COLIN COHEN

THE LAST DAYS OF KAFKA

THE OLD TRAIN sputtered, and sputtered at such a speed that a fast walker could've overtaken it.

Inside the last car, a tall and frail man of thirty-nine—a man with a ghost-like complexion—looked around and noticed that the only passengers were men just like him—men half-alive—men taking their final journey. Because of this, he half-expected Charon to walk through the door and lead them the rest of the way. He even reached into his pocket for a one-heller coin, just in case. So, he wasn't surprised at all when a god-like entity entered the car, even if this entity were dressed as a train conductor.

"Ústí nad Zapomněním," the man bellowed. "Final stop—Ústí nad Zapomněním."

The conductor afterward exited the car, and the train came to a stop in front of a tiny and dilapidated and empty station. Though the tall man wanted to remain right where he was sitting, as he was afraid—afraid of what he might find once he left.

Still, almost involuntarily, he rose along with the rest of the men, and, in a single file, they walked out of the train into the dim morning light of the town. Then, once on the platform, the tall man saw a large white edifice in the near distance—one sitting on top of a small hill. It was the only structure in town and seemed to be glowing in a smoky fog.

This frightened him even more than he already was—so much more that he turned and tried to return to the train. However, the men behind him simply pushed him forward, and together—while maintaining a single file—they silently marched toward the building in unison, as if in a chain gang.

Eventually, they reached the gate of the building, and the tall man looked down. He looked at the dying river

below—with its flow barely a trickle—something that reminded him of himself. Once again, he tried to turn and leave—and once again the men behind him pushed him forward, right inside the sanitarium.

There, at the threshold of a waiting room so large that he couldn't see where it began or end, a stoic nurse greeted him and handed him a numbered card. Which he took before sitting on a long wooden bench with the others, where he waited his turn.

All day he waited, and more than once he gazed back at the front door and thought about escape—and he might've even attempted it if he had the strength.

Finally, at about sunset, he was the last man waiting.

"Kafka!" a woman called out, from the other side of the room—the sound of which echoed off the whitewashed walls. "Franz Kafka!"

At once, the tall man stood. He stood as if he had no choice, and, after leaving the meaningless card on the bench, he walked toward the voice and took a seat in front of the admitting nurse, who carefully looked over his file, which contained page after page of facts and figures.

"You do realize this is a provincial establishment," she told him as she slowly turned one of the extra large pages. "Our staff doesn't speak German well. Some not at all."

"It does not matter," he told her back.

"Would, wouldn't you be more comfortable some place closer to Prague, or even in Austria?"

"My doctor recommended the air here."

"Did he mention that we don't have private rooms?"

"It does not matter."

"Very well. Nurse Černá will show you to your room."

Suddenly, Kafka felt a coughing spell oncoming and he reached into his pocket for a handkerchief, right before the storm hit. Which was long and violent—and, when it finally subsided, he looked down at the blood-stained cloth, unable to determine which stain was newer. At the same time, Nurse Černá—a large woman with enormous dark eyes—lifted him with ease off his seat and into a wheelchair, prior to leading him down a seemingly endless and eerily silent corridor.

The journey was so long that Kafka lost track of the time, especially when his eyes wandered toward the misshapen ceiling, where the filthy paint conjured images of beasts—beasts hidden just below his consciousness—beasts, he believed, who were out to destroy him and surely would at any moment.

However, before they could, the nurse wheeled him inside a hall-like room, where he saw a small group of men surrounding the bed of an obese man Kafka's age, who was reading aloud from a notebook.

"Lieutenant Dub," the obese man spoke, "who thought the horrible liquor was going to his head, tapped his finger on the table and lucidly explained to Captain Ságner: 'The district commissioner and I have always said, "Patriotism, loyalty to duty, self-achievement—these are the true weapons in war." I'm reminded of this especially today when our troops are on the cusp of crossing the border.'"

The obese man then fell silent, and the men around him, who looked on as if they were listening to the word of God, glanced at each other uncomfortably for a few moments.

"Well?" one finally asked.

"Aren't you gonna finish?" inquired another.

"There is no more, gentlemen," answered the obese

man. "Perhaps there will be no more."

"You can't just end it without finishing the story," said a third man.

"I don't know what I can tell you."

Suddenly, the obese man started coughing, just as violently as Kafka had—only without a handkerchief. Then, he wiped the product of the fury onto his gown, which was far from clean beforehand.

"Do you think," timidly began one of the man's admirers, "do you think you could sign my copy?"

"What for?" growled the obese man. "What good will it do you now?"

The timid man responded by lowering his head, just before the obese man sighed—or, more accurately, moaned.

"Give it here," he afterward barked, while reaching out his hand.

At once, the timid man brightened up, and he took from the pocket of his robe the first volume of *The Fortunes of Good Soldier Švejk*—which was wrapped in the finest leather, and he handed it to the obese man, who quickly signed and returned it.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Hašek," the admirer cried out—"thank you so much!"

"Jarda," Hašek replied. "My friends call me Jarda."

"Jarda."

"Now, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me . . ."

The men smiled at this, and nodded at Hašek before taking their leave, just as the nurse wheeled Kafka to the free bed next to him. Which is when Hašek took just one look at the Semitic features of Kafka's face before reddening with anger.

"What's this," he then howled, "it's not enough the Jews have taken over Prague—now they have to take

over my death bed, too?"

"Mr. Hašek," the nurse bellowed, "I've told you before to keep your bigotry to yourself. You'll soon discover just how meaningless your petty prejudices are."

"Oh, don't get so upset, nurse. Most of these Jews don't understand Czech, apart from the numbers on the bills."

"Sometimes not even that," Kafka murmured as the nurse helped him into a gown.

"So, you speak Czech. What a miracle—I'm stuck with one of the few Czech-speaking Jews in the world. Nurse, please find me another bed."

"Find yourself one," the woman retorted. She then tucked Kafka into bed and told him: "If you need anything, just ring the bell on the end table."

"Thank you, nurse."

"*Thank you, nurse*," Hašek uttered in falsetto, just as the nurse left. He further added, "Where did you learn to speak Czech so well, Jew?"

"My father's house. He forced us to speak it."

"Why?"

"This is his country, too. And mine."

Unable to reply to this, Hašek grumbled something under his breath, just before he turned away and pulled the covers up to his head. Which was just before sleep came.

To both men.

"FRANZ KAFKA!" A monstrous voice echoed in the tall man's head, causing his whole body to shake—thinking the voice belonged to one of the beasts from the ceiling.

Soon, the voice repeated itself, and, after opening his eyes, Kafka saw Hašek standing at the foot of his bed—

holding his chart with an expression of surprise.

"You're Franz Kafka?" Hašek growled. "Franz Kafka, the writer?"

"You've heard of me?" Kafka groggily replied as he sat up.

"I've read some of your stories. If you can call them that. 'Absurd nonsense' is a better name for them. Men turning into bugs, and ridiculous penal colonies."

"Yes, and you are one to judge literary quality, Jaroslav Hašek. The author of pure and utter dreck. The ramblings of a drunkard. A common street urchin can write more coherently than you."

"You filthy . . ."

Suddenly, Hašek—after dropping the chart—rushed toward Kafka, and he swung his fist at him—missing Kafka, but knocking Kafka's end table onto the floor, along with the bell. Though this didn't deter Hašek. He simply rolled up his sleeves and muttered, "It's time for a little pogrom."

"I should warn you," Kafka stated, matter-of-factly, "my father was a boxer, who taught me well. Very well. Even in my pathetic state I can still knock you to the floor. Especially in *your* pathetic state."

"Boxer? . . . You, your father's not Hermannek?"

"Well, I've certainly never called him that. But yes, his name is Hermann."

"He's got a little shop on Staromák?"

"Yes."

Almost against his will, Hašek began to smile. He also lowered his arms and sat on his bed, and he muttered, "Why, that man—he, he's more Czech than me."

"That's quite possible," said Kafka.

"You know, I think he's the only person in Prague who can outdrink me."

"That's quite possible, too."

"How come I've never seen you with him?"

"I don't frequent pubs and such places."

"No, I don't imagine someone like you would."

"What does that mean?"

"Why would a member of the literati hobnob with us common folk?"

"Listen to you talk, like you're some kind of proletariat. Why, you're likely the richest writer in the entire country. I doubt even Čapek makes what you do. Seriously, what you earn off Švejk in one day probably exceeds my writing earnings for a lifetime."

Just then, Nurse Černá burst inside the room.

"What's wrong?" she called out. "I heard a bell."

"I'm sorry, nurse," spoke Kafka. "I knocked the table over by accident."

Skeptically, the woman came over, and, while warily looking at Hašek, she picked up the table and the bell.

"Don't let this ruffian bully you, Mr. Kafka," she told the tall man.

"Oh, have no fear of that, Nurse Černá," Hašek jovially retorted. "He's the son of one Hermann Kafka of Old Town Square Prague—a man who once stared down a whole street of rioters. And I should know—I was one of them!"

"If he bothers you, Mr. Kafka," she added as she left, "you just let me know."

Slowly, Hašek turned to Kafka, and he whispered, "Well, I'll say this much for you, Jew—you're no rat."

FOR HAŠEK, THERE were bad days, and even worse ones, and this particular morning was one of the latter.

He awoke in a frenzy of hacking, and was coughing so badly that he couldn't even see. Then, when it finally

subsided and his eyes gained focus, he saw that his pillow was drenched in both blood and mucus, and he started out of bed.

On bad days, he could usually drag himself outside for a short walk on the grounds—but on days like this all he could do was scurry around the halls a bit in his wheelchair. At least it was something, he told himself—something to remind him that he was still alive. So, he crawled onto the chair—doing so just as Kafka awoke, and he made his way toward the exit, where he nearly bumped into a smiling Nurse Černá, who was accompanied by a well-dressed man about Hašek's age.

This man was also smiling—that is, until he saw who was sitting in the wheelchair in front of him, and he at once turned away, looking quite uncomfortable.

"Good morning, Mr. Hašek," he mumbled.

"It was," Hašek growled, before pushing his way through the two people.

Ignoring this, the nurse announced, "Mr. Kafka, you have a visitor."

At the same time, Hašek rolled himself down the hallway with all his might. Though, by the time he reached the end of the first corridor, he was out of breath. He actually needed to rest five minutes just to acquire sufficient strength to go back to his room, and, when he finally reached the door, he saw the visitor sitting on Kafka's bed talking to him.

"You must do what I ask, Max," Kafka pleaded.

"I can't," Max pleaded back. "Ask me anything else. You are more than a brother to me. I'll do anything. Anything but that."

"You must burn them."

"I can't."

Angrily, Kafka grabbed Max by the lapel, and he hollered, "It is my property! *Mine!* Destroy it, you hear—destroy it! Destroy everything!"

Max didn't reply. He just lowered his eyes.

"Promise me," Kafka insisted, with his voice suddenly faint.

"I . . . I promise," murmured Max, who afterward stood—and, on the verge of tears, he rushed toward the door.

Soon, he passed Hašek, without any acknowledgment—only stopping when he felt something holding his jacket.

Reluctantly, he turned around, and he saw Hašek looking up at him, with his eyes ablaze.

"What do you want?" Max asked, in a loud whisper.

"Burn what?" Hašek whispered back.

"What are you talking about?"

"What are you to burn?"

"I don't see how it's any of your business."

With a sudden burst of fury, Max pushed Hašek's hand away, and he started into the hallway. Though Hašek followed him, as best he could.

"Brod!" he then screamed, once he realized the chase was quixotic.

Suddenly, Max came to a halt, but he didn't turn around—and Hašek rolled up to him and lifted himself out of the chair, before grabbing hold of the man for balance.

"What does he want you to burn?" Hašek demanded.

Max refused to answer, but Hašek kept pressing and pressing, and finally Max told him.

"His novels," Max muttered, as he started weeping a bit.

"He's written novels?"

Max nodded.

"Are, are they like his stories?" Hašek asked.

"Better," answered Max.

"Better? And, and you're gonna burn them?"

"What else can I do?"

Ferociously, Hašek forced Max to face him—and roared, "What gives you the right?"

"Me?" meekly spoke Max. "Their not mine—their his."

"What gives *him* the right—the selfish little kike!"

"Let me go!"

"Listen you, you worthless wretch—you're gonna publish those novels, every single word."

"No!"

"The greatest writer Prague has ever known, and you, you'd turn his poetry into ash? You'd be damned. For such crime there can be no absolution!"

"Leave me alone!"

Just then, Max pushed Hašek away—causing the obese man to fall to the floor—before he frantically ran off.

"You won't do it, Brod!" Hašek screamed. "I know you won't!"

EVENTUALLY, HAŠEK CRAWLED back onto his wheelchair, and he slowly made his way back to his bed.

"What was all that screaming about?" Kafka asked when Hašek passed him.

"I don't see how it's any of your business," Hašek replied.

"You know Max?"

"I know him."

"He's a very good writer, don't you think?"

"If you like that sort of stuff."

Hašek then, with great difficulty, lifted himself into bed, and he turned away from Kafka, and he pulled the covers up to his head. Though before long he murmured, "I lied."

"Excuse me?" Kafka replied.

"When I told you I had read some of your stories—I lied."

"What do you mean?"

"I've read them all. Every single one. In fact, I still have them at my home in Lipnice." Hašek then paused for a few seconds, and, with a breaking voice he added, "Mr. Kafka, you are looking at a jealous man. A man jealous of your talent and accomplishments."

"You?"

"I'm a failure, you see. It doesn't matter how many books I sell—I'm still a failure. All I ever wanted was recognition, just a little recognition. To be considered a real writer, and not just some uneducated scribbler. You, you called my book 'dreck.' You wanna know why it made me so mad? Because that's what many publishers called it. All of them, actually. That's why I had to self-publish. No one would touch it. Not because they thought it wouldn't sell—they knew it would. But because it was dreck."

"If it's confession time," Kafka uttered after a brief silence, "then I guess it's my turn. I never really thought your book was dreck. I, I was just lashing out. I . . . I loved every page. Every single page. You're a modern-day Rabelais, Mr. Hašek—a Cervantes even. And if publishers are too stupid to see that, never you mind. History will prove them wrong. You, you called yourself a failure just now, but let me tell you a little story. About a month ago, I was walking through Prague and I saw a group of teenage boys acting out a scene from your book. One of

the bawdy ones, of course. They had memorized all the best lines. Through them, Mr. Hašek, Švejk will live on past you. He will live forever. These children will pass it onto their children and their children's children. I, I should be the one who's envious. When I die, I'll be quickly forgotten. But you . . ."

Kafka's words sent tears streaming down Hašek's chubby face. He couldn't remember the last time he cried like that—if he ever had.

"Don't be so sure you'll be forgotten, Mr. Kafka," he mumbled, with his voice past the breaking point. "Don't be so sure."

"FRANZ KAFKA!" THE voice echoed in the tall man's head.

Though this time it wasn't monstrous—and Kafka opened his eyes and saw a smiling Hašek gazing at him.

"It's time, Mr. Kafka," Hašek cooed.

"Time for what?" replied Kafka.

"You'll see. Come on, let's go."

"Go where? I'm sorry, but, but I don't have the strength to go anywhere."

"You will."

Hurriedly, Hašek helped Kafka into his wheelchair and pushed him into the hallway, where they were greeted by a surprised-looking Nurse Černá.

"Mr. Hašek!" she howled. "What are you doing with Mr. Kafka?"

"Ah, my dear Nurse Černá," Hašek howled back with a grin, "the better question is: what has Mr. Kafka done to me?"

The two then made their way through the hospital, and Kafka—with lots of apprehension—looked up at the misshapen ceiling. But no matter how hard he tried,

he could no longer see the beasts.

Soon, the two exited the building into a beautiful sunny morning. Which is when Hašek stopped and took a deep breath, right before uttering, "Well?"

"What?" Kafka uttered back.

"Shall we walk down to the river?"

"I told you, Mr. Hašek, I can't."

"But *we* can."

Without waiting for a response, Hašek lifted Kafka up, and the men strode down the small hill leaning against one another—with the two complementing each other to the extent that they appeared as one healthy body.

Suddenly, when they were about halfway to the water, Kafka slipped on a stone—and Hašek caught him with one of his bear-like arms, which he kept around him.

"Can I call you Franta?" Hašek asked, with his face beaming with joy as it reflected the near blinding sun.

"You may," Kafka told him.

"And you, you call me Jarda. That's what my friends call me."

Not long after this, the two friends reached the bank of the lively river, and they could see a skiff in the near distance—one manned by a single ethereal boatman.

"He's here for us, Franta," Hašek said.

"I know," replied Kafka.

"Have you got your heller ready?"

Kafka smiled at this. Which was strange, he thought, as he believed he had forgotten how.

"Are you scared?" Kafka asked.

"Some," Hašek told him. "You?"

"Not anymore."

the end