

The Archipelago (A short story)

By AC Tillyer

Theme: Construction of wall in the name of protection had a great negative impact on life.

Setting: the archipelago

Characters: No named Characters, all the inhabitants, plants, animals

Language: Descriptive

style: a lot of visual and auditory images are used

In the remote southern seas there is a cluster of islands; fictional Archipelago.

Description: weather is fair, the land is fertile and the ocean is rich with fish. Each island is inhabited by a different race of people. People look alike but they are different in their dress, dialects and casual gestures. Each island has its own unique form of architecture. Each race builds in a manner that is stubbornly at odds with the immediate environment. On rocky hillsides there are wooden huts and in wooded valleys, towns of brick. Arid uplands are irrigated and planted with leafy gardens, whereas, on fertile plains, the parks are paved with stone. On windswept outposts people live in tents but in the most sheltered regions they have stout, resilient cottages.

The islanders coexist peacefully. They, of course, have some sense of rivalry (competition) over certain fishing waters and sporting prowess ([superior skill](#) or [ability](#)) but they never fight. People prefer to preserve their culture. Mixed marriages are rare. The only contact between the different races is for trading purposes.

At the centre of the archipelago, there is an island that has been deserted (abandoned) for many generations. It has good soil, plenty of freshwater, two natural ports and suitable climate for crops.

Long ago, it was inhabited by farmers and fishermen much like everywhere else in the archipelago. They sailed brightly painted boats and were known for being excellent divers. Their beaches were rarely empty and even at night there were often fires in the dunes (A [dune](#) is a [hill](#) of sand near the sea or in a desert) and people in the water, enjoying a swim. An offshore beacon on the north side, which warned sailors of a treacherous ridge of rocks, was tended by the islanders, who never let it

go out. Goats were kept on the upland slopes, their bells tinkling as they grazed. The people were fond of seafood and sun-bathing, were enthusiastic winemakers, reluctant housekeepers and notoriously bad at ball games. They married early, died late and generally kept themselves to themselves. Things could have gone on like this forever, but everything changed when they decided to dynamite the cliffs and began building the first wall.

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Now their island is darker, taller, silent. Giant loops of barbed wire lie rusting in the surf. The cliffs are sheer, blasted smooth and bristling with broken glass. Above them there is a great fortress. Slabs of granite, quarried relentlessly from the once volcanic heart of the island, make up the base of the wall.

It looks as if the wall was meant to end there but as soon as it was finished a second circle of battlements began to rise from the centre. This one was interspersed with watchtowers, which were never used. When it was finished, yet a third ring of defences was built so that from faraway the island resembled an enormous wedding cake.

The surrounding islanders cannot say for sure why the wall was built. Nobody was planning an assault of any kind, nor was anyone powerful enough to pose a threat with enough strength to justify such a fortress. There were no rumours of an attack from overseas. The people admit that while the wall was under construction, they had grown nervous. But they had no idea of potential danger. But they had crops to plant, cattle to feed, children to care for and pleasures to seek. Despite their bewilderment, the people of the archipelago got on with their lives and watched in wonder as year after year the fortress grew, until the low clouds grazed its upper reaches and its blackened walls seemed to swallow the sunshine; a broken crown in the deep blue sea.

Gradually the island fell silent. There was no business. They spent so much time on the wall they had nothing left to sell. The fishing boats stopped sailing from the ports. Only a sandy haze was left hanging in the air. Last of all to disappear were the sounds of building; the echo of brick on brick and the continual whine of pulleys.

Nobody can explain why the wall was started but there are many theories as to why it was never finished. Some say that so many had perished during its construction, that no one dared halt the work and thereby admit that it had all been in vain. Others claim that the builders simply ran out of materials and since they had scooped so much rock from the centre of the island, there was no land left to plough. There are those who believe that the bricks near the top of the wall are made from the baked bones of labourers who dropped from exhaustion further down. Or perhaps the islanders grew so used to the work that they just couldn't stop themselves. But one thing is certain, the prophesied threat never arrived and the people at the centre of the archipelago had, quite simply, bricked themselves in.