be a bricklayer. After this, when he was left alone, he carefully examined his hands, covered with hard calluses. He never had hands like that, he almost never did physical work when he was free. He became a builder here in this cell. He didn't build -- he burrowed through an ancient stone wall; this was maybe more difficult than building. For freedom, what would you not do? You can only understand that after you lose freedom for good.

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It would be better if he died, so that his friends in struggle would bury him, and she, crying, would bury her love for him together with him. This would be better, but it didn't turn out this way. It was worse. She was suffering from the uncertainty, the lack of closure. That autumn evening they left each other for what they thought would be a couple of hours, and at midnight he promised to return to her. He remembers that she was not even going to sleep, but said: I will wait. They didn't say goodbye to each other as they should have, she just hugged him a little and opened the door -- go! And he went. He was in a hurry -- he had to rush across the city and was running late. If only he knew where he was rushing! He thought he was going to his friend, to work on their holy struggle, but blackest betrayal awaited him. He didn't have time to give his lover any kind of sign, this was how quickly despair befell him. He disappeared forever. Maybe they think he ran away. From friends, from her, from the city. To think -- he, a traitor! Maybe his enemies made her and his friends think he was just a con-man. And now, instead of loving him, she hates him. Is it possible to love a traitor? He still didn't say the most important word to her -- he was thinking, planning, putting it off. Sometimes, the moment wasn't right, sometimes it was the right moment, but he thought: later.

No, he needed freedom.

All of these years he spent in solitary confinement and shared cells, he never even thought about the possibility of waiting for his freedom. Of course, he could have waited for a pardon, after the dictator dies. But dictators in this country rarely died quickly, because they had vigorous health, like most dictators. He will likely die sooner because his health has never been great. He collapsed suddenly and coughed often. When hope flared up, he felt better. He coughed only lying down. He did not cough even once in the corner. He couldn't let himself do it.

One time, in the depth of the night, after the guard's footsteps grew louder and then softer behind the door, he grasped something new in the hole. A new edge of a stone, a corner of which could be grasped. It was a new opportunity, it increased his hope, he was getting closer to his goal.

But maybe there was no need to rush. There was little chance he would quickly pull the stone out, he had no strength for it. He needed to crack it, make the gap wider, maybe make another one next to it. He started to sweat and get tired a lot. Especially in the mornings. Without sleep. Two hours before the wake-up call was not enough for him to regain his strength. He ate his lentil soups, but they were not enough anymore. He ended up asking for supplements, and they looked at him with surprise: what is he up to now suddenly? He fell silent. He had to work with what he was given.

From that minute, when he felt that stone, he thought of her more often. Her dear face appeared in front of him as he scraped and pulled. She appeared in a short dream. It was always miserable. Never a beautiful dream as his daydreams were. When the wind rustled the trees behind the window and they sat, without words, with silent love for each other and for their common, holy cause.

Now he just needed to say that he loves her, that he is not a traitor. He is a victim. He just needs to let her know that. He just needs to fix everything. So that she doesn't think of him differently -- he does not deserve anything else. If he had known how it all would have turned out, he would have been a different person. He would have been a hundred times better. He would have been braver. Smarter. He would have told her every day that he loved her. He loved her like no one else. If only he had known. But he did not know and did not say it. This unspoken word withered him.

And now this hope...

So far, things were going well. It seems the guards have not noticed anything and did not suspect anything. A cold breeze blew in from the forever-damp corner, the stone became cold, his hands were freezing. That, however, gave him reason to feel that there was not a whole lot left. A couple of final stones, and there - freedom. One day, lying on his rags, he heard voices -- from there, from behind the wall. They were speaking somewhere close to his corner, the words could not be made out, but these were free people. That means freedom was very close. Exactly at this time, he was suffering from considerable anxiety, which had started that morning. There was a scream behind the door, it seemed that they

were beating someone there. After this, the screaming became quieter, was it moved into a cell, or what? He sat, listened and, with a groaning heart, waited. He thought that this somehow concerns him. And this was true, soon his door opened wide, a whole group of guards stormed in, pushed him into the corridor, yelling -- they started searching. They turned over his rags, they touched the walls all over. He felt as if he would die from the fear that they were onto something. Perhaps his face turned pale and was scared that they would notice. It seems like, however, they did not notice -- they cleared out, after pushing him onto his wrinkled and scattered rags. That night he didn't poke around in the corner, but waited and listened instead. The night was somewhat restless -- guards walked and ran behind the door almost until morning, screaming was heard again, yelling, threatening commands. But by morning everything seemed to have calmed down and become quiet. He slept a little before the wake-up call. The following day was calmer, and he, starving until the time for food, laid down at his work. He tried to take it deeper, through the width of the wall, without poking around to make it wider. If only he dug deeper, with both hands, to dig out and pry out a large stone, there'd be a hole. Just some kind of opening. He would have already crawled through.

He dug around, but it became unclear where to put the stone rubble. To throw it into the corner was impossible, it would have been noticed immediately. Twice he poured it out into the latrine, which prisoners took out under the watchful eye of the guards. But that too was risky. Maybe it's better to eat it? For now he poured the rubble out into his shoes, which stood by the door off to the side. In plain sight, but the darkness did not allow them to see what was in them. He went barefoot. As if he would feel too hot in his shoes.

One morning, before breakfast, he glanced at his corner, and almost lost consciousness: in the darkness a narrow short chink dimly shined. Like a splinter of light on the dull blackness of the wall. Fearing that the guards would notice this, he threw his prison jacket there to block the splinter of light. The guards, in fact, did not notice, but he thought, it's worth it! It is necessary to tear this thing open. Or else all will be lost.

The following night he achieved new success -- he widened the slit enough that he was able to get both of his hands through, and grab the sides of the stone. He needed to pull it out towards himself, but would it come out? Would he have enough strength? Perhaps he did not have quite enough strength. Then he started to budge the stone – to pull it and push it from side to side, up and down. That took up a lot of time, but gave a better result – it seems that he was overcoming this rocky passage. With his feeble human strength and his powerful thirst for freedom.

Finally, he dug out this stone, although colorful circles floated across his vision from the strain, and he was short of breath. In the wall there was a narrow and deep crawlway, from which the cold and darkness of a moonless night came in. But, he must act

now, he didn't have any time left. The minutes until morning are numbered – he felt that he wouldn't make it in time. And that in the final minutes the worst will happen.

With great care he rolled the stone to its former place, and rolled it around for a long time until it settled into the exact spot where it had always laid. With his rags, he covered up the cracks. It seemed that even from close-up nothing could be seen. But if only they do not conduct another search. If there is a search, all is lost.

That day he felt on edge. He sat, he sprang up, walked here and there around the ugly cell. The guard who brought him his lentil soup, was in a damp overcoat and wet boots, that means out there, in freedom, it was raining. It seems that Autumn has arrived. And they have not discovered his plot. This was already great luck – unheard of and unprecedented. It would be awful if everything fell apart in the final moments. In the final minutes. He just needed to wait until night...

And the night came. The guards acted like they always have: they brought supper, changed the latrine. It seemed that there was nothing in their behavior or their glances that would bring him anxiety. He would have noticed. His eye and ear have become now like taut strings, or laser beams – he noticed everything. Everything depended not on him anymore – but on others. And he relied on the others – on his jailers. All that had depended on him, he did all of it. Even more than he hoped to do.

He was anxious. In the evening he could not make himself eat his ration of bread (it could not go down his throat) and he could not see a place to hide it. Uneaten, it could have aroused suspicion and given him away. He stuck it in his gaiters, already half-full with rubble. He was already used to going barefoot. How he would manage being barefoot out there, in freedom, he didn't want to think. The main thing was to break away into that freedom. When it became sufficiently dark, and all of the rustling behind the wall fell silent, he kneeled and crossed himself. Of course, he was not too religious, but... He must cross himself, for goals this big any and all means to achieve them are suitable, both the devil's and God's. Both helped. He rolled the stone a little to the side, hunched over, bent over – his head went first. He badly scratched his ear and tore the skin off of his forehead, but it was harder to get his body through. Mainly, his shoulder couldn't get through along with his arm, no matter how he twisted it in this stone tunnel. He jerked this way and that, and became afraid that he was completely stuck, because he could no longer get back out. But eventually, somehow he forced his way through with his arm and head, bleeding under his shirt. Worse than this, however, was that it did not get any easier from here. He already felt that he had no strength to shove his way through, neither back-

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ward nor forward. For some time, he laid like this, stuck in the stone, and did not move. And then clearly felt that he was going to die. If he does find the strength in himself for the final push. Fear seized him. But fear must have given him strength and he forced his way forward. He grabbed something in front of him and forced him forward a bit. Then he pulled again and forced himself forward again. And again. And finally he was out up to his chest, out of the stone tunnel, and from there it became easier. And he ended up under the wall, now on the outside, on wet, cold pavement with small patches of grass growing in its cracks.

It was dark and quite cold around him, but quiet. For some time, he laid on the pavement, resting, unable to push himself to sit up. After this, he raised his head – into the black sky rose the gray wall, from which there started another, semi-circular wall – perhaps the tower of this old building. This wall was right next to his tunnel, which gaped like a black stain low by his feet. Around him was night and freedom, which he had finally reached. But why did joy leave him?

Something stubbornly hindered that joy of his, perhaps the gloomy uncertainty of the surroundings – what was this? The street, the yard, the abandoned square? But there were no trees to be seen. But they were supposed to be growing near the old prison wall. Instead of trees, a black tower steeply rose, and behind it, in the darkness, the gray expanse of that same wall. With a sense of foreboding he stood up, staggering along the wall, touching it with his bloody hand. The cold pavement was slippery under his bare feet. He quickly got into a corner; the tall, two-story wall turned in the other direction. With barely a jog he let it guide him, all the while touching its rough side, thinking he would run into a gate, an archway out, or some kind of exit. And it was useless. He ran for a while and almost struck the edge of some old and uneven stonework, behind which was something darkened against the gray. It was a wide and high alcove, with an exit door from this stone trap. Indeed, in the alcove, there were massive black doors, forged from wrought iron, but neither near them nor under them shone any gap. There wasn't even a latch. He quietly pulled at the doors, pushed them with his shoulder – they did not even budge from his feeble strength. Then he rushed from here to the other side, hitting himself against something in the darkness, and found himself on the pavement. He badly hurt his knee, but sprang up, and froze in fearful surprise. Above him in the dark grayness of the sky was the familiar outline of the gallows, with the noose hanging almost right above his head. Below it was a wooden platform, which he had hit in the darkness. There was no escape from here.

Stunned and exhausted, he quietly sank down. This was a dead-end; the trap had closed. Hope, which had guided him for so long suddenly vanished. He was still alive, but only with one part of his being. To live in prison didn't make sense, to die didn't make any more sense. It would have been better not to have been born at all. But unfortunately, that was not up to him...