FRANZ KAFKA

Metamorphosis and Other Stories

Translated with an Introduction by MICHAEL HOFMANN

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'I can see you've never spoken to a ghost in your life. They're famous for never giving one a clear answer. It's all equivocation. These ghosts seem to be more doubtful about their existence than we are, which is no wonder, given their frailty.'

'I've heard, though, that it is possible to fatten them up.'

'You're well informed. That is indeed true. But who would do such a thing?'

'Why not? What if it's a female ghost, for example?' he said, and moved up to the top step.

'I see,' I said, 'but even then it's not a good idea.'

I reflected. My acquaintance was already so far up the stairs that, in order to see me, he had to twist round a curve in the stairwell. 'But even so,' I shouted, 'if you take my ghost away from me, then we're finished, you and I, for good.'

'But I was only kidding,' he said, and pulled his head back.

'That's all right then,' I said, and I suppose I might have gone out calmly and had my walk. But because I felt so forlorn, I preferred to go back upstairs and to bed.

The Judgement

A Story for F.

It was a Sunday morning at the height of spring. Georg Bendemann, a young businessman, was sitting in his study on the first floor of one of the low, lightly built houses that ran along the river bank in a long row, varying only in details of height and colour. He had just finished a letter to an old friend presently living abroad, and now sealed it with playful ceremony and with his elbows propped on his desk gazed out of the window at the river, the bridge, and the pallid green of the heights on the opposite bank.

He was thinking about the way this friend of his, dissatisfied with his prospects at home, had abruptly lit out for Russia several years ago now. Now he was the manager of his own business in Petersburg, which had begun very promisingly, but for a long time now had been in the doldrums, as his friend complained on the occasion of his increasingly rare visits home. So there he was stuck abroad, driving himself into the ground, the foreign-looking beard barely serving to conceal the face so familiar to Georg from boyhood on, whose yellow tinge seemed to hint at some lurking disease. By his own admission, he didn't really have much to do with the expatriate colony living there but, having at the same time almost no social interaction with local families, he was left with little alternative but to prepare himself for a life as a bachelor.

What could you say to a man like that, who had obviously

lost his way, whom you might sympathize with, but could do nothing to help? Should you advise him to come home, to take up his old life here, pick up the threads of his former friendships – there was no reason why he shouldn't – and look to the support of his friends in other ways too? That was tantamount to telling him (and the more carefully one did it, the more wounding it was) that his endeavours thus far had been a failure, that he should call a halt and come home – and thenceforth suffer himself to be stared at by everyone as a returnee – because it was only his friends who had known what to do with their lives, while he was an overgrown schoolboy, who would have done better to stick to what they, quite properly flourishing at home, now told him to do. And was it even certain that putting him through such torment would pay off in any sense? Perhaps Bendemann wouldn't even be able to secure his return home – the man even admitted he no longer understood how people ticked here – and he would therefore be consigned to remaining abroad, only further alienated from his friends and offended by their well-meaning advice. Whereas if he did take their advice and found himself – not deliberately, but merely by the weight of circumstances – oppressed here, unable either to get on with his friends, or to get by without them, humiliated, now genuinely depatriated and friendless; would it not be better for him simply to remain abroad? And in light of all these circumstances, what gave one any right to suppose that he might do any better for himself here?

For these reasons, it wasn't possible to write him the sort of substantive letter one might write unhesitatingly to even the most distant acquaintance with whom one wanted to remain in correspondence. It was now three years since his friend had last been home, a factor inadequately explained with reference to the political uncertainty in Russia, that wouldn't permit of the briefest absence even of a small businessman – while all the

time hundreds of thousands of Russians criss-crossed the world in apparent insouciance. But in the course of these three years, there had been many changes in Georg's life. The death of Georg's mother two years earlier, since which time Georg and his old father had set up home together, was known to the friend, who had responded with a letter of condolence that was of such a perfunctory matter-of-factness that it could only be explained with reference to the fact that grief at such an event becomes unimaginable abroad. Since that time, however, Georg had applied himself to the business, as he had also applied himself to everything else, with new vigour and tenacity. It was possible that while his mother was alive, his father by insisting on managing the business entirely by his own lights, had stood in the way of his developing any independence. It was possible that since his mother's death, his father, while continuing to work in the business, had become a little more withdrawn, and it was possible, nay, probable, that certain fortunate coincidences were now playing their significant part, but what was incontestably true was that the business had unexpectedly boomed in the past two years. The number of employees was twice what it had been in former times, sales had gone up fivefold, and further progress was very much on the cards.

But of all these developments his friend had no inkling. Earlier, once, perhaps in that letter of condolence, he had sought to persuade Georg to emigrate to Russia, and had spoken at some length of the prospects precisely for Georg's particular line of trade in Petersburg. The figures were frankly unimpressive, compared to the scale of Georg's business now. But Georg hadn't wanted to write to his friend about his commercial successes, and to do so now would have seemed tactless to him.

And so Georg had confined himself to the retelling of insignificant trifles, in just the random way they happened to come into one's mind on a quiet Sunday. He wanted nothing more,

basically, than to leave undisturbed the picture his absent friend presumably had formed of their town, and with which he was presumably content. And so it came about that when Georg happened to bring up the engagement of some perfectly uninteresting individual to some equally uninteresting girl in three separate, chronologically widely spaced letters, it had the unforeseen consequence that his friend had begun to take an interest in the couple.

But even then, Georg would far rather have continued to tell him of such things than let him know that just last month he himself had become engaged to one Miss Frieda Brandenfeld, a young lady from a well-off family. He often discussed his friend and the nature of their correspondence with his fiancée. 'So he won't be coming to our wedding,' she said, 'even though I'm surely entitled to get to know all of your friends.' 'I don't want to bother him,' replied Georg, 'please understand, he probably would come, at least I think he would, but he would feel constrained, and that might hurt him, perhaps he would feel envious of me, and certainly he would feel unhappy and unable to set aside his unhappiness, and in the end he would go back alone. Do you remember what that felt like – alone?' 'Yes, but what if he were to hear of our wedding some other way?' 'That's something that I'm unable to prevent, but it's hardly likely given the circumstances in which he lives.' 'But Georg, if you have friends like that, you should never have become engaged in the first place.' 'Well, you and I are equally to blame there; but, for myself, I wouldn't have it any other way.' And when, slightly gasping under the weight of his kisses, she yet managed to say, 'Well, I still feel offended,' he felt decently able to write to his friend and inform him of everything. 'I am as I am, and that's all there is to it,' he said to himself, 'I can hardly take a pair of scissors to myself, and cut out a different person who might be a better friend to him.'

And so it was that in the long letter he wrote to his friend on that Sunday morning, he informed him of his engagement in the following words: 'But my best news I've saved till last. I have become engaged to a Miss Frieda Brandenfeld, a girl from a well-off family which only moved to the area long after you left, so the name probably won't mean anything to you. There will be plenty of opportunity in due course to tell you more about her, but for today let me just say that I am very happy, and that the only change I anticipate in our mutual friendship will be that instead of a perfectly ordinary friend, you will find you now have a happy friend. Moreover, in the person of my fiancée, who sends you her warm regards, you will have a confidante, which, for a bachelor, is not without significance. I know there are always a lot of obstacles standing in the way of a visit from you. But might not my wedding be just the occasion for you to set aside all these impediments? But leaving that aside, please act without regard to us, and only as you think fit.'

With this letter in his hand, Georg had remained seated at his desk, facing the window, for a long time. To an acquaintance, who had waved up to him from the street in passing, he responded with a preoccupied smile.

Finally he put the letter in his pocket and, leaving his room, crossed the little passage to his father's room, in which he hadn't set foot for some months. There was no particular occasion for him to have done so, because he had regular dealings with his father at work. They took their lunch together in a restaurant, while for their evening meals each catered for himself, but then they would sit together a while in their shared drawing room, usually each of them with a newspaper, unless, as often happened, Georg was out with friends, or, just lately, visiting his fiancée.

Georg remarked at how dark his father's room was, even on

such a sunny morning. The shadow cast by the wall at the far end of the narrow courtyard was really very high. His father sat by the window in a corner decorated with various mementoes of Georg's late mother, and was reading the newspaper, angling it in front of his eyes, to try to correct some frailty of vision. On the table were the leftovers from his breakfast, of which he seemed to have eaten not a great deal.

'Ah, Georg!' said his father, and he got up to greet him. As he did so, his heavy dressing-gown fell open, and the flaps of it fluttered around – 'what a giant of a man my father still is,' thought Georg to himself.

'It's unbearably dark in here,' he began by saying.

'Yes, it is dark,' his father replied.

'You've got the window shut as well?'

'I prefer it that way.'

'It's quite warm outside,' said Georg, as if to supplement his previous remark, and sat down.

His father gathered up the breakfast dishes, and put them on a sideboard.

'Actually,' Georg continued, following the old man's movements with a peculiar intentness, 'I just came in to say that I have informed Petersburg of my engagement.' He pulled the envelope a little way out of his pocket, before letting it slip back.

'Petersburg?' asked his father.

'My friend there,' said Georg, seeking his father's eye. 'He's really not like this at work,' he thought, 'the way he's sitting there so solidly, with his arms folded across his chest.'

'Yes. Your friend,' his father said with undue emphasis.

'You remember, father, that I first wanted to keep quiet to him about my engagement. Merely out of forbearance, not for any other reason. You know he's a difficult person. I told myself, it's one thing if he gets to hear of my engagement from some

other quarter, though given the retired manner of his life it's hardly likely – I can't prevent it – but he's not to hear about it from me.'

'And now you've reconsidered that position?' asked his father, laid the large newspaper down on the windowseat, then on top of it his glasses, which he proceeded to cover with his hand.

'Yes, I've reconsidered. If he is a good friend of mine, I said to myself, then my happiness at becoming engaged should afford him some happiness as well. And therefore I no longer hesitated to tell him. But before taking my letter to the post, I wanted to inform you.'

'Georg,' said his father, and drew his toothless mouth very wide, 'now listen to me! You've come to talk to me about this matter, to get my advice. That does you credit, no question. But it means nothing, less than nothing, if you don't tell me the complete truth now. I don't want to stir up matters that don't belong here. Since the death of your dear mother, there have been certain unlovely developments. Perhaps the time has come to talk about them, a little earlier than we might have expected. At work, certain things escape my notice; they're perhaps not exactly done behind my back – I don't want to make the assumption that they were done behind my back – but I no longer have the strength, and my memory isn't what it was either. I can no longer deal with so many different things at once. Firstly, that's the way of nature, and secondly the death of the little woman has affected me much more than it has you. But while we're on the subject of this letter, do let me beg you, Georg, please not to deceive me. It's a detail, it's barely worth losing one's breath about, so why deceive me? Do you really have this friend in Petersburg?'

Georg stood up in some confusion. 'Don't let's talk about my friends. A thousand friends are no substitute for one father.

Do you know what I think? I think you don't look after yourself properly. Old age demands to be treated with consideration. At work, you're indispensable to me, as you well know; but if work is affecting your health, then I would close the business down tomorrow. It's not worth that. I can see we shall have to arrange things very differently. From the bottom up. You're sitting here in the dark, but if you were in the sitting room, you'd have plenty of light. You peck at your breakfast, instead of taking proper nourishment. You sit here with the window closed, when fresh air would do you the world of good. No, Father! I'm going to send for the doctor, and we will follow his instructions. We will change rooms – you can move into the front room, and I'll move in here. It won't mean any changes for you, you can still have all your own things around you. But we can sort all that out later, for now you should just lie down in your bed a little, you need rest. Come on, I'll help you get undressed, you'll see, I can manage that. Or, if you like, you can move into the front room right away, and lie down in my bed. That would be the most sensible course to take.'

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

'Georg,' said his father quietly, without moving.

Georg straightaway knelt down beside his father, and in his father's tired face he saw the overlarge pupils looking at him from the corners of his eyes.

'You don't have any friend in Petersburg. You always were a practical joker, and you didn't shrink from using me as a butt for your jokes either. Why should you have a friend there, of all places! I find that impossible to believe.'

'But Father, just think,' said Georg, lifting his father out of his chair and, as he stood there feebly, pulling the dressing-gown off him, 'it's now almost three years since my friend was here to visit us. I remember you didn't particularly care for him.

I twice denied him to you, even though he was sitting in my room at the time. I could understand your dislike of him quite well, as my friend does have his odd points. But on other occasions you had quite good conversations with him. I remember once feeling terribly proud of the way you were listening to him, and nodding and asking questions. If you think back, I'm sure it'll come back to you. He was telling the most astonishing stories about the Russian Revolution. For instance, how, on a business trip to Kiev there was a public disturbance, and he saw a priest on a balcony, who cut a cross in blood in the palm of his hand, and raised it aloft and addressed the crowd. I remember you telling the story yourself to others on subsequent occasions.'

While talking to him Georg had been able to sit his father down again, and carefully pulled off his socks and the knitted drawers he wore over his linen undergarments. At the sight of these not especially clean things, he reproached himself for having neglected his father. It was surely part of his responsibility to supervise the changing of his father's underwear. He had not yet talked to his fiancée about how they were to arrange his father's future for him, but they had tacitly assumed that he would remain behind on his own in the old flat. But now he suddenly and irrevocably decided to take his father with him into their future household. It almost looked, on closer inspection, that the care his father would receive there from both of them would be a little too late.

He took his father to bed in his arms. It was very upsetting to notice how, while he carried him the few steps to his bed, his father was fiddling with Georg's watch chain. He was unable to lay him straight down in his bed, because of the way he was gripping the watch chain.

Once he was in bed, though, all seemed well. He was able to cover himself up, and even pulled the blanket especially high

over one shoulder. He looked up at Georg in a not unfriendly way.

'You do remember him, don't you?' Georg asked, nodding encouragingly at him.

'Am I properly tucked in now?' his father asked him, as if unable to see for himself that his feet were covered.

'You're feeling a little happier in your bed already,' said Georg, and straightened the covers for him.

'Am I properly tucked in?' his father asked him again, and seemed to be waiting for the answer.

'Everything's fine, you're properly tucked in.'

'No!' shouted his father, in such a way that his answer collided with the question, threw the blanket back with such strength that it seemed to float for a while in mid-air, and stood upright on his bed. With one hand he supported himself lightly on the ceiling. 'You wanted to tuck me in, sunshine, I know that, but I'm not buried yet. And even if it's with my last remaining strength, I'm still enough for you, more than enough for you! I know your friend very well. He would have been a son after my own heart. That's why you strung him along all those years. Why else? Do you imagine I didn't weep for him? But that's why you lock yourself up in your office, do not disturb, the director is busy – just so that you can write those mendacious letters of yours to Russia. It's just as well a father doesn't need lessons to help him see through his son. The way you thought just now you'd got him beaten, beaten so you can plonk your bottom on him, and he can't do anything about it, that's when my son takes it into his head to get married!'

Georg looked up at the terrifying vision of his father. His friend in Petersburg, whom his father suddenly knew so well, moved him as never before. He pictured him, lost in the vast expanses of Russia. He saw him at the door of his empty, plundered business. Barely managing to stand among the rubble

of his shelves, the shredded wares, the falling gas brackets. Why had he had to move so far away!

'Now look at me!' shouted his father, and Georg, almost distracted, ran to the bed, to try to take everything in, but faltered part way there.

'Because she hoicked up her skirts,' his father began to tootle, 'because she hoicked up her skirts like this, and like this, the disgusting slut,' and, by way of demonstration, he lifted up his night-shirt so far that the scar from his war wound could be seen on his thigh, 'because she hoicked up her skirts like this and like this and like this, you nuzzled up to her, and to be able to gratify yourself with impunity, you disgraced the memory of your mother, and betrayed your friend, and trussed your father up in bed, so that he can't move any more. But tell me now: can he move, or can't he?'

And he stood there, kicking up his legs, without holding on to anything. He looked radiant with insight.

Georg stood in a corner, as far away from his father as he could get. A long time ago, he had determined to observe everything absolutely precisely, so that nothing could take him by surprise whether from behind, or from above, or wherever. Now he remembered this long since forgotten resolution, and quickly forgot it again, like someone pulling a short thread right through the eye of a needle.

'But your friend wasn't betrayed after all!' shouted his father, and his wagging index finger supported him. 'I was his representative here.'

'You play-actor!' Georg was unable to refrain from shouting. Straightaway he realized the damage he had done, and with staring eyes, but too late, he bit his tongue, till he doubled over with pain.

'Yes, I was play-acting! Play-acting! A good word. What other comfort remains for an old widower of a father? Tell me – and

while you think about your reply, you can remain my living son – what else was there for me, in my back room, hounded by my disloyal staff, old to the marrow? And my son passing through the world in jubilation, concluding deals I had prepared, turning somersaults of glee, and turning his back on his father with the doughty expression of a man of honour! Do you imagine I didn't love you, I, from whom you sprang?'

'Now he's going to lean forward,' thought Georg. 'I wish he would fall down and break into little pieces!' The phrase hissed through his brain.

His father did indeed lean forward, but he didn't fall. As Georg didn't come nearer, as he had expected he would, he straightened himself up again.

'Stay where you are, I don't need you! You think you have enough strength to come here, and are merely staying back because that's what you have chosen to do. You are mistaken! I am still by far the stronger of us. Alone, I might have had to give best to you, but your mother left me all her strength. I have made a wonderful pact with your friend, and I have all your customers right here in my pocket!'

'So he's even got pockets in his shirt!'* Georg said under his breath, and thought the remark would make his father impossible in the world. The thought came and went, as everything did, because he was continually forgetting everything.

'Just you try slipping your arm through your fiancée's and coming to meet me! I'll swat her away from you, you have no idea!'

Georg pulled a face, as though of disbelief. His father merely nodded towards Georg's corner, in confirmation of what he had said.

* Kafka's variation on the German proverb that says the last shirt – the shroud – has no pockets in it.

'How you amused me today when you came along and asked me whether you should tell your friend about the engagement. He knows everything, you silly boy, everything! I wrote to him, because you forgot to deprive me of my writing implements. That's why he hasn't come for years, he knows everything a hundred times better than you. In his left hand he crumples up your letters unopened, while in his right he holds mine in front of him to read!'

'In his enthusiasm, he swung his arm over his head. 'He knows everything a thousand times better!' he shouted.

'Ten thousand times!' said Georg, to mock his father, but even as he spoke them the words sounded deadly earnest.

'For years I've been waiting for you to approach me with your question. Do you think anything else had the least interest for me? Do you imagine I read the newspapers? Here!' and he tossed Georg a page from the newspaper, which had somehow been carried into bed with him. An old newspaper, with a name that didn't sound at all familiar to Georg.

'How long you dilly-dallied before reaching maturity! Your mother was unable to witness the joyful day, she had to die first, your friend is going under in Russia; three years ago he was so yellow he was obviously not long for the world, and as for me, you see what condition I'm in. It seems you have enough vision to see that!'

'So you were lying in wait for me!' shouted Georg.

Pityingly, his father remarked: 'I expect you meant to say that earlier. It doesn't fit in here.'

And then, louder: 'So now you know what else there was besides yourself; up till now all you knew was you! You were an innocent child, really, but it would be truer to say you were a veritable fiend! – And now pay attention: I sentence you to death by drowning!'

Georg felt himself expelled from the room, the crash with

which his father came down on the bed ringing in his ears as he sprinted away. On the stairs, which he took like a smooth incline, he collided with the charwoman, who was just on her way upstairs to give the flat its morning clean. 'Oh my God!' she exclaimed, and buried her face in her apron, but he was already gone. He sprang through the gate, crossed the road, and raced towards the river. Already he was gripping at the rails, like a hungry man his food. He swung himself over them, like the excellent gymnast he had been in his early years, to the pride of his parents. His grip was beginning to weaken, when through the rails he spied a motor omnibus that would easily cover the sound of his fall, softly he called out, 'Dear parents, I have always loved you,' and let himself drop.

At that moment, a quite unending flow of traffic streamed over the bridge.

The Stoker

*A Fragment**

*Reprinted from Franz Kafka, *Amerika/The Man Who Disappeared*, trans. Michael Hofmann (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996).