

The Glass Ceiling

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"Do your duty, lad." he often said, "I expect nothing more." and nothing less - the implied corollary.

"You'll get your dues." she reassured him, adding her thoughts to her husbands.

"My dues", the boy mused. Such an ill-defined term in his mind. He expected *they* had a clearer view, but from his perspective, the term was far from binding, and certainly not generous.

Why would it be? The system didn't work like that. The rich and powerful made the terms and offered you your "dues", and that was fair, and it was all that could be expected. Afterwards you go to your hovel and I'll return to my "castle", mansion, estate, or warm house. Either way, we all got what was fair, didn't we?

"You are not very capable, or indeed properly educated." they intoned, "It's not your fault." He could just imagine the remainder of the speech. He'd "heard" it all through his life, not usually spelled out in words, for they might sound rude, or worse, boorish, but certainly in the consistent way he'd been treated throughout his existence.

It was the way of the "Empire". It had been this way for years, no, for generations! No matter the actual timescale, for him, it was all of his short life, and all he had experienced.

His mind wandered back to the subliminal message, "... As I was saying," politely clearing his throat with a quiet "ahem", "my role here is different to yours, you see." There was no implied question mark indicating a response might be necessary. It seemed clear that the hearer did see - how could they not? "I do rather important thinking and planning jobs." The voice in his head began to take on that typical and irritating tone of those used to spouting forth great wisdom and insight to the lesser mortals whose job was to lap up the scraps of the conversation they might understand... one day ... with diligence and application ... hopefully. In the meantime, one was expected to smile and nod. Just smile and nod.

He did neither. He did notice a small smudge that appeared to be hanging in mid-air. He rubbed his eyes, but it was still there. *This smudge can't exist on nothing.* Blinking several times in a row to clear his vision, he wondered if it was on a glass object that might surround his unimportant life. Its existence had simply popped into being this very minute, right? *It can't have always been there, could it?* Certainly, these two question marks were real, and the smudge had to be on something.

The drone resumed in his head despite his efforts to silence it: "We each do our part to help. You should do your *very* best." He couldn't help noticing the added "very", which made it almost sound fatherly and made an attempt at appearing caring.

At first, when he became aware of the unspoken message and somewhat sad glances that came his way when congratulated for completing an often menial task, he felt proud. Now, a little older and having "heard" the speech repeated so often, his view began to reveal a different hue.

He had gradually become aware that this country which he called "home" was built on ancient foundations. For time immemorial, humans had gradually settled into undefined groups; the "have-mores" and the obligatory partner, the "have-lesses".

Those who were given more had more expected from them; a greater responsibility, if you will. And so, if they did poorly, then many suffered, but if they did well, then we all benefited... or did we? Somehow, much too often, the “have-mores” took an extra cut of the benefit. “After all, I need space in my head to do all the planning and ...” the implication seemed to be, “... to carry this heavy responsibility for you all (not that *they* understand the dreadful burden of that).” This second explanation was only heard rarely, and generally not from sober lips, let alone in the presence of “have-lesses” and the aside was virtually never spoken out loud at all.

And so it was that he found himself faced with doing his duty and preparing to expect his dues. Somehow, on this day, the speech espousing this way of thinking didn't seem to make sense. The speech had likely never made sense, but that was of little consequence, given that he was never inclined to take the time to think on it.

Perhaps he had been too young, or perhaps too busy. Could it be that he was just too limited in his ability to ask the questions that seemed “above his station” in life?

He cast his mind back. Now that the speech sounded nonsensical, he couldn't force it to make sense again. It was like looking at a picture of two separate images. Once one saw the second image, the first, which initially seemed so clear, became elusive. One couldn't “unsee” what had become evident. It is like a blemish on an item that one's eye is forcibly drawn to after noticing it.

It was frustrating and left him bemused. The world had held together and made sense for years, and now, quite suddenly, there seemed to be cracks joining the smudge on the glass: and they all hadn't existed until very recently. Worse still, as he looked, the cracks lengthened, like those in a windscreen that is heated by the radiance of the Sun. The whole glass structure began to shift and the tension would lead to the inevitable shattering into disparate shards.

It was unclear what would happen if it shattered in its entirety, but he began to dread it. True, it felt somewhat claustrophobic, noticing that one was hemmed in so tightly. True, breathing deeply was hard in this constricting space. There was, however, safety here, and predictability. What if this glass shattered completely? What kind of space would he be in? What kind of world? How would he cope? What would his place be in this new arena?

He chided himself, as he did at times, in a low voice “How did I get so confused? Why couldn't I have left the glass alone? Why did I have to fiddle with things I don't understand, things that are not mine to play with?”

Staring out at the sky, he noticed it looking bluer and somehow bigger. The trees looked greener and like they were reaching for something more. Even the birds looked freer and frivolous in their flitting flight. The world, *his* world, did somehow feel different; scarier, broader, life-filled, hopeful, lighter. But why now? What had changed?

In a sense, nothing had changed. The same place, the same house, the same people, the same state of play, the same expectations, and the same lack thereof. And yet, much had changed. The bedrock of his life seemed to have shifted. Cracked? Smashed?

Somehow, his usual self-chiding didn't seem to fit with the light openness that he now felt. The glass was indeed in danger of coming to pieces; the bedrock too. Being unclear what to do, he stared again at the sky, the trees and the birds. For reasons that

seemed to emanate from deep within his body, he lifted his hands up, unfurled his fingers and faced his palms to the sky. He felt like he was bigger than he had ever been, and more substantial, too.

He held his hands stretched up in this unfamiliar posture for longer than he expected. It felt effortless. It opened his chest, his mind and his eyes. He stared at the sky intently, like he saw it for the first time. And then ... Well, then he did something that felt quite foolish and perhaps even childish. Slowly and purposefully, he wrapped his arms snugly around his chest.

He had never seen anyone do this, and even though he did it, he had no idea where the idea came from. It was just that the sky was so blue and the trees so green and the birds so carefree and ...

Suddenly, the light came on, like a sunrise in a cloudless sky. Rays shooting shockingly into squinting eyes. The reality: now too intense to take in all at once.

That's why the glass looked fractured! That's why the world looked entirely different. That's why he needed to express in his body feelings that were unfamiliar. It seemed such an insignificant event at the time, such a brief conversation, so little communicated, and yet ... so much.

He had done what was expected, just like he always did. This time, however, the person had, quite spontaneously, like it was the most natural thing in the world, not just given him his "dues". They didn't treat him according to his rightful station. They caught his eye, held his gaze, and with a full heart said, "Thank you."

He knew instantly that they meant it. He could tell by their body language that they had seen what he did, and despite his having done his job as expected, they were truly grateful to him, personally. They hadn't taken him for granted. They hadn't ignored the hired help.

In that one two-word sentence, his world changed. Both words were chosen carefully, and both were filled with meaning. They were combined with an extended and intentional eye-to-eye contact. Someone valued him, honoured him, and saw him.

He had never really been seen before, and this experience had changed how he saw himself. If they could treat him like that, perhaps someone else might also treat him with value. And ... it may even be that the ember that those words ignited deep in his soul might grow into a consistent flame, that could one day shine forth from his eyes as a warm and blazing fire: "I am a person of value. I am appreciated. Here I am. See me."

His eyes were opening. The glass finally lay in tiny splinters. The world was bigger than he knew. He was bigger. Nothing would ever be the same. Dignity had been generously offered. Dignity had been gratefully received.