

# GLASS AIR

a novel by  
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## GLASS AIR

### A big day

The priest had to be there; there was no way around it. He came late, held long speeches and didn't bring gifts. His yellowed eyes hung on everything and everyone across the table from him. Especially glasses which were filled and emptied and perhaps filled again. Each one of them was mirrored in his sharp gaze, while the guests shuddered slightly, whispered remarks in a nearby ear and tried to chat primly about something pleasing. Farther down, on his side of the table, the guests sat more comfortably shielded, murmuring to one another.

Some people threw caution to the wind and didn't invite Fy and Bi, the tall, bony priest and his little plump wife; or they ignored tradition, like my mother and grandmother, when I was going to be confirmed in my red confirmation dress.

At first I was embarrassed when I walked into the confirmation room, where the priest was saying thank you for the invitations to one person after the other, and then he walked right past me with a bitter expression. But later I felt resolute.

Some priests measured their popularity by the number of invitations they received to confirmations, baptisms and funerals, but in reality they hated – and their wives even more so – these local parties, smelling of perfume, soup, roast and ice cream.

From the day I started trying on my dress, it was like waving a red flag in the faces of the other girls and parents. The dress was taken carefully from the closet and hung up on the living room door, where we could see it while we drank coffee and ate extra delicious pastries. The grocer's daughter Betty saw it first, when she delivered the groceries. She didn't say anything, but she took a couple of deep breaths. The following day, Henriette Larsen came with her father to do some work. She was smarter and more talented than other ten-year-olds and even than many adults. Whenever she had a day off from school she was the most ambitious of the shelving workers. She could run a sander just as well as her father, Svend. And she could sweep, fill, and tie sawdust sacks better than Warehouse-Kurt. Always the same weight, always tied properly and placed in a row for pick-up. She wanted to look at the dress while the men had their afternoon coffee break, surrounded by stacks of beautiful new planks, amid the pleasant wood aroma. She

stood for a while looking up at it with her neck bent back. “The picture,” she said. “This is going to add a wrong color to the confirmation picture on the church door.”

“No it won’t,” I said. “Whoever wants a white dress, wears white...”

“The whole picture,” she said. “The whole day will be colored wrong. The red messes it up. You...are messing it up.”

And the red dress disturbed the priest’s presence in front of the altar. I could feel it. It was buzzing inside me. And when my name was called, filling the room, and my mother and grandmother stood up and looked my way, I couldn’t budge.

I stood out in the picture on the door.

When we got home, I wanted to run into the house and see my gifts, but they stopped me.

All the packages and telegrams with and without money in them were locked in the blue room, and the key was in my mother’s pocket, where it would stay until after dessert. Then I could receive the gifts along with the people who gave them.

I was placed behind the flower decoration at the table with all the white napkins and all the polished glasses, while my mother and grandmother stood by the door greeting guests. I listened to the voices through the open doorways and guessed who they could be. Each voice was a surprise. Cousin Ida, beautiful as always, sending me a warm smile from the doorway, came without her husband. Frederik Land came. “Here comes number twelve,” he said chuckling, holding up his table card. We pointed to the plate with the number twelve on it simultaneously and looked curiously at the empty chairs. Who was going to sit there? Now we were three.

Henriette and her father and Ena Luna and her parents all came together. They liked me. Finn from the factory, who had picked pears for me from the tall tree since I was little; Sjuff, who took secret shortcuts in his truck when he drove me to or picked me up from Vera or Emmeli’s houses. The lady from the bakery, who gave me cookies over the counter when no one else was in the store, and with whom I talked like a grown-up and told her what I knew from the neighborhood about money issues, illnesses, deaths and pregnancies.

The food was good, and I was hungry and happy. Between courses the guests acted like strangers, as they thought of what to say to each other. Strangers, but also jovial and a bit impatient in their fine clothes. I thought about the blue room with the gifts, and I didn’t talk to anyone.

Afterward I kept imagining them in their fine clothing at my confirmation table, whenever I met them or talked to them at the factory. It was so great to see them smile like that, free and easy. That was last party we held at home. I got sick six months later and never had the same relationship to other people again.

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November 19

The north wind is whistling in the downspouts.

The winter apples are small and hard as rocks this year. The pile of peels, cores, and scabby spots is three times as big as the morsels of white apple flesh.

How miserable and poor to stand with freezing, fruit-covered fingers like that and cut myself without realizing it, and then to see the thin, watered-down blood drip into the sink.

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November 22, 2015

The young girls examine fashion, pop, and porno magazines, all of which tell them that they don't measure up. Their eyes are wrong or they don't see what the girls in the pictures see. There is something wrong with the shape of their heads and their hair. The model's is lighter and curlier, much smoother, darker and puffy as a pillow. Not only the first model's but also the second's, the third's and the fourth's; all the models' hairstyles are unachievable with the girls' own poor hair, which can only be hidden under a cap. Their earlobes sticking out, pointier or flatter, are different too. Their faces below the caps are too narrow, too small, too wide, the ears, the chins... Their feet ruin any effort at creating a good figure. Just one that is tolerable. They are too long or too short and flat, too high an arch, too pudgy or bony. Not one of the models, not one in a hundred of them, which the girls can find surfing the internet for an hour, the many hundreds until late into the night and the next day, has feet like them. No one must have feet like theirs, and everyone must stare at them. They stick out like blocks, jutting like tops of fenceposts, stumpy and crooked. Not even Hans Christian Andersen in his tight pants had such conspicuous ugly feet. Not in the picture of him in the park nor in the living room nor in any of the gallery portraits. Not even Prime Minister Estrup, when he was shot. No man, woman or child was ever so ashamed or made such a comical and vain attempt to hide them with tiny ballerina shoes, stiff ladies' shoes, stilettos, bound feet, sports shoes, overly tightened straps and buckles. And their hands. The first thing you see... Trying to hide them in gloves or pockets only makes the matter worse. Their arms are put on wrong, horribly, on clunky, lumpy shoulders. Not even the fat Minister of Commerce in his poorly-fitted red jacket, not even the Italian singer who has to be searched for on a cell-phone late at night, far removed from the ranks of the fashion models, has shoulders like that. Rear ends, oh no, and thighs... While the girl with the white hairband in all positions... especially her, but, also Ann, Lua, Bibi, Liz, Della, Doris... Page after page, photo after photo, well-formed and beautiful. So unlike the reflection in the mirror with its pants down around her heels, her top pulled up. Breasts, nipples – pitiful, embarrassing; the secret lie underneath the clothing; labia too lopsided, crooked, too fat here, too narrow there, flatter than all the models, slanted and curled differently than all the proud, ample girls. Miserable, disgusting deformities.

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Sunday, November 29

Out of breath at the keyboard

In the clearing on the ridge I passed two thin young men from the refugee camp in their blue ski caps, not Arab faces with black hair, but light brown, wherever they came from in Africa. Maybe this is where the new story begins without us.

With the image of their dark features on my retina, I recognized Ina Hennesen far ahead of me. She was on her bicycle, tiny and windblown like a slanted red letter in the sidewind. Her coat was luminous in the rainy mist. After I passed her, I watched her for a couple of seconds in my rear-view mirror, and I saw her wave her arm vigorously, stop pedaling, and use her entire body to signal for me to stop.

I braked too fast, which yanked the seatbelt and I almost hit my forehead on the windshield. There were no other cars, and plenty of room for an easy U-turn in the road. When I made it back to Ina, I rolled up beside her and stopped on the shoulder against the flow of traffic.

She leaned in, resting her body on the bike seat, with her face close to mine through the open window.

“Hi, Elvine.” The damp mist didn’t faze her, as it dripped down her stiff cold face, like water over a newly washed porcelain bowl. “Don’t you think that loyalty is the most important thing?”

“Sure,” I said. “You have to be able to trust...”

She seemed to look inward. “If you’re not loyal, you’re nothing, so... I see it the same way. You can’t let your folks down, especially the weak, the old and sick, and the children... The young men in the camp. How can they leave behind their parents, their siblings, their grandparents... How can they deal with it... I couldn’t.”

“No,” I said. “No.” I thought about my childhood, when I had young and vibrant relatives. I saw them before me so vital and alive, laughing and crying. Two or three infirm old folks, who are more distant family, I never hear from.

“But what do we know. Nothing. Where they come from, on which side, or how...”

“No, we don’t know who they are,” I said, “but we know that a person can change from being a criminal to being a good citizen and back again, when the opportunity arises. Like from *Les Misérables*.”



“Did you see those two walking?” She glanced back over her shoulder up the road. A scooter was approaching. “You should have seen their surprised, shy smiles when I smiled at them. Dear God, they are only big boys. Maybe not even twenty years old. I don’t think so... Two good-looking boys, nice and sensitive. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“No,” I said. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“They pour gasoline on each other and light it.” Ina pursed her top lip and brought the words to the front of her mouth as she inhaled. “And cut each others heads off. My God... and here.”

We gazed up at a grayish purple sky, across the fields towards the horizon. The rain was moving in a tight band across a buffeted windbreak, across the road behind it, towards the choppy sea.

“What are they doing here? They don’t fit in.”

The boys were coming closer, step by step. I was following them in my rear-view mirror. Ina was staring at them unabashed. We didn’t understand one another’s languages and we weren’t hiding our curiosity. Just eyes. Staring coldly and hard at us. We relented.

As they passed us, we smiled. I looked the closer one in the eye. His short, kind-eyed smile was deep and reserved, foreign to himself. And we had just been thinking how many of them were terrorists and murderers.

We watched them pass as they continued walking down the hill. They turned and looked back. The one walked with even, light, young strides, while the other walked a bit unbalanced and wobbly. Then we couldn’t see the lower part of their legs anymore. They were quickly approaching the trees at the bottom. Only their torsos bounced slightly at the road edge, then their shoulders in the shiny eggplant colored coat, and in the blue coat, and the ski caps. Then they were gone.

“Spindly,” I said. “Still boys. Maybe in their twenties. And their own kind will hunt them like rats if they go back home. As deserters and curs. Here, boys; there...”

“I don’t think I want to be a mother. They have a mother, a kind of aunt...” said Ina. “That’s what I was thinking when I drove by them, until I stopped here.” Her words tumbled out as if from deep inside her.

Ina, who otherwise always looks down and hides from people, opened up.

“That’s it, Elvine. Invite them over for coffee, set a nice table, like people do here. Sit nicely and offer them...”

The meek find those even meeker and more oppressed, and try to take the initiative for once, make something happen, take the lead: Here you go, have a seat, and they sit there, because she decided it. She gives them what she wants to give them.

“Should I feed them? What are they used to? Have they been starving, scraping rice from a tin plate with their fingers? Have they survived on camel milk? Or have slaves served them caviar, which they ate with silver spoons?

“Would it be wrong to offer them coffee with something sweet to go with it?”

“No, not at all,” I said. “You should do whatever you want.”

“Is this just to make myself feel better?

“Or to get them to like me? That’s what it is, isn’t it?”

“Don’t think like that,” I said. “If you want to do it, it doesn’t matter. That’s just speculation. Why should you be worse than anyone else?”

“I would like to be a kind of aunt... where they could come... and visit a bit... I have so many good apples right now...

“Maybe in time... I could leave my house to them. That’s all there is anyway. The bathrooms, the porch, furniture... ready to use... Imagine someone doesn’t even have a roof over their head. And then to suddenly receive what’s been so difficult to get. And it’s what I have put my time and effort into.

“And they might be victims of torture, back where they came from – or murderers.”

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Advent Saturday

Dark, gloomy, windy, wet.

Ever since I was five and my hair was combed straight back, stinging my scalp when my mother brushed it smooth and put barrettes in, it has been one misfortune after the other, like a magnet attracts another magnet. But no one paid it any mind, as if I didn’t know that that was

what was going on. I wasn't thinking of myself, but of the others – my dead father, my bereaved mother, my bereaved grandmother. I thought about the expensive repair of the sander motor and of replacing the planer, and of the new burgeoning housing market and factories. I thought about my mother's cough and my grandmother's back pains, and Sven Larsen's strange, extended illness: So where does it hurt? Where is he sick? Is it getting worse? It got worse. When will he be well again? Will he get well? I thought about how little he worked and about the sick pay when he didn't show up. One day I was sitting in the pile of sawdust with my coloring book and crayons, keeping myself from picking up the prettiest color first. The other ones shouldn't be just ignored. Suddenly I thought, I hope Sven dies, so we can hire a strong, healthy man for the same pay.

The thought was out. Warehouse-Kurt stood there looking at me from the door. I jumped up in a cloud of sawdust and ran all the way to the house, into the closet under the stairs, where I sat for a long time hugging my legs with my chin on my knees. I was a devil. My thoughts were devils in my head. He will never get better. Shut out lies and sickness. Shut out Sven. Get rid of him and his little girl, Henriette. My mother and grandmother must never know I was like that. They wouldn't be able to handle it. My happy mother, who ran like the wind through the house, sang aloud from every corner as she worked. My good grandmother, who held my hand in town to show me off, even though I was too old for that. They must never find out what my grandmother's cousin, the white-haired butcher, did to me with his red hands, his pruned fingers and frayed nails in the stuffy office after closing.

They liked seeing me in the swing on the barn beam. They liked seeing me happy. When I was happy, they were happy.

One day I was invited to another world... when I was twelve. Birgitte Skov whispered to me through the door after recess, "Come home with me after school."

It was strange to see Birgitte, who was more or less invisible in the grade's middle ranks, in this incredible house, where she meant so much and spoke so loud and clear, without even noticing that her father's bookstore on the first floor was about to go bankrupt. I saw all this at first glance, when we had parked our bicycles next to the house, where people otherwise weren't allowed, and walked through a corridor along the storage area, looking into the store from the back, through the blue cigarette smoke and the dusty shop windows. On the closest wall were shelves with books spread out, leaning on each other in little bunches, as if to make them appear

more numerous. But what was most noticeable were the bare shelves. Lacquered, worn and chipped plywood, assembled with screws which in some places had lost their wood putty. The shelf backs and crosspieces had loosened. There were small gaps everywhere. Half-centimeter wide shadows and cracks. A number of the shelves bowed in the middle from the weight of earlier titles; in other places, the ends sagged. There were no straight lines. On the bottom shelves there were rows of paper packages. The top shelf was decorated with a faded plaster figurine. On the back wall one or two books were placed with the front cover facing out. Here and there a faded cover. The same book in several places, as if people wouldn't notice. There were no customers in the shop.

When Birgitte shouted, "Elvine came home with me," an answer came from a stool in the shadow of the thick tobacco smoke. "Fine, Birgitte. I'm glad you're home. Go up to your mother. The boys *are* here."

Mrs. Miller opened the door when we were halfway up the steps. "So here you are child; and you have a friend with you." I blushed at the thought that I never paid Birgitte any attention.

Mrs. Miller laid a hand on Birgitte's head as she went past and tossed her schoolbag into the corner below the coat hooks. I shook hands and was invited inside, as if I were also a child of the house.

"You probably could really use a snack about now," said Mrs. Miller, going into the kitchen, while we went into the living room, where the boys sat eating a bag of nuts. They had an impressive globe that lit up in front of them, and a radio on behind them, while they pretended to do homework. They cracked the nuts with their teeth and threw the shells at each other and at us.

Birgitte picked up a few shells from a recliner behind us, threw them and hit the smaller of the boys on the top of his head. "Girls," he said, continuing to crack nuts and gnaw them with an open book in front of him.

Birgitte knelt on the seat of a chair with her torso leaning over the big table. She usually sat at a school desk like everyone ought to sit. "You can go get the cake," she said to her big brother.

"You go yourself," he said. He sat there drawing a big contraption with a ruler and compass. It had pipes, containers, rods and plates.

"I have company."

"Don't you want some homemade cake?" their mother yelled from the kitchen. It smelled good.

“We want homemade cake and cakes from the bakery too,” Birgitte yelled back. To her brother she said, “I got them when you had company.”

The bigger and rather lanky boy collected his things at the opposite end of the twelve-person table and indulged his little sister.

Jenny Miller stood in the doorway with a purse for him.

“One cream puff and one napoleon hat for each person,” said Birgitte, chewing loudly on her gum. Smacking.

Jenny Miller shook her head. A quick and reluctant smile passed over her lean face. “Birgitte,” she said.

The boy glanced at his mother as he took the purse. “Well fine, then” she said, looking over the table. Then she opened the linen cabinet and took out a gray-blue tablecloth with white birds on it, which was big enough to cover half the table. “Can you move for a second?” she said to Birgitte. Birgitte remained lying on the table for a few moments, chewing, then she sighed, moved off the table and leaned back in her chair. She held tight to the table edge and rocked back a couple of times, so the rear chair legs creaked.

Her mother paid no attention to her daughter’s misconduct; she set the table. Cups, small plates, cream and sugar. Everything was placed neatly and carefully for each setting. For Birgitte, for her friend, for the older son, for the younger one, the handle of each cup turned towards the person’s hand, the fork to eat the treats with, the dish with the cake and the cake server.

When the big brother came back with the bakery box, the mother placed the cakes carefully on shiny serving dishes and said amiably, “enough of that,” when the little brother stuck his finger in the whipped cream and then sucked it clean.

The mother loaded a tray and went downstairs to her husband in the shop; she came back and sat down at the unclaimed cup at the table, then looked around at each of us.

She elevated serving dishes and pitchers, poured and served the pampered children gently, sweetly and mildly, smiled forbearingly when an arm reached across the table for a particular piece before another got it, and then tried to find a piece that was just as good or better for the one who missed out.

She ate the children's treats with her eyes. While they ate and chewed, stuffing themselves, she was enjoying the whipped cream, cream filling and pastry just as much. She wasn't thinking about reality.

She was thinking of them and their welfare, and they were thinking of themselves, their wishes, and their plans; what they wanted. They wanted to have fun:

"I want to go to Tivoli."

"I want a white leather suitcase."

"I want to go to the Canary Islands."

"My coat is too short, I can't go out like that."

"I want a TV in my bedroom."

They imagined everything and didn't think of the price, or if what they received deprived someone else. Each saw themselves in the airplane with a little tray in front of them and a new bathing suit in their suitcase. They walked right to the movie theater, the burger stand and the hair salon. Blind and deaf. Without a thought for the expense and the economy tightening around us and causing business after business to close. They paid no attention to that and didn't give a thought to the future.

I wanted to save what could be saved. Nothing more.

When someone close to me turned out to have plans and illusions, a wall came down between us.

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