

COLD SHIELD

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Translated from Persian by Sara Khalili

Don't worry. It's been fourteen or fifteen years and, as you can see, nothing has happened to me. I'm well. They can't get their hands on you, just as they couldn't get their hands on me. Otherwise, they will tear you to pieces. This glass partition will always shield you. All this time, it has shielded me, too. Touch it! No? But, you have to test it every day. All you have to do is touch it to see if it is still cold or not. Once you've made certain that it is cold, you can rest easy, and you can go and sit at your desk. It's safe. You sit down and your work begins. There are always a few people who have arrived here before you. They're waiting to come up to the partition. If you're busy working, they start by gently tapping on the cold glass. If you ignore them, they will knock harder. You worry that they may break it. When you look up—you have to look up—they point to the wall clock. You turn and see that, yes, it's even a few minutes past eight. You telephone the unit and ask them to send the person whose turn it is. There is commotion behind the partition—you can tell from people's gestures and facial expressions. It seems someone's name has been announced on the loudspeaker. But you can't hear anything. It is totally quiet on this side. The crowd knows better than you whose turn it is. They have been informed several days or several months in advance. And they have been told that it's their last time. Your job is only to push these buttons. If

you press the yellow button, they will be able to hear each other through that frame in the glass. Three minutes later, you have to push the red button. It turns off the connection. They know they only have three minutes. Both sides know this. They have to prepare what they want to say ahead of time. Ignore their pleas! When their time is up, push the red button. Exactly three minutes. Sometimes, before their relative comes, one of them, for instance a woman, will come up to you on the other side of the partition. She will claw at her sagging cheeks ... meaning, I beg you, please give us an extra minute ... Don't feel sorry for them! Try not to look at them. And if you do, make sure you don't point to your ear to indicate that you can't hear them. Otherwise, they will write what they want to say on a sheet of paper, in large letters, and hold it up against the glass. It's their own fault. They know full well. It's as if they forget everything the minute they walk in. By the time they finish greeting one another, they realize their time is up. Then they will come to you, they will beg, cry, weep, maybe even faint. Whether they have finished their conversation or not, you have to push the button in exactly three minutes. Some of them write notes or letters to their relatives and want to somehow get it to them. They will show them to you. Ignore them. They will try to shove them into your booth through some opening in the partition. But rest assured, they won't find any openings. One of them may start pounding on the glass. Pay no attention. You can be certain that as long as the glass is cold, it can't be damaged. Your shift is not long. From eight to eleven in the morning! Just three hours. Don't be surprised! Or perhaps you're surprised because every three minutes someone will walk up to the frame in the glass to talk to a person on the other side. Yes, the unit will send one person every three minutes. Of course, it's different in the hall next door. There, they don't need a partition. Everyone is periodically

allowed visitors. And there, instead of a frame in the partition, you actually need a small window down by your feet. Visitors will offer you gifts because they want a favor from you, or they want something to be given to the person they are visiting. Cigarettes, for instance. But there, your work hours would be longer. Until four in the afternoon.

Perhaps even later. It all depends on that small window at your feet. The people there are different from those here. You can recognize them by their faces, which seem to be larger and wider! What's good about this side is the work hours. After your shift, you can go and tend to personal matters. And out on the street, you are not likely to run into these people. If you ever do see one of them, turn around and walk away. It's better that way. It may be someone who came to visit a relative and three minutes was too short a time for him. Or it may be the person who got into a fight after two minutes and left crying ... But some people don't complain at all. They sit and talk and they go away satisfied! Don't worry about the ones on the other side. They will come and take them away. Sometimes a few at a time. And then no one sees them again. There are times when two people sit in front of each other without their lips ever moving. They just stare into each other's eyes and then get up and leave, and you press the red button and wait for the unit to bring in the next person and for someone from this side to come and sit in front of them. If you ever forget to press the red button after exactly three minutes, don't let on. Believe me, even if they talk for seven minutes, they will still claim that it was too short, and they will come and plead with you. It's ridiculous. If it were you, what would you do with these three minutes? Do you know how much there is to say in three minutes and be satisfied? When their three minutes begins, these people probably start talking nonsense and blabbering on, and when their time is up, they remember that they have forgotten to pass

along something important. That's when, with their mouths gaping wide, they shout out their supposedly crucial messages, hoping that the other person can hear them ... but you have already pushed the button and there is only silence. When they get tired of doing this, they will come over and start pleading with you with their gestures ... but, in fact, they were notified several days or months ahead of time so that they can prepare what they need to say. Therefore, they can't really have any expectations. Imagine you are one of them. What would you say to your relative? Once, I forgot to press the button. The guy had prepared a three-minute talk and had nothing more to say! It was from his lips no longer moving that I realized I had neglected to press the button. If they end up fighting with each other, you can cut them off sooner. They can go on running off at the mouth as long as they want. Once in a while you see them, one on this side of the partition and the other on that side, put their lips and hands against the glass to kiss each other, perhaps for the last time. It looks as if they have clasped each other's hands through the glass ...

They say goodbye! But let me tell you, after a while you will get used to this place. When you run your hand against this partition every day and feel it's coldness, you will develop an unusual fondness for it. Just as I have. Then you will have to install one of these partitions in your home. And you will. If you're in bed and your eldest son comes and knocks on the glass to ask for this or that, you can just ignore him. All you have to do is close your eyes and wait until you fall asleep ... I have told my wife to sleep on the other side of the partition, her baby's crying disturbs me, I don't sleep well ... Run your hand against this partition! It's cold, isn't it? So, don't worry at all!