

[Prague, end of March 1922]

It's been such a long time since I've written you,* Frau Milena, and even today I am only writing as the result of coincidence. Actually I don't have to apologize for my not having written, after all, you know how much I hate letters. All my misfortune in life—I don't want to complain, just make a generally instructive observation—derives, one might say, from letters or from the possibility of writing letters. People have hardly ever deceived me, but letters always have, and as a matter of fact not those of other people, but my own. In my case this is a particular misfortune which I do not want to discuss further, but it is nevertheless also a general one. The easy possibility of writing letters—from a purely theoretical point of view—must have brought wrack and ruin to the souls of the world. Writing letters is actually an intercourse with ghosts and by no means just with the ghost of the addressee but also with one's own ghost, which secretly evolves inside the letter one is writing or even in a whole series of letters, where one letter corroborates another and can refer to it as witness. How did people ever get the idea they could communicate with one another by letter! One can think about someone far away and one can hold on to someone nearby; everything else is beyond human power. Writing letters, on the other hand, means exposing oneself to the ghosts, who are greedily waiting precisely for that. Written kisses never arrive at their destination; the ghosts drink them up along the way. It is this ample nourishment which enables them to multiply so enormously. People sense this and struggle against it; in order to eliminate as much of the ghosts' power as possible and to attain a natural intercourse, a tranquility of soul, they have invented trains, cars, aeroplanes—but nothing helps anymore: These are evidently inventions devised at the moment of crashing. The opposing side is so much calmer and stronger; after the postal system, the ghosts invented the telegraph, the telephone, the wireless. They will not starve, but we will perish.

*Here Kafka has reverted to the formal *Sie*.

I'm surprised you haven't written about this yet, not in order to prevent or achieve something with its publication, it's too late for that, but at least to let "them" know they have been exposed.

Incidentally, "they" are also exposed by the exceptions, for it sometimes happens they let a letter through untouched, and it arrives like the light, kind handclasp of a friendly hand. But probably that also merely appears to be so; such cases may be the most dangerous of all, and should be guarded against more carefully than the others. On the other hand, if this is a deception, at least it is a complete one.

Something like that happened to me today and that's why I thought of writing you. I received a letter from a friend whom you also know; we haven't been writing each other for a long time, which is extremely sensible. A corollary of the above is that letters are an excellent antislipping pill. What shape they're in when they arrive! Desiccated, empty, and provocative, a single moment of joy with long suffering to follow. While one is reading them and forgetting oneself, the little sleep one has gets up, flies out the open window and doesn't return for a long time. This is why we haven't written one another. But I often think about my friend, even if too much in passing. All my thinking is too much in passing. Last night, however, I thought about him a lot, for hours and hours; I spent the deep night hours in bed—these hours which are so costly to me because they are so hostile—using the same words over and over to keep repeating certain things to him in an imaginary letter, things which at that moment seemed extremely important to me. And in the morning a letter from him actually arrived, containing moreover the remark that for a month, or perhaps more correctly a month ago, my friend had had the feeling that he should come and see me, a remark which strangely coincided with things I had experienced.

This letter incident induced me to write a letter and as long as I've begun, how could I not write to you as well, Frau Milena, since you are perhaps the person I enjoy writing to most. (Inasmuch as writing can be enjoyed at all, which I only

add for the ghosts surrounding my table, who are waiting and lusting.)

It's been a long time since I found anything of yours in the newspapers except the fashion articles which—with a few minor exceptions—have recently seemed happy and calm, especially the last one on spring. But it's true I hadn't read the *Tribuna* for 3 weeks beforehand (I'll try to find the copies)—I was in Spindelmühle.

[Prague, September 1922]

Dear Frau Milena,

I must confess I once envied someone very much because he was loved, well cared-for, guarded by reason and strength, and because he lay peacefully under flowers. I'm always quick to envy.

I think I was right to conclude from the *Tribuna*, which I read often although not constantly, that you have had a good summer. I once acquired a copy in Planá at the station; two women, summer guests, were conversing with each other, one was holding the supplement behind her, in my direction; my sister then borrowed it for me. If I'm not mistaken you had a very funny article attacking the German spas. Once you wrote about the happiness of spending the summer in places far removed by rail, that was also nice; or was that the same article? I don't think so. As usual when you appear in *Národní Listy* and leave the Jewish (fashion) school behind, your article about the window displays was grandly superior. Then you translated the essay about the cooks—why? Your aunt is peculiar: one time she writes how people should stamp their letters properly, next how they shouldn't throw things out the window, all matters beyond dispute—but hopeless struggles nonetheless. Occasionally, however, something lovely, moving