

The Other Side

by Zackary Sholem Berger

That was the first time I went over the wall. No bird opened its mouth to chirp. No wind blew. I staggered a little on the stony edge.

And dropped down. I changed in a cafe. Shaved. Emerged as that rare thing: a new man. My clothes were old, saved for years in my basement, but my thoughts and person were new.

The first thing was to find somewhere to stay. One problem: I was broke. The currency I had on the other side was terrible to look at, with the eagle and arrows and the face of that villain who yesterday I had to believe was the greatest of heroes, redeemer of his generation.

I saw a money card on the ground and an ATM on the corner.

At the machine I made a huge scandal, acting like my card didn't work, cursed and pounded on the machine with both fists. Broke out crying. I didn't look like a bum, with a suit on and clean-shaven.

It's true what they said! Everyone here was so goodhearted. A woman - probably in her fifties - professional looking, was dragging her daughter, 8 or 9? (I thought with a shudder of my own heirs, who knows where they were lost to) and saw that I was crying.

I bet she knew I was playacting. Her eyes shone with suppressed laughter

"Look, darling, at that poor man. We have to give him something - after all, it's a mitzvah."

That's how, smooth like a noodle from a spoon, a piece of paper fluttered out of her palm. I didn't know anything about the currency

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here, but money's money, so I wiped my tears and bent my head. I didn't want to utter the accent of the other side. I would need to do that soon enough but I wanted it to be my own terms.

The girl looked at me a long time, as if I were a crazy person, as I was walking away.

It was getting dark. I needed to find somewhere to sleep. They said on the other side that the police over here...

Suddenly I stopped, stunned. "The other side." Now I was on the other side. That means that the other side was now this side, and my side was now on the other side of the wall. I had now wandered into the wrong place.

This was a game that kids play, a trick with words, but I couldn't get out of it, I was stuck and the tears started flowing. Water from the eyes, like my grandmother used to say.

Sound of footsteps. Someone down the road heard my crying and came running over.

You won't believe me, but it was the girl whose mother gave me a handout. She stood right in front of me, a plastic shopping bag in one hand. The cars had made her green school uniform dusty.

The girl, the very picture of innocence and timelessness, gave a short hard laugh. "You're from the other side," she said nonchalantly.

She took me by the hand and dragged me for half an hour without another word. I didn't know the geography here. Finally we came to a door where a big rusted lock was hanging. A sticker on the door: "They will not pass."

From a backpack she took a small key on a pink knitted chain, like something produced by girls in summer camp.

The door opened in a strangely efficient way, like it wanted to show the world that it wasn't the kind of door you thought it was, but a shrewd door ready to face the world.

The girl turned the light on and pointed to a chair without a word. I sat down. Only then did I notice that the shelves were full of books, in my language. From the other side.

The walls, too, hung with portraits. From my (former!) leader, from our natural attractions, from cafes which I had already said goodbye to in my mind.

The girl bolted the door and moved a second chair to me. Making herself comfortable, she took out a pen from her backpack (pink, decorated with little flowers) and a notebook (with a fairy and rainbow on the cover).

"We have an assignment for school," she began. "We need to interview someone from another region."

I nodded silently.

"Everybody wants to know about your side, so start."

"Start what?" I managed to croak out.

"Telling about everything," she said. "When you're done, you can come out." She looked at the door.

I began from the very beginning.

