# Glass Houses

Robert F. Young

She is standing in her window waiting for me. She waits for me every night when I come on guard. She knows my post as well as I do—knows exactly when I will appear around the curvature of the force field. We are would-be lovers, she and I, thwarted by time and electronic sorcery.

In the lights that the army installed around the Time colony, we can see each other as well as though it were day. She smiles at me as I gaze up at her through the invisible field. Marianne. Her face is that of a beautiful woman and simultaneously that of a child. She has just combed her bright yellow hair. Her negligee is pink, but not much more so than the flesh it tries to conceal.

The field acts as a sound barrier, too, but we have learned to read each other’s lips. With hers, she forms the wordsI love you, Wayne. I form the wordsI love you, too with mine.

Who would dream that love could come to a sentry while he walked his post? Who would dream he could awaken love in a girl from the future who had come back to the past?

I ask the oft-repeated question:Marianne, have you found a way? She answers:No, but I will soon.

I want to take you in my arms. I want to kiss your hair.

I want you to.

So somehow you must escape.

Only with a disseminator can I burn through the field, and a disseminator is difficult to obtain.

Why are you imprisoned in the past?

I told you before, it does not matter why.

You must escape, Marianne. I cannot live without you.

I will, I will, I will.

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I continue on my way. At unexpected times, the corporal of the guard makes his rounds, and I do not want him to catch me talking to Marianne. I walk to where the next post begins. The sentry who has it has moved out of sight beyond the curvature of the field. I would be able to see him, but the colonists’ houses are in the way. I am grateful for the conformation of the colony, for it has enabled me to keep my trysts with Marianne a secret from the other guards.

I unsling my rifle and rest for a while before starting back. It is a warm August night. I cannot see the stars because of the mercury-vapor lights, but I know that they are out. I think the moon has set. I re-sling my rifle and start back. It is unnecessary baggage. It is meant to discourage people from coming too close to the field, but the colony is out of bounds by night and no one ever comes near it.

Marianne disappeared from the window when I left. Now she reappears.I have thought of you all day , she “says.”

And I have thought of you.

There must be other women in your life besides me.

There are none anymore.

I find that hard to believe.

It is true. But with you, there must be other men.

The men I know, compared to you, are dead leaves blowing in the wind.

We converse at intervals the whole night through. We do so every night when I am on guard. At 6:30, we say good night; at 7:00, I am relieved. She must be sound asleep by now. Perhaps she is dreaming of me.

I know that I shall dream of her.

\* \* \*

I do not like the army, but it has proved to be a blessing in disguise, for if I had not enlisted, I would never have found Marianne.

No doubt I would have come to see the Time Colony and would have stood with the other sightseers staring at the people and the houses beyond the field. But I would not have seen Marianne. Even if she had come to her window, I would not have seen her, for sightseers are not allowed to go close to the field. Then, too, the colony has many windows, and during the day many people from the future look through them into the past. With so many faces and standing so far away, I would never have been able to isolate Marianne’s.

The first time I went on duty at night, I had the eleven-to-seven shift. For a while all the windows were empty, then Marianne stepped into hers. I looked up at her and she looked down at me. After that, I made sure I got the same post again each time I went on guard at night. The other guys did not care which section of the field they patrolled. They did not know about Marianne. Soon she and I learned to read each other’s lips. Soon we fell in love.

I asked the lieutenant who is in charge of our contingent if I could have the eleven-to-seven shift right along. He looked at me as though he thought I were crazy. Then he shrugged and said it was all right with him. I was tempted to ask him if I could dispense with my nights off, but I did not think it would be wise. I always tell Marianne ahead of time when someone else will be walking my post. I know she does not appear in her window on those nights, for whenever one of the other guys sees an attractive woman, he raves about it for days.

\* \* \*

When the Time Colony first appeared, there was a national alert, and the army at once put it out of bounds. Only after it became certain that it posed no danger and that the force field enclosing it threw forth no harmful radiation was the restriction lifted. Thousands of people began coming to view the phenomenon, people from all over the world, and the nearby town of Weberville began growing fat and rich. Only a contingent of troops guards the field now, but in the beginning our whole company was involved. But interest waned, and there really was not much of anything to see, since the colony, despite the field enclosing it, does not look markedly different from an ordinary village. People, in fact, have even begun referring to it as such. If it is indeed a village, it is a dead one, for the people in it do not work. All they do is go for leisurely walks, or sit for hours in the “village” park. The only real activity they ever engage in is a game much like croquet that they sometimes play in their back yards. Their houses are as uninteresting as they are. The structures are modular, but in appearance do not differ greatly from most modern two-story dwellings. Nevertheless, in two respects the colony, when thought of as a village, is unique: It contains no children, and all of the “villagers” are beautiful.

My “villager” is the most beautiful one of all.

\* \* \*

Marianne, you must hurry and find a way.

The only way is with a disseminator.

Get one now.

I cannot. They are for emergency use only and are under lock and key. But I will get the key, Wayne—I will, I will, I will.

Who has it? Your jailer?

There is no jailer. We are not truly imprisoned, but it is against the rules for any of us to leave.

Why should it be against the rules?

It is not necessary for you to know.

I want you, Marianne.

I want you, too.

I cannot wait to hold you in my arms.

I will get the key, Wayne—I will, I will, I will.

\* \* \*

A letter from my mother. Everything is fine back home. Dad sends his love. P.S.: Jennifer got married.

Jennifer?

Oh, yes—the girl I used to go with. I had almost forgotten her name.

\* \* \*

Marianne, did you get the key?

Yes. I have it hidden away.

If you have the key, then get the disseminator now.

I cannot get it till tomorrow, because at night there is a guard. Oh, Wayne, I am so afraid.

You do not have to be afraid. Once you are free, I will take care of you.

But your world is so different from mine.

You will be happy in it. I will make you happy.

Where will you take me?

I will find a place for you in town. We will live there together. I will marry you.

You do not have to marry me.

I do not have to, but I will.

How will I get to town?

I will take you there. After you break free.

Oh, Wayne I am so afraid.

\* \* \*

In the beginning, the people who are from the future were thought to be from the stars. The learned men who put their heads together concluded that the colony had been transmitted to Earth by an alien race whose technology was so advanced that ours, when compared to it, was still in the Tinkertoy stage. But when closer scrutiny revealed that the colonists are exactly like us, another answer had to be found, for the odds against two identical life forms existing on two different worlds are astronomical. Nevertheless, it was a long time before the learned men finally faced the fact that since the colony could not conceivably have come from the stars, and since matter transmission is as far beyond the Russians’ ken as it is beyond ours, the colony must have been sent back from the future.

Why had it been sent back? Certainly not so the people in it could study the past, for they never emerged from their electronic cocoon, and although they often looked through its invisible walls at the surrounding countryside, the expressions on their faces indicated that they did so out of boredom rather than scientific curiosity.

Attempts were made to contact them, but they ignored the learned men who sought entrance at their “door.” Attempts were made to short-circuit the field, but it proved to be as far beyond the grasp of present-day electronics experts as quantum mechanics would be to a five-year-old child.

It is said that the termnuclear bomb passed through some of the learned minds and even escaped some of the learned lips. I find this hard to believe.

Why don’t they talk to us? one anchorman bewailed. Think of all the wonderful things they could tell us! Think how easily they could solve the problems that beset us every day!

Sometimes the colony makes me think of a huge bathysphere that has been dropped deep into the sea of time. The people in it are looking out at fish swimming around them in the sea. Marianne saw a fish she liked, and the fish is me.

\* \* \*

I go into town and rent a small apartment. I return to camp and try to fall asleep. I cannot. That evening I sit on my bunk and smoke too many cigarettes. At quarter of eleven, the other guards and I are driven to the colony in the personnel carrier. Marianne is in her window waiting for me. She says yes when I ask her if she has the disseminator. I tell her she must wait till almost dawn before she burns through the field. She is in her negligee, and I tell her the sooner she gets dressed, the better. Next time I stop before her window, she has a short blue dress on. It is different from the dresses present-day women wear, but not radically so. You must pack, I tell her my next time by. She nods. Perhaps she already has. Throughout the night, she keeps telling me she is afraid, and I keep telling her not to be. When the sky in the east begins to brighten, I tell her there is no need to wait any longer, and she disappears from the window.

She reappears a few moments later, hurrying around the house. She is carrying a suitcase in one hand and a small object in the other. Kneeling close to the field, she points the object toward it. There is a lance of white light. It turns the section of the field directly before her a fiery blue. Blue flames leap up; there is an acrid smell. Then a hole appears in the field. She drops the object and leaps through the hole with her suitcase. The hole closes behind her. In a moment she is in my arms, soft, sweet-scented, taller than I thought she would be. I kiss her greedily, and she kisses me back no less greedily. At length I force myself to pull away. I point to a small stand of locusts about a hundred feet from the field. “Over there. You must hide. I’ll come for you as soon as I’m relieved.”

“Oh, Wayne, I’m so scared!”

I kiss her cheek. “Don’t be, Marianne. Everything will be fine.”

She hurries toward the trees. Presently the darkness beyond the range of the lights hides her from sight.

\* \* \*

It is impossible for me to go to her immediately after I am relieved. I have to return to camp with the other guards and get rid of my rifle first. Hurriedly I shave and shower and get into a clean uniform. At the gate, I call a cab. I have the driver take me back to the colony. I get out on the highway and cut across the fields to the stand of locusts. Marianne is lying in a fetal position at the foot of one of the trees. Her suitcase is lying beside her. I seize her shoulders and shake her. “Marianne!”

I pull her to her feet, and she clings to me as though a gale wind were blowing and she is afraid it will tear her away. She is trembling. “Marianne, will they come looking for you?”

“I do not think they will dare to.”

I lead her back across the fields to the highway. I did not tell the cab driver to wait, because I feared he might guess the truth. We walk the short distance to town. I lead Marianne up the stairs to our apartment. At once, we make love.

After we are through, she lies beside me on the bed, breathing softly. Although she looks like a little girl, she did not make love like one. Her flesh is roseate. Compared to it, my flesh is like that of an old man. “Is this where we are going to live together?” she asks.

“For now. In six months, I’ll be discharged. Then I’m going to take you home.”

“I thought you were going to . . . marry me.”

“I am going to. But as yet I don’t even know your last name.”

“I have none.”

“We’ll make one up.” I look at my watch. It is nearly noon. “Let’s go have lunch somewhere.”

“I Can’t. I tore my dress in the woods.”

“Put another one on.”

“I don’t have another.”

“But your suitcase—you must have one in there.”

“No. I didn’t bring one.”

“Well, what did you bring?”

“It’s not important.”

“Well, put your dress back on. We’ll go buy you another.”

\* \* \*

She picks out a cotton and polyester one. I wanted to buy her something better, but she insists it is all she needs. It does not need altering, and we return to our apartment, where she puts it on. Then we go to a small restaurant for lunch. Her table manners are quaint. Probably if I were to go back to ancient Sumer, mine would seem quaint, too.

We make love all afternoon. In the evening, we again go out to eat. Then we make love again. I am exhausted when I go back to camp to go on duty.

\* \* \*

During the night, I look often into the colony. All seems as calm as before. Perhaps Marianne’s absence has not been discovered yet. If it has been, it has given rise to no excitement.

The hours drag by. I am glad when at last I am relieved. After a shower and a shave and a change of clothes, I go immediately into town. Marianne seems to have sensed my coming, for she is lying in bed with the covers thrown back, waiting to make love.

\* \* \*

That afternoon, after I have slept part of the day away, I ask her about the future. “The world you come from, Marianne—what’s it like?”

She smiles and says, “Could you tell someone who lived thousands of years before your time what the late twentieth century is like?”

“It would be difficult.”

“It would be impossible.”

“What century are you from?”

“The date would mean nothing to you, since the Gregorian calendar is no longer in use.”

“Then tell me how many years separate your time and mine.”

“Enough of them so that I had to learn to speak English all over again when we were learning to read each other’s lips.”

“Twenty thousand?”

“No. Not quite. . . . If we keep talking about the future, we may lose track of the present.”

“Only one more question, then. How long will the colony be here?”

“There are no plans to take it back.”

“Why was it sent back in time?”

“You said only one question.”

“All right. The subject is dropped.”

After all, why should I care why she is here? The fact that sheis here is all that counts.

\* \* \*

Despite her objections, I buy her another dress and a new pair of shoes and new underthings. I also buy her a toothbrush and a comb and a brush. Although she brought her suitcase, she seems to have brought nothing in it.

It becomes known in camp that I am shacking up. Some of the guys saw Marianne and me together in a restaurant, and they keep asking me where I came up with such a dish. I introduce my buddy Steve to her one evening when he is doing the town. She is wearing the new dress I bought her. It is white and has a low neckline, and she looks as though she stepped out of a TV screen. Steve is awed. “I didn’t think they made them like that anymore!”

\* \* \*

There is a man standing in Marianne’s window!

I pretend I did not see him, and do not slow my pace. But I know he is looking at me.

The window is empty when I retrace my steps. Perhaps he only glanced through it out of idle curiosity.

But what is he doing in Marianne’s house?

\* \* \*

“Marianne, in the colony, did you live with someone?”

“. . . No.”

“There’s someone staying in your house. I saw him looking through your window.”

“. . . Perhaps someone else moved in.”

The slanted morning sunlight is full upon her face. It is the face of an innocent little girl. She is lying there in our bed waiting to make love. I cast the man from my thoughts.

That night he is standing in her window again. I try to cast him from my thoughts again, but he will not go away.

\* \* \*

The next night, when I am getting ready to go on guard, Steve asks if I will change nights off with him. He will take my place tonight if I will take his tomorrow night. He had a heavy date lined up. This is fine with me. Tonight the man in the window can watch him. After we make arrangements with the corporal of the guard, I return to town.

The wordSurprise! is on my lips as I enter Marianne’s and my apartment and walk across the little living room to the bedroom, but the word does not leave my lips. She is lying in bed with the bed light on, and her suitcase is positioned beside her. It is open, revealing the metallic control panel of some manner of machine. Wires issuing from the base of the panel are attached by electrodes to her forehead, her neck, her chest, her stomach, her arms and legs. It is as though she were taking an EKG.

When she sees me, she tears the wires away. They retract themselves, and she sits up in bed and quickly closes the suitcase and lowers it to the floor. She looks like a little girl who has been caught with her hand in a cookie jar, but she recovers quickly and holds out her arms to me. As always, I am unable to resist them.

“I thought,” she says, after we have made love, “that you were supposed to go on guard.”

I tell her that Steve and I changed off. She does not mention the suitcase. I do not, either. People who live in glass houses should not throw stones.

\* \* \*

The next afternoon, shortly after we have returned from lunch, someone begins knocking on our door. “Don’t answer!” Marianne says. I see that her face has gone pale. “Why not?” I ask. “It may be Steve.” She runs into the bedroom and closes the door.

It is not Steve. It is the man I saw in her window. Despite the August heat, he is wearing a blue pastel suit. Its styling is subtly different from that of suits I am familiar with. He has blond hair and his eyes are as blue as Marianne’s. He is built like a Greek god and is at least a foot taller than I am.

He stands in the doorway and looks into the room. He says something, only one word of which I can understand. “Marianne.”

“I don’t think she wants to see you.”

He says something else that I do not understand. He not only looks like a Greek god, he talks like one. He steps into the room, pushing me aside. He sees the closed bedroom door and starts toward it. I do not know what to do. He opens the door, and Marianne screams. “Wayne, make him go away!”

I reach up and seize his shoulder, and he turns toward me. Again he says something I do not understand, then he turns his back on me and starts to step into the bedroom. I seize one of his arms with both hands and try to pull him away from the doorway. I do not expect to be able to, he is so huge, but to my astonishment, he backs up several paces and almost loses his balance. I pull harder on his arm, and this time he does lose his balance and crashes to the floor. I have to let go his arm, and now I stand there watching him. He rolls over onto his stomach, gets up on one knee, struggles to his feet. There is terror in his blue eyes. I push him into the hallway, and he almost falls again. I slam the door. I hear his footsteps as he hurries toward the stairs.

I go into the bedroom. “Marianne, he’s gone.”

She has assumed a fetal position on the bed. I sit down beside her. “He’s gone,” I say again.

Slowly, she straightens out her legs, then turns on her back. Color comes back into her cheeks. “He was your lover, wasn’t he?” I say.

“In—in a way.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I—I was afraid.”

“You shouldn’t have been. I would have understood.”

“I don’t think you understand now.”

Yes, I do, Marianne.

“He—he won’t come back?”

“I don’t think so. When I’m not here, just lock the door.”

“He may break it down.”

I laugh. “He won’t break it down.”

“You’re not mad, Wayne?”

“No.”

She holds out her arms to me. “Let’s make love.”

“Not right now. I’m tired.”

“Later on?”

“We’ll see.”

\* \* \*

They play croquetlike games in their back yards and they go for walks in the therapeutic sunlight and they sit in the park and talk, these beautiful people from tomorrow. They were unable to bring their golf courses with them, but I am sure they brought their TVs.

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When Marianne is taking her morning shower, I place her suitcase on the bed and raise the lid and look at the control panel. There are a number of recessed dials and a switch by which the machine can be turned on and off. I know there must be batteries somewhere. At length I find the hidden receptacle that encloses them, and I remove them and recover the receptacle. They are like no batteries I have ever seen before. They are so tiny they do not even make a bulge in my shirt pocket. I close the suitcase and shove it back under the bed.

During the days that follow, I watch my true love grow old.

She does not know the batteries are gone. Probably she never knew the machine needed batteries in order to run. When I walk my post, I picture her lying in bed with the suitcase beside her, its dead wires attached to her like a web.

Age comes into her eyes first. I watch their blueness pale. I see them settle deeper and deeper into her skull. I marvel at the concavity of her temples. I pity the shuffling way she begins to walk.

I am not a monster. I put the batteries back in.

Youth blooms again, and my atrophied true love turns back into a rose. The concupiscence that my real youth awakened reappears in her eyes. But I am unable any longer to assuage it.

“You know, don’t you,” she says to me one morning.

I nod. I go into the bedroom and get her suitcase. “Can you get back in?”

Her young-old eyes will not look into mine. “Yes. He’ll let me in.”

I call a cab. On the way to the colony, I ask, “Is there no room for you in your own time?”

“No. There are too many of us. It had to be the past or euthanasia.”

“There must be other colonies.”

“There are many. Each is a century apart.” She shudders. “I do not wish to grow old. I do not wish to die.”

“No one does.”

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There are not many sightseers looking at the colony. After we get out of the cab, I lead the way around the field till we can see her window. I time our approach to coincide with the moment when both of the nearest guards will be hidden by the curvature. Her “lover” has been watching us through her window. He disappears and a few moments later comes hurrying around the house. He has a disseminator in his hand. He burns a hole in the field, and she runs through it with her suitcase. He takes her suitcase, and they embrace, and then, arm in arm, they walk back around the house.

This afternoon they will probably play “croquet” in their back yard. Later on, they will no doubt go for a walk. Perhaps they will sit for a while in the park and chat with their acquaintances. This evening they will watch TV. The future equivalent thereof. Programs beamed back from the future, actors who have not as yet been born. Sitting before the screen, perhaps they will hold hands. They will pretend that the youth that left them long ago still resides in their rejuvenated flesh. After a while they will go to bed, but they will not make love, because even in the future, old men, despite their beauty, are still old men.

All of the houses in the colony are made of glass, but I do not dare to cast a stone.

Although it is reinforced glass, all of the houses will eventually come tumbling down.

One of the guards rounds the curvature of the field. I wave to him and he waves back. No doubt he wonders what I am doing so close to the field. Before it occurs to him that he should challenge me, I turn and walk away.

Tonight is my night off. I will find a bar somewhere where young people drink and dance and revel in their youth, and I will join them and revel in mine. And if we keep reveling long enough and loudly enough and are careful not to throw stones, perhaps our own glass houses will never come tumbling down.