KAFKA'S DAUGHTER
by
CALEB WYCKOFF SMITH

A Man is waiting by the river.
A Girl is coming to meet him, letter in hand.
A Doctor waits in his office.
A Fog is rolling in.
Below the ground, an author lies dead and buried.

CONTENTS / PACKING SLIP
Find Enclosed:

1. BY THE RIVERSIDE - an Unnamed City in an Unnamed Country

The plain winter sunlight painted a grey layer onto the stone pavement and blocky masonry of the riverside wall, next to which I had stood waiting for the previous half-hour, rolling and unrolling the same cigarette to pass the time. I was there at the request of a friend I had known since our college days, himself studying psychology and neatly appending the title of Doctor to his surname Bendelmayer, myself swept away with women and drinks, spending my ink on fruitless love letters instead of dissertations or reports. I ultimately dropped out without a degree to speak of, and despite the objections of my pride, I found myself being pitied upon at his doorstep. I wound up as his taskman, running off at a moment's notice to take care of this or that at his request. Yes, I was his dog, but he paid me at a generous rate, keeping a roof over my head and a packet of tobacco in my breast pocket, so as far as I was concerned, I'd have all too happily presented my neck for him to fit a leash.

Most often, I'd be sent out to deliver invoices to clients, or to pick up the office's stationery from the store, or otherwise to fetch various supplies for the Doctor. For instance, one day I'd be sent across the city to fetch a single box of matches, while another I'd be burdened with a sack of letters heavy enough to break my back, and another I'd wait for unending hours at a frigid train platform to ferry an aged client to his practice's doorstep. However, no matter the drudgery, monotony or frivolity of my tasks, I always carried them out with a sort of dignified diligence that I felt was appropriate for my role — I had no delusions about my station, and in fact took a strange kind of comfort in subordination. Having grown up as the son of a tailor, I would even take it upon myself to mend the Doctor's suits where a seam had split or a pocket had worn through. I found this kind of thing almost second nature, as if my hands could think for themselves and I only needed to observe —

— Tsk, My mind had wandered too far, and the cigarette paper I had been rolling idly slipped from my fingertips, lifted away from me in a sudden draft, the shreds of tobacco scattering across the pavement. As I bent over to attempt to salvage a few of the leaves, I realised that two leather-booted feet stood before me. Pulling myself upright, I found a girl of twenty-something years standing before me, dressed in an elegant but austere winter ensemble, its black fabric having faded very slightly. The girl's expression was almost completely unreadable, staring back seemingly without any intention of saying anything despite having stood herself so directly before me. I paused for a moment, and clumsily palmed the flakes of loose tobacco into my

jacket pocket without thinking. I cleared my throat and broke the strange silence.

"... Can I help you?"

A pursed expression flashed across her face, as if *she* were the one who ought to be indignant, despite *her* having imposed her presence onto *me* out of nowhere.

"Ah…You're not Egon?", she asked in a quiet voice.
I was taken aback — I had been sent to meet a client of the Doctor's, but would never have expected to meet a woman this young. At his price point and expertise, Bendelmayer's clientele skewed exclusively towards the wealthy-and-unhappy, who would complain of stock-market stresses, marital coldness, or some other affluenza, leaving his offices happily with a prescription for this-or-that pill in their breast pocket, their worries eased proportionally to the resulting lightness of their billfolds.

As such, I hadn't heard of the doctor taking a client this young before.

"Ah, forgive me. Yes, I'm Egon ... You must be Fraulein Lana Kammel?"

"Yes, That's me."

Her expression went blank again, and she studied my face for just longer than I would have accepted as a natural gap in conversation, before suddenly moving to extract something from the leather bag strung across her shoulder, unbuckling countless straps to reveal the compartments within. Her gloved hand emerged holding a rectangular envelope at its corner the same way one might hold a fish by its tail.

"The doctor asked me to give this letter to you. I haven't read it — he asked me not to — but he instructed that you are to read it in its entirety. I understand they are instructions of some sort."

I took the letter in my hands. Somewhere down the street, a group of black-suited men shuffled into the ornate doors of a Synagogue. A thin fog was lapping at the sandstone corners of buildings, seeping from the boulevards and clinging to the pavement. A wire twitched overhead as a tram's pantograph stroked it somewhere further away, a haze beginning to obfuscate the further depths of the street and opposite riverbank. I read the letter.

2. BENDELMAYER'S LETTER

Meine Sehr Geehrte Egon,

I hope you are not too taken aback by the circumstances and situation within which you receive this letter, but you will find that there is a reason for my methods.

According to her uncle, Lana's parents passed away suddenly when she was young, leaving her alone with an inheritance and the family's library. Her uncle decided it best for her to be home schooled, as it appeared to him that her grief had estranged her from connecting with others — as such, she spent her time reading, becoming so fond of the work of Kafka that it apparently seeped into her — her understanding of the world around her seems to be almost entirely constructed through a Kafkaesque lens. I didn't think it was especially objectionable with regards to her immediate health or safety, but her uncle expressed concern on the degree of her obsession and implored me to take her as a client.

Over the course of our sessions, Lana revealed something peculiar. In short: from her absorption of Kafka's work, she feels as if she communicates with him directly, and vice-versa. She has grown an *imago* of Kafka, one that lives in her mind. She seems to think that Kafka wrote *to* and *for* her, and that she has some way to respond, or even communicate. This belief is obviously delusional, but it connects to a theory I am slowly developing— she makes an interesting case study on the parasocial connection between a creator and someone who consumes that work. All of these factors make her a very interesting individual to my study — All I ask is for the two of you to talk.

— Doctor Bendelmayer

3. AN IMPERIAL MESSENGER

I folded the letter and put it away, then took a moment to chew on the story I had just read. This was a strange case indeed, but I failed to see the point in having entrusted me as an interviewer — what difference could there be between the two of us talking and Bendelmayer simply talking to the girl himself? And then— I was only cursorily acquainted with Kafka's writing, whereas I knew Bendelmayer to be an avid reader; I didn't consider myself that type in the least. I'd studied some literature in university of course, but my inability to comprehend of that sort of thing was one of the contributing factors in my failure. Setting Lana opposite a blank slate — could this be Bendelmayer's game? This made some sense at least, so I decided I could play that role.

"Bendelmayer would like us to have a talk."

"I see."

She looked out over the river. The fog was beginning to cloud the view of the buildings across the way.

"About Kafka I assume?"

"That's right. I suppose he wants to hear someone else's viewpoint on your ... " — I couldn't summon what the polite phrase would be.

"Mhm."

"He says you see Kafka as some kind of friend, that you talk to him somehow."

A smile rippled at the corner of her mouth. "That's right"

"Ah. And this Kafka —" I looked around— "Is he here somewhere?"

She suddenly began to laugh — an unexpectedly warm laugh.
"No, not at all like that ... !"

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least she wasn't delusional to *that* degree.
Maybe we'd be able to find some middle ground.

"Herr Egon, do you believe in Telepathy ... ?"

I had a feeling like being squashed between two streetcars.

“Telepathy?"

She smiled.

“I know it’s strange, but please listen before you disregard me. Let’s walk, and I’ll explain it to you.”

So the two of us began to walk, and she explained her view.

“I am sure Bendelmayer mentioned the death of my parents. In truth, I was very young when they died, probably about six or seven — enough time has passed since then that my memories of their faces are only murky. We really were a happy family, and my uncle says I was absolutely devastated when they passed. What Bendelmayer probably didn’t mention is that I was the one who caused their deaths.”

I had a feeling like some dark ball of hair was writhing in my gut.

“It really was trivial. I had asked for a kitten on my birthday, but they didn’t get me one. Being a spoiled seven year old, I threw a tantrum and locked myself in my room. When you’re that young, you view your parents as perfect things — It doesn’t even cross your mind that they’re their own human beings, they’re just impossibly ancient and unknowable, but always pouring love into you… So you’re expecting that unquestioningly. Something that your childish mind sees as a violation of that, even trivially unfair— it feels like being swallowed by an impossible wave that you can’t really understand yet— the creeping feeling that they’re different people than the models of them you have in your head— the fact that parents are not just establishments is terrifying, and you don’t have the words to articulate that terror yet. So I locked myself in my room, and just sat there wishing and wishing for something bad to happen to them— not even cognisant of what that would really mean. And then it did happen.”

We had been walking a short while, and the buildings around us had stretched upwards and grown narrow. The fog was continuing to thicken. Lana continued her story.

“The two of them became exasperated and went for a drive to get some air. I continued to sit there just swilling bile inside my seven-year old head. It became later and later, and by the time it got dark I realised that they hadn’t come home yet. My uncle arrived late that night and cooked dinner in

silence, then sat me down and explained to me what had happened while I ate. There was a crash, of course: someone rammed into their car, killing the both of them and himself in the process. Apparently they were dead in less than a second. My uncle was strangely blunt about it in a way that might seem objectionable when talking to a child, but somehow it really did help that he held nothing back. I don't remember much about the time after that. My uncle moved in to take care of me and had me homeschooled. It was around then that I first met Kafka."

A streetcar streaked past suddenly, its dark carriage packed with blurry figures.

"It was a few years later. I don't have many memories of that time — by all accounts I was a very quiet child. I spent most of my time in the house's library, and enjoyed reading greatly, but never really took note of what exactly I was doing — It all kind of washed over me, just an entertaining passing of time. One day, choosing at random, I picked up a collection of Kafka's writing. I don't even remember which story it was, but as I read I started to become aware of something: it was like the words and my mind — or my heart— were in perfect resonance."

"Every sentence just *fit* — how I felt, the people I met, the places I'd been. It was like I had discovered a secret script acted out by the world around me. I inhaled that book in one go, and then his next and his next, and when I had finished reading all there was in the library by him, I read them again, over and over. I gradually started to feel a vague presence in my heart, and one day I tentatively began to talk to it, and its feeling changed; I could feel it moving, becoming solid. I knew it was Kafka — and as I felt his presence, I became aware that his writing was actually about *me*. Everything around me, every person around me, every feeling I felt; Somehow, the two of us had become tangled up in each other."

She paused, and took a deep breath.

"In essence: what I feel, he feels. What I see, he sees. I go into the world, I look out, I see it, I give it back. The two of us send our thoughts back and forth, I tell him the scenes of my life, and he tells me what they mean. Look there —",

She gestured at a figure in the fog across the street, whose silhouette I could only just make out against a background of pale ornate brickwork— a postman, his shoulders buffeted by pedestrians pushing past him.

“That’s the Imperial messenger, is it not?”

I blinked at the shuffling figure. The murky shape of a paragraph presented itself from some dimly-lit shelf tucked away at the back of my head— The Imperial Message, of course some Kafkan fable.

“An imperial messenger... How so?”

“He pushes through crowd after crowd, advancing at a glacial pace through pavements choked with people who do not move from his way even slightly, forcing him to push against torsos and shoulders with all of his might, just to deliver a single letter— and once he’s delivered that, he has another hundred-or-so within that bag, and on him hang bags so uncountable that his shape is almost entirely obscured and his feet drag behind him, yet the task of pushing through the crowd cannot afford him even a single moment of rest. And then — imagine each person waiting desperately for the contents of the mail bags he carries—! Perhaps waiting for so long that the promise of their mail arriving becomes abstract, more a feat of faith than patience. Perhaps they wait urgently for news of a loved one in peril, or a cheque with which they may afford to fix the holes in their roof that drip stained water onto their bedsheets at night — or perhaps they imagine a distant kingdom’s emperor has addressed them directly from his deathbed, a decree to lift him from desperation into the lap of luxury — a decree that never arrives, but still they wait, because to give up on waiting would be to give up hope, however deluded or depleted.”

The man took heavy footstep after heavy footstep, his body moving as if dragging anchors that snagged on everything around him, his blurred silhouette cluttered with a shape like an uncountable mass of satchels hung from his torso, shuffling onward then consumed by passing crowds until faded out by the thick fog pushing itself against the stone-brick walls of the street.

I scratched at my cheek. Lana’s eyes stared flat at the place in the fog his figure had blurred into, still clearly transfixed with the vision she had conjured. I let the second hang long, then cleared my throat.

“Lana, if I may say something ... ”

She shifted her fish-eye gaze towards me.

“That was only a postman. You may see him as some poetic figure, but I assure you that myself, and anyone else on this street, can tell you plain as

day: only a postman. If I were Bendelmayer, I wouldn't object. I am sure he has some kind of intention in letting his patients talk at length of such things. But as I am not Bendelmayer, I see no reason in it — coating the world around you in the ooze of some Kafkan malaise. You make a mountain out of a molehill, and conjure a Sisyphus to climb this molehill, but I see no good in it. All of this talk of telepathy, of communication with Kafka… You're completely detaching yourself from what's *real*."

Her face assumed a puzzled expression.

"Herr Egon, I think you're mistaken. You seem to think I care at all about you seeing things my way — that is not the case in the least. What would be the point in imprinting my eyes onto yours? I'm not in the business of trying to fiddle with people's heads, unlike you or your superior."

"Then why talk to the Doctor or me at all?"

Again, she laughed.

"It's just a favour to my uncle — and to myself, so that it will calm his unnecessary worrying. That aside, I do actually enjoy having an opportunity to talk to others, even if they try to bat me off. My uncle shuts me down whenever I try to articulate myself, and Bendelmayer only scribbles notes and asks insipid questions — it's dreadfully plain. So, even if you're dismissing me, it's nice to be able to just talk for once. In fact, I probably even prefer to be dismissed — I'd likely just get annoyed if someone were trying to needle their personal interests into my experiences."

She turned away.

"Besides, in your shoes I'd probably dismiss myself as crazy as well— I've asked myself the same questions. But the thing is — I have proof."

She plunged her hand into her pocket and dredged out a strange object — something like a star-shaped spool wrapped in ragged silken threads.

"This is an Odradek."

I stared at the object, still unable to discern what exactly I was looking at. Odradek? I couldn't place what that name could even mean. She motioned for me to touch it, and I hesitantly took it into my hand. It was much heavier than It looked.

"Kafka described his encounter with it in 'The Cares of a Family Man' — You're probably pretty confused, right? Kafka was confused as well. He wasn't sure if it was spectre, visitor, or omen. One morning, I found it sitting at the bottom of my stairs, just like in the story— I cannot explain its presence. The Odradek that visited Kafka was real, and had come to visit me."

She took the spool from my hand and held it out in front of her.

"The thing is, while Kafka didn't know what it was— I do."

She took one end of a loose thread and pulled it taut.

"Essentially, it's a tool for removing things from yourself. I don't… quite know how to describe *what* it removes— it's something you can hold in your hand, and that stains your fingertips. It's like… a ball of dark hair."

"A ball of hair?"

"Mhm. Around the time I first found the Odradek, I had this writhing feeling in my gut whenever I tried to speak to others. I struggled to put my thoughts into words, every time I tried to articulate myself it wouldn't come out right. Likewise, others seemed to understand what I said all wrong, and I realised that I couldn't understand them right either. In the midst of this frustration, this feeling continued to writhe. When the Odradek appeared, I had a firm sense that it had arrived to help me somehow, and I only had to figure out how to use it — but nothing I tried made any sense. I chewed on the string idly, and found that when it emerged, it had somehow drawn loose strands of hair into a tangled knot at the tip of its strand. This was how I discovered its use."

"I swallow the cord at one end, and it travels down the length of my throat into the pit of my stomach like a fishing line. The ball of hair clings to it, and I pull it out of my mouth. When I started doing it, I wasn't very good at it— I'd cough and gag, or it would come out incomplete, and it would just be painful — the impotent frustration of incomplete emesis … it's like a novice sword-swallower cutting up their insides. Sometimes I'd be in bed several days after, just laying there recovering, feeling the ball of hair writhing and growing again, biding time until the next time I knew I'd have to draw it out. And then I'd do it again and wreck myself just as much. It took a long time until it felt like it was getting less destructive. After a while, I discovered something strange — continuing to communicate with Kafka made me better at that regurgitation. One day, there was a strange pregnant

heaviness inside of me, and when I swallowed the Odradek, instead of amassing a dark tangle of hair, It felt more like there was a dense ball in the pit of my stomach. I carefully pulled the string, and it was so large that I could feel it touching each the entirety of my esophagus, but it didn't hurt at all, and it came up smoothly like it was coated in oil. Finally, I spat out this huge pearl, right onto the desk. For a while I just sat there, kind of shocked, this queasy warm feeling filling each part of me. As I watched, the pearl dissolved into the air. But the warmth remained, and the glow was still tangible."

Lana paused and flexed her gloved fingers absentmindedly.

"For the first time, this process wasn't just an act of vain expungement, but the pulling of something beautiful and exciting from somewhere deep inside of me. It's still an imperfect process — more often than not, I still cough up tangled messes that stain everything they touch until I tuck them away in a drawer, and I still have to lie down and recover sometimes — but once in a while I'll extract another pearl, and I'll feel warm, and it will have been worth it."

I stared blankly at the Odradek in my hand as she talked. For a while, neither of us said anything. The strange light behind the clouds had begun to dim, and the fog was pulling itself from the spaces between the streets to travel elsewhere. I felt like I was completely out of my depth, like a blurry hand had reached deep into my head and muddled everything I thought I could make sense of into a state of abject disarray and confusion. I felt a total absence of any words with which I could comment on what Lana had described — just nothing. My head was swimming, and Lana seemed like she was still suspended within her own glassy-eyed world.

***

We had circled back to the river bank before long, and exchanged polite goodbyes. I was happy to be done with the puzzling encounter, and took the streetcar back to my apartment. Looking out at the faces of the people within the car, I could only register blurs where their features should have been. Outside, the city slid past in stone-shade streaks. I reached into my pocket and discovered the loose flakes of tobacco I had absentmindedly poured into it earlier that day. I slowly started to comb through what I could remember of our discussion, trying to review what we had talked about. No matter how hard I tried to concentrate, all I could summon was a feeling of abject confusion, so I just sat there staring out of the window. Watching the city blurring past, I was slowly becoming aware — though I tried to ignore it

— that I too could sense of a mass of black hair writhing somewhere deep within my stomach.

4. BENDELMAYER'S OFFICE

The next day, I set out for Bendelmayer's office to recount my conversation with Lana.

The fog of the prior day had been displaced by a darker, phlegmy haze that stained deep into the fabric of your clothes like an incorporeal mud. It was noticeably colder, and I found myself having to wrap my scarf over my face to bandage the sting of the frigid air. Bendelmayer's office was close enough to my apartment to walk, but upon arrival I found that even this short stroll had chilled my fingertips to their bones.

I unwrapped my black wool overcoat and ascended the steep wooden staircase to where Bendelmayer keeps his offices. Through a nondescript door, the waiting room is a simple affair that aims to soothe a client before a session, opening into the consultation room, which is decorated with several objects that the client can rest their eyes on to avoid direct eye contact with the Doctor. From the client's perspective, the whole office creates an impression of an overwhelmingly organised and ordinary — even comforting — space, but behind a door in a barely noticeable corner of the waiting room lies Bendelmayer's true office.

I hang my coat on the stand, nod to the Doctor's secretary, and knock on the door to Bendelmayer's private study, which he opens. He beckons me inside, moving a stack of books from a chair across from his desk. The room is so cluttered with stacks of books that one can barely tell the colour and pattern of the wallpaper behind them, and any exercise of moving through the space is a lurching balancing act, throwing your legs from one narrow well of exposed floorboard to another.

Once I sit down, Bendelmayer busies himself by shifting more books from the desktop, before finally raising a hand and smiling to signal that I have his attention.

"Well! You've met Lana. I am curious to hear what you think of her."

"She's certainly... unusual."

Bendelmayer removed a file marked "L. Kammel" from a drawer, unsheathed a blank sheet of paper and prepared his pen.

"If you would be so kind as to recount your conversation in as much detail as you can."

I tried my best to accurately recall the sequence of events. The riverbank, the story of her parents, the library, the spectre of the messenger, and the unintelligible description of the Odradek seemed a million miles away, despite having occurred only yesterday. Once I finished my story, Bendelmayer continued to scribble notes in silence for another two minutes or so. Looking up, and having seemingly forgotten that I was still there, he chuckled and apologised for his inattentiveness.

"This is all very interesting. This information is essentially identical to what she had already described to me, but it appears that her rapport with you is already very strong. Progress between us was stagnating, so from here on I'd like for you to step in on my behalf."

"I see."

"Let me tell you about the plan from here. Lana's view of the world through Kafka is obviously maladaptive. One could maybe leave her in this state, and she would probably be able to live her whole life — but this symptom she describes — the 'ball of black hair', real or not, signals to me a level of discomfort or frustration that we should endeavour to cure. I believe that it's a manifestation of her subconsciousness' frustration about the inability to articulate. The Odradek is a tool derived from an external source, representative of her usage of Kafka to articulate herself — Of course, the thing doesn't exist, it's just a metaphor dreamt up by the subconscious."

I furrowed my brow— Lana had revealed the real thing to me myself. Was I misremembering? Or had she simply never shown it to Bendelmayer? If Bendelmayer noticed my confusion, he didn't let on.

"It represents the expungement of painful miscommunications, and the retrieval of a one-in-a-hundred *true* articulation in the form of this 'Glowing Pearl'. But it's an imperfect tool, an imperfect process, and the mismatch cuts her up. That's not something she wants to believe, however… but the process is an imperfect externalisation of what grows inside— something that could push her deeper and deeper into a depressive or unhealthy state."

Bendelmayer paused and rubbed his forehead.

"Basically, a disillusionment is in order: she has to confront the inability to live through Kafka and discover the toolset to live as Lana. For this purpose, you will help her construct her Kafkaesque world."

"What do you mean?"

"I've rented an abandoned warehouse by the river— It's no small investment, but if this method is successful, then it's valuable research into a new field of generalisable practice. You will assist her in constructing sets, sewing costumes, finding actors — she will execute her vision of a Kafkan world to the best of her ability."

"Won't that only reinforce her delusion?"

"My theory is that through the creative process, she will discover the fundamental mismatch between her articulation of an inner vision and her absorption of another person's work. She will have to confront that what she has the ability to make is uniquely coloured by her own internal voice and understanding of the world. Her view might strongly resonate with Kafka, but will never be identical: in failing to replicate the work of the Other, she discovers the work of the Self."

Bendelmayer scrawled an address on a loose slip of paper and handed it to me.

"This is the warehouse. You only need write to me and I will provide all necessary materials from the practice's budget. I have instructed Lana to meet you there at twelve. Go now, and remember that I am counting on you. You must go along with what she says— assist her articulation into reality to the closest possible degree, so that she must confront her shortcomings without excuse."

4. A WAREHOUSE BY THE RIVER

Lana was already at the warehouse when I arrived. She had apparently already been informed of our task by the Doctor, and was eager to begin. We shifted tables and workbenches into the cavernous space, took measurement after measurement, and started to draft out sets of city-streets, nervous family-rooms, penal colonies, and courtrooms. We unrolled long metres of dark fabric and cut them into coats, pockets, sleeves, pants, overalls, and dresses. Each day began to blend, and before either of us could notice, months had passed. The winter months stretched their pitch-black nighttimes long, then eased into a burgeoning spring. My life was lived as a builder within her vision of another's world, but I existed on the outside still, no shared vocabulary with which to connect to what she articulated.

This was the thought that rang through my ears one day, when I happened to pass a library, and happened (almost thoughtlessly) to enter. I wandered through the unfamiliar stacks, winding my way towards 'K.' for Kafka. I would read his work for myself, more out of curiosity than any other impulse, and would perhaps at last begin to understand Lana. But when I arrived at the bookshelf where Kafka should have been, I found only empty space. All of his books had been borrowed, leaving me robbed of a chance for understanding.

Dejected, I found a librarian and asked what could be done. Consulting the logbooks, she found it would be another month before the the books would be returned. Determined not to leave empty-handed, I asked if there were any other books on Kafka I could borrow. She paused to think, then marched down the corridor, already out of sight before I could rise to follow her. She was gone for so long that I thought she may not return, and I was just about to leave dejectedly when she finally emerged holding a small hardback book with a brown canvas cover. Thanking her, I returned home with the book, knowing nothing of its contents and not expecting much.

The book described how at the age of 17 its author Gustav Janouch was introduced by his father to a colleague at the Workmen's Accident Insurance Institution, a spindly lawyer in the industrial insurance devision named Franz Kafka. The two would become fast friends, Taking long walks and discussing any topic that came to mind: life, marriage, weather, writing, strange dreams, and so on. The book, which represented a firsthand account by someone who actually knew Kafka as a friend, described a very different individual than the man Lana had imagined —While the author did describe Kafka as neurotic or anxious, he also described his love of gesture, humour, and even laughter. It was certainly interesting, but didn't mean that much to me until I reached a section describing a conversation between the two outside a bookstore — a conversation that I realised held the key to Lana's predicament.

5. FALSE CITY

The next morning, I arrived at the warehouse and found Lana leaning on one of the workbenches, leafing through set diagrams and staring off into space, clearly deep in thought. Behind her stood the wood-plank backside walls of the sets we had built, flanked by rows of mannequins clothed in the costumes we had sewn according to her designs and descriptions.

"Good Morning Lana. How is it?"

Lana sighed. In the past weeks I had observed her growing more dejected, more distant — perhaps Bendelmayer's forecasted disillusionment was coming to fruition at long last. She cast the drawings across the table.

"It's still not quite there."

"Why don't we take a walk? I have something to share that may clear your mind."

She stretched her arms, thought for a moment, and nodded. Side by side, we walked into the maze of false rooms.

"Yesterday, I found this book at the library. It's called *Conversations with Kafka.* Have you read it?"

She eyed the book with suspicion and shook her head.

"No… my father didn't have a copy in his collection? What is it?"

"It was written by a man who knew Kafka— a friend of his, even. The two would go on long walks together, and the author would write their conversations down."

Lana's eyebrows furrowed with scepticism.

"Lana, up until now you've been living in the world of another person, wrapping it around yourself like a comfort blanket. But I've seen the expression that sits heavy on your face when you think nobody is looking. You sense there's something wrong, but can't put it into words."

Lana paused, then exhaled as if she had been holding back a great breath.

"That's right… at first, making these sets and costumes was exhilarating, but something's been nagging at me more and more — it isn't coming out right. For a while, I even blamed you — I thought your presence was corrupting it somehow. But recently… the Odradek has stopped working. No more black masses come out, no more pearls — Dark things just build and build and I don't know which way is up. And now —"

She paused, suppressing a sob, and took a moment to collect herself.

"… And now, Kafka won't even respond. It's as if failing to get these things right has cut off our connection."

She took heavy breaths, suppressing tears. Her arms hung loose from her sides. I took the book from my pocket and placed it in her hands.

"Page 25."

She slowly turned to the page and read it. Kafka and Janouch were looking into the window of a book store.

> I bent my head to right and left, trying to read the titles on the backs of books. Kafka was amused, and laughed.
> 'So you too are a lunatic about books, with a head that wags from too much reading?'
> 'That's right. I don't think I could exist without books. To me, they're they whole world.'
> Kafka's eyebrows narrowed.
> 'That's a mistake. A book cannot take the place of the world. That is impossible. In life, everything has its own meaning and its own purpose, for which there cannot be any permanent substitute. A man can't, for instance, master his own experience through the medium of another personality. That is how the world is in relation to books. One tries to imprison life in a book, like a songbird in a cage, but it's no good. On the contrary! Out of the abstractions one finds in books, one can only construct systems that are cages for oneself.'

Lana was silent for a while, then sighed and closed the book.

"…Okay."

She handed me the book. She looked as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"I see that I have to let him go. I've been living my life in search of approval from a figure that never truly existed anywhere other than inside my head."

"That's right."

She sighed.

"…But the dark masses in my stomach weigh heavy still… How can I hope to expunge them, or even render a pearl without Kafka?"

"Because it never was Kafka. This mismatch between what you've absorbed and what you've made of it means that the difference is what comes from *yourself*. Wearing the eyes of another has allowed you to understand a sketch your own intentions, but it can only take you so far. From there, the road is difficult, but it's a bridge that anybody who needs to articulate themselves must cross."

Lana chewed it over and nodded.

"Kafka wanted his work burnt, to be liberated from it, to let it go. That's a fact I've been ignoring up to now. In a way, obsessing over him would only injure him. The truest action one could take to respect his wishes wouldn't be all of *this*—"

She gestured to the sets and costumes around us.

"— but to finish the job and burn his work. We've only multiplied the derivations of his isolation. Now, I just want to take it all apart."

She took a few moments to inspect one of costumes, a mine-inspector's overalls. She dusted coal from its sleeve, then wiped her smudged fingers on its shoulder. We walked back towards the open mouth of the warehouse's doors, leaving the wooden city behind us.

"Will you forgive me two more? Kafka quotes, I mean. Then no more."

"Of course."

"Zürau Aphorisms, No. 5 and No. 25. Which do you want to hear first?"

"Number 5."

She steeled herself, as if holding a sheet of paper against a great wind, pausing at the moment before release.

"*From a Certain Point on, there is no more turning back. That is the point that must be reached."*

"What's the other one?"

Lana Smiled.

"Number 25—"

She turned towards the warehouse doors. A breeze was running its invisible fingers through the trees, lifting discarded pamphlets into the warm sunlit air.

"*How is it possible to rejoice in the world except by fleeing into it?*"

7. BURNING KAFKA

That evening, we collected all of the clothing and set about unpicking the seams until each article was reduced to a collection of loose fabric shapes. Every button was detached, every lining torn out, every seam ripped open. We were meticulous, free of frenzy. Every thread sliced felt like cutting another cord constricting the lungs, and we could at last take deeper and deeper breaths. Before long, we found we had nothing left to unmake. We took a moment to look down at the sprawling mess of disassembled rags laid out in front of us, neither of us saying anything. Then, we took each scrap and folded them, packing them neatly into brown cardboard boxes and loading them into the van I had borrowed from Bendelmayer.

We drove out of the city as the sunset. At a certain point, Lana told me to stop the car, and we unloaded the boxes by the side of the road, where we lit them on fire.

"Do you think it will be okay?" asked Lana.

"What will?"

"Walking forward, I mean. Continuing to live a life spent trying to turn yourself inside-out, never quite getting it right. We're choosing a life of frustration— It will only ever be a punishing cycle of getting it wrong nine times out of ten, of watering yourself down and having to simplify the scale of what you can imagine into what your inept hands can actually make."

"That's true."

"So how can that be worth it?"

Lana had an imploring look in her eyes.

"Mm….. "

I looked at the bonfire. The things we had made together were blooming into flame, the ashes floating upwards to form a thick tower of ink-dark smoke.

"It will be worth it. I believe that, no matter how confusing it will be. You'll start getting it right two times out of ten, and then three, and so on. You won't stop making mistakes— nobody can, and for that matter you'll never stop miscommunicating yourself. If you could, you'd never need to make things in the first place. If making something real were just as good as imagining it, then it follows that you could save yourself the effort and simply picture whatever you liked— but that's not the case, so we have to try to make them real.
Basically, if we were all telepaths there'd be no need for art. Each person could simply communicate their thoughts and feelings perfectly, and be understood perfectly. If you wanted to avoid the pain of miscommunication, all you'd have to do is become a hermit, lock yourself off from everyone and everything. But then, the unknown things in the pits of your viscera would

only continue to grow, never externalised, until you find yourself weighed down heavier and heavier by the weight of unexpressed things. I think that can kill you. Being a human is basically about overcoming the discomfort of that mis-expression, trying and trying and trying despite getting it wrong over and over. Whatever you do, whatever you say, it all changes into a different shape as you attempt to externalise it— the words I'm saying now aren't even coming out quite right. Anything you say, no matter how simple, can be misunderstood, dismissed or ignored, but that can be both a frustration and a liberation. It means that the most important part of expression is that you're making whatever you're making for *yourself*, not anyone else."

"In the end, we've burnt everything we made. All of this will become ash, and will be scattered in the wind. The physical remains will be lost, and the world's best archaeologists couldn't piece it back together. But you can never undo having made them— that experience lives inside of you. Even if your head forgets, your hands will remember."

For a while, we watched the fire. Pattern-cut pieces of black fabric danced in spirals, licked by tongues of flame, fluttering up into the night sky as spinning red pinpoints of light.

We left the pit smouldering and drove back into the city. I dropped Lana outside of a train station, and returned to the warehouse.

Tomorrow, I would pry apart the sets, reducing them to loose props and wooden boards. I would clear out the paper-sheet drawings, empty out the furniture, and make a new bonfire somewhere on the outskirts of the city. The warehouse would be vacant, and I'd return to Bendelmayer's office, there for whatever purpose he required of me next. For now, though, I only wanted to rest. I took one last walk through the wooden warehouse city, pulled a chair into Samsa's room, and closed my eyes. Almost immediately, I fell into a deep sleep.

END.