

THE GLASS WALL

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To all those who are facing a glass wall.
Or those who have the feeling they are facing one.

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He must have arrived at the sea again, as the young man saw a thin, grey streak come in sight, rising just above the horizon. Had he been wandering in a circle all the time through the desert? For three days, or four? He had lost count. He took a few more steps, dragging his bare feet through the sand, and the strip rose higher. The heat slapped his face and his bare arms. Clad in only a T-shirt and worn trousers, his head wrapped in a rag, he looked round, dazzled by the gleaming sun high in the vast cupola of the blue sky that enclosed the desert from all sides.

He pushed himself forward, hobbling, tired, thirsty and hungry; a water bottle in his hand, with only a few sips remaining. The faint line was now higher up in the bright sky. He lingered, staring at it, eyes wide open, dizzy from the sun. There was no sea. Only the air between the horizon and the line. But wait! What was that glassy layer? Its tone slightly different from that of the sky. Oh, it was glass, indeed. A huge piece of glass rising from the heat haze that emanated from

the sand. But just what was this immense piece of glass – a barrier, a fence, or something else besides? It was a wall of glass.

He gathered his strength and limped forward, clutching the plastic bottle. The strip rose higher and higher, the glass wall gaining magnitude all the while until the young man came close enough to observe the tops of buildings and trees emerging far in the distance behind the glass.

It was there, a stone's throw from where he stood in the sand. Grand and glorious, reaching high into the sky, a wall of glass stretched the length of the desert.

He took a few more steps and his jaw dropped: some two hundred metres behind the glass, a vast lake shone serenely. An oasis of vegetation, above which, behind a few green hills and rows of trees, protruded dozens of buildings. Ivy-covered towers; copper roofs and gilded domes; terracotta brick buildings; skyscrapers with shiny glass glistening in the sun. Several cranes rose into the sky, hovering over the skeletons of new buildings.

Tiny and frail in front of that giant monster, the young man looked left and right at the colossal wall of glass expanding over the desert; each end melting into the shimmering heat haze of the horizon.

He knelt in the sand and squinted in the bright sunlight at the city behind the glass. Tears blurred his sight. He could feel a lump growing in his throat and a heavy weight pushing down on his chest. He closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

He wiped his eyes, then turned round and looked back at the desert. A trail of his footprints stretched in the sand to a vanishing point at the horizon behind him. Litter spread everywhere around. Worn shoes and sandals; torn clothes; sticks; twigs; long tree branches; a few large stones half-sunk

in the sand. Here and there, holes filled with ash and charcoal. Empty plastic bottles; rusty crumpled tins; abandoned bags and suitcases. Beside each of these, a small hillock of sand had grown. Nothing more except a vast, expansive desert behind him, utterly silent.

He looked at the water bottle in his hand. The last of anything he had left now. He drank the remaining sips and tossed the empty bottle away. Into the litter.

He stood up and hobbled to the glass wall, leaning on it with both hands. Exhausted, perspiring in his ragged clothes, he peered at the town on the other side.

A gust of wind blew sand over him, clattering against the glass. He wanted to shout but what was bogged in his lungs was too strong to be cried out. He started panting in the heavy, dry desert air.

He stared at the wall that rose high in the sky above, and banged his head on the glass. The sharp pain reminded him of the wound on his brow; from bumping his head on something hard. A few days ago, in the boat. There were other people as well. Then a splash. He had fallen in the water. Splash. But what had happened before that? His sight turned black. He held to the glass and sat down at the foot of the wall.

Eyes firmly closed, teeth clenched, he removed the rag from his head, put his sweaty palms to his forehead and felt a burning sting. He clenched his teeth harder until the pain slightly eased.

Opening his eyes, he rested his hands on the glass again and stared at the unreachable landscape. The town seemed even further away. Right behind the glass barrier, just in front of him, stretched a wide asphalt road, behind which the lake. On its far side, several boats, some with masts and sails, were

moored in a semicircle. Shadowy human figures moved about on the boats and on the promenade, their presence barely noticeable. From one side to the other, willows, magnolias, maples, shrubs, reeds and bullrushes encircled the lake, and far, far away, to the left, a vast forest filled his view. The lush reflection in the lake of the buildings, the hills, the trees, the clean blue sky and the moored boats, made the world behind the glass even more enticing.

He pressed on the glass with all his strength, banging on it vigorously. No trembling. Not even a slight quiver in the hard glass. Only a dull clang resonated as if it was made of iron. He raised his fists again, but overtaken by a wave of nausea, leaned on the wall, his head resting on his forearms. Pounding wouldn't help anyway when there was no one on the other side to hear him.

'Nothing will help, boy! Better to go back,' shouted a harsh, metallic voice from nowhere.

The young man flinched and turned, searching for the source of the voice. Nobody was in sight.

'I wouldn't waste your time here – better go back home!' cried the voice again, sounding as if it came from a radio buried somewhere in the sand.

The young man jumped up and limped along the glass wall towards the voice, frowning. The man spoke his language in a strange yet comprehensible way. His voice clanged as if he was speaking into a tin. It was clear that it was not from a native speaker, so it must have come from the other side of the glass.

About five metres away, there was a small cement hut right behind the glass wall, with an iron door to the street.

Another few steps and the young man came upon a hefty

older man in a white shirt, sitting in the hut behind the glass at a desk, peering into a large computer monitor. His grey eyes looked small behind his thick glasses that drooped over his nose. One hand clasped a mouse whilst the fat fingers of his other hand spread over a keyboard.

The young man took another step forward and put his forehead on the glass, careful not to hurt his wound again. The old man was surrounded by three bare walls and a low ceiling, with the iron door to his left. On the wall behind him, stood a small white air conditioner. The fourth wall of the hut was the glass wall standing between them. A set of blinds was rolled up under the ceiling.

The man behind the glass addressed the young man without diverting his eyes from the monitor. 'I would of course not want to meddle in your business but I'm warning you, whatever you try, you will not succeed. It's impossible to get in.'

The voice reached the young man through pinprick holes in the glass, arranged in perfect order within a circle with a diameter of no more than fifteen centimetres. On the other side of the glass, behind the holes, a bowl-shaped speaker was fixed with a microphone dangling from it. Under the holes, there was a horizontal slot, about thirty centimetres long, but so narrow that only a single sheet of paper could slip through. The young man brushed his fingers over the holes and along the slot, bent his head and held his ear close to the apertures.

'Listen, young man!' said the old man, his metallic voice coming now directly to the young man's ear, which made him recoil. At the same time, he heard the old man's own voice inside the cubicle, muffled, and in another language.

'The only way to be let in is to have a good story,' the old man continued.

The young man lifted his head and stared at the older man. What did he mean?

'Here is the procedure,' the old man added, releasing the mouse, bothering at last to look at the young man. He took off his glasses and said, 'You tell me your story. I type it into this computer and send it on to the authorities. It's up to them to decide whether you pass or not. If they allow you to come in, I open the door for you.'

The young man looked more closely at the glass between them. There was indeed a rectangular outline in the glass about two metres high and less than a metre wide. It was a glass door, held by a thin metal frame, hardly visible. No lock. And the glass was about five centimetres thick. He pushed on it, but the door did not move. How was it possible? How could it be locked without any lock? He hammered on it with all his strength, but in vain.

'Don't get agitated, boy. It's set to lock magnetically and can only be opened electronically. Only when your asylum request is granted, will I get a code with which I can order the computer to open the door for you. But it's impossible to break it open. I'm telling you.'

The young man took a step back and saw his own, faint reflection in the glass. Dishevelled hair and a beard of a few weeks covered his bony chin and cheeks in a disorderly fashion. His tanned face was as dark as his arms which ached from sunburn.

The old man stared at him from the other side of the glass, as if waiting for some reply.

'And when you're through the door,' the man started again, as there was no response from the young man, 'you're not in yet.' He leant forward and pointed to the space in front of his

desk. 'Don't you see that you'll end up inside the turnstile?'

The young man looked. There was indeed an enormous iron turnstile right behind the glass. Why all this? Why don't they just let him in and then ask him questions or whatever they wanted?

'Only me, with a push of this button...' the old man said, moving aside, allowing the young man to see the large red button on the wall behind him. 'You see it, don't you? Only I can open it for you. But before that, I need permission, of course. So come up with your story, I suggest.'

The man paused and scratched his almost bald head. He straightened, then leant back in the chair which rolled back on its wheels, his large stomach dangling in his lap. He squinted at the young man, then continued, 'You look like the type who wants to try it anyway, my advice notwithstanding. Come on, try it then. Tell your story.' He rolled himself forward on the chair back to the desk and bent over the keyboard. 'But I warn you; it's really a waste of time. You'll see... And boy, do something about that!' He nodded at him, pointing to his wound.

The young man pulled a dirty handkerchief out of the pocket of his worn trousers and wiped the blood from his forehead, looked at the handkerchief, then wiped his brow again.

'Your chin too,' the Guard said, nodding.

The young man watched his own reflection in the glass again and wiped his cheeks and chin, then returned the handkerchief to his pocket. He looked left and right. On either side, the glass wall stretched as far as the eye could see. Did he really understand what the man was talking about? Should he believe him? Did this man behind the glass really

mean what he said, or was he laughing at him? Why would he? He might have said all of that to discourage him from trying. Or maybe he was just a confused old man whose task was only to guard the gate. Surely there must be someone else who could allow him through, if this old man had indeed no authority.

'Listen, boy!' the Guard said in the metallic voice. 'I actually don't want to listen to you today. You have no idea how tired I feel.' He then released the mouse and looked at the young man who wearily leant against the glass, his body already drooping with exhaustion.

'You know,' the Guard continued, 'I spent last night up till late, drinking, and now I can barely keep my head up. Let's do it tomorrow. But we can do the first formal intake now and register you as asylum seeker. If you don't give up and go back, that is.' He screwed his gaze back to the screen.

The young man said nothing. He didn't even know what to say.

After a short silence, the Guard peered at him again, then said, 'You must be the last of your sort, boy. It's been over a year now since anyone has come here. They all know about this wall. How come you never heard of it?'

He stopped for a moment then started again, 'Don't you see the glass? You see it, don't you? You really can't go over it. People have tried to penetrate this fortress, but no one has succeeded. They camped here for weeks and months, waiting to be let in, but their stories were rejected. They got angry and tried everything to get in. Look around. I don't know where they got all those huge rocks from or how they extracted them from the endless desert, trying in vain to break the glass.'

The young man turned his head and looked at the scattered

litter and the stones. The wind had now dropped. The heat even stronger. He looked back to the man. How was it possible that he spoke his language so well? It was actually the loudspeaker talking to him. But to hear a stranger speak his mother tongue... But what was his mother tongue? And mother? Who was his mother? No answer came to mind. Only a dizzying gap inside his head.

‘It was pathetic,’ the Guard continued, ‘though sometimes it was amusing to watch.’ He smiled. ‘Then they tried something with really long tree branches. Where the hell they found those, I don’t know. I think they had tried to make ladders so that they could maybe jump over the glass wall, you know. That was ridiculous but also sad. You know how high it is? It’s a hundred and thirty metres tall! Who can jump over a wall of a hundred and thirty bloody metres high? And some others tried to dig under it, so they could tunnel themselves through to this side. But no way! The glass, let me tell you, is planted five metres into the ground and fixed to a concrete base.’

The Guard turned his eyes to the monitor briefly, then looked back in the direction of the young man, ‘It’s unbreakable, really. You know, when they finished building it two years ago, they tested it by crashing it with a bulldozer at high speed. That didn’t cause even a scratch! They showed it on television, and it was everywhere in the papers and on the internet. How come you knew nothing about it? You cannot get through, boy. No way, really!’

The Guard paused for a few moments, resting his chin in his hand and advised the young man in a calm voice, ‘I would go back before you become exhausted, as you already are. How, I don’t know! But you have survived the desert

coming here, so you can maybe return... Oh, and by the way, even this vast desert, even this is man-made.'

The young man turned and stared at the desert behind him again. He had spent a few long days and nights walking through it. What does he mean, 'man-made'? What was this old, mad man talking about?

'Oh, what a project!' the metallic voice rose again behind the young man, making him turn to the old man again. The Guard's own subdued voice sounded more sarcastic, amused almost. 'You know how long it took them? And... Oh, yes, and the mastermind of all this...? You see that billboard over there?' The Guard nodded towards his right.

The young man took a few steps to the left. There was indeed a huge billboard on the other side of the road, picturing the smiling face of a man: his blue eyes sparkled; his light-blond hair looked dyed. And what would that sentence say written in large letters over the poster? Was the smiling man in the picture probably welcoming visitors to the City?

'I'm really worried about you,' the metallic voice continued through the perforated circle of holes in the glass. 'Soon you'll be hungry and thirsty. I can't help, as you see. How long have you been on your journey, boy?'

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