

ALEX CHRISTOFI
GLASS

A NOVEL



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Someone taught that temples are for fanatics only and took away the temples and promised there was no need for temples. And now there is no shelter. And no map for finding the shelter of a temple. And you all stumble about in the dark, this confusion of permissions. The without-end pursuit of a happiness of which someone let you forget the old things which made happiness possible. How is it you say: *'Anything is going'?*

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

Foreword

I am well aware that you probably do not consider glass to be crucial to the success of the human race. Let me assure you, it is as essential to the story of humanity as light, or water, and has a quality of character unsurpassed in any other substance. It appears pure and clear though, like the pearl, it is a purity composed of dirt. There is nothing like glass to catch the various accretions of the world on its surface, though we create it for its opposite quality: that of transparency.

Glass is a cipher. It can be sharp, or soft. It can stop sound; it can make the blind see. It can bend light itself with the dexterity of water; it can focus light into a cutting laser, or disperse it in a thousand droplets. Glass can even form mirrors to turn light back on itself, and show us what we are. Without glass, there would be no civilisation, any more than there might be without fire. It was glass that brought light into our homes; that reeled in the whole wide universe, so that we might better scrutinise it. Without glass, we would live in a windowless, flat world, unshaven, blind, thirsty, sullenly groping at our faces to discern what shape they made.

One man is responsible for my deep awe of glass. I met him in Salisbury, at the Cathedral where I work. He is dead now, sadly – his family has a tradition of jumping the queue to meet their

Maker – and as one of few who might understand his hidden motivations, I have taken it upon myself to tell the story that he now cannot. I have gleaned what particulars I can from newspaper and police reports, and from those who knew him.

You wouldn't believe the truth if I told it to you, so I am taking the liberty of couching it in my own brand of picaresque. Above all else, it amuses me. But if I deviate from the reality, or invent a character here and there, I do so only to separate out the various truths, just as a prism shows white light to be composed of a number of distinct and brilliant colours. I am convinced it is the only way to proceed: he was a very great man, composed of many contradictions, and I do not propose staring at the sun.

Of course, I do not know whether Günter would have approved of my rendering him in a work of fiction. I rather think that he might cry out, like Jesus before him, 'Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.'¹

Dean Angela Winterbottom, Salisbury, 2 May 2012

1 John 2:4. DW: I know one is not really supposed to use the King James Version in this day and age, but it's a damn sight more poetic than that awful New International Version.

I

An Introduction to Glass

As it happens, my name is Glass. My mother cut a deal with my father: if I was to get his surname, she would pick my forename. Perhaps yearning for the abandoned country of her birth, she decided on a solid German name, a hero's name. And so they called me Günter.

I have come to wonder whether I will make it through my twenty-third year. In the nine months since my mother died, I started a new job, which led me to meet a number of new people, one of whom I killed in a misunderstanding. But other things happened in the first twenty-two years that I should explain first.

My first years, as you might imagine, were unremarkable. I went through all the usual phases: vegetable (0-1), animal (1-4), memorable (4+). I look down on my early childhood as a time when I didn't know many words and couldn't put things in categories. The benefit of this was that almost everything came as an epiphany. A gloopy substance! It tasted nice! Light changed colour through it! It was sticky! It stuck to the cat! The downside was that I had to formulate rules for behaviour, such as 'one is only allowed honey sometimes (when?)' and 'do not pour honey on the cat'. It seems to me now, though it wasn't apparent at the time, that growing up is the forfeit of one's pure experience in return for the comfort and reliability of rules.

I would say that we had a happy family. I mean, Dad's not the

sort of person to actually say that he is happy, and obviously, if you picked a day at random, the strong likelihood was that there would be some kind of disturbance or argument, but the important thing was that it was always replaced by a different one the next day, so that it didn't develop into a feud. Apparently there weren't any arguments before Max was born, but that was only a year after I was born, so I can't remember. I can't think that I would have caused any.

I should explain something about my brother. People assume that, because he's deaf, he can't be a bad person. But his being deaf is completely unrelated to the fact that he's a total bastard. Whenever it gets too much I close my eyes and think to myself, *you'll never hear music*,² and then I feel bad for him, and I suspect that other people do something similar and this is why he gets away with being such a bastard. But I know what you're thinking: surely he wasn't always such a bastard. Maybe there was an event in his childhood that made him lash out at the people who cared about him, and maybe before this event there existed a pre-bastard Max.

Let's have a look at the evidence. When I was four and he was three, he managed to get hold of some scissors and cut my comfort blanket up into neat confetti. When I was five and he was four, he put Lego under my sheets and in my empty shoes and everywhere he thought they might cause me discomfort. When I was nine and he was eight, he woke up early and unscrewed the inside door-handle of our shared bedroom before shutting me in. I thought I was stuck in some inescapable nightmare and, needing the toilet very badly, resorted to

2 DW: Some deaf people can't hear music at all. They are called 'profoundly deaf', their ears being about as much good as if they were submerged under a hundred tonnes of water. Max can, in fact, hear music, but it's the difference between a live orchestra and a touch-screen phone.

escaping through the (ground floor) window, only to find that he'd also locked the back door. The cat appeared, staring at my bare feet and pyjamas, as if to say, *you too?*

In return for these human rights abuses, I had the privilege of sitting with Mum every time we took a family trip to the hospital. Dad would go in with Max, and Mum would sit with me in the waiting room, where there was an abacus and some other toys that I was too old for. When we arrived, there was always a gang of two or three children playing with them who would tell me to go away. Once, I remember distinctly, I was called 'fatty fats McNugget'. I suppose I didn't really mind being outlawed, though, if my mum was there. I would sit on her lap and help with her wordsearch. Mum explained that a wordsearch was easier than a crossword because you didn't need to know what the word meant, but she always did know, and she would always tell me. I thought of wordsearch like battleships. The big boat might look bigger and therefore nastier, but it was the easiest to hit. So if there was a word like 'sesquipedalian', it wouldn't be hiding in the corners. When we first started playing, Mum would read the words to me; later, she would try to make me read them to her. She took great pleasure in pronouncing long words with me. German has lots of long words because you can join two words together to make a new one.³

The fact that it was always my mother who looked after me during these long waits confirmed my instinct that my mother and I got on the best. Though the rules weren't stated, we wouldn't speak sign in the waiting room, and we would not talk about Max.

Lots of people love their mothers, but I think it's fair to say I loved mine more than you love yours. When I was very young, it

3 DW: I can't find any record that Günter spoke German, even later, in London. His mother seems never to have taught him, perhaps because she had spent so long convincing herself she was English.

felt as if we were still one person, as if my every need were preempted by her. Nestled in close, I could hold her and have her arms surround me and almost feel she still carried me through the world. We had been separated, of course, but I was still a part of her. If I ventured out into the world at all, it was on her behalf, as an extension of her, and I would always report back on the things I had seen and done, the knowledge I had collected to share with her. Sometimes, to help me in my job of bringing the world to her, she would tell me things that she already knew, things that would help me understand what I was seeing and doing. And even though I got things wrong, and I never knew the right thing to say, and I sometimes forgot to put socks between my feet and my shoes, she loved me.

She wasn't pretending, either. She liked to look at me. She thought my jokes were funny, even or especially if they didn't make sense. As we grew older I wanted to reach a balance point in our relationship where I might also look after her. But I never got that far. Even in the end, I had no way to comfort her as she had comforted me.

Salad Days

When I was seven, my father took me to discover glass. Mum had a shift on the checkouts at Sainsbury's, and there wasn't space to hide me under the till, so I had to go on Dad's business trip. Dad was a salesman. What he sold changed regularly, so the only constant was that he was always selling something. He never excelled, which means he probably didn't cheat anyone out of their money, but when other children asked me what my dad did, I got a bit confused and mumbled something about him wearing a tie.

My father has always been a straightforward man. You wouldn't catch him using two words when one would do. You'd never catch him using words when a nod would do, though this did not make him good at sign language. He was always an advocate of just getting on with it, eating what was put in front of him, putting one foot in front of the other, drinking in moderation, almost hitting targets, making ends meet, walking before jogging, but he would never tell you this because he kept himself to himself. He has not, until recently, been the kind to share his thoughts or feelings, so I used to think of him as a kind of anti-philosopher, capable of doing many things unthinkingly that others might question.

On this particular day, my father had to take a trip to Dudley. He couldn't very well have taken me into his meeting,

as I liked to pull out long strings of questions which, if left unchecked, would unravel the very jumper of the universe. I might have ruined the meeting, and cost Dad his reputation, or worse, his job, and then there wouldn't be any money for food or the mortgage. To have allowed that to happen would have been irresponsible. So he did something that would no longer be considered Good Parenting: he found the nearest museum, put me in it, and told me not to leave the building.⁴

At first I wandered around peering at and through the pieces on display, marvelling at how they chewed up the world and spat it back out in swirls and strange perspectives. It was very like a liquid, but frozen, so when a kindly old man told me that glass was in fact a very slow liquid, I could see for myself that he must be right. And yet how very like a solid it behaved, how very like ice. I had just learnt about solids and liquids and gases, and it definitely looked like a solid. It was exciting to see something breaking the rules.

I learnt that glass was one of the first materials that man made; that scientists found glass very useful because it could hold almost any chemical; glass was made of the same stuff as sand; glass was the reason Galileo saw the stars.

I imagined that my family were the royalty of glass. I was Günter, Prince of Glass, and people could see straight through me, and they came to me to ask about the stars and I gave them all the answers. As I wandered towards the end of the hall, I wondered what my father, King of Glass, was up to. He was probably magicking sand into crystal palaces for the people of Dudley. That must be why he travelled so much, because Salisbury didn't really have any sand. And he went on a trip to Bournemouth once, and there was lots of sand there.

⁴ DW: It's called The Broadfield House Glass Museum. It's still there, if you're ever stuck for childcare.

Thinking about my dad made me feel lonely. I looked around and there were some adults standing still and looking at things and holding their chins, but they all looked very stern, and I was hungry, and my dad had left me all alone. I began to well up. If Dad was making castles he had to show me how for when I was king, and it was very mean of him not to take me along. Instead I was alone in this stupid place, and he'd been gone for – I looked at the clock – thirty-seven minutes! I started to cry in earnest.

The old man who had told me about glass being a liquid came over and knelt down beside me.

'Now then, where's your daddy?'

'I don't know,' I said angrily. I'd thought that much was obvious.

'Deary me,' he said. 'Would you like to come and sit with me behind the desk?'

I nodded, still a bit angry.

'Come on then,' he said. I took his hand, which felt like sugar paper.

We sat behind the desk in the foyer, and I took the money from people and gave it to him to put in the register. He gave me one of his liver sausage sandwiches. When he chewed, his moustache wriggled.

'Your moustache is lovely,' I told him. He laughed.

'Thank you,' he said. 'Where's your moustache?'

'I left it at home,' I said. 'My moustache is made of glass.'

'Is it now?'

'Yes, it was a present from the Queen of Sweden,' I said. I instantly regretted saying the last bit. It had been quite believable up to then. Now he probably knew I was fibbing. I wasn't very good at telling lies.

But he didn't seem to notice, and after a few minutes another man came up to us and said hello. He was wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt with thick, tight sleeves over his forearms like black bandages.