

A close-up portrait of Franz Kafka, a man with dark hair and a serious expression, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. The background is a textured, olive-green color.

FRANZ KAFKA

The Complete Novels

R E A D I N G
T I M E

A portrait of Franz Kafka, a man with dark hair, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a solid olive green color.

FRANZ KAFKA

The Complete Novels

READING
TIME

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Unhappiness

First published: 1912
a short story

When it had already become unbearable — by an evening in November — and I was running along over the narrow carpet in my room as on a racetrack, frightened by the sight of the lights in the street turned around again and was given a new goal in the depths of the room, at the bottom of the mirror, and I cried out, just to hear the scream which is answered by nothing, and from which nothing takes the strength of the scream, which therefore rises up, without any counterpoise, and cannot cease even when it grows silent; a door was opened in the wall so hastily, since haste was indeed necessary, and even the wagon-horses down on the pavement reared, like crazed horses in a battle, their throats exposed.

As a small ghost, a child scurried out of the completely dark corridor, in which the lamp was not yet burning, and stood still on his toes, on an imperceptibly shaking floorboard. Immediately blinded by the twilight of the room he wanted to hide his face in his hands, but calmed down unexpectedly with a look at the window, before whose cross-bar the rising haze from the streetlights finally kept low under the darkness. With the right elbow he supported himself in front of the open door by the wall and let the draught from outside caress the joints of his feet, also the neck, also along the temples.

I watched a little bit, then I said “Good evening” and took my coat from the fire-screen because I did not want to stand there so half-naked. I kept my mouth open for a while, so that the excitement may leave through my mouth. There

was bad saliva in me, and in my face the eyelashes were twitching, in short, it only wanted this nevertheless expected visit.

The child was still standing by the wall in the same place, he pressed the right hand against the wall and, all red-cheeked, could not get enough of this, that the whitewashed wall was coarse-grained and rubbing the finger-tips. I said: "Do you really want to come to my place? Is it not a mistake? Nothing easier than a mistake in this big house. My name is Soandso, I live on the third floor. So, am I the one you wanted to visit?"

"Silence, silence!" the child said over his shoulder, "everything is just right."

"Then come further into the room, I would like to close the door."

"I just have closed the door. Do not go to trouble. Calm down at any rate."

"Do not mention trouble. But there are many people living in this corridor, naturally all of them are acquaintances; most of them are now returning from their businesses; if they hear talk in my room they just assume the right to come in and see what is going on. That's just the way it is. These people have left behind their daily work; who would they submit to in the provisional freedom of the evening! You also know that, by the way. Let me close the door."

"Well then, so what? What's the matter with you? For aught I care all the house might come in. And once again: I have already closed the door, why, do you think only you can close the door? I have even locked it with the key."

"Then it's alright. That's all I ask for. You did not even have to lock it with the key. And now make yourself comfortable, as you are here now anyway. You are my guest. Trust me completely. Spread yourself without fear. I will force you neither to stay nor to leave. Do I have to say that in the first place? Don't you know me better?"

“No. You really didn’t have to say that. Even more, you should not have said it. I am a child; why go to all the trouble for me?”

“It’s not that bad. Of course, a child. But you are not so very small. You are really already grown-up. If you were a girl you might not just lock yourself in a room with me.”

“We don’t have to worry about that. I just wanted to say: The fact that I know you so well protects me little, it only saves you the effort of telling me lies. Nevertheless you are making compliments. Don’t, I’m telling you, don’t. Add to this that I don’t know you everywhere and always, especially in this darkness. It would be much better if you let the lights be put on. No, rather not. Yet, I will bear in mind that you have already threatened me.”

“What? I have threatened you? But I beg your pardon. Why, I am so glad you are finally here. I say ‘finally’ because it is already so late. I don’t quite understand why you came this late. So it is possible that I spoke confusedly in my gladness, and that you understood it like that. I confess ten times that I spoke like that, yes I have threatened you with everything you want. — Only no fight, for heaven’s sake! — But how could you believe it? How could you offend me like that? Why do you want with all your power to spoil this short moment of your presence? A stranger would be more obliging than you.”

“I believe that; that is no wisdom. As much as a stranger can be obliged to you I already am by nature. You also know that, so why this woefulness? Tell me you want to play-act and I’m going right now.”

“Really? You dare even to tell me that? You are a little too bold. After all, you are still in my room. You are rubbing your fingers like crazy on my wall. My room, my wall! And besides, what you are saying is ridiculous, not only insolent. You say your nature obliges you to talk to me in this way. Really? Your nature obliges you? That’s obliging of your

nature. Your nature is mine, and when I am friendly to you by nature you mustn't do otherwise."

"Is this friendly?"

"I'm talking about earlier."

"Do you know how I will be later?"

"I know nothing."

And I went over to the bedside-table on which I lit a candle. I didn't use to have gas or electric light in my room at that time. Then I sat for a while at the table, until I grew tired of this, too, put on the overcoat, took the hat from the settee and blew out the candle. Going out I became entangled with a leg of the armchair.

On the stairs I met a tenant from the same floor.

"You are already leaving again, you scamp?" he asked, resting on his legs spread out over two steps.

"What am I to do?" I said, "now I have had a ghost in my room."

"You say that with the same discontent as if you had found a hair in your soup."

"You are joking. But mark my words, a ghost is a ghost."

"Very true. But what about it if you don't even believe in ghosts?"

"Why, do you think I believe in ghosts? But how does my not-believing help me?"

"Very easy. You just don't have to be afraid anymore when a ghost really comes to you."

"Yes, but this is just the subordinate fear. The substantial fear is the fear from the cause of the apparition. And this fear stays. This one is downright tremendously in me." In my nervousness I began to search through all my pockets.

"But since you were not afraid of the apparition itself you could have asked it quietly for the cause of it!"

"You have obviously never talked with a ghost. Why, you can never get any clear information from them. It's a to and fro. These ghosts seem to be in doubt as to their existence

even more than we are, which, considering their frailty, is no wonder."

"But I have heard you can feed them up."

"You are well informed. You can do that. But who would do such a thing?"

"Why not? If it's a female ghost, for example," he said and rose up on the upper step.

"Oh, I see," I said, "but even then it will not stand for it."

I recollected myself. My acquaintance was already so high up that in order to see me he had to bend forward under a curvature of the staircase. "But still," I cried, "if you take away my ghost up there it is over between the two of us, forever."

"But that was only a joke," he said and drew back his head.

"Then it's alright," I said and could have quietly gone for a walk, now. But because I felt ever so much forsaken, I rather went up and laid me down to sleep.

The Judgment

First published: 1913

a short story

It was a Sunday morning in the very height of spring. Georg Bendemann, a young merchant, was sitting in his own room on the first floor of one of a long row of small, ramshackle houses stretching beside the river which were scarcely distinguishable from each other in height and coloring. He had just finished a letter to an old friend of his who was now living abroad, had put it into its envelope in a slow and dreamy fashion, and with his elbows propped on the writing table was gazing out of the window at the river, the bridge, and the hills on the farther bank with their tender green.

He was thinking about his friend, who had actually run away to Russia some years before, being dissatisfied with his prospects at home. Now he was carrying on a business in St. Petersburg, which had flourished to begin with but had long been going downhill, as he always complained on his increasingly rare visits. So he was wearing himself out to no purpose in a foreign country, the unfamiliar full beard he wore did not quite conceal the face Georg had known so well since childhood, and his skin was growing so yellow as to indicate some latent disease. By his own account he had no regular connection with the colony of his fellow

countrymen out there and almost no social intercourse with Russian families, so that he was resigning himself to becoming a permanent bachelor.

What could one write to such a man, who had obviously run off the rails, a man one could be sorry for but could not help. Should one advise him to come home, to transplant himself and take up his old friendships again — there was nothing to hinder him — and in general to rely on the help of his friends? But that was as good as telling him, and the more kindly the more offensively, that all his efforts hitherto had miscarried, that he should finally give up, come back home, and be gaped at by everyone as a returned prodigal, that only his friends knew what was what and that he himself was just a big child who should do what his successful and home-keeping friends prescribed. And was it certain, besides, that all the pain one would have to inflict on him would achieve its object? Perhaps it would not even be possible to get him to come home at all — he said himself that he was now out of touch with commerce in his native country — and then he would still be left an alien in a foreign land embittered by his friends' advice and more than ever estranged from them. But if he did follow their advice and then didn't fit in at home — not out of malice, of course, but through force of circumstances — couldn't get on with his friends or without them, felt humiliated, couldn't be said to have either friends or a country of his own any longer, wouldn't it have been better for him to stay abroad just as he was? Taking all this into account, how could one be sure that he would make a success of life at home?

For such reasons, supposing one wanted to keep up correspondence with him, one could not send him any real news such as could frankly be told to the most distant acquaintance. It was more than three years since his last visit, and for this he offered the lame excuse that the

political situation in Russia was too uncertain, which apparently would not permit even the briefest absence of a small businessman while it allowed hundreds of thousands of Russians to travel peacefully abroad. But during these three years Georg's own position in life had changed a lot. Two years ago his mother had died, since when he and his father had shared the household together, and his friend had of course been informed of that and had expressed his sympathy in a letter phrased so dryly that the grief caused by such an event, one had to conclude, could not be realized in a distant country. Since that time, however, Georg had applied himself with greater determination to the business as well as to everything else.

Perhaps during his mother's lifetime his father's insistence on having everything his own way in the business had hindered him from developing any real activity of his own, perhaps since her death his father had become less aggressive, although he was still active in the business, perhaps it was mostly due to an accidental run of good fortune — which was very probable indeed — but at any rate during those two years the business had developed in a most unexpected way, the staff had had to be doubled, the turnover was five times as great; no doubt about it, further progress lay just ahead.

But Georg's friend had no inkling of this improvement. In earlier years, perhaps for the last time in that letter of condolence, he had tried to persuade Georg to emigrate to Russia and had enlarged upon the prospects of success for precisely Georg's branch of trade. The figures quoted were microscopic by comparison with the range of Georg's present operations. Yet he shrank from letting his friend know about his business success, and if he were to do it now retrospectively that certainly would look peculiar.

So Georg confined himself to giving his friend unimportant items of gossip such as rise at random in the memory when one is idly thinking things over on a quiet Sunday. All he desired was to leave undisturbed the idea of the home town which his friend must have built up to his own content during the long interval. And so it happened to Georg that three times in three fairly widely separated letters he had told his friend about the engagement of an unimportant man to an equally unimportant girl, until indeed, quite contrary to his intentions, his friend began to show some interest in this notable event.

Yet Georg preferred to write about things like these rather than to confess that he himself had got engaged a month ago to a Fraulein Frieda Brandenfeld, a girl from a well-to-do family. He often discussed this friend of his with his fiancée and the peculiar relationship that had developed between them in their correspondence. 'So he won't be coming to our wedding,' said she, 'and yet I have a right to get to know all your friends.' 'I don't want to trouble him,' answered Georg, 'don't misunderstand me, he would probably come, at least I think so, but he would feel that his hand had been forced and he would be hurt, perhaps he would envy me and certainly he'd be discontented and without being able to do anything about his discontent he'd have to go away again alone. Alone — do you know what that means?' 'Yes, but may he not hear about our wedding in some other fashion?' 'I can't prevent that, of course, but it's unlikely, considering the way he lives.' 'Since your friends are like that, Georg, you shouldn't ever have got engaged at all.' 'Well, we're both to blame for that; but I wouldn't have it any other way now.' And when, breathing quickly under his kisses, she still brought out: 'All the same, I do feel upset,' he thought it could not really involve him in trouble were he to send the news to his friend. 'That's the kind of man I am and he'll just have to take me as I am,' he

said to himself, 'I can't cut myself to another pattern that might make a more suitable friend for him.'

And in fact he did inform his friend, in the long letter he had been writing that Sunday morning, about his engagement, with these words: 'I have saved my best news to the end. I have got engaged to a Fraulein Frieda Brandenfeld, a girl from a well-to-do family, who only came to live here a long time after you went away, so that you're hardly likely to know her. There will be time to tell you more about her later, for today let me just say that I am very happy and as between you and me the only difference in our relationship is that instead of a quite ordinary kind of friend you will now have in me a happy friend. Besides that, you will acquire in my fiancée, who sends her warm greetings and will soon write you herself, a genuine friend of the opposite sex, which is not without importance to a bachelor. I know that there are many reasons why you can't come to see us, but would not my wedding be precisely the right occasion for giving all obstacles the go-by? Still, however that may be, do just as seems good to you without regarding any interests but your own.'

With this letter in his hand Georg had been sitting a long time at the writing table, his face turned toward the window. He had barely acknowledged, with an absent smile, a greeting waved to him from the street by a passing acquaintance.

At last he put the letter in his pocket and went out of his room across a small lobby into his father's room, which he had not entered for months. There was in fact no need for him to enter it, since he saw his father daily at business and they took their midday meal together at an eating house; in the evening, it was true, each did as he pleased, yet even then, unless Georg — as mostly happened — went out with

friends or, more recently, visited his fiancée, they always sat for a while, each with his newspaper, in their common sitting room.

It surprised Georg how dark his father's room was even on this sunny morning. So it was overshadowed as much as that by the high wall on the other side of the narrow courtyard. His father was sitting by the window in a corner hung with various mementoes of Georg's dead mother, reading a newspaper which he held to one side before his eyes in an attempt to overcome a defect of vision. On the table stood the remains of his breakfast, not much of which seemed to have been eaten.

'Ah, Georg,' said his father, rising at once to meet him. His heavy dressing gown swung open as he walked and the skirts of it fluttered around him. — 'My father is still a giant of a man,' said Georg to himself.

'It's unbearably dark here,' he said aloud.

'Yes, it's dark enough,' answered his father.

'And you've shut the window, too?'

'I prefer it like that.'

'Well, it's quite warm outside,' said Georg, as if continuing his previous remark, and sat down.

His father cleared away the breakfast dishes and set them on a chest.

'I really only wanted to tell you,' went on Georg, who had been vacantly following the old man's movements, 'that I am now sending the news of my engagement to St.

Petersburg.' He drew the letter a little way from his pocket and let it drop back again.

'To St. Petersburg?' asked his father.

'To my friend there,' said Georg, trying to meet his father's eye. — In business hours he's quite different, he was thinking, how solidly he sits here with his arms crossed.

'Oh yes. To your friend,' said his father, with peculiar emphasis.

'Well, you know, Father, that I wanted not to tell him about my engagement at first. Out of consideration for him, that was the only reason. You know yourself he's a difficult man. I said to myself that someone else might tell him about my engagement, although he's such a solitary creature that that was hardly likely — I couldn't prevent that — but I wasn't ever going to tell him myself.'

'And now you've changed your mind?' asked his father, laying his enormous newspaper on the window sill and on top of it his spectacles, which he covered with one hand.

'Yes, I've been thinking it over. If he's a good friend of mine, I said to myself, my being happily engaged should make him happy too. And so I wouldn't put off telling him any longer. But before I posted the letter I wanted to let you know.'

'Georg,' said his father, lengthening his toothless mouth, 'listen to me! You've come to me about this business, to talk it over with me. No doubt that does you honor. But it's nothing, it's worse than nothing, if you don't tell me the whole truth. I don't want to stir up matters that shouldn't be mentioned here. Since the death of our dear mother certain things have been done that aren't right. Maybe the time will

come for mentioning them, and maybe sooner than we think. There's many a thing in the business I'm not aware of, maybe it's not done behind my back — I'm not going to say that it's done behind my back — I'm not equal to things any longer, my memory's failing, I haven't an eye for so many things any longer. That's the course of nature in the first place, and in the second place the death of our dear mother hit me harder than it did you. — But since we're talking about it, about this letter, I beg you, Georg, don't deceive me. It's a trivial affair, it's hardly worth mentioning, so don't deceive me. Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?'

Georg rose in embarrassment. 'Never mind my friends. A thousand friends wouldn't make up to me for my father. Do you know what I think? You're not taking enough care of yourself. But old age must be taken care of. I can't do without you in the business, you know that very well, but if the business is going to undermine your health, I'm ready to close it down tomorrow forever. And that won't do. We'll have to make a change in your way of living. But a radical change. You sit here in the dark, and in the sitting room you would have plenty of light. You just take a bite of breakfast instead of properly keeping up your strength. You sit by a closed window, and the air would be so good for you. No, Father! I'll get the doctor to come, and we'll follow his orders. We'll change your room, you can move into the front room and I'll move in here. You won't notice the change, all your things will be moved with you. But there's time for all that later, I'll put you to bed now for a little, I'm sure you need to rest. Come, I'll help you to take off your things, you'll see I can do it. Or if you would rather go into the front room at once, you can lie down in my bed for the present. That would be the most sensible thing.'

Georg stood close beside his father, who had let his head with its unkempt white hair sink on his chest.

‘Georg,’ said his father in a low voice, without moving.

Georg knelt down at once beside his father, in the old man’s weary face he saw the pupils, overlarge, fixedly looking at him from the corners of the eyes.

‘You have no friend in St. Petersburg. You’ve always been a leg-puller and you haven’t even shrunk from pulling my leg. How could you have a friend out there! I can’t believe it.’

‘Just think back a bit, Father,’ said Georg, lifting his father from the chair and slipping off his dressing gown as he stood feebly enough, ‘it’ll soon be three years since my friend came to see us last. I remember that you used not to like him very much. At least twice I kept you from seeing him, although he was actually sitting with me in my room. I could quite well understand your dislike of him, my friend has his peculiarities. But then, later, you got on with him very well. I was proud because you listened to him and nodded and asked him questions. If you think back you’re bound to remember. He used to tell us the most incredible stories of the Russian Revolution. For instance, when he was on a business trip to Kiev, and ran into a riot, and saw a priest on a balcony who cut a broad cross in blood on the palm of his hand and held the hand up and appealed to the mob. You’ve told that story yourself once or twice since.’

Meanwhile Georg had succeeded in lowering his father down again and carefully taking off the woolen drawers he wore over his linen underpants and his socks. The not particularly clean appearance of his underwear made him reproach himself for having been neglectful. It should have certainly been his duty to see that his father had clean changes of

underwear. He had not yet explicitly discussed with his bride-to-be what arrangements should be made for his father in the future, for they had both of them silently taken it for granted that the old man would go on living alone in the old house. But now he made a quick, firm decision to take him into his own future establishment. It almost looked, on closer inspection, as if the care he meant to lavish there on his father might come too late.

He carried his father to bed in his arms. It gave him a dreadful feeling to notice that while he took the few steps toward the bed the old man on his breast was playing with his watch chain. He could not lay him down on the bed for a moment, so firmly did he hang on to the watch chain.

But as soon as he was laid in bed, all seemed well. He covered himself up and even drew the blankets farther than usual over his shoulders. He looked up at Georg with a not unfriendly eye.

‘You begin to remember my friend, don’t you?’ asked Georg, giving him an encouraging nod.

‘Am I well covered up now?’ asked his father, as if he were not able to see whether his feet were properly tucked in or not.

‘So you find it snug in bed already,’ said Georg, and tucked the blankets more closely around him.

‘Am I well covered up?’ asked the father once more, seeming to be strangely intent upon the answer.

‘Don’t worry, you’re well covered up.’

‘No!’ cried his father, cutting short the answer, threw the blankets off with a strength that sent them all flying in a moment and sprang erect in bed. Only one hand lightly touched the ceiling to steady him.

‘You wanted to cover me up, I know, my young sprig, but I’m far from being covered up yet. And even if this is the last strength I have, it’s enough for you, too much for you. Of course I know your friend. He would have been a son after my own heart. That’s why you’ve been playing him false all these years. Why else? Do you think I haven’t been sorry for him? And that’s why you had to lock yourself up in your office — the Chief is busy, mustn’t be disturbed — just so that you could write your lying little letters to Russia. But thank goodness a father doesn’t need to be taught how to see through his son. And now that you thought you’d got him down, so far down that you could set your bottom on him and sit on him and he wouldn’t move, then my fine son makes up his mind to get married!’

Georg stared at the bogey conjured up by his father. His friend in St. Petersburg, whom his father suddenly knew too well, touched his imagination as never before. Lost in the vastness of Russia he saw him. At the door of an empty, plundered warehouse he saw him. Among the wreckage of his showcases, the slashed remnants of his wares, the falling gas brackets, he was just standing up. Why did he have to go so far away!

‘But attend to me!’ cried his father, and Georg, almost distracted, ran toward the bed to take everything in, yet came to a stop halfway.

‘Because she lifted up her skirts,’ his father began to flute, ‘because she lifted her skirts like this, the nasty creature,’ and mimicking her he lifted his shirt so high that one could

see the scar on his thigh from his war wound, 'because she lifted her skirts like this and this you made up to her, and in order to make free with her undisturbed you have disgraced your mother's memory, betrayed your friend, and stuck your father into bed so that he can't move. But he can move, or can't he?'

And he stood up quite unsupported and kicked his legs out. His insight made him radiant.

Georg shrank into a corner, as far away from his father as possible. A long time ago he had firmly made up his mind to watch closely every least movement so that he should not be surprised by any indirect attack, a pounce from behind or above. At this moment he recalled this long-forgotten resolve and forgot it again, like a man drawing a short thread through the eye of a needle.

'But your friend hasn't been betrayed after all!' cried his father, emphasizing the point with stabs of his forefinger. 'I've been representing him here on the spot.'

'You comedian!' Georg could not resist the retort, realized at once the harm done and, his eyes starting in his head, bit his tongue back, only too late, till the pain made his knees give.

'Yes, of course I've been playing a comedy! A comedy! That's a good expression! What other comfort was left to a poor old widower? Tell me — and while you're answering me be you still my living son — what else was left to me, in my back room, plagued by a disloyal staff, old to the marrow of my bones? And my son strutting through the world, finishing off deals that I had prepared for him, bursting with triumphant glee, and stalking away from his father with the

closed face of a respectable businessman! Do you think I didn't love you, I, from whom you are sprung?'

Now he'll lean forward, thought Georg, what if he topples and smashes himself! These words went hissing through his mind.

His father leaned forward but did not topple. Since Georg did not come any nearer, as he had expected, he straightened himself again.

'Stay where you are, I don't need you! You think you have strength enough to come over here and that you're only hanging back of your own accord. Don't be too sure! I am still much the stronger of us two. All by myself I might have had to give way, but your mother has given me so much of her strength that I've established a fine connection with your friend and I have your customers here in my pocket!'

'He has pockets even in his shirt!' said Georg to himself, and believed that with this remark he could make him an impossible figure for all the world. Only for a moment did he think so, since he kept on forgetting everything.

'Just take your bride on your arm and try getting in my way! I'll sweep her from your very side, you don't know how!'

Georg made a grimace of disbelief. His father only nodded, confirming the truth of his words, toward Georg's corner.

'How you amused me today, coming to ask me if you should tell your friend about your engagement. He knows it already, you stupid boy, he knows it all! I've been writing to him, for you forgot to take my writing things away from me. That's why he hasn't been here for years, he knows everything a hundred times better than you do yourself, in

his left hand he crumples your letters unopened while in his right hand he holds up my letters to read through!’

In his enthusiasm he waved his arm over his head. ‘He knows everything a thousand times better!’ he cried.

‘Ten thousand times!’ said Georg, to make fun of his father, but in his very mouth the words turned into deadly earnest.

‘For years I’ve been waiting for you to come with some such question! Do you think I concern myself with anything else? Do you think I read my newspapers? Look!’ and he threw Georg a newspaper sheet which he had somehow taken to bed with him. An old newspaper, with a name entirely unknown to Georg.

‘How long a time you’ve taken to grow up! Your mother had to die, she couldn’t see the happy day, your friend is going to pieces in Russia, even three years ago he was yellow enough to be thrown away, and as for me, you see what condition I’m in. You have eyes in your head for that!’

‘So you’ve been lying in wait for me!’ cried Georg.

His father said pityingly, in an offhand manner: ‘I suppose you wanted to say that sooner. But now it doesn’t matter.’ And in a louder voice: ‘So now you know what else there was in the world besides yourself, till now you’ve known only about yourself! An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but still more truly have you been a devilish human being! — And therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning!’

Georg felt himself urged from the room, the crash with which his father fell on the bed behind him was still in his ears as he fled. On the staircase, which he rushed down as if

its steps were an inclined plane, he ran into his charwoman on her way up to do the morning cleaning of the room. 'Jesus!' she cried, and covered her face with her apron, but he was already gone. Out of the front door he rushed, across the roadway, driven toward the water. Already he was grasping at the railings as a starving man clutches food. He swung himself over, like the distinguished gymnast he had once been in his youth, to his parents' pride. With weakening grip he was still holding on when he spied between the railings a motor-bus coming which would easily cover the noise of his fall, called in a low voice: 'Dear parents, I have always loved you, all the same,' and let himself drop.

At this moment an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge.

Before the Law

First published: 1915

a parable

Before the law sits a gatekeeper. To this gatekeeper comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry into the law. But the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man thinks about it and then asks if he will be allowed to come in later on.

“It is possible,” says the gatekeeper, “but not now.”

At the moment the gate to the law stands open, as always, and the gatekeeper walks to the side, so the man bends over in order to see through the gate into the inside. When the gatekeeper notices that, he laughs and says:

“If it tempts you so much, try it in spite of my prohibition. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the most lowly gatekeeper. But from room to room stand gatekeepers, each more powerful than the other. I can’t endure even one glimpse of the third.”

The man from the country has not expected such difficulties: the law should always be accessible for everyone, he thinks, but as he now looks more closely at the

gatekeeper in his fur coat, at his large pointed nose and his long, thin, black Tartar's beard, he decides that it would be better to wait until he gets permission to go inside. The gatekeeper gives him a stool and allows him to sit down at the side in front of the gate. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be let in, and he wears the gatekeeper out with his requests. The gatekeeper often interrogates him briefly, questioning him about his homeland and many other things, but they are indifferent questions, the kind great men put, and at the end he always tells him once more that he cannot let him inside yet. The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, spends everything, no matter how valuable, to win over the gatekeeper.

The latter takes it all but, as he does so, says, "I am taking this only so that you do not think you have failed to do anything."

During the many years the man observes the gatekeeper almost continuously. He forgets the other gatekeepers, and this one seems to him the only obstacle for entry into the law. He curses the unlucky circumstance, in the first years thoughtlessly and out loud, later, as he grows old, he still mumbles to himself. He becomes childish and, since in the long years studying the gatekeeper he has come to know the fleas in his fur collar, he even asks the fleas to help him persuade the gatekeeper. Finally his eyesight grows weak, and he does not know whether things are really darker around him or whether his eyes are merely deceiving him. But he recognizes now in the darkness an illumination which breaks inextinguishably out of the gateway to the law. Now he no longer has much time to live. Before his death he gathers in his head all his experiences of the entire time up into one question which he has not yet put to the gatekeeper. He waves to him, since he can no longer lift up

his stiffening body. The gatekeeper has to bend way down to him, for the great difference has changed things to the disadvantage of the man.

“What do you still want to know, then?” asks the gatekeeper. “You are insatiable.”

“Everyone strives after the law,” says the man, “so how is that in these many years no one except me has requested entry?”

The gatekeeper sees that the man is already dying and, in order to reach his diminishing sense of hearing, he shouts at him, “Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I’m going now to close it.”

The Metamorphosis

First published: 1915

a novella

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Chapter 1

One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into some horrible vermin. He lay on his armor-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked.

“What’s happened to me?” he thought. It wasn’t a dream. His room, a proper human room although a little too small, lay peacefully between its four familiar walls. A collection of textile samples lay spread out on the table — Samsa was a travelling salesman — and above it there hung a picture that he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and housed in a nice, gilded frame. It showed a lady fitted out with a fur hat and fur boa who sat upright, raising a heavy fur muff that covered the whole of her lower arm towards the viewer.

Gregor then turned to look out the window at the dull weather. Drops of rain could be heard hitting the pane, which made him feel quite sad. “How about if I sleep a little bit longer and forget all this nonsense”, he thought, but that was something he was unable to do because he was used to

sleeping on his right, and in his present state couldn't get into that position. However hard he threw himself onto his right, he always rolled back to where he was. He must have tried it a hundred times, shut his eyes so that he wouldn't have to look at the floundering legs, and only stopped when he began to feel a mild, dull pain there that he had never felt before.

"Oh, God", he thought, "what a strenuous career it is that I've chosen! Travelling day in and day out. Doing business like this takes much more effort than doing your own business at home, and on top of that there's the curse of travelling, worries about making train connections, bad and irregular food, contact with different people all the time so that you can never get to know anyone or become friendly with them. It can all go to Hell!" He felt a slight itch up on his belly; pushed himself slowly up on his back towards the headboard so that he could lift his head better; found where the itch was, and saw that it was covered with lots of little white spots which he didn't know what to make of; and when he tried to feel the place with one of his legs he drew it quickly back because as soon as he touched it he was overcome by a cold shudder.

He slid back into his former position. "Getting up early all the time", he thought, "it makes you stupid. You've got to get enough sleep. Other travelling salesmen live a life of luxury. For instance, whenever I go back to the guest house during the morning to copy out the contract, these gentlemen are always still sitting there eating their breakfasts. I ought to just try that with my boss; I'd get kicked out on the spot. But who knows, maybe that would be the best thing for me. If I didn't have my parents to think about I'd have given in my notice a long time ago, I'd have gone up to the boss and told him just what I think, tell him everything I would, let him know just what I feel. He'd fall

right off his desk! And it's a funny sort of business to be sitting up there at your desk, talking down at your subordinates from up there, especially when you have to go right up close because the boss is hard of hearing. Well, there's still some hope; once I've got the money together to pay off my parents' debt to him — another five or six years I suppose — that's definitely what I'll do. That's when I'll make the big change. First of all though, I've got to get up, my train leaves at five."

And he looked over at the alarm clock, ticking on the chest of drawers. "God in Heaven!" he thought. It was half past six and the hands were quietly moving forwards, it was even later than half past, more like quarter to seven. Had the alarm clock not rung? He could see from the bed that it had been set for four o'clock as it should have been; it certainly must have rung. Yes, but was it possible to quietly sleep through that furniture-rattling noise? True, he had not slept peacefully, but probably all the more deeply because of that. What should he do now? The next train went at seven; if he were to catch that he would have to rush like mad and the collection of samples was still not packed, and he did not at all feel particularly fresh and lively. And even if he did catch the train he would not avoid his boss's anger as the office assistant would have been there to see the five o'clock train go, he would have put in his report about Gregor's not being there a long time ago. The office assistant was the boss's man, spineless, and with no understanding. What about if he reported sick? But that would be extremely strained and suspicious as in fifteen years of service Gregor had never once yet been ill. His boss would certainly come round with the doctor from the medical insurance company, accuse his parents of having a lazy son, and accept the doctor's recommendation not to make any claim as the doctor believed that no-one was ever ill but that many were workshy. And what's more, would he