

*Somewhere in the Present*

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There are five of us, all wearing raincoats of one depressing color or another — beige, brown, faded gray. We are sitting on wooden folding chairs in a dimly lit, L-shaped, stucco room, white, with yellow and brown streaks. It is hard to tell what the room was originally designed for. It reminds you of an igloo because all the corners are rounded. But it smells damp — smells of old rainwater. Perhaps it was once part of an underground drainage facility — there is a drain right before my feet, ugly with peeling, thick, white paint, the shiny metal showing through. Perhaps the corners of the room are rounded purely because of bad workmanship.

The chairs creak. None of us wants to be here. We have done it as a favor for someone we don't even know.

We are sitting in the long part of the L. The other part goes to the left a few yards in front of us. We overhear a conversation that is taking place there. A person is apparently being interrogated. We, or at least I — I don't know what the others are thinking — get the impression that the interrogators themselves are heading off to another assignment, and have only by accident been thrown together with the person being interrogated. It sounds as if they have decided, reluctantly, to practice their interrogation skills on this person.

We do not see the speakers. All we can do is hear them, and see their indistinct shadows on the wall inside the L.

We hear an older man — his shadow is bulky — say, in an obviously bored voice, and a thick, East-European accent, “And so you were feeling life had no meaning?”

A man's voice responds, “Yes.”

In a confirming tone, the man says, “You feel that we are born without purpose and suffer for no reason at all.”

Through a brief yawn, “Yes.”

“And that there is no *reason* for you to live.”

Another yawn. “Yes.”

A woman, apparently an apprentice of some sort, speaks in a foreign language. She is immediately interrupted by the man.

“And what gave you this feeling?” the man asks.

Long pause. The interrogatee is apparently not listening. Then, with a start, he says, “What?”

“What gave you this feeling?”

“The feeling of life having no purpose?”

“Yes.”

“Don't know. Always been there, I guess.”

The woman speaks. She seems to be urging the man to be more forceful.

He growls at her in the foreign language. Then he continues: “But you don't know where it came from.”

“No.”

“Would you like to know?”

He asks the woman a question in their language — perhaps what time it is. She replies hastily.

“I don't know.” replies the interrogatee, despondently.

“Well, then we can't help you.”

Long pause.

“We could get it out of you if we wanted to.”

“Well...”, the interrogatee begins, as though he is about to make up whatever they want to hear.

“Don't you care about life?” the man asks.

“Not much.”

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“Well, then, the hell with you,” the man says. He asks the woman the same question again. From his impatience, it must be the time he is inquiring about.

“We just leave you sit. You like that?”

“I don’t care.”

Long silence. Then what sounds like pots and pans being dragged across a cement floor. The sigh of the man, as from effort. Shadows moving on the wall. Guttural whispers between the man and the woman. Now they are apparently sitting on their own folding chairs, for we hear the same kind of creaks as ours make. No more words are spoken.

“Guess that’s it”, says a man on my left, quietly. We all agree, get up, buttoning our coats around us. Those who wore gloves, look for their gloves (black leather, all of them). We take a last look at the wall with the shadows. We reach for our umbrellas.

“Guess they’ve reached a decision”, says the man on my left, pulling his umbrella off his chair.

We leave by climbing up a narrow curved stair in the wall behind us, to the sound of another pot being dragged across the floor, and a long-drawn-out I-told-you-so sigh from the man.