

Introduction

Franz Kafka

1883–1924

A man awakens to find himself transformed into a giant vermin; a son impulsively obeys his father's command to commit suicide; a fiendish engine of capital punishment engraves the letter of the law into the body of the condemned. Such are the nightmare scenarios that confront the reader of Franz Kafka, one of the twentieth century's most formative, mystifying literary figures. In its uncanny combinations of the real and the fantastic, its frequently sinister atmosphere, and its indifference to conventions of plot and character, many readers find Kafka's work frustrating, oppressive, even incoherent. But for others it seems to conduct a fearful current that can shock one into recognition of some kindred uneasiness of mind or spirit deep within oneself. Indeed, this is precisely the effect that Kafka sought to produce in much of his fiction. As he observed as a young man: "we ought to read only those books that sting and stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow on the head, what are we reading it for?"

The violence of this startling conception of literature is typical of Kafka, whose work explores extremes of physical and psychic distress. In many ways, the enigmatic quality of his writing lies in its intimately personal origins in his troubled emotional life. Kafka's fiction seems to issue directly from what he spoke of as a spiritual "wound"—one of his favorite and most frequent metaphors. The title of an early piece, "Description of a Struggle," might well apply to the whole of his work, which reflects his attempts to free "the prodigious world inside my head ... without being torn to pieces." The material born of this struggle—which includes three unfinished novels and an assortment of remarkable stories, fragments, and aphorisms—feels like an open channel into what Kafka called his "dreamlike inner life." As with a dream, it seems to hold a vital significance that can be sensed but not grasped. To feel more than one understands; to be thwarted by one's helplessness in the face of doubt; to seek a way through only to find

oneself at a further remove from one's object: this is the essence of what is known as the *Kafkaesque*.

At the time of his death, Franz Kafka could never have imagined that his name would one day become a household word. In his short lifetime he achieved modest success among German-speaking writers and intellectuals as the author of a few slender volumes of short stories. Many of his texts he considered failures, and he left instructions for the entirety of his unpublished work to be destroyed upon his death. If not for the relentless efforts of his friend Max Brod, who ignored Kafka's final verdict on his writing and instead undertook to edit and publish the complete works, it is unlikely that Kafka would have come to exert such a profound influence on modern art and culture.

The main facts of Kafka's life are straightforward. He was born in Prague to a prosperous bourgeois Jewish family, the eldest of four children not including two brothers who died in infancy. His mother came from a family of means, while his father had clawed himself up from poverty to establish a shop selling fashion accessories to an upscale clientele. Until the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, Prague's social, political, and intellectual life was dominated by German culture. An aggressive social climber, Kafka's father pursued a domestic policy of assimilation intended to downplay the family's Slavic and Jewish heritage in the hope of improving their standing under the Austrian administration that then ruled the city.

The young Kafka was sent to German grammar school, and later settled on a course of legal studies at Charles University. After graduating, he worked briefly in the Prague offices of an Austrian-Italian insurance firm before accepting a position with the state-run Workers' Accident Insurance Institute. There he was responsible for reviewing injury claims, visiting factories to inspect machinery and report on safety standards, and drafting technical rules and regulations. As Kafka ascended the hierarchy to become a senior official, he struggled to balance the increasingly onerous demands of his job with what he considered his true calling: literature. The labyrinthine bureaucratic procedures that guided his professional life inevitably protruded into the world of his fiction, where characters often find themselves at

the mercy of an inscrutable system presided over by remote authorities. The intricately analytical nature of his work and legal training may also help account for his winding syntax, his fascination with language and semantics, and the elaborate, often contradictory reasonings and counter-reasonings that circle endlessly in the minds of his characters.

The need to earn a living forced Kafka to adopt particular habits of composition. Many of his daylight hours were devoted to his paid work, but his goal was to sleep after leaving the office so that he could then resume what he called his “nocturnal scribbling.” The fragments, sketches, drafts, and reflections that fill his notebooks record the peculiar motions of his creative process. Kafka believed that he could overcome the natural limits of his abilities only while in the “grip” of an idea (*im Ergriffensein*), a nearly transcendent state of mind in which his writing seemed to break free of conscious controls and to take its own direction. After completing “The Judgment” (written 1912), a pivotal story in his development that poured out of him in a single night, Kafka avowed in his notebook that “only in this way can writing be done, only with such continuity, with such a complete opening out of body and soul.” This spontaneous method of composition meant that Kafka typically did not plan his texts, and he was reluctant even to return and make revisions after the primal inspiration had ebbed. That the majority of his writings are incomplete is a testament to the fugitive nature of his creative impulse.

Although Kafka rose to become a respected executive within his company, as a Germanized Jew of Czech descent he was destined to remain an outsider even in the city of his birth. The Jews of Prague were in an especially vulnerable position: to the Germans, they were Jewish; to the Czechs, they were German. This dual condition of being without belonging may account in part for the alienated perspective so characteristic of stories such as “The Metamorphosis” (written 1912, published 1915).

Kafka himself believed that his strained relationship with his family—and above all with his father—had permanently damaged his precarious sense of self. In Kafka’s mind, his father was a colossal figure, feared as well as admired, who sat in scornful judgment over

his entire life and work, particularly his failure to marry. The degree to which Kafka felt dominated by the family patriarch is the subject of his *Letter to His Father*, a painful, sprawling document—part accusation, part apologia—that offers an unsparing analysis of their fractured relationship. In it, Kafka argues that his father’s violent temper, tyrannic force of will, overbearing personality, and sheer physical presence combined to break his spirit and instill in him a sense of guilt, powerlessness, and inadequacy. Though as a child he was often baffled by the arbitrariness of his father’s laws and prohibitions, Kafka describes how he came to accept and even internalize them as just and indisputable—a process he attributes to his docile nature and feelings of unworthiness.

Many critics have argued that Kafka’s relationship with his father was the key generative impetus behind much of his work. Novels such as *The Trial* (written 1914–15, published 1925) and *The Castle* (written 1922–24, published 1926), whose protagonists seek in vain to understand their positions in relation to an elusive higher power that condemns or rejects them, have thus been read as Kafka’s attempts, if not to escape his father’s influence, then at least to transmit an impression of its effect upon his psyche. Kafka himself was the first to take such a view. In his *Letter to His Father* he asserts that “my writing was all about you; all I did there, after all, was to bemoan what I could not bemoan upon your breast.” But though the specter of Kafka’s father hangs over his work, in a sense he too is one of the author’s literary constructions. Their relationship may have driven Kafka to write, but it cannot explain the almost mythic power of his work to awaken a sense of immanent disquiet even in those who know nothing of the circumstances of his life.

Kafka’s work undoubtedly has a significant autobiographical dimension; even the names of many of his protagonists—Raban, Bendemann, Samsa, K.—are cryptograms of his own. And yet, his novels and stories are first and foremost works of imagination. Kafka’s conception is so unique that no account of his work can exhaust its mysteries. Yet perhaps his writings nonetheless express some inner truth; as Kafka himself wrote of his story “The Judgment,” “It is somewhat wild and meaningless, and if it didn’t express some inner truth (which can never be universally established but has to be accepted or denied every time by each reader or listener in turn), it would be nothing.”

Might the same be said of his entire body of work? Where should we look for the inner truth of Kafka's fictions?

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Kafka's fiction has often been associated with expressionism, a movement in the visual and literary arts that originated in Germany in the early years of the twentieth century. Broadly understood, the term "expressionist" can be applied to any work of art that disregards conventions of realism in order to portray emotions or ideas more intensely. Expressionist painters and writers often voiced strong opposition to the conventions of realism, and used distortion, exaggeration, incongruity, and other surreal effects to render deeply personal, often deeply troubled visions and states of mind. In visual art, expressionism is often contrasted with impressionism, another movement that took root in the late nineteenth century; whereas impressionists attempt to convey the impressions that the outer world makes on the human senses—most notably, visual perceptions—expressionists attempt to give outward expression to sensations they feel within themselves. For visual artists, such expression is often accomplished through the use of striking colors and simplified or distorted forms; the most famous example of these principles may well be the several paintings and drawings that the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch completed between 1893 and 1910, each one entitled *The Scream*. Expressionist literature is often characterized by non-realistic elements such as extreme simplification of form, intensity of language and of emotion, the use of archetypes, and the abandonment of linearity and logic.

Among writers of fiction, Kafka is perhaps the figure most frequently associated with expressionism. Yet he did not consider himself an expressionist, and his style is in some respects an uneasy fit with the sorts of intensity that are so characteristic of some other expressionist writers and painters. The matter-of-factness with which Kafka presents his narratives is in continual tension with the extraordinary character of the stories he is telling. It is the same sort of matter-of-factness that we experience in dreams—when the mind is often able to accept the "impossible" as entirely unremarkable. It is only when we awaken that we are able to recognize the extraordinary nature of

what we have been experiencing—and then the strangeness of what we have been experiencing may be made to seem stranger still for the matter-of-fact fashion with which we have been able to accept it. So, too, it may be argued with the sometimes dream-like nature of Kafka's fictions.

Kafka's stories, however, refuse to be dismissed from our minds in the same way we slough off dreams; they persistently give us a feeling of a world more real than that of dreams. In reading "The Metamorphosis" we may well feel pressed to imagine what it would be like to awake and truly be fundamentally altered. What would it be like to return to consciousness after some horrific accident and find oneself horrifically disfigured? In his provocative discussion of "The Metamorphosis," film director David Cronenberg has suggested that the experience of Gregor may even be likened to that of someone looking in the mirror and being shocked by a new-found awareness of having grown older—someone, like Gregor, who is "awakened to a forced awareness of what we really are"—an awareness that is both "profound and irreversible."

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Though tracing the connections between Kafka's work and the broader currents of expressionism is one way of placing "The Metamorphosis" and other Kafka stories within the context of cultural and intellectual history, it is far from the only one. Critics have often examined his work in the context of various sets of ideas that revolutionized much of the world's thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—notably, Marxist economic and political theory and Freudian psychology.

From one angle, for example, "The Metamorphosis" is a story of a family supported by one man working outside the home, alienated from his work, and intimidated by his boss—a story that in many ways calls out for interpretation in the light of the Marxist ideas that were swirling throughout Europe at the time Kafka was writing. To what extent are the relationships of the family members determined by their economic situation? What is the significance of their taking in lodgers? What effect does increasing wealth have in the household?

Seen from a different angle, the same story is a tale of a sexually repressed young man with an overbearing father and an unusually close relationship with his sister. Can one see in Gregor's investment in his sister's music lessons anything of Freud's ideas as to the ways in which humans sublimate sexual libido in artistic pursuits? What can one read into the picture of the woman in fur, or the apple thrown by the father that so damages the son? Might one interpret the transformation itself as the fulfilment of Gregor's own unconscious wishes?

Fruitful as these lines of inquiry may be, it would be a mistake to suppose that the power or literary value of Kafka's work resides in secret meanings, or that one need only turn the proper key to unlock his symbols and reveal their true significance. Kafka's stories do not point the way toward some higher truth or universal meaning. More often, they dramatize a failure to comprehend, a failure to communicate, a failure to withstand the surpassing strangeness of the ways and shapes of the world. One of Kafka's most famous aphorisms reads: "There is a goal, but no way; what we call way is hesitation." When reading Kafka, there is a sense in which the goal *is* the way: to understand is to accept one's inability to understand. Paradox and contradiction are among Kafka's favorite devices, for it is in their very nature to suggest the limits of understanding—perhaps a central theme of his life and work.

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"One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in his bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug." Thus begins "The Metamorphosis," the most famous of all Kafka's literary creations. What are we to make of the absurd predicament—at once humorous and terrifying—in which Gregor finds himself? We are assured it is no dream. But though the literalness of the events described is not in any doubt, neither is their symbolic aspect: so much more is implied than stated that it is difficult to avoid the impression something far greater is at stake.

Another angle from which to approach "The Metamorphosis" is as a chronicle of exile and otherness. It belongs to a cluster of so-called creature stories—notably "A Report to an Academy" (written and published 1917), "Josephine the Singer" (written and published

1924), “Investigations of a Dog” (written 1922, published 1931), and “The Burrow” (written 1923–24, published 1931)—in which Kafka takes up the perspective of a non-human animal in order to convey an impression of otherness, alienation, and entrapment. Each of these stories questions the relationship of the individual to the community, a recurrent Kafka theme likely suggested by his experience as a Diaspora Jew in Hapsburg Prague, the dysfunction in his own family, and his lifelong feelings of loneliness and isolation. The creature stories also bear the imprint of Nietzsche’s idea that the human animal is the “sick animal,” a being uniquely disfigured by the repression of its natural instincts, particularly the desire for freedom, the will to power, or what the onetime-ape narrator of “A Report to an Academy” simply calls “a way out.” For Gregor, there is no immediate escape at hand. But though his transformation has been variously interpreted as an expression of helplessness, estrangement, self-loathing, or parasitic dependency, Kafka seems to be more interested in its effect upon the Samsa household. Gregor’s is merely the most conspicuous of several transformations that occur in the story, and his outward change may ultimately be less important than its inward, spiritual correlative.

Many critics have pointed out that Kafka often fuses the real and the fantastic by suppressing the imaginative proposition *as if*: Gregor does not merely feel as if he were some kind of vermin; he has literally become one. At the same time, Kafka also takes care to preserve the story’s irreducible ambiguity by avoiding overly specific language. The German word that he applies to Gregor is *Ungeziefer*, which is typically translated as “insect” or “bug,” though a more strictly literal translation would be “pest” or “vermin.” (Kafka made a point of insisting that his publisher not use an image of an insect on the cover.) As one of his father’s dehumanizing put-downs, the word *Ungeziefer* held particular significance for Kafka. In his *Letter to His Father*, he writes of the older man’s “total lack of feeling for the suffering and shame you could inflict on me with your words and judgments.” In an extraordinary passage in the same letter, Kafka metamorphically adopts his father’s voice and denounces himself in the following terms: “You have put it into your head to live entirely off me [...],” he writes, like “vermin, which not only sting but, on top of it, suck your blood in order to sustain their own life.” In literalizing a loathsome term of abuse, Gregor’s transformation seems designed in part to reg-

ister an impression of the devastating impact of a father's language on a child's innocent understanding.

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"The Metamorphosis" is one of several Kafka stories that create something of a dreamlike effect through a transformation of the figurative into the literal. "In the Penal Colony" (written 1914, published 1919) is a more grisly instance of the same phenomenon. Perhaps partly inspired by Schopenhauer's notion that the world is a place of atonement or a "penal colony," the story may also owe its origins to *The Torture Garden* (1899), a French novel by Octave Mirbeau in which a European couple tours a Chinese prison complex whose inmates are sadistically punished for trifling offenses. Yet despite these likely sources, "In the Penal Colony" depicts what seems to be the author's wholly original vision of hell. It can hardly be called a story at all in any traditional sense: the nameless, vaguely drawn characters are less like discrete individuals than the personified totems of a morality play or the projections of a single mind or conscience at strife with itself. Kafka's abandoned plan to publish the story with "The Judgment" and "The Metamorphosis" in a single volume entitled *Strafen* ("punishments") suggests that he may have considered them cognate expressions of an inner truth closely bound up with the dreadful power of condemnation without cause.

The narrative consists mainly of an exchange between a Traveler—one of Kafka's many outsiders and seekers of clarity—and an Officer of the colony who speaks for its judicial procedures, which are embodied in a diabolical torture apparatus. The Officer goes to great lengths to explain the workings of the apparatus in the hope of justifying its continued use to the Traveler. When the latter questions the Officer about the sentence of a condemned prisoner, whose guilt is in any case a foregone conclusion, the Officer informs him that sentence is withheld until carried out: "It would be useless to give him that information," he explains. "He experiences it on his own body."

Kafka scholars frequently speak of "translation losses," shades of meaning, suggestion, and nuance that cannot be reproduced outside of the original German. The Officer's use of the phrase *etwas am eigenen Leib erfahren*—roughly meaning "to experience something in

the flesh”—assumes a brutal latent meaning as the torture apparatus is brought to bear: the Condemned is literally made to experience the Officer’s perverse notion of justice “on his body.” The word *Eindruck*, or “impression,” is likewise horrifically literalized as the machine’s needled Inscriber is engaged, making a physical impression in the prisoner’s flesh that the Officer insists will lead to revelation: “You’ve seen that it is not easy to figure out the inscription with your eyes,” he remarks to the Traveler, “but our man deciphers it with his wounds.” The entire mechanism of the story seems calculated to produce a visceral reaction that cuts the more deeply precisely because it is indecipherable.

Certain critics have argued that “In the Penal Colony” is an extended religious allegory, but such interpretations tend to be highly selective: they cannot account for the full range of its effects. A number of other commentators have viewed the story as a commentary on the colonialist state, though the precise target of the commentary seems impossible to locate. Scholars such as Sander Gilman have linked Kafka’s story to the Dreyfus Affair, a French scandal in which a Jewish military officer, Alfred Dreyfus, was wrongly convicted of treason and sent to the famously brutal penal colony of Devil’s Island in French Guiana. Others, such as Paul Peters, argue that, despite the story’s title, “In the Penal Colony” resembles an ordinary colony much more strongly than it does a prison; Peters notes that Kafka’s uncle Joseph witnessed firsthand the violent colonization of the Belgian Congo. A literary source has also been identified for the work’s political content: an article by Alfred Weber, the brother of the more famous sociologist Max Weber, published in a journal that Kafka regularly read. In this article, “The Civil Servant,” Alfred Weber describes

an immense “apparatus” rising up in our life with a tendency to pervade more and more of our more native, free and organic facets of existence, and to suck us into its chambers, into its compartments and sub-compartments [...] a dead system of soulless substitutions and bit-by-bit repetitions that spread over all work and all creating.¹

¹ The translation quoted here is that of Austin Harrington; for the full translation, see his article “Alfred Weber’s essay ‘The Civil Servant’ and Kafka’s ‘In the Penal Colony’: The evidence of an influence” in *History of the Human Sciences* 20.3 (2007): 41–63.

Although he was ultimately unsatisfied with it, “In the Penal Colony” is perhaps the most vivid manifestation of Kafka’s desire to write the sort of fiction that stings and stabs. To be sure, much of his work may be approached as a commentary on itself. Again and again in his notebooks and letters he returns to the demands and sacrifices exacted by his writing and his struggle to reconcile his devotion to literature with his desire to establish a family of his own. In later stories such as “A Hunger Artist” (written and published 1922), conceived as he suffered from the tuberculosis that would eventually end his life, he seems to critically reflect on the solitary nature of his art and the impossibility of finding true fulfillment.

Although Kafka considered himself a failure, he has come to be recognized as one of the most singular and important writers of the twentieth century. Early in his career he described his appetite for “books that affect us like a disaster, that hurt us deeply, like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide.” Kafka dedicated his creative life to supplying this need by writing fiction that he hoped might serve as “the axe for the frozen sea inside us.” The inner truth expressed in his work must ultimately be accepted or denied by the individual reader. But in an age of wars on terror, abusive prison facilities, technological brutality, mass surveillance, and widespread loneliness and alienation, Kafka arguably remains the author who—as W.H. Auden put it—“comes nearest to bearing the same kind of relation to our age as Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe bore to theirs.”



The Metamorphosis

I

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in his bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug. He lay on his armor-hard back and saw, as he lifted his head up a little, his brown, arched abdomen divided up into rigid bow-like sections. His blanket, perched high on this belly, could hardly stay in place; it seemed about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, pitifully thin in comparison to the rest of his circumference, flickered helplessly before his eyes.

“What’s happened to me?” he thought. It was no dream. His room, a proper room for a human being, only somewhat too small, lay quietly between the four well-known walls. Above the table, on which an unpacked collection of sample cloth goods was spread out—Samsa was a traveling salesman—hung the picture which he had cut out of an illustrated magazine a little while ago and set in a pretty gilt frame. It was a picture of a woman with a fur hat and a fur boa. She sat erect, lifting up in the direction of the viewer a solid fur muff into which her entire forearm had disappeared.

Gregor’s glance then turned to the window. The dreary weather—you could hear the rain drops falling on the metal window ledge—made him quite melancholy. “Why don’t I keep sleeping for a little while longer and forget all this foolishness?” he thought. But this was entirely impractical, for he was used to sleeping on his right side; and in his present state he could not get himself into this position. No matter how hard he threw himself onto his right side, he always rolled onto his back again. He must have tried it a hundred times, closing his eyes so that he would not have to see the wriggling legs, and gave up only when he began to feel a light, dull pain in his side that he had never felt before.

“O God,” he thought, “what a demanding job I’ve chosen! Day in, day out, on the road. The stresses of selling are much greater than the actual work going on at head office, and, in addition to that, I still have to cope with the problems of traveling, the worries about train connections, irregular bad food, temporary and constantly changing

human interactions, which never come from the heart. To hell with it all!" He felt a slight itching on the top of his abdomen. He slowly pushed himself on his back closer to the bed post so that he could lift his head more easily, and found the itchy part, which was entirely covered with small white spots. He did not know what to make of them and wanted to feel the place with a leg, but he retracted it immediately, for the contact felt like a cold shower all over him.

He slid back again into his earlier position. "This getting up early," he thought, "makes a man quite idiotic. A man must have his sleep. Other traveling salesmen live like harem women. For instance, when I come back to the inn during the course of the morning to write up the necessary orders, these gentlemen are just sitting down to breakfast. If I were to try that with my boss, I'd be fired on the spot. Still, who knows whether that mightn't be really good for me. If it weren't for my parents' sake, I'd have quit ages ago. I would've gone to the boss and told him just what I think from the bottom of my heart. He would've fallen right off his desk! How weird it is for him to sit up at that desk, talking down to the employee from way up there—and even more weird because the boss has trouble hearing, so the employee has to step up quite close to him. Anyway, I haven't completely given up that hope yet. Once I've got together the money to pay off my parents' debt to him—that should take another five or six years—I'll do it for sure. Then I'll make my big break. In any case, right now I have to get up. My train leaves at five o'clock."

He looked over at the alarm clock ticking away on the chest of drawers. "Good God!" he thought. It was half past six, and the hands were going quietly on. It was even past the half hour, already nearly quarter to. Could the alarm have failed to ring? You could see from the bed that it was properly set for four o'clock. Certainly it had rung. Yes, but was it possible to sleep peacefully through that noise which made the furniture shake? Now, it is true he had not slept peacefully, but evidently he had slept all the more deeply. Still, what should he do now? The next train left at seven o'clock. To catch that one, he would have to go in a mad rush. The case of samples was not packed up yet, and he really did not feel particularly bright and lively. And even if he caught the train, there was no avoiding a blow-up with the boss; the firm's errand boy would have waited for the five o'clock train and reported the news of his absence long ago. He was the boss's min-

ion, without backbone or intelligence. Well then, what if he reported in sick? But that would be extremely embarrassing and suspicious, because during his five years' service Gregor had not been sick even once. The boss would certainly come with the doctor from the health insurance company and would reproach his parents for their lazy son and cut short all objections by asking for the insurance doctor's comments; for this doctor, everyone was completely healthy but really lazy about work. And besides, would the doctor in this case be totally wrong? Apart from a really excessive drowsiness after the long sleep, Gregor, in fact, felt quite well and even had a really strong appetite.

As he was thinking all this over in the greatest haste, without being able to make the decision to get out of bed—the alarm clock was indicating exactly quarter to seven—there was a cautious knock on the door by the head of the bed. “Gregor,” a voice called—it was his mother—“it's quarter to seven. Don't you want to be on your way?” That soft voice! Gregor was startled when he heard his own voice answering. It was clearly and unmistakably the voice he'd had before, but in it was intermingled, as if from below, an irrepressible, painful squeaking, which left the words positively distinct only in the first moment and distorted them in the reverberation, so that anyone listening did not know if he had heard correctly. Gregor wanted to answer in detail and explain everything, but in these circumstances he confined himself to saying, “Yes, yes, thank you Mother. I'm getting up right away.” Because of the wooden door the change in Gregor's voice was not really noticeable outside, so his mother calmed down with this explanation and shuffled off. However, as a result of the short conversation, the other family members became aware that Gregor was unexpectedly still at home, and already his father was knocking on one side door, weakly but with his fist. “Gregor, Gregor,” he called out, “what's going on?” And, after a short while, he urged him on again in a deeper voice: “Gregor! Gregor!” At the other side door, however, his sister knocked lightly. “Gregor? Are you all right? Do you need anything?” Gregor directed answers in both directions: “I'll be ready right away.” He made an effort with the most careful articulation and inserted long pauses between the individual words to remove everything remarkable from his voice. His father turned back to his breakfast. However, his sister whispered, “Gregor, open the door—I beg you.” Gregor had no intention of opening the door;

he congratulated himself on his precaution, acquired from traveling, of locking all doors during the night, even at home.

First he wanted to stand up quietly and undisturbed, get dressed, above all have breakfast, and only then consider further action, for—he noticed this clearly—by thinking things over in bed he would not reach a reasonable conclusion. He remembered that before now in bed he had often felt some light pain or other, which was perhaps the result of an awkward lying position, and which later, once he stood up, turned out to be purely imaginary, and he was eager to see how his present fantasies would gradually dissipate. That the change in his voice was nothing other than the onset of a cold, an occupational illness of commercial travelers, of that he had not the slightest doubt.

It was very easy to throw aside the blanket. He needed only to push his stomach out a little, and it fell by itself. But to continue was difficult, particularly because he was so unusually wide. He needed arms and hands to push himself upright. Instead of these, however, he had only many small limbs, which were incessantly moving with very different motions and which, in addition, he was unable to control. If he wanted to bend one of them, then it was the first to extend itself, and if he finally succeeded doing what he wanted with this limb, in the meantime all the others, as if left free, moved around in an excessively painful agitation. “But I must not stay in bed uselessly,” said Gregor to himself.

At first he wanted to get out of bed with the lower part of his body, but this lower part—which, by the way, he had not yet looked at and which he also could not picture clearly—proved itself too difficult to move. The attempt went so slowly. When, having become almost frantic, he finally hurled himself forward with all his force and without thinking, he chose his direction incorrectly, and he hit the lower bedpost hard. The violent pain he felt revealed to him that the lower part of his body was at the moment probably the most sensitive.

Thus, he tried to get his upper body out of the bed first and turned his head carefully toward the edge of the bed. He managed to do this easily, and in spite of its width and weight his body mass at last slowly followed the turning of his head. But as he finally extended his head beyond the bed into the air, he became anxious about moving forward any further in this manner, for if he allowed himself eventually to fall

by this process, it would really take a miracle to prevent his head from getting injured. And at all costs he must not lose consciousness right now. He preferred to remain in bed.

But after a similar effort it was no different. He lay there again, sighing as before, and once again saw his small limbs fighting one another, if anything even worse than earlier, and did not see any chance of imposing quiet and order on this arbitrary movement. He told himself again that he could not possibly remain in bed and that it might be the most reasonable thing to sacrifice everything if there was even the slightest hope of getting himself out of bed in the process. At the same time, however, he did not forget to keep reminding himself periodically of the fact that calm—indeed the calmest—reflection might be much better than confused decisions. At such moments, he directed his gaze as precisely as he could toward the window, but unfortunately a glance at the morning mist, which concealed even the other side of the narrow street, offered little to make him more confident or cheerful. “It’s already seven o’clock,” he told himself at the latest sounds from the alarm clock, “already seven o’clock and still such a fog.” And for a little while longer he lay quietly with weak breathing, as if perhaps waiting for normal and natural conditions to re-emerge out of the complete stillness.

But then he said to himself, “Before it strikes a quarter past seven, whatever happens I must be completely out of bed. Besides, by then someone from the office will arrive to inquire about me, because the office will open before seven o’clock.” And he made an effort then to rock his entire body length out of the bed with a uniform motion. If he let himself fall out of the bed in this way, his head, which in the course of the fall he intended to lift up sharply, would probably remain uninjured. His back seemed to be hard; nothing would really happen to that as a result of the fall onto the carpet. His greatest reservation was a worry about the loud noise which the fall must create and which presumably would arouse, if not fright, then at least concern on the other side of all the doors. Nevertheless, he had to take that chance.

As Gregor was already in the process of lifting himself half out of bed—the new method was more of a game than an effort; he needed only to rock with a series of jerks—it struck him how easy all this would be if someone were to come to his aid. Two strong people—he

thought of his father and the servant girl—would have been quite sufficient. They would only have had to push their arms under his arched back to get him out of the bed, to bend down with their load, and then merely to exercise patience so that he could complete the flip onto the floor, where his diminutive legs would then, he hoped, acquire a purpose. Now, quite apart from the fact that the doors were locked, should he really call out for help? In spite of all his distress, he was unable to suppress a smile at this idea.

He had already got to the point where, by rocking more strongly, he was making it very difficult for himself to keep his balance, and very soon he would finally have to make a final decision, for in five minutes it would be a quarter past seven. Then there was a ring at the door of the apartment. "That's someone from the office," he told himself, and he almost froze, while his small limbs only danced around all the faster. For one moment everything remained still. "They aren't opening the door," Gregor said to himself, caught up in some absurd hope. But of course then, as usual, the servant girl with her firm tread went to the door and opened it. Gregor needed to hear only the first word of the visitor's greeting to recognize immediately who it was, the manager himself. Why was Gregor the only one condemned to work in a firm where the slightest lapse would attract the greatest suspicion? Were all the employees collectively, one and all, scoundrels? Among them was there then no truly devoted person who, if he failed to use just a couple of hours in the morning for office work, would become abnormal from pangs of conscience and really be in no state to get out of bed? Would it not have been enough to let an apprentice make inquiries, if such questioning was even necessary? Must the manager himself come, and in the process must it be demonstrated to the entire innocent family that the investigation of this suspicious circumstance could be entrusted only to the intelligence of the manager? More as a consequence of the excited state in which this idea put Gregor than as a result of any actual decision, he swung himself with all his might out of the bed. There was a loud thud, but not a real crash. The fall was absorbed somewhat by the carpet and, in addition, his back was more elastic than Gregor had thought. For that reason the dull noise was not quite so conspicuous. But he had not held his head up with sufficient care and had bumped it. He turned his head, irritated and in pain, and rubbed it on the carpet.

“Something has fallen in there,” said the manager in the next room on the left. Gregor tried to imagine to himself whether anything similar to what was happening to him today could have also happened at some point to the manager. At least one had to concede the possibility of such a thing. However, as if to give a rough answer to this question, the manager now, with a squeak of his polished boots, took a few determined steps in the next room. From the neighboring room on the right the sister was whispering to inform Gregor: “Gregor, the manager is here.” “I know,” said Gregor to himself. But he did not dare make his voice loud enough so that his sister could hear.

“Gregor,” his father now said from the neighboring room on the left, “Mr. Manager has come and is asking why you did not leave on the early train. We don’t know what we should tell him. Besides, he also wants to speak to you personally. So please open the door. He will be good enough to forgive the mess in your room.” In the middle of all this, the manager called out in a friendly way, “Good morning, Mr. Samsa.” “He is not well,” said his mother to the manager, while his father was still talking at the door, “He is not well, believe me, Mr. Manager. Otherwise how would Gregor miss a train? The young man has nothing in his head except business. I’m almost angry that he never goes out in the evening. Right now he’s been in the city eight days, but he’s been at home every evening. He sits here with us at the table and reads the newspaper quietly or studies his travel schedules. Working with wood can be quite a diversion for him; he busies himself with fretwork. For instance, he cut out a small frame over the course of two or three evenings. You’d be amazed how pretty it is. It’s hanging right inside the room. You’ll see it immediately, as soon as Gregor opens the door. Anyway, I’m happy that you’re here, Mr. Manager. By ourselves, we would never have made Gregor open the door. He’s so stubborn, and he’s certainly not well, although he denied that this morning.” “I’m coming right away,” said Gregor slowly and deliberately, without moving, so as not to lose one word of the conversation. “My dear lady, I cannot explain it to myself in any other way,” said the manager; “I hope it is nothing serious. On the other hand, I must also say that we business people, luckily or unluckily, however one looks at it, very often simply have to overcome a slight indisposition for business reasons.” “So can Mr. Manager come in to see you now?” asked his father impatiently and knocked once again

on the door. “No,” said Gregor. In the neighboring room on the left an awkward stillness descended. In the neighboring room on the right the sister began to sob.

Why did his sister not go to the others? She had probably just got up out of bed now and had not even started to get dressed yet. Then why was she crying? Because he was not getting up and letting the manager in, because he was in danger of losing his position, and because then his boss would badger his parents once again with the old demands? Those were probably unnecessary worries right now. Gregor was still here and was not thinking at all about abandoning his family. At the moment he was lying right there on the carpet, and no one who knew about his condition would have seriously demanded that he let the manager in. In any case, Gregor would not be casually dismissed right away because of this small discourtesy, for which he would find an easy and suitable excuse later on. It seemed to Gregor that it would be far more reasonable to leave him in peace at the moment, instead of disturbing him with crying and exhortations. But the others were distressed by their uncertainty, which excused their behavior.

“Mr. Samsa!” The manager was now shouting, his voice raised. “What’s the matter? You are barricading yourself there in your room, answering with only a yes and a no, you are making serious and unnecessary trouble for your parents, and you are neglecting—I mention this only incidentally—your commercial duties in a truly unheard-of manner. I am speaking here in the name of your parents and your employer, and I am requesting you in all seriousness to give an immediate and clear explanation. I am amazed. I am amazed. I thought I knew you as a calm, reasonable person, and now you appear suddenly to want to start parading around in strange moods. The Chief indicated to me earlier this very day a possible explanation for your neglect—it concerned the collection of cash entrusted to you a short while ago—but in truth I almost gave him my word of honor that this explanation could not be correct. However, now I see here your unimaginable pig-headedness, and I am totally losing any desire to speak up for you in the slightest. And your position is not at all the most secure. Originally I intended to mention all this to you privately, but since you are letting me waste my time here uselessly, I don’t know why the matter shouldn’t come to the attention

of your parents as well. Your productivity has been very unsatisfactory recently. Of course, it's not the time of year to produce exceptional sales, we recognize that, but a time of year for producing no sales, there is no such thing at all, Mr. Samsa, and such a thing must not be permitted."

"But Mr. Manager," called Gregor, beside himself and, in his agitation, forgetting everything else, "I'm opening the door immediately, this very moment. A slight indisposition, a dizzy spell, has prevented me from getting up. I'm still lying in bed right now. But I'm quite refreshed once again. I'm in the midst of getting out of bed. Just have patience for a short moment! Things are not yet going as well as I thought. But things are all right with me. How suddenly this can overcome someone! Only yesterday evening everything was fine with me. My parents certainly know that. Actually just yesterday evening I had a small premonition. People must have seen that in me. Why did I not report that to the office? But people always think that they'll get over sickness without having to stay at home. Mr. Manager! Take it easy on my parents! There is really no basis for the criticisms which you're now making against me. Nobody has said a word to me about any of this. Perhaps you have not seen the latest orders I sent in. Besides, I'm setting out on a new sales trip on the eight o'clock train; the few hours' rest have made me stronger. Mr. Manager, there's no need for you to wait here any longer. I will be at the office in person right away. Please have the goodness to report that and to convey my respects to the Chief."

While Gregor was quickly blurting all this out, hardly aware of what he was saying, he had moved close to the chest of drawers without effort, probably as a result of the practice he had already had in bed, and now he was trying to raise himself up on it. Actually, he wanted to open the door. He really wanted to let himself be seen and to speak with the manager. He was keen to see what the others who had been asking about him just now would say when they saw him. If they were startled, then Gregor would no longer be burdened by responsibility and could be calm. But if they accepted everything quietly, then he would have no reason to get excited; if he got a move on, he could really be at the station around eight o'clock. At first he slid down a few times on the smooth chest of drawers. But at last he gave himself a final swing and stood upright there. He was no longer

at all aware of the pains in his lower body, no matter how they might still sting. Now he let himself fall against the back of a nearby chair, on the edge of which he braced himself with his small limbs. By doing this he gained control over himself and kept quiet, for he could now hear the manager.

“Did you understand even a single word?” the manager asked the parents, “Is he playing the fool with us?” “For God’s sake,” cried the mother, already in tears, “perhaps he’s very ill, and we’re upsetting him. Grete! Grete!” she yelled. “Mother?” called the sister from the other side. They were making themselves understood through Gregor’s room. “You must go to the doctor right away. Gregor is sick. Hurry to the doctor. Did you hear Gregor speak just now?” “That was an animal’s voice,” said the manager, remarkably quiet in comparison to the mother’s cries. “Anna! Anna!” yelled the father through the hall into the kitchen, clapping his hands, “Fetch a locksmith right away!” The two young women were already running through the hall with swishing skirts—how had his sister dressed herself so quickly?—and pulling open the doors of the apartment. One couldn’t hear the doors closing at all. They probably had left them open, as is customary in an apartment where a great misfortune has taken place.

However, Gregor had become much calmer. All right, people did not understand his words any more, although they seemed clear enough to him, clearer than previously, perhaps because his ears had gotten used to them. But at least people now thought that things were not completely all right with him and were prepared to help him. The confidence and assurance with which the first arrangements had been carried out made him feel good. He felt himself included once again in the circle of humanity and was expecting from both the doctor and the locksmith, without differentiating between them with any real precision, splendid and surprising results. In order to make his voice as clear as possible for the critical conversation which was imminent, he coughed a little. He certainly took care to do this in a really subdued way, since it was possible that even this noise would sound like something different from a human clearing of the throat. He no longer trusted his judgment. Meanwhile in the next room it had become very quiet. Perhaps his parents were sitting with the manager at the table whispering; perhaps they were all leaning against the door and listening.

Gregor pushed himself slowly towards the door, with the help of the easy chair. Then he let go of the chair, threw himself against the door, held himself upright against it—the balls of his tiny limbs had a little sticky stuff on them—and rested there momentarily from his exertion. Next he made an effort to turn the key in the lock with his mouth. Unfortunately it seemed that he had no real teeth. How then was he to grab hold of the key? But to make up for that his jaws were naturally very strong; with their help he managed to get the key actually moving. He did not notice that he was obviously inflicting some damage on himself; a brown fluid was coming out of his mouth, flowing over the key, and dripping onto the floor. “Just listen,” said the manager in the next room. “He’s turning the key.” For Gregor that was a great encouragement. But they should all have called out to him, including his father and mother, “Come on, Gregor,” they should have shouted, “keep going, keep working on the lock!” Imagining that all his efforts were being followed with suspense, he bit down on the key unthinkingly with all the force he could muster. As the key turned more, he danced around the lock. Now he was holding himself upright only with his mouth, and he had to alternate as necessary between hanging onto the key and pressing it down again with the whole weight of his body. The quite distinct click of the lock as it finally snapped open really woke Gregor up. Breathing heavily he said to himself, “So I didn’t need the locksmith,” and he set his head against the door handle to open the door completely.

Because he’d had to open the door in this way, it swung open really wide without him yet being visible. He first had to edge himself slowly around the door frame, very carefully, of course, if he did not want to fall awkwardly on his back right at the entrance into the room. He was still preoccupied with this difficult movement and had no time to pay attention to anything else, when he heard the manager exclaim a loud “Oh!”—it sounded like the wind whistling—and now he saw him, nearest to the door, pressing his hand against his open mouth and moving slowly back, as if an invisible constant force were pushing him away. His mother—in spite of the presence of the manager she was standing here with her hair sticking up on end, still a mess from the night—first looked at his father with her hands clasped, then went two steps towards Gregor and collapsed right in the mid-

dle of her skirts, which were spread out all around her, her face sunk on her breast, completely concealed. His father clenched his fist with a hostile expression, as if he wished to push Gregor back into his room, then looked uncertainly around the living room, covered his eyes with his hands, and cried so that his mighty breast shook.

At this point Gregor had still not taken one step into the room; he was leaning his body from the inside against the firmly bolted wing of the door, so that only half his body was visible, as well as his head, tilted sideways, with which he peeped over at the others. Meanwhile it had become much brighter. Standing out clearly from the other side of the street was a section of the endless gray-black house situated opposite—it was a hospital—with its severe regular windows breaking up the facade. The rain was still coming down, but only in large individual drops visibly and firmly thrown down one by one onto the ground. Countless breakfast dishes were standing piled around on the table, because for his father breakfast was the most important meal time in the day, one which he prolonged for hours by reading various newspapers. Directly across on the opposite wall hung a photograph of Gregor from the time of his military service; it was a picture of him as a lieutenant; smiling and worry free, with his hand on his sword, he demanded respect for his bearing and uniform. The door to the hall was ajar, and since the door to the apartment was also open, you could see out into the landing of the apartment and the start of the staircase going down.

“Now,” said Gregor, well aware that he was the only one who had kept his composure, “I’ll get dressed right away, pack up the collection of samples, and set off. You’ll allow me to set out on my way, will you not? You see, Mr. Manager, I am not pig-headed, and I am happy to work. Traveling is exhausting, but I couldn’t live without it. Where are you going, Mr. Manager? To the office? Really? Will you report everything truthfully? A person can be incapable of work momentarily, but that’s precisely the best time to remember the earlier achievements and to consider that later, after the obstacles have been removed, the person will certainly work all the more diligently and intensely. I am really so indebted to Mr. Chief—you know that perfectly well. On the other hand, I am concerned about my parents and my sister. I’m in a fix, but I’ll work myself out of it again. Don’t make things more difficult for me than they already are. Speak up on

my behalf in the office! People don't like traveling salesmen. I know that. People think they earn pots of money and thus lead a fine life. People never have any special reason to think through this judgment more clearly. But you, Mr. Manager, you have a better perspective on what's involved than other people—even, I tell you in total confidence, a better perspective than Mr. Chief himself, who in his capacity as the employer may easily shade his decisions at the expense of an employee. You also know well enough that the traveling salesman who is outside the office almost the entire year can become so easily a victim of gossip, coincidences, and groundless complaints, against which it's totally impossible for him to defend himself. For the most part he doesn't hear about them at all, and if he does it's only when he's at home and exhausted after finishing a trip. Then he gets to feel in his own body the nasty consequences, which can't be thoroughly traced back to their origins. Mr. Manager, don't leave without speaking a word indicating to me that you'll at least concede that I'm a little in the right!"

But at Gregor's first words the manager had already turned away, and now he looked back with pursed lips at Gregor over his twitching shoulders. During Gregor's speech he had not been still for a moment but had kept moving away towards the door, without taking his eyes off Gregor, but really gradually, as if there were a secret ban on leaving the room. He was already in the hall, and given the sudden movement with which he finally pulled his foot out of the living room, you could have believed that he had just burned his sole. In the hall, however, he stretched his right hand out away from his body towards the staircase, as if some almost supernatural relief was waiting for him there.

Gregor realized that he must not under any circumstances allow the manager to go away in this frame of mind, if his position in the firm was not to be placed in the greatest danger. His parents did not understand all this very well. Over the long years, they had developed the conviction that Gregor was set up for life in this firm and, in addition, they had so much to do nowadays with their present troubles that all foresight was foreign to them. But Gregor had this foresight. The manager must be detained, calmed down, convinced, and finally won over. The future of Gregor and his family really depended on it! If only his sister had been there! She was clever. She had already cried

while Gregor was still lying quietly on his back. And the manager, always a friend of the ladies, would certainly let himself be guided by her. She would have closed the door to the apartment and talked him out of his fright in the hall. But his sister was not even there. Gregor had to deal with it himself. Without thinking that as yet he did not know anything about his present ability to move, and without thinking that his speech possibly—indeed probably—had once again not been understood, he left the wing of the door, pushed himself through the opening, and tried to go over to the manager, who was already holding the handrail on the landing tight, gripping with both hands in a ridiculous way. But as Gregor looked for something to steady himself, with a small scream he immediately fell down onto his numerous little legs. Scarcely had this happened, when he felt for the first time that morning a general physical wellbeing. The small limbs had firm floor under them; they obeyed perfectly, as he noticed to his joy, and even strove to carry him forward in the direction he wanted. Right away he believed that the final amelioration of all his suffering was immediately at hand. But at the very moment when he lay on the floor rocking in a restrained manner quite close to and directly across from his mother, who seemed to have totally sunk into herself, she suddenly sprang right up with her arms spread far apart and her fingers extended and cried out, “Help, for God’s sake, help!” She held her head bowed down, as if she wanted to view Gregor better, but then she ran senselessly back, contradicting that gesture, forgetting that behind her stood the table with all the dishes on it. When she reached the table, she sat down heavily on it, as if absent-mindedly, and did not appear to notice at all that next to her coffee was pouring out onto the carpet in a full stream from the large, overturned pot.

“Mother, mother,” said Gregor quietly and looked over towards her. The manager had momentarily vanished completely from his mind. On the other hand, when he saw the flowing coffee Gregor could not stop himself snapping his jaws in the air a few times. At that his mother screamed all over again, hurried from the table, and collapsed into the arms of his father, who was rushing towards her. But Gregor had no time right now for his parents—the manager was already on the staircase. With his chin on the bannister, the manager looked back for the last time. Gregor made a running start to catch up to him if possible. But the manager must have suspected something,

because he made a leap down over a few stairs and disappeared, still shouting “Aah!” The sound echoed throughout the entire stairwell. Unfortunately this flight of the manager seemed to bewilder his father completely. Earlier he had been relatively calm. Now instead of running after the manager himself, or at least not hindering Gregor from his pursuit, with his right hand he grabbed hold of the cane that the manager had left behind on a chair with his hat and overcoat. With his left hand, the father grabbed a large newspaper from the table and, stamping his feet on the floor, he set out to drive Gregor back into his room by waving the cane and the newspaper. No request of Gregor’s was of any use; no request would even be understood. No matter how willing he was to turn his head respectfully, his father just stomped all the harder with his feet. Across the room from him his mother had pulled open a window, in spite of the cool weather, and leaning out with her hands on her cheeks, she pushed her face far outside the window. Between the lane and the stairwell a strong draught came up, the curtains on the window flew around, the newspapers on the table rustled, and individual sheets fluttered down over the floor. His father relentlessly pushed his way forward, hissing like a wild man. Now, Gregor still had no practice at all in going backwards—it was really very slow going. If Gregor only had been allowed to turn himself around, he would have been in his room right away, but he was afraid to make his father impatient by the time-consuming process of turning around, and each moment he faced the threat of a mortal blow on his back or his head from the cane in his father’s hand. Finally Gregor had no other option, for he noticed with horror that he did not understand yet how to maintain his direction going backwards. And so he began, amid constantly anxious sideways glances in his father’s direction, to turn himself around as quickly as possible, although in truth he could only do this very slowly. Perhaps his father noticed his good intentions, for he did not disrupt Gregor in this motion, but with the tip of the cane from a distance he even directed Gregor’s rotating movement now and then. If only his father had not hissed so unbearably! Because of that Gregor totally lost his head. He was already almost totally turned around, when, always with this hissing in his ear, he just made a mistake and turned himself back a little. But when he finally was successful in getting his head in front of the door opening, it became clear that his body was too wide

to go through any further. Naturally his father, in his present mental state, had no idea of, say, opening the other wing of the door a bit to create a suitable passage for Gregor to get through. His single fixed thought was that Gregor must get into his room as quickly as possible. He would never have allowed the elaborate preparations Gregor required to raise himself up and perhaps in this way get through the door. Perhaps with his excessive noise he was now driving Gregor forwards as if there were no obstacle. Behind Gregor the sound at this point was no longer like the voice of only a single father. Now it was really no longer a joke, and Gregor forced himself, come what might, into the doorway. One side of his body lifted up. He lay at an angle in the door opening. His one flank was all raw from the scraping. On the white door ugly blotches were left. Soon he was stuck fast and would not have been able to move any more on his own. The tiny legs on one side hung twitching in the air above, and the ones on the other side were pushed painfully into the floor. Then his father gave him one really strong liberating push from behind, and he scurried, bleeding severely, far into his room. The door was slammed shut with the cane, and then finally it was quiet.