

His books are amazing. He himself is far more amazing. Many thanks for everything. I wish you all the best. I'm allowed to visit you when I come to Prague, am I not? I send you my most heartfelt greetings.

[presumably beginning of January 1921]

Dear Herr Doktor:

Forgive me for not being able to write in German. Perhaps you know enough Czech to understand me; forgive me for bothering you. I simply don't know what to do; my brain cannot handle any more impressions or thoughts, it can't take in any more, I don't know anything, I don't feel anything, I don't understand anything. I have the feeling that something terrible has happened to me during these months, but I don't know much about it. I don't know anything about the world at all, I just feel I would probably kill myself if I somehow grasped whatever it is that's eluding me.

I could tell you what brought it all about, how it happened and why; I could tell you everything about myself and about my life, but what good would that do: and moreover I don't know—I just have Frank's letter from the Tatra mountains in my hand, a very deadly request and at the same time an order: "Make it impossible for us to meet, and do not write; please fulfill my one request in silence, it is the only thing that can enable me to go on living, everything else causes further destruction." I don't dare write a word, a question; I don't even know what I want to ask of you. I don't know what—I don't know what I want to know. Jesus Christ, I'd like to press my temples into my brain. Just tell me one thing, you've been with him lately, you know: Am I guilty or not guilty? I beg you for God's sake not to console me, don't say no one is guilty, don't write any psychoanalysis. I already know all that, you see, all that you could possibly write me. I am trusting you, Max, in

what God knows is perhaps the most difficult hour of my life; I beg you to trust me too. Please understand what I want. I know who Frank is, I know what happened and I don't know what happened; I am bordering on insanity; I have strived to act properly, to live, think, and feel according to my conscience, but there *is* guilt somewhere. That's what I want to hear about. Of course I don't know whether you can understand me. I want to know whether I am causing or have caused Frank to suffer as he has with every other woman, so that his sickness only grew worse, so that he had to flee from me too into his fear, and so that I must now disappear as well, whether I am to blame or whether it is a consequence of his own nature. Is what I'm saying clear? I *have* to know. You are the only one who may know something. I beg you, answer me, please answer me with the full naked, simple, and, if need be, brutal truth; tell me what you really think.

[. . .] I will be very grateful if you reply. This will give me some direction. Also please send me news how he is doing. I haven't heard anything from him for months.

[. . .]

My Address: M.K. , Vienna VIII, Postamt 65, Bennogasse. Forgive me, I cannot rewrite this letter; I can't even read it. Thank you. Milena.

[January–February 1921]

Thank you for your kindness. In the meantime I have come to my senses somewhat. I can think again. Not that this has made things any better for me. Of course it goes without saying I won't write Frank. How could I! If it's true that people have a task to fulfill on earth, then, where he is concerned, I have fulfilled mine very badly. How could I be so immodest and hurt him when I was incapable of helping him? I understand his fear down in my deepest nerve. Furthermore, it was always

there, before he met me, all the time he didn't know me. I knew his fear before I knew him. I armed myself against it by understanding it. In the four days Frank was next to me, he lost it. We laughed about it. I know for certain that no sanatorium will succeed in curing him. He will never be healthy, Max, as long as he has this fear. And no psychic reinforcement can overcome this fear, because the fear prevents the reinforcement. This fear doesn't just apply to me; it relates to everything that is shamelessly alive, also to the flesh, for example. Flesh is too uncovered; he can't stand the sight of it. This is what I was able to dispel back then. Whenever he sensed this fear, he would look me in the eye, and we would wait a while, as if our feet hurt or we had to catch our breath, and after a moment it would pass. This didn't require the slightest effort, everything was simple and clear, I dragged him over the hills behind Vienna, I went on ahead since he was walking slowly, he came trudging on behind me, and if I close my eyes I can still see his white shirt and his sunburned neck and how he was straining. He kept hiking the whole day, uphill, downhill, in the sun; he didn't cough once, he ate an enormous amount and slept like a bagpipe; he was simply healthy, and during those days his disease was like a slight cold. Had I gone to Prague with him back then, I would have remained the person I was for him at the time. But I was also planted with two feet here, infinitely firmly in the ground; I was incapable of leaving my husband, and perhaps I was too much a woman to have the strength to subject myself to a life that I knew would demand the most rigorous asceticism, for the rest of my days. I have, however, an insuppressible longing, a maniacal longing for a completely different life than the one I am leading now or ever will lead, a longing for a life with a child, for a life that would be very close to the earth. And this is what probably won out over everything else inside me, over love, over my love of taking flight, over my admiration, and once again over love. (Incidentally, whatever one says on this subject will always turn out to be a lie—this is perhaps the smallest lie possible.) And then it was just too late. The conflict within me became too clearly

visible, and that scared him. After all, that is exactly what he was fighting against his whole life, from the other side. With me he could have found peace. But then it began to pursue him even with me. Against my will. I knew very well something had happened that couldn't be erased. I was too weak to be able to fulfill this task, to do the one and only thing I knew would help him. This is my fault. And you too know it's my fault. What people attribute to Frank's not being normal is actually his virtue. The women he was with were normal women and didn't know how to live any differently. I really think that every one of us, that everyone in the world, is sick, and that he is the only one who is healthy and understands things correctly and feels correctly and the only pure human being. I know he isn't resisting *life*, just *this type of life*. If I could have brought myself to go with him, he would have been able to live happily with me. But it's only today I realize all of this. At the time, I was an ordinary woman, like all women in the world, a small, impulsive female. And that is what led to his fear. It was correct. Is it possible for this man to feel anything that isn't correct? He knows ten thousand times more about the world than everyone else. This fear of his was correct. And you are wrong—Frank will not write me of his own accord. There isn't anything for him to write. There is literally not a single word he could say to me in his fear. I know he loves me. He is too good and retiring to be able to stop loving me. He would see that as a fault. After all, he always considers himself guilty and weak. And there's really not another person in the world with his enormous strength: this absolute, unshakeable need for perfection, purity, and truth. That's the way it is. I know it down to my last drop of blood. I just can't bring this knowledge fully into my consciousness. When I do, it will be terrible. I run through the streets, sit by my window for long nights on end, sometimes my thoughts jump around like sparks when you sharpen a knife, and my heart feels as if it were hanging on a fishhook, you know, on a very thin little hook, so that it keeps tearing with an extremely thin, horribly sharp pain.

My health has reached its limit, and if something is still

sustaining me, it is happening against my will, and it's probably the same thing that has carried me this far, something very unconscious, an involuntary love of life. I recently stumbled across some tracks, somewhere at the other end of Vienna; imagine streets that go on for miles, forming a great oblong pit—and at the bottom, tracks, red lights, trains, viaducts, box-cars; it was such a horrendous black organism; I sat next to it and felt as if something were breathing. I thought I'd go crazy out of sheer grief, longing, and a terrible love of life. I am as alone as mute people are, and if I'm running on here telling you about myself, it's because I am merely regurgitating the words, they are rushing out against my will, since I simply can't be silent any longer. Forgive me.

I won't write Frank, not a line, and I don't know what will happen further. I'm coming to Prague in the spring and I will visit you. And I'll be very happy if you write me now and then how he is doing—I go to the post office daily; I can't break the habit.

I thank you once again

M.P.

One more request: a very silly one. My translations of "The Judgment," "The Metamorphosis," "The Stoker," "Meditation" are appearing with Neumann in the *Červen* edition—in the same format as Charles Louis Philippe's *Bubu*, which you probably know.

Well, I'm finished with them—the last months have eaten away at both heart and soul; it was ghastly to be so forlorn, working on his books—but Neumann wants me to "send a few words about him for the Czech reading public." Jesus Christ, I'm supposed to write for people about him—? I just can't. I don't know whether you have something against it politically—*Červen* is communist, but the series is nonpartisan. Neumann is so willing and happy to publish the volume, and he is looking forward to its appearance—but of course your name would be on it—does that bother you? If not, then please do this. About three or four pages, I'll translate it and include it

as a forward. I once read something similar you had written, an introduction to Laforgue, done very very beautifully. Would you like to do that for me? I would be very glad. The book has to be superb, don't you agree? The translation *is* good. And your introduction would certainly be good. Please, if you don't have any political reservations, do this for me. Naturally it has to be some sort of information for the Czech reader. But don't write it for them, just for yourself as you did this Laforgue prologue. Wherever you love something, you are frank and very clairvoyant. And then it is, as you say, very very beautiful. It should be very soon, Max, and I beg you: do this for me. I would like to step before the eyes of the world with this book perfected to the best of our ability; you know, I feel as if I had to defend something, vindicate something. I beg you.

And don't tell F. anything. We'll surprise him, agreed? Perhaps—perhaps it will bring him a little joy.

[Spring-Summer 1921]

Dear Herr Doktor:

Forgive me for answering so late. Yesterday I got out of bed for the first time, my lungs have managed their last, the doctor gives me only a few more months if I don't leave immediately. At the same time I am writing my father; if and when he sends me money I'll go, although I still don't know where or when. But I'm sure I'll come to Prague first and will permit myself to look you up so I can find out more about Frank. I'll write you again when I get in. However, I firmly insist you don't mention anything about my sickness to F.

I have no idea when the book will appear, evidently this winter. It will be published by K. St. Neumann, in the Borový press, as a volume in the series *Červen*, Stefansgasse 37, perhaps you can inquire with him whether you may publish the prologue separately, before it appears in the book. There is a