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Prague, 11 August, 1917

‘You’re done for!’ says the maid when she sees his blood. His sheets are red and so is his pillow. Then she looks at the washstand. There’s more blood there.

‘I managed to get across the room mostly in time. I apologise for the mess,’ he says, formal even in stained pyjamas. And as he speaks he reflects that now he has no choice, he has to talk about his blood. Previously it only came out of his mouth after swimming. Then it was a smear, nothing more than an oddity, and the smear he washed from his hands and dismissed from his mind. He spat twice and it was gone. It was that sort of smear.

‘Sir, Doctor K, I’m sorry,’ says the maid, Ruzenka, and she wants to say more, judging by her half open mouth, but her eyes suggest she has said too much already, that she didn’t mean to tell him he was finished – that the words just came out. Then she puts down the breakfast tray and turns round. ‘A mop, some rags,’ she says as she hurries out of the door.

He contemplates his breakfast. There’s not much to eat, just some fruit and milk and a small white roll, which seem a little lost on the tray. He doesn’t want much. He never does, despite being six foot and skeletal. So much is he like a skeleton that one of his colleagues after looking down from a bridge as he lay in a boat, remarked it was like a painting of Judgement Day after the graves opened, but before the dead were able to climb out.

But after three years of war his body was not as abnormal as it had been. The blockade put the empire on a diet. Fat people were rare now and suspicious. ‘Honest men don’t eat well,’ so people say – so Ruzenka says, when she wants to be sympathetic.

He studies his washstand and his bed. They look worse than they did at night. By the light of a solitary candle his blood didn’t seem so red, nor the stains so extensive. Yet under the high windows the morning sun makes the scene appear fatal. ‘Possibly fatal,’ he thinks. Though after the blood flowed he slept better than he had for years. And he gained a sense of relief, of something being palpably wrong, before there was just a terrible unease.

Ruzenka returns and he takes his breakfast tray to the far corner of the large but almost empty room. He wants to leave her free to clean the mess and change the sheets, and he sits in the shade and looks at her in the sunlight – her apron’s white and her skin’s brown, and he admires her.

Then his thoughts slide to his own work. Perhaps he shouldn’t go to the office, and he composes a note in his mind.

*Dear Assistant Director Pfohl,*

*With regret I’m forced to report that my brain has grown tired of supporting the impossible burden of being me and so cried for help. One of my lungs then volunteered. It is still adjusting to the load and consequently blood has been coming out of my mouth.*

*Yours with the utmost respect,*

*Doctor K*

He takes a notebook and pencil out of the pocket of his dressing gown, and jots down the words. Then he reads them over and smiles. He has a smile like a scar – or so he's been told.

Ever so slightly he shakes his head and puts the notebook away. He has sent such notes in the past to the head of his department, but Pfohl would insist on him seeing a doctor, a medical doctor, and he doesn't feel inclined to do so just yet.

He watches the maid some more, decides definitely that he won't send the note, and resolves to go to work.

*The office is the true hell* – that's what he put in a love letter several years before, but it was a familiar hell.

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He walks down into the courtyard of the Schönborn Palace where he happens to have his couple of rooms. The steps are cracked and some of the tiles are loose; and above them, by the front arch, a bush is starting to grow out of the stones. The building evidently lacks a purpose now, other than providing accommodation to a few bachelor civil servants. He looks at the bush and wonders how big it will be by the end of summer – he assumes nobody will bother to remove it – and then he increases his pace and lengthens his stride, and makes his way to the narrow street through the heavy wooden double doors. Dr K is about six inches taller than the average man, and his features and dark skin are also striking – strangers at times have assumed he is an Indian – and the way he paces the city makes him unmistakable at full speed.

He follows a twisting route that takes him past a baroque church whose white walls have turned grey from the smoke of the chimneys. There's a poster asking for volunteers

to read to blind soldiers who've returned from the front. He glances at it and crosses the street as a man smiles and nods in his direction – a veteran of the first battle with the Russians, who has no leg below the right knee and no arm below the left elbow. His army shirt is bleached with age but he wears a relatively new brown corduroy suit.

‘A gift,’ he says pointing to his jacket with his stump.

K puts a coin in the tin on the pavement. The old soldier lets go of his crutch, gives a quick salute, and catches the crutch before it falls to the ground. K raises his hat and, with their morning ritual complete, he walks on.

‘My husband's in Siberia! My son's crippled! Bread!’ A gaunt, half-crazed woman holds out her hands as her tiny granddaughter holds on to her skirt. But they aren't amongst his regulars and he isn't rich enough to help all of the needy of Prague. He looks down and thinks of his own wound and feels slightly justified by his blood. The woman lifts up the child and pursues him until she sees an elderly policeman, who salutes K, but waves the beggar away.

Then the road widens slightly and the traffic increases: a tram goes past and there's a crackle from the overhead wires; there are lean horses and donkeys pulling carts and their hooves clang on the tram rails, iron against steel; there are official cars with men in black, men in leather on army motorbikes, and uniformed soldiers driving trucks – and the deep-throated engines growl, groan and belch when they accelerate – and there are ragged delivery boys on bicycles shouting and screeching to each other through the rumble of motors and wagons.

And K weaves between them and approaches the Charles Bridge and there, by the arch of the gatehouse, stands his second regular of the day. He is in a lightweight blue summer suit and wears a straw hat, and at first looks calm and unmarked, but then he starts to shake as if convulsed by electricity. K holds out his right hand and it's grasped tightly

until the convulsions stop. Then the man smiles an embarrassed smile and turns and walks away with a peculiar hurried gait, as if he has been caught doing something indecent in public.

Along the bridge, spaced between the giant heroic statues, are more contemporary heroes. They are equally still but sit with their backs to the parapets and with their eyes fixed on the caps by their feet – only the way they hold their hands distinguishes one man from another. K studies their degrees of dejection until a newspaper vendor sells him a copy of *The Prague Daily*.

### **Victory on the Banks of the Prut – futile mass sacrifice by Russian troops**

He just glances at the headline before slipping the newspaper into the sleeve of his briefcase and negotiating his way round the end of a bread queue which partly blocks the street. The bread is mostly made of potatoes, acorns, wood shavings and nettles, and it's grey when it comes out of the oven, but it's better than hunger and people wait at the baker's door for hours. Dr K's white breakfast roll is a black-market miracle about which he asks no questions. He didn't request the favour, he just accepts it each day with thanks and some guilt.

And beyond the bread queue there's the bone queue, which winds its way round the scaffolding that supports the front of the butcher's sagging building. The house demands repairs just as people demand meat, but scaffolding and bone soup are all that the authorities can provide. And K can't help noticing the bones of the people in the bone queue – their light summer clothes make them more evident, but particularly he looks at the faces which appear even starker than normal in the early morning light.

However he only glances at them quickly. Queues make him uneasy, particularly when heading to the office with his briefcase in his hand. It's widely accepted that Jewish middlemen cause shortages by hoarding goods so as to raise prices. Yet what can he do to make himself seem innocent? Stand before the bone queue and protest that he's a vegetarian and doesn't even take his own portion of meat? He thinks he's unlikely to be believed. And it would draw attention to his civilian suit. Older men than him are in the army. Yet he tried to go to war. He bought a pair of military boots and enrolled in the 28<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Infantry Regiment. However Pfohl went to the director, Marschner, and they contacted the War Ministry and Dr K's card was marked – *Vital for Civilian Administration*.

And so he was not going into battle but into the office – though at least now he has a wound; he has shed blood. Yet this thought is interrupted by a man in a wheelchair being pushed by his hefty daughter – who's wearing a coarse apron of sacking as if she's just stepped out of a shop.

'Paraffin!' shouts the man.

'Vital,' says Dr K.

'It gets rid of leeches. When we still had paraffin we had a choice – kill a leech or light a lamp. I preferred to be in the dark by myself without a leech. Others preferred to sit in the light with a leech. And the debates we had! Legendary!'

K puts a hand his pocket but can't find the right coin. It would irritate him deeply to give the wrong amount – for in his head there is a charitable table of alms.

'Excuse me a moment,' Dr K says and goes to a newsagent's.

He picks up a copy of the German National Party's paper. It devotes half of its front page to a new battle in Flanders, and the other half to the Austro-Hungarian triumph in Bukovina – and it tells of a Russian retreat. For Dr K this is ambivalent news, as every

Russian retreat has seen them resort to *a scorched earth policy*, which in practice has meant Cossacks being allowed to rape and murder Jews, steal everything they can carry, and destroy what they can't. And the survivors flee. The last Jewish influx saw *Israelite refugees* being forbidden from riding on the city's trams *in order to stop the spread of typhus* – that was what the posters said. And even Prague's Jews are tired of helping their alien, Yiddish speaking brethren.

In his change for the newspaper Dr K gets the coin he needs and returns to the man reminiscing about paraffin. He is grateful for 'the donation' and his daughter makes the sign of the cross before K's face. Blessed in such a fashion he heads once more towards his office.

Yet, as he often complains to himself, on every pavement in the city centre he always sees someone he has known for years. Coming towards him is Uncle Rudolf – his mother's half-brother. Despite the brim of the man's hat being pulled down low because of the sun, K recognises him, as his moustache and beard are brushed peculiarly wide, and because he is smoking with his left hand and holds his left elbow unusually high.

Dr K is fond of his uncle though he has always been described as an example of what he might become if he's not careful. K's father, Hermann, delights in saying, 'Rudolf is one of the deserving poor – he's poor and he deserves it!' And Hermann always laughs enthusiastically at his joke.

Uncle Rudolf is a bachelor and a convert to Catholicism – 'Twice over he's a traitor to the family.' So Hermann says. Dr K is a bachelor but he hasn't turned Christian, though he's rarely seen in a synagogue.

Uncle Rudolf is a bookkeeper and unconcerned about his career as long as he can afford his modest pleasures – 'He's wasted his ability.' So Hermann says. K is only

concerned about writing, though he has just four very slim books to show for his devotion. Yet his friends are full of praise for the manuscripts in his desk.

And Uncle Rudolf is a hypochondriac – ‘The man’s a fool.’ So Hermann says. And if Rudolf sees his nephew he will quiz him on his health as well as describing his own ailments in detail and at length. And K hasn’t decided what he wants to tell his family. Therefore, despite his affection for the man, he sets off in a new direction.

He crosses the road between two cabs drawn by tired horses, and makes his way down a side street whose baroque beauty is masked by dirt. Then he turns right and approaches and crosses the square at the heart of the city. Having lived there, or thereabouts, all his life, he doesn’t give the gothic town hall or the churches any attention. But he does look left and up and gaze briefly at the family apartment, and right at the family shop. His father has worked his way from a distant village, where his own father was a kosher butcher, to the centre of Prague. Characters such as Uncle Rudolf are beyond Hermann’s comprehension – and so is his son.

Now though Hermann’s worried. People are hungry and increasingly desperate and the authorities have nothing to offer except nettle bread, bone soup and eternal war. Czech nationalism has grown as the prestige of the Habsburgs has withered; the city’s government has failed to stop shops being looted; and prisoners of war in Russia are forming their own independent army – the Czech Legion.

But Hermann is glad he runs a haberdashery – amongst his cloths and ribbons and lace there is nothing to eat. His shop survived the riots in the past – he is a Czech-Jew when he needs to be – but he fears his luck won’t hold. ‘If you’re unhappy with the government, what do you do? Kick a Jew!’ So Hermann says – all too frequently.



And as Dr K passes between the apartment and the shop he realises that he can't say anything that will increase their worries further. Does he have to mention the blood? Perhaps not yet.

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He walks into the lobby of The Workers Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague. It's quarter past eight.

'You can set your watch by Dr K' – that's what his colleagues have been saying for years. So punctually late was he that his lateness was regarded as precise time keeping.

There are six veterans sitting on the wooden benches by the door – fewer than he feared. K pauses, gives a slight bow and says, 'Gentleman, you will be seen shortly by Mr Bachmann.'

Six faces stare at him in surprise at his courtesy.

'But please remain here for now.' And Dr K climbs the stairs before any of them has a chance to speak.

As he goes up he wonders how long it will be before he needs the lift. Yet today he's fine, but he makes himself walk up one step at a time for the sake of his lungs.

His desk sits amid files as always, and on top there's the usual accumulation of office papers and trade journals. He picks up the latest edition of *Typewriter News* and puts it on the side table. Underneath there's a letter from the enemy – which as far as K is concerned isn't Russia, nor Italy, France nor England, it's The Provincial Association of Lumber Mill Owners.

Ever since he wrote his article *Measures for Preventing Accidents with Wood-Planing Machines* and revised the *Imperial and Royal Woodworkers' Safety Regulations*,

the association has regarded him as an intrusive and hostile agent, a saboteur, though he's saved the fingers and hands of countless workers. Despite this their chairman has remained apoplectic, 'The best guard against accidents is for a man to pay attention to his job!'

Dr K reads the first few lines of the letter then puts it aside for a better day – should there ever be one.

Mergl the messenger approaches pushing his trolley, which badly needs to be oiled. He places five more files by the desk, then he catches sight of the National Party's newspaper sticking out from the sleeve of Dr K's briefcase. Mergl is a party member and smiles in delight. 'Bukovina – boldness that's what's done it, sir! *This noble impulse, with which the human soul raises itself above the most formidable dangers, is to be regarded as an active principle peculiarly belonging to war.* It's true, sir, it is true!'

Since 1914 Mergl has been studying *On War* by Clausewitz and quoting him whenever possible.

'Though I'm sorry to say, sir, that Bachmann's brother's been brought back wounded on a train, and he's with him in hospital. In case... just in case, sir.'

Dr K frowns and nods in sympathy.

'And the men downstairs, sir, there's no one to see them. Shall I send them away?'

Dr K pauses and looks at the clock. He glances at Mergl and looks at the clock again. 'No. I'll see them. Bring me their papers, please.'

Squeaking down the corridor Mergl disappears.

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The first man moves towards his desk with the help of two crutches. He has no right foot. Dr K checks his name and grabs a chair and places it for him to sit on.

‘Kriva, Sergeant Kriva, artillery – is that right?’

‘I was but not anymore, sir. Counter-battery fire – got us all one way or another.’

He balances his crutches across his lap and sits with arms folded. Kriva looks poised to get away as quickly as he can. His suit is too big for him, though it might have fitted before the war. The cuffs of his jacket and the elbows have been mended and protected with leather; and somehow the breast pocket got torn, and the tear has been sewn up with cotton that’s a shade too bright.

K notices all this as he glances at the man, and the ill-at-ease look on his face. Kriva had been decorated twice for bravery, but the desks and the files and the officials seem to make him nervous. ‘He’d rather face shrapnel,’ or so Dr K thinks.

‘Before it started I was a joiner but you have to clamber over things on a building site – get on to roofs.’

‘Did you do much carpentry as well?’ K asks.

‘A little.’

Dr K pulls the *Trades and Wounds Eligibility Table* across his desk. He finds the carpentry column, looks at the line for *Legs or Feet missing*, moves his finger across the page and finds the word, *Acceptable*.

Though he doesn’t need to do this for himself – he wrote the chart – he just wants to show Kriva that he is being officially cared for, and then Dr K checks his address.

‘Do you still live in the south of the city?’

‘I do, sir.’

‘Carpentry vacancies, that’s trade category C3’ – again K points to a chart. ‘And the south of Prague comes under zone P3.’

Mergl is waiting to escort Kriva from the building.

‘Could you find file C3P3, please?’

‘Sir, it’s with Wottowa. I’m sorry.’ And Mergl looks down at his shoes.

Wottowa is also a messenger, but he is Czech and his two nephews are prisoners of war. Their regiment was disbanded because of mass desertions and Wottowa said that this was better than them being killed. Mergl and Wottowa no longer speak, which complicates the movement of files.

‘I’m sure he’ll let me borrow it for three minutes.’ Dr K finds Wottowa and returns with file C3P3. It contains just one suitable vacancy – but that is in central Prague.

‘I believe a tram could take you there from your street,’ says Dr K.

Kriva studies the card. ‘It could, but I don’t know them, sir. And my old boss is dead and the firm’s gone. How can I get a reference? You’ve got to have a reference, otherwise they won’t look at you.’

None of the typists are free, so K types a note quickly himself. It says little but it appears to give Kriva courage – yet he has medals for bravery under fire.

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The first of Dr K’s two planned meetings seems to him to be the more ludicrous of the pair. It is something left over from his pre-war existence, in particular from the Second International Congress for Rescue Services and Accident Prevention. One of the papers presented there has continued its slow progress through the imperial bureaucracy despite the carnage of the intervening years. And now four seemingly sane officials are sitting down to discuss *The Prevention of Accidents in Railway Carriages Caused by Falling Luggage*, while millions of other men are trying to kill one another with machine guns, flame throwers and poison gas – so Dr K reflects.

The man who called the meeting is a railway manager and K studies his thick moustache, full beard, grey hair and damp brow. And K wonders if his hair has naturally become greyer or whether he has dyed it so as to seem older and less eligible for the army.

‘Does he fill his days with meetings for the same reason?’ K asks himself – as the railway manager talks of the regulations concerning suitcases and hat boxes and overhead luggage racks.

In his mind’s eye K sees an armoured train in Russia firing a broadside from its cannons, and he imagines himself in the 28<sup>th</sup> Austro-Hungarian Infantry Regiment sheltering in a trench. And as the railway manager starts to talk of golf clubs, K sees himself being completely annihilated by an explosion – not even his military boots survive. And his fantasy ends with him seeing the words against his name, *Missing in Action, presumed dead*. And Dr K smiles at the thought.

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Dr K goes to his second meeting because of his contribution to founding the military psychiatric hospital in Frankenstein. He was one of the three senior civil servants who ran the project and now a doctor wants to talk to him – Captain Ratzenhofer, an elderly captain, but one who looks vigorous, though K suspects he’s blackened his hair since they last met.

At once Captain Ratzenhofer states his problem, ‘Four of our male nurses have been called back by the army, but we need them. The girls do fine work, but at times, for heavy work, for example, we need young men – solid young men.’

With his eyes, and a twist of his hand, K questions the word, ‘solid.’

‘Heavy work includes subduing lunatics. Many of our patients leap at the slightest noise, others just sit in the remotest corner they can find – they’d burrow into the walls if they could – but some are ready to fight on any pretext, or even none. Walking the corridors in the dark is a horror! Some inmates, as if on night patrol, lurk at corners with improvised weapons – a bracket perhaps, ripped from a wall. A doctor needs two solid men as bodyguards. We don’t have enough cells; we don’t have enough nurses.’

Dr K eyes look puzzled again. This time he interrogates with both hands.

‘Yes, I know,’ the captain continues, ‘we’ve appealed, but we’ve been overruled by the district recruiting authorities. Firmly overruled – no more questions! Though it might even have been an accident in the first place – the wrong names on the wrong list. It does happen. Yet your director can talk to the highest authorities – he can talk in a way not possible for anybody in our hospital. He knows the route in, one might say – the route in! Could you approach him, please, on our behalf? What’s the point in setting up an institution and taking away the staff?’

Dr K says he’ll try and seemingly makes a note of their conversation, but instead he writes, *Bureaucracy is capable of random acts of destruction like a badly made machine.*

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As it is Saturday Dr K is able to escape early from the office, and he finally decides that he should see his own doctor, Gustav Mühlstein, though he regards conventional medicine as a higher form of superstition.

He likes Mühlstein due to the lack of grandeur in his manner – in this he’s an exceptional doctor. ‘He doesn’t put on airs and he’s entertaining.’ When K approached him about his headaches, insomnia and anxiety, Mühlstein said that he should smoke less,

drink less, eat more vegetables and take up swimming – despite K having told him that he didn't smoke, hardly touched alcohol, was a vegetarian and a keen swimmer and rower.

K expects to be amused once more and so is far from surprised when Mühlstein says, 'Bronchial catarrh.'

'A bad cold – it that what you're suggesting, doctor?'

'Something like that, Dr K, something like that.'

K pays him the fee for his diagnosis.

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That night blood flows out of his mouth again. It promises the complete derangement of his existence and – once he finishes at the washstand – he again smiles a smile like a scar.

## 2

Prague, 4 September, 1917

As he has done several times before, the small, dark haired man looks up and down the street. He takes his watch out of his waistcoat pocket, peers at it through his wire framed glasses, and puts it away. Anxiously he rubs his moustache.

Dr K watches from afar through the wooden slats of a wagon. Then two women in work caps emerge from a restaurant carrying a barrel between them, and they head in his direction; and with his cover about to vanish K decides to keep his appointment.

He darts round the wagon and runs along the road. His face takes on an expression of regret – almost an expression of horror at being so late. And he holds his right hand to his chest as if to say his sorrow is heartfelt.

The small man tries to look irritated but he is clearly too relieved to manage this, and it is only relief which is showing in his face by the time Dr K shakes his hand.

‘Max! Max! I’m sorry. The last man was in a wheelchair and I couldn’t just turn him round and shove him out of the door. I’m sorry.’

He turns his palms upwards and shrugs with theatrical exaggeration.

‘It’s your appointment – not mine. I’m just here to make sure you go in. For my sake, if not yours, do it – go in and see the specialist.’

Dr K smiles as he looks down at Max Brod. ‘You really don’t respect my own doctor, do you?’

‘No! Go in, please.’

Max points at the door.

‘I saw Mühlstein again. He urged me to take a long holiday in the south. I explained that we were at war with Italy and being shot as a spy might be bad for my health. Reluctantly he agreed.’

His friend stabs his finger in the direction of the door, and Dr K bows slightly, turns, takes two steps towards the office of Professor Gottfried Pick, lung specialist, then stops and turns about once more, ‘I don’t believe famous doctors – I believe doctors only when they tell me that they don’t know anything. And, anyway, I hate them!’

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‘The Rat of Palais Schönborn,’ was how he described himself the previous winter. It was a joke he enjoyed for a while. He felt like an animal hiding away. The gas and coal shortages kept his rooms unheated and outside the temperature had dropped to twenty below freezing; and unlike at his parents’ apartment there was no large family to provide human warmth; and though the windows offered a magnificent view of the castle, they also let the cold in – until Dr K thought it was as harsh indoors as in a trench on the Eastern Front or a bunker in the Alps.

‘Such extravagances will cost you,’ his father said. So his youngest sister, Ottla, found him a house to write in – a tiny house on Alchemist Street at the foot of the castle. In the past all the buildings there had been occupied by alchemists employed by the emperor, but now the atmosphere was more subdued. And there was a stove in his house, and just a little coal made a large difference in the cramped space – he could write without fear of his ink turning to ice. He allowed himself the luxury of warm ink.

To endure the cold was a challenge – he enjoyed the struggle – but now, back in his room in the palace, he reflects on the consequences for his health, and on the professor’s diagnosis. Yet he is not in a mood to blame himself just because of his accommodation. His thoughts slip away from the specialist to his fiancée, Felice Bauer – the woman he has spent five years not marrying.

They got engaged for the second time a few months before, and then, that summer, made their formal visits as a couple to friends and family. He wore a high collar to emphasise his intent – even when they visited Max and his wife. ‘Never was a farce played with a straighter face,’ K now reflects.

And the furniture she wanted to buy! It was solid – solid enough to withstand wars, revolutions and a minor Biblical cataclysm. He has a taste for bamboo furniture, ‘I don’t

know any chair more comfortable than that,' he argued in a shop. But apparently bamboo chairs were only for eccentric bachelors like Uncle Rudolf.

But the worst thing of all was the sideboard – the one that delighted her was a tombstone. Living with that would proclaim he was buried alive – which was how he felt in Prague, but he'd always hoped, ever so faintly, that there remained some possibility of him digging his way out. Yet if he were buried and there was a monumental sideboard on top of the tomb, he would be finished.

Dr K thinks of the furniture because it's less confusing than thinking of problems more fundamental; but these tap at his conscious mind from down below, and he feels the need to escape into the air, so he leaves his apartment, descends the stairs and walks to the river. He finds a quay which is almost deserted and paces up and down until his anguish subsides.

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He doesn't write to his fiancée. He writes to his sister instead.

*I believe that in this illness there is justice: I'm justly punished. But in comparison with the torments of the last few years there's sweetness in it, and I don't feel it as a blow. It is just, but so coarse, so earthly, so simple, so handy. And there must be a way out.*

*The professor says I should spend three months in the country. Could I stay with you, but would you want me?*

*Not a light request.*

And the suggestion has family implications. When Ottla decided in the spring to manage the farm in Zürau their father thought she had lost her mind.

‘In the country you live in shit and everybody is stupid,’ so Hermann says – again and again.

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Late at night he writes a letter of thanks to his publisher, Kurt Wolff, for his proposal for publishing *A Country Doctor* – K’s latest collection of short stories.

*I would never have dared suggested a letter-type of that size – not for my sake, not for your sake, not for the sake of the book itself. But as you suggested it, I joyfully accept.*

And he gives Kurt Wolff his address in Zürau – for he assumes Ottla will not refuse to let him stay.

When this letter is done he remembers he should write to Max Brod. When they met at the swimming pool after the appointment he felt his friend put words into his mouth, and no doubt was writing them down in his diary, and in the days to come he would be repeating them about Prague. Perhaps it would be possible to refine Max’s view of his sickness and the diagnosis.

*My head has made an appointment with my lungs behind my back,* K jots down in his notebook with a smile, then decides that the letter can wait until the morning.

3

Prague, 12 September, 1917

Dr K's coffin is carried out of his parents' apartment and stood on end in the lift. One of the men pulls shut the outer wooden door with a thud, and then slides the iron grill across and pushes it hard so that it clangs into place. Then he presses the button for the ground floor. With seeming reluctance, then a clunk, the chains unravel and the lift descends.

K walks down the steps. He refers to his trunk as his coffin, and believes that if his body were folded carefully it would fit and could be returned in that fashion – should his health fail completely while he's away.

From one side and then another of the lift-shaft he watches the cabin slowly get further away as he spirals down. Then he hears the grill clang open and the wooden door thump against the iron bracket. Without waiting for Dr K the men heave the coffin onto a handcart and set off along the edge of the square.

They've neglected to close the lift door, and so he releases it from the hook, and turns round – and then Max Brod appears in the hallway. Evidently he's rushed from his office during the lunchbreak. Max clasps his hand.

'You will get better, you will. I know, believe me, believe...'

His words trail away and they stand there – a tall, slender man and his short, plump companion. K looks puzzled and finally says, 'If I get better what would I be?'

'Yourself.'

'Perhaps not – perhaps if the misery were unravelled I'd fall apart. And perhaps that is true for you as well.'

‘Things will improve!’

Dr K shrugs and smiles, ‘I don’t have to go to the office for months – but I do have to be at the station for the two o’clock train.’

They shake hands again and Max Brod watches him march after his coffin until he turns a corner and vanishes from sight.

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Dr K sits in a crowded compartment with *The Prague Daily*.

### **Kerensky Murdered?**

The headline asks the question and the article re-cycles reports from Swedish and Dutch papers – the Russian counter revolution has begun; General Kornilov is approaching St. Petersburg with his *Wild Division*; he is *young and ambitious* and may prove to be a *new Napoleon*.

And with a jolt Dr K’s train sets off and takes him and his trunk, and hundreds of other people and their possessions, through the suburbs and into the country. But it’s not the familiar view which holds his attention, but the smell of the substitute fuel, the brown coal, which seems even browner than before – more acrid and it smudges any surface on which it settles, including skin. And beneath the homely odour of the other people in his carriage, there’s a lingering reek of war, of soldiers crammed together returning from the front – sweat, blood, vomit, beer, tobacco, medicine and iodoform, all mingled and concentrated.

‘Was there no soap left to clean the carriages?’ K asks himself, even though he knows the answer.

Then he looks at the newspaper of the man sitting opposite him. The nationalist news is of a French failure on the Maas, of a new Russian attack in Bukovina that will be undermined by their political turmoil, and of an artillery duel in Flanders between the English and Crown-Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria. But it’s the man’s right hand that catches K’s attention as it holds the edge of the paper – it’s missing the two smallest fingers.

The hand looks just like one of the illustrations that accompanied his article, *Measures for Preventing Accidents with Wood-Planing Machines*. The change he had recommended from square to cylindrical cutters would have prevented just that sort of mutilation. And not only are the cylindrical machines safer, they are cheaper to buy and to maintain. And he has proved it!

And Dr K imagines how all of those fingers he’d saved might be wriggling about in the sawdust – in his mind’s eye he sees their vain struggles for life; there are thousands of severed fingers expiring in his unwanted fantasy. But then he thinks that many of those fingers might have survived to go to war, and might now still remain with their bodies, but be buried in shallow, battlefield graves – skeletal fingers all.

He turns away from the hand opposite and looks out of the window. And he stops thinking about his work and goes over his last letter to Felice Bauer. He still has his draft in his pocket, though he posted the fair copy three days before; and so she might be reading it as his train makes its way through the Bohemian countryside – she might just be discovering that he has tuberculosis in both lungs.

If it has reached her then everybody close to him knows, except his parents. He told them that he was suffering from nervous strain and had been granted a long holiday to recuperate. First he told his mother, and she just said, ‘That’s very kind of them. I’m sure

Ottla will be glad of your company.’ Then he told his father, and he remarked, ‘If you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas’ – which has always been one of his favourite sayings, and now he applies it to Zürau.

In his letter K warned Felice about this white lie, as he’d feared she would phone his mother to say some comforting words. He takes the draft out of his pocket and re-reads the postscript.

*Since the blood came out of my mouth the headaches have left me and I’ve been sleeping better than before. Until then headaches and insomnia were the things I had been suffering from most.*

K puts it away and it feels heavier than his coffin in the guard’s van. It has the weight of failure. For five years he struggled to get married – struggled against himself.

*I can’t believe that in any legend a man strives for a girl as desperately I have striven for you within me – since the beginning, and ever again, and perhaps forever.*

So he’d written in the past. Well, it wasn’t forever. The wound he received was serious – severe enough to bring the struggle to an end. The anxiety of struggling had ground him down. And how he’d tortured her! And was still torturing her. But perhaps the first engagement was worse – with his parents travelling to Berlin for the betrothal party. And there he’d stood like a sacrificial victim. And he couldn’t play the part. The traditional meat dish had been made in his honour and he’d refused to taste it because he was a vegetarian. Just one mouthful would have been enough to have shown his appreciation of all that was being done for him – and to show his respect for Jewish

customs. Just one! But there he had stood mute and defiant and martyred. He was both torturer and sacrifice. And he'd brought his parents to Berlin to witness his self-humiliation!

The train passes a farm and in the farmyard there's the remains of three carts – all lacking wheels, as if they were stripped over the years for the sake of some other vehicle; perhaps for a wagon requisitioned by the army, along with the horses. K pictures the scene, the farmer and his wife protesting, the officer and his sergeant insistent. And eventually they write a receipt, and the couple are left with a piece of paper, and two horses and a wagon are led down the lane.

And she'd told her manager she was leaving! K was going to support her as a married man should – according to convention. It was a technological job for a manufacturer of record players and dictating machines. She'd started as a shorthand-typist and made her way up – and she'd enjoyed her work and the respect it earned her and the money. And she was willing to leave it for him. And they hadn't got married.

Now, at least, his tuberculosis provides a reason that people can understand for separating – or so Dr K believes. But he's convinced of the inevitability of his failure, and condemns himself; and as the train pauses for some unknown reason he gets out his notebook and jots down his thoughts before the jolting resumes.

*An engagement should be the step on the stairway rising to the made-up marital bed – the reward and meaning of my existence. Yet it is an enterprise Napoleonic in its ambition. And the bed will never be made up and I will never even leave Corsica. Imagine a Napoleon who can't even escape from his own island. That Napoleon is me.*



He puts his notebook away and looks out of the window at two women driving cows from one field to another. A man gets ready to close the gate – his crutches are hanging from the branch of a tree. In the distance, on the ridge of a low line of hills, stands a windmill slowly turning. K would like to be that windmill with that view forever more.

The train jolts forward and resumes its journey.

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Though his room faces north-east it's airy and warm and delights him – and for the first time in his life he is not living in Prague. Naturally he's taken holidays, but he's never left the city for months at a time. There is a tinsmith across the yard hammering away at his tin, but inside Ottla's house everything promises to be tranquil. And his sister's house means freedom. Ottla has given him a considerable gift. 'She is bearing me up on her wings,' so Dr K believes.

He goes down the stairs to find her in the kitchen. Her face as ever shows energy and intelligence, but now it's beginning to be marked by the experience of running a farm. It's a bold thing she has done – a city girl taking a place amongst the men of the village. But many women now are filling gaps made by the war. Yet to do this in a strange environment with unknown work shows a special type of courage. K has confidence in her and admires her long, dark country dress – particularly he likes the stout leather belt and iron buckle which gathers it around her waist. And her sleeves are rolled-up and there is a trace of oil on the collar of the white shirt she wears underneath. She's slender but hardy and he can sense in her the granddaughter of a butcher. Ottla already looks as if she belongs in Zürau – at least to his urban eyes. Yet he wears a city suit and he appears to be what he is – a civil servant from the capital on holiday. And with that he's content.

K extends his arms wide and opens his hands as if to embrace it all – the house, the village, even the fields beyond – and he smiles. Then he embraces his sister and kisses her on both cheeks. She leads him outside and shows him Zürau. The tour does not take long – there is a manor dating from the sixteenth century, and there are a couple of dozen houses and cottages arranged in a ragged circle about a baroque church with a low tower capped by an octagonal dome. Facing this tower across the green lies Ottla's house.

When the tinsmith stops work for the evening, a woman starts to play a piano.

4

Zürau, 15 September, 1917

The new life justifies a new notebook though his old one still has some blank pages.

*You have the possibility to make a beginning, as far as this possibility might exist. Don't waste it. Don't avoid the dirt which bloats you if you want to penetrate down. But don't roll about in it. If, as you maintain, the wound in your lung is just a symbol deeply justified by the inflammation called Felice – if this is so – then the medical advice (light, air, sun, rest) is also symbolic.*

\*\*\*

He has lunch with a tramp. He's sixty-two and has been on the road for ten years. Above his majestic and well-groomed moustache his face is clean and rosy; and seen from the waist up, at the table, he looks like a retired official.

'Just begging – well, with a bit of work here and there – but it's on begging that I've lived. I've been fine, except that for the last few years I've been a little muddled in my head – low in spirits. Never married, you see. Always advised me against it they did – my mother, my two sisters, and my father, businessman he was – they all said, "Don't!" whenever a woman came along. I had my chances. Though when all your family are against something... well, what can you do? And so... what can I say... well, the bottle became my wife. I took to the bottle. But tramping has kept me fit and stopped me drinking too much – a respectable tramp does better, you see. But I am low in spirits, but I'll get by – I always do.'

He doesn't linger once he's finished eating; he's got miles to walk to the village where he aims to get his supper. They shake hands and he leaves K at the table.

He didn't feel completely comfortable with the tramp; K was too much of an outsider for that, and he didn't like to ask many questions. But he was glad to listen to a man with a real job – begging. It was much better than listening to the writers in Café Arco. And like the tramp he too must face the consequences of not getting married.

\*\*\*

Dr K is too long for the tin bath in the kitchen – his legs and arms dangle over the sides, and he feels like a giant insect on its back, and in this condition he is happy.

When he gets out he coughs a little, but this leaves just the slightest trace of blood on his handkerchief.

K rubs himself down, gets dressed, and rises up the stairs smiling.

\*\*\*

As the evening darkens he returns to his diary.

*O, beautiful hour, masterful setting, a garden turning wild. You leave the house, go round the corner and the Goddess of Fortune rushes down the path towards you.*

*Majestic appearance, prince of the realm.*

*Five bulldogs – Phillipp, Franz, Adolf, Isidor and Max.*

*The village green given to the night. The wisdom of the children. The primacy of the animals. The women – cows nonchalantly roam about the place. My sofa floats over the land.*

On that sofa the possibilities seem vast – even the untiring pianist cannot alter his mood.

## 5

Zürrau, 19 September, 1917

‘Get off from that bench!’

Dr K looks round and sees a head above a bush some thirty yards away. And then a second head appears and shouts something more radical. But his fierce words are in the local dialect and K doesn't understand the precise meaning – only the sentiment.

The heads continue down the lane and disappear, and K is left to continue sunbathing. He's found an isolated spot on a small plateau and due to the hills round about he is mostly hidden. There are only a couple of places where he can be seen by passers-by – which is welcome as he is a civilian enjoying a holiday during a harvest in wartime.

However he does hope eventually to be accepted. The village idiot is an old man far decayed and Dr K has the ambition to succeed him in his post. In his mind's eye he sees the years rolling into the future like the gentle slopes of the Bohemian countryside – a tranquil life of rural idiocy. All he need do is write a letter of application to the mayor. Yet how should one write such a letter? Indeed wouldn't anybody capable of writing a letter to request to be the next village idiot be deemed too elevated to be an idiot? But if he doesn't apply how might he get the job? The current idiot is too demented to nominate an heir.

Dr K contemplates the ways of grasping this opportunity as he lays his head back on the wooden bench and looks at the clouds and smiles his peculiar smile.

\*\*\*

On the table in the kitchen there's a letter and a newspaper. K sits down and studies them where they have been left beside the tea pot. The letter is from Berlin and the paper from Prague. Eventually he picks up the letter, rotates it, puts it down, finds his pocket-knife, picks up the letter once more, slits it open and then puts it aside. He unfolds the newspaper and reads the front page – then he takes the letter out of its envelope.

Felice is coming to Zürau and Field Marshall Allenby is going to Palestine. Both imminent confrontations unsettle him.

He hadn't expected Felice to follow him on his retreat. The journey from Berlin is lengthy and complicated and he'd thought he was secure. K looks at the stuffed head of a deer on the wall – something the landlord has left behind as decoration. The dead deer looks back. Then he glances at the portrait of the dead emperor, Franz Joseph, who is positioned so he can see down the garden path. And then K looks at the deer once more, and again the animal returns his gaze.

Dr K imagines that he will look at her in just the same way – a visit by Felice will prove little different to being handled by a taxidermist. K gets up and walks round the table anti-clockwise, and then clockwise. He sits down and looks at the deer a third time – it remains unmoved.

He looks at the paper.

Allenby!

He is leading the British Army out of Egypt to fight the Ottoman Empire – empires clash and Jews are in the middle.

'There's a Biblical tint to the paper's news.' Or that is what he imagines Max Brod saying to his Zionist friends.

Yet the Turks are the allies of Austria and part of the Habsburg Army is supporting them. However, it's whispered in Prague that some sort of Jewish homeland might emerge from a British victory. And won't they need a homeland if Vienna's empire disintegrates?

K's eye is caught by the cat in the garden. It's playing with the goats. With their long faces and scraggy beards they remind him of eastern Jews. But if they were in Palestine perhaps eastern Jews wouldn't resemble goats.

And if there was a choice between living in the Russian Empire or the Ottoman Empire or the British Empire which would they pick?

Dr K makes a pot of tea.

There was a time when he abstained from tea as well as coffee, chocolate, alcohol and tobacco. But with rationing so tight he doesn't feel the need to impose severe restrictions upon himself. The proportion of tea in tea is not so great – much of it consists of nettles cut very fine.

As he drinks he re-reads the article and thinks of Jerusalem. When Max Brod had introduced him to Felice they had talked of going there – he'd even shaken hands with her to confirm their commitment to a joint holiday.

'Next year in Jerusalem!'

It wasn't to be. K studies the deer once more, then puts the letter back in its envelope. As he does so, he hears the deer say, 'Felice is coming' – which disturbs K as he reflects that either a miracle has occurred or he's going mad. He's not sure which would be worse, and he takes his tea and goes outside and sits on the plank supported by the two halves of an old barrel. As he rests his back on the wall one of the goats leaves the village green and approaches him. This one isn't like an eastern Jew – he's much more like Uncle Siegfried, another half-brother of his mother, a country doctor and a bachelor. He admires Siegfried and has often stayed with him, despite what he describes as his, 'Faintly burbling madness and bird-like chirping wit.'

Three of his mother's brothers and half-brothers are bachelors – only two are married. 'Never to have a wife, is that my fate?' Dr K asks the goat. To his relief the goat doesn't reply.

The tinsmith walks to his forge, having finished his lunch, and resumes his tin beating. When he rests the brief silence is ended by a woodworker who saws with a mighty saw that cuts K's head down the middle.

\*\*\*

*Tear everything up.*

So Dr K wrote in his diary the day before – that and nothing else. Now at his desk in his bedroom he puts down his pen and wonders what *everything* should include.

He thinks of his new collection of short stories – *A Country Doctor*. The title piece was inspired by Uncle Siegfried. K is not sure that this will make him proud. Previously Kurt Wolff had published *Contemplation*, *The Judgment*, *The Stoker* and *Metamorphosis*. Should all these be torn up, every copy annihilated?

It doesn't seem worth the effort – though if it could be done without trouble, then yes, that's how he feels. But he'd like a few copies of *The Judgement* to remain. That has a special place in his memory – it was written in the true fashion. He started at ten o'clock in the evening and continued until six o'clock in the morning. Through Sunday night into Monday, five years before, those hours are vivid in his mind. He remembers how stiff his legs were when he finally tried to emerge from his desk. He remembers the sense of wonder he felt when he was writing, as if he was advancing across water. He remembers feeling that he was carrying his own weight on his shoulders. And outside, down below, a wagon rolled across the bridge and two men followed it on foot, and he checked the time at two o'clock and was then oblivious to the passing hours until the maid arrived – and as she walked down the hall he wrote the last sentence.



He remembers how he trembled when he went into his sisters' room as they were waking up – and read it all to them, the tale of a young man savagely condemned to death by his father. And Ottla at least was impressed – she hadn't started a day in such a fashion before, so she said. Then she read the manuscript herself.

He dedicated the story to Felice as he'd just begun writing letters to her – though she remained more ambivalent than Ottla, and she even wanted him to explain it.

*The Judgement* marked the opening of a phase in his life, which now seems to K to be closing – thanks to tuberculosis. Writing through the night was how to live – at least in Prague. While the city slept, he worked.

In Zürau he needn't work in the same way, he reflects, as he picks up his pen. In his pocket notebook he jots down:

*I live with Ottla in a good minor marriage; marriage not on the basis of the usual violent high currents but of the slight oscillations of the low voltages. And I've gained weight in a week – from 9 stone 7 pounds to 9 stone 9 pounds.*

*The disease in its initial stages is more like a guardian angel than a devil. But its further development may well be the diabolic aspect and in hindsight what seemed angelic will be the worst part of it. All that is certain is that there is nothing to which I would surrender with more complete trustfulness than death.*

\*\*\*

‘Twice Mařenka went to the post office and returned, claiming it was shut. The third time I sent her she got the telegram sent off. We’ll meet Felice at the station at Michelob.’

Ottla gives him the news with some satisfaction as she slices vegetables for a soup. Mařenka seems to have a telegram-phobia, or perhaps just a dislike of the operator. But finally Ottla prevailed.

‘So, it’s arranged,’ K says. The news of the telegram topples the good mood he established at his desk. Not that there was any doubt about Felice’s ability to reach their home. Yet the telegram – a short message of practical details – highlights the ambiguity of his feelings that he’s expressed in hundreds of letters over the previous five years.

‘A suitcase of letters collectively ambiguous,’ so K thinks.

Though at the same time he admires his sister’s handling of Mařenka. Apart from her obstinacy with regard to telegrams, Ottla gets on well with her – ‘short, dark skinned and lively,’ was how she had described her, and that is how K would start to describe her. Yet there is something in the way she helps around the house and farm – in the way that she always seems to know what to do and what will be wanted next – which makes her unapproachable to K, and he is constrained in her presence; and he is surprised when she responds to him, just as he is surprised when he tells an animal in its stall to get out and it does – not that he’s been into the stalls very often.

‘But Hermann’s gone off in a peculiar mood.’

Ottla interrupts his thoughts, and for a moment he thinks of their father, before realising that she was talking about the farmhand.

‘Didn’t come for his meal this evening, didn’t say good-bye – and the question is, will he come tomorrow? Though Mařenka is friendly with his wife, perhaps she can serve as our ambassador and restore peace. Yet what happened, I’ve no idea.’

K believes his sister belongs in a way that he never will – even if he did become the village idiot.

6

Michelob, 21 September, 1917

As she walks up the platform amongst the farmers, labourers and soldiers, and their bundles of belongings, Felice Bauer looks as if she has travelled thirty hours to a place that seems impossibly remote and to a fiancé who behaves with impossible peculiarity.

Dr K smiles and she smiles back but her eyes are tired and questioning. The train sets off for the next small rural station, stains the air with its brown fumes and assaults their ears with a painful squeak – oil for lubrication is in ever shorter supply.

He does not ask her whether she's had a pleasant journey – indeed he doesn't know what to say. Fortunately Ottla is there, and she makes Felice welcome as they climb into the waiting carriage and make their way back to Zürau at a pace comfortable for an old horse.

'I love this countryside,' Ottla says and Felice looks about and replies, 'It's a world away from Berlin.'

As she talks K notices her gold capped teeth – they catch the sun. Every tooth now has a golden cap, he's sure – and as they jolt along a lane he compares her, with gold in her mouth, to himself with tuberculosis in his lungs. He described them as a perfect couple because *their contrasts would complement each other to form a complete, harmonious marriage*. K marvels at his own powers of persuasion, because he managed to persuade himself of something which now appears ludicrous.

A rut tilts the carriage and Felice, unprepared, slides down the seat and squeezes K into a corner. There's not enough flesh on him to serve as a cushion. She feels so much more solid. He remembers the impression she first made on him when they met in the apartment of Brod's family. *Bony, empty face, which wore its emptiness openly. Almost broken nose. Blonde, somewhat straight, unattractive hair. Strong chin.* And this was the woman of whom he formed an *unshakable opinion* that evening, while he was still on his feet and saying hello. And he wrote to her for the first time on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 1912 – he couldn't forget the date – five years and one day ago. And yesterday she was on the train heading south to mark the anniversary with a singular expedition.

Felice moves back across the bench and takes firm hold of a strap to guard against the next rut.

\*\*\*

Dr K stands at his window.

'Over there in that house is the only piano between Prague and Dresden.'

'You've always complained about the noise.' Felice joins him and looks across the street to the house, which is currently quiet, and then to the fields beyond. Three pigeons rise up and flap their wings before disappearing, otherwise it's a tranquil scene.

'Every letter... most letters you have...'

He moves away from the window, twists his hands and raises them, and lowers his eyes.

'...but you volunteered for the army.'

K shifts the notebook on his desk a few inches.

‘The men I’ve heard talk about it – they say there’s nothing worse than being pounded in a trench by shells, except being caught in the open.’

K shifts the notebook back.

‘Leave it alone! The way you switch and change... it frightens me... is it more than tuberculosis?’

‘You think I’m mad?’

She looks at him for a while.

‘Five years of my life – I was a young woman, now I’m facing middle age.’

‘You’re still young. Look in the mirror.’

She doesn’t look in the mirror. She stares at him. K looks in the mirror.

‘Near the beginning you wrote to me of some fantasy of yours – living alone in a deep cellar with just a desk, a lamp, and paper, pen and ink. Your food would be left outside the door. Do you remember?’

She waits until finally he says, ‘Yes,’ to his reflection.

‘You’d go and fetch it, return to your desk, you’d eat, return the dirty plate to the doorstep, and go back and resume your writing. I thought it was a joke... Why did you ever consider getting married?’

She doesn’t wait for another answer, but goes down the stairs and talks to Ottla about the journey back to Berlin.

The aspiring pianist starts to play the piano.

\*\*\*

K looks for her outside. He assumes she’s wandering about the village and doesn’t understand why he can’t find her as he walks along the few paths. Finally he opens the

door of the church. It's empty, he thinks at first, then he notices the priest, an old, small man, behind the lectern in the pulpit. He's placing bookmarks in the Bible, perhaps in preparation for a sermon. The priest looks up, K bows apologetically, and leaves.

Defeated he returns home, goes in the back door, and sees Ottla in the kitchen. He shrugs and looks bewildered. 'Where's Felice? I've been walking round and round.'

'She's just in front of the house.'

He hurries out. 'So, you are here! I was looking for you everywhere.'

'But I heard your voice indoors only a moment ago.'

They don't speak any more, they just stand by the steps, gazing out over the village green and the pond. The ducks paddle; the goats nibble the grass.

\*\*\*

The carriage stops by their house. Ottla goes out first with her bag; she'll accompany Felice to Prague – the first leg of her journey.

Felice has nothing to say; K has no way of speaking – the words won't come out. She turns her head from him and follows his sister into the carriage.

K stands outside – he's not going to the station with them. The driver touches the horse ever so slightly with the whip, it steps forward, and slowly follows the track round the green and the pond. K cuts across and is close to Felice once more. They both manage a smile – a scar facing gold capped teeth.

At a pace befitting a hearse the carriage disappears.

Zürau, 8 October, 1917

He stands still and then he strikes. Hermann the farmhand is good at waiting at dusk in the shade of the tree – motionless in his old grey coat. Then he slashes down with his sharpened spade. Only rarely does he need two blows to kill a mole – but when such a mishap occurs his habitual black mood becomes even blacker. He kills moles and he skins them, and he regards himself as an expert in both tasks.

Therefore Dr K fears for the creature bustling near the bank of the stream fifty yards from the fatal tree. In his dark overcoat, imitating Hermann, he stands by a bush where fortune happened to have left some sacking. He waits for the mole to approach him. And to his surprise he manages to swoop and smother it and hold it fast despite its dreadful struggles to be free. There's mud on his coat, but it doesn't matter, he has the creature secure.

Dr K carries it to a field of hops where the soil is looser and tosses it on to the ground. The mole plunges into the earth as if it has gone mad – disappearing as if it has dived into water.

'For Pepa!' he says out loud, as a mole saved the life of his brother-in-law. He was in a ditch crawling along when a mole burrowed beneath him, and he saw this as an ill-omen and quickly shifted forward. And when the man behind moved up, he was killed on that very spot.

Dr K remembers how excited Pepa was when he got home – he burst into the apartment and his tales tumbled out. That was in the first winter. Since then, thanks to his job, K has become exceptionally familiar with wartime stories. And moles and all

burrowing creatures have taken on a human likeness in his mind. In trenches on every front, in mines beneath them full of explosives, in caverns in the Dolomites, and in fortresses in Russia and France, men live and fight in the underworld. And Dr K has heard their stories – or at least fragments of their experience. Though some men are reluctant to talk at all, yet their memories are always expressed by their eyes and by the lines in their faces.

But Lieutenant Zangerl was voluble, K remembers him – above all the others, he remembers him. For reasons he didn't explain, Zangerl went to Munich and enlisted in the German Army, and stayed with the Germans until could only walk with a stick. Then he returned to Prague, where Dr K met him at his desk. He'd served at Verdun, and ultimately at the captured fort, Douamont, and K got the impression that in the depths of his mind he was still there.

'One thousand and fifty-two! One thousand and fifty-two!' Zangerl kept repeating this number as K searched on his desk for the right file. But the number was too short to be his army ID, and certainly it wasn't a file reference, and K was puzzled, stopped searching, and raised the palm of his right hand to urge him to say more.

'That's how many were in that chamber. The French defences were extraordinary – chamber, tunnel, passage; chamber, tunnel, passage. And on and on! And that battalion – one thousand and fifty-two men – slept with their flame throwers and everything else. It was an armoury as well as a dormitory. And somebody must have tossed aside a cigarette. There was a roar and a light brighter than the sun – brighter than the sun deep down there! And the heat! We could hardly breathe. And the screams! One thousand and fifty-two men were burning alive and screaming. And there was an explosion – mortar shells probably – and as I staggered forward I was knocked down. Splinters caught me. So I discovered when I woke up in the field hospital. And I heard the colonel say, "One



thousand and fifty-two.” And he ordered the chamber to be bricked up and a plaque put on the wall. Bricked up! He made it a tomb.’

And though the lieutenant had come in search of a job, K got him a place in the Frankenstein Sanatorium. Where, K believes, he still sits in a corner weeping and telling his story as others tell their stories around him.

Yet a mouse runs past K’s feet and brings him back to his present place – and then five more mice go by and disappear in the field ahead. And once they’ve vanished seven girls appear out of the field, farmhands, and nod in a friendly way, and the seventh girl is smaller than the rest and sweet – she carries a rabbit on her shoulder.

‘How the wind blows up our arses,’ she says – which surprises K. Then she looks at the sacking, which he still has in his hands, and takes hold of her rabbit in mock fright, but then she adds, ‘Or is it me you want in your bag?’

And before K can reply, she’s gone.

\*\*\*

He doesn’t have the manuscript with him. He doesn’t want to return to his American novel – he just has the first chapter, which was published as a fragment called *The Stoker*.

It was included in the *Judgment Day* series by his publisher, Kurt Wolff – a collection which, according to the firm’s note on the back cover, ...*combines contemporary writing in the strongest unity in a new undertaking which frees it from the constraints of magazines – each Judgment Day is more than a book, yet together they are less than a bookshop, they are a series of creations of our youngest poets brought about by the common experience of our time.*

Whenever K reads these words his eyebrows rise and his heart sinks. He doesn't think he has much in common with the other writers; he doesn't think he has much in common with himself. And he doesn't like the way the word 'poet' is used so freely.

Max Brod pushed him into the arms of Kurt Wolff, almost physically, in Leipzig. And K suffered the feeling that he was a trick pony being exhibited by an impresario before a circus owner. Max didn't produce a giant hoop for him to leap through, but the office was small and it would have been difficult.

Now, after re-reading the first few pages of *The Stoker*, and thinking about all of the unpublished chapters, K is struck by how uncontemporary it is – 'an imitation of Dickens,' he says softly but audibly, '*David Copperfield* re-written,'

His novel is a tale of an ill-fated youth wandering through America until he reaches a crisis at 'The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma.' Where somehow everything's going to be joyfully resolved. K now admits he isn't capable of a joyful resolution, and that he must abandon his characters as they travel by train through a range of mountains. 'A train journey which will never end,' so he reflects.

K is certain that even if he had packed the manuscript in his trunk and worked on it throughout his months in Zürau he would achieve nothing. There's a painful paradox in this, because often in Prague K thought of what he might achieve if he could free himself from his job. He always needs to throw himself into a story and write it as rapidly as possible with complete concentration – which was why in the city he favoured writing while everybody else was asleep.

'The night isn't night enough,' he often thought. He wanted nights which were darker, longer and quieter. His room was next to his parents' and he could hear his father snoring – which had seemed particularly pronounced while he was working on another tale

published by Kurt Wolff, the insect story, *Metamorphosis*. Hermann K's snoring had helped shape the story's oppressive atmosphere.

Yet it was not because of this that he had stayed – far from it. To some extent K feels ashamed that he moved out only once the war had forced changes. He endured his parents because living alone would have been a declaration that he was a bachelor – a man who failed to get married. And this troubled him in Prague almost as much as the lack of time for his writing.

In Zürau however, it's all different. His time is his own and he's living with Ottla – K feels that his room in her house makes him less of a bachelor than he would be in a solitary apartment. Though he avoids giving this thought too much scrutiny in case it collapses. Instead he reads the first page of *The Trial* – the one manuscript which he did decide to bring with him, and which sits on his desk with a stout candle flickering beside it.

'Tear everything up,' again this occurs to K and again he's tempted. Though burning it would be more practical. There is a stove in his room, and the manuscript would provide some heat and light. And candles are now expensive, and fuel must be carried home from the woods.

'There is no more beautiful fate for a story than for it to disappear,' so K thinks.

He gets up and opens the stove's black, iron door, and looks at the twigs burning away. He fetches a page of the novel – a fragment, the start of an otherwise unwritten chapter. It contains, as a margin note, some words from *Bleak House*, 'I have the honour to attend the court regularly. With my documents. I expect a judgement. Shortly. On the Day of Judgement.'

He was going to start the chapter again. Instead, he puts the page on the twigs and after a few seconds it catches light and soon is transformed into ashes. K closes the door, goes back to his desk and leafs through the rest of the manuscript. It's a collection of

fragments, as far as he is concerned. He just wrote as the inspiration took him – and his imagination had skipped from scene to scene. For a couple of years the pages had been in Max Brod's keeping, and he'd talked of performing some editorial masterstroke and making a coherent book out of it. K thought this was a good joke. Yet his friend was in earnest; he values K's work more than K does himself, and only with reluctance did he allow K to take the manuscript with him to Zürau.

K puts it back in his trunk. Even if he burnt it all, it wouldn't produce that much heat and light; it would be kinder to let farmers use the pages to roll cigarettes – such is the paper shortage that they would be grateful. He is certain that his second attempt at writing a novel is another failure. It's about a man who is accused of something evil, but he doesn't know what, and is tormented by his efforts to find out, by his futile attempts to escape his inevitable punishment. Just like a child surrounded by adults, his hero finds himself in a world of incomprehensible rules, where the only certainty is his guilt. But its Dickensian trace is only one of its elements: there were other things which had influenced him – some deeply felt; some a parody of the passing days.

Should he make a third attempt at writing a novel? It's a futile question. He has no control over his inspiration – he discovered that long ago. He has to wait for a story to seize his mind. And though it might seem perverse, given that now for the first time he has the scope to devote himself to something substantial, he is tempted by a form of writing even briefer than the stories that flowed from him the previous winter.

'I'm not tempted,' he thinks. 'That's the wrong word – not "tempted" because it's more compelling than that, I must take stock of it all.'

Then he thinks on the idea, develops it into a self-accusation, and puts this in a letter to Max Brod, which had been lying half-completed on a shelf.

*I'm a deceitful creature, it's the only way to avoid sinking, for my boat is fragile. When I consider my ultimate aim, I can see that I don't strive to be a good man who might be confident before the highest court; rather I seek to understand the preferences, desires and ideals of the human and animal kingdoms, reduce these to some simple rules, and adapt myself to them, become pleasing to all, and eventually (here's the trick) become so pleasing that I can reveal my inner nature without losing the love I've earned, and therefore be the only sinner who isn't burnt.*

He adds a suggestion that these words would suit his gravestone, then Ottla calls him down to dinner.

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'The goats are looking healthier.'

'I've been feeding them in a new way.'

'How?' Ottla looks perplexed.

'They've eaten all they can of the leaves up to the height of their heads. So I stand there and help by holding down the branches and letting them eat their fill. That's how I occupied myself this morning. The three eastern doctors were much impressed – and grateful, as far as doctors can be.'

'The eastern doctors? Three of them? Here?'

'Three of them clearly have the transmigrated souls of Jewish doctors from Russia. You can see it in their faces.'

'Isn't it sad then that they might need to be killed and eaten?'

'No, I might even take a holiday from being a vegetarian. I hate doctors.'

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K resumes the struggle over what he should write. But there isn't only a question of the needs of his soul, there is also the lack of paper to consider. As well as his diary he brought with him a number of small notebooks – he'd stocked up before the shortage became acute. And he also helped himself to office stationery that was torn or stained, and to rough drafts with blank spaces. And thanks to the directive from Vienna after Franz Joseph died, there was a stack of paper marked with the name of the old emperor which shouldn't be used. In the circumstances it was a mad directive, but still compelling for officials. And as well as a wad of out-of-date stationery, Dr K even pilfered a copy of this instruction – and on its back he writes, *The True Path passes over a taut rope, but it's not stretched high up, it's just above the ground. It seems more like a hazard than a route.*

It's so obscure it could be a government notice. He imagines that Max Brod, were he ever to see it, would give it a strictly religious interpretation. For himself though he interprets the true path as the railway line to Zürau and Felice Bauer as the taut rope. In the past he felt she was a guide to a better life, and still that thought haunts his mind, but it can only lurk around the conviction that she would trip him up. Yet the words before him, K acknowledges, have an ambiguity that allow other readings.

The true path leads to a desk in a room in a village at night – so the physical and the spiritual combine. That's what his aphorism might mean, he is willing to accept, as he lays aside his pen, and prepares himself for bed.

Zürau, 9 October, 1917

‘A farm is a zoo in which the animals are free until they are executed,’ or so Dr K thinks in his comfortable seat by the front door. It’s an old, broad, easy chair with two hassocks in front of it for his feet. He doesn’t know how the hassocks made their way from the church to Ottla’s house, but he’s glad they did. It’s a sheltered spot and for the moment he is warm enough in his shirt and trousers.

He accepts his animal thought is an aphorism, but isn’t inclined to write it down. Instead, he expresses the idea to one of the goats which persist in impersonating an eastern doctor. The goat seems unperturbed – grateful for its current liberty, and stoically untroubled about its future.

Yet their flock isn’t large and they can’t live off mutton with any regularity; and, indeed, the farm Ottla manages is poor in many ways – they’ve no corn, cows nor hens. They barter with neighbours and can feed themselves and help the family in Prague, but K knows that his friends expect help as well. He is living in a village, the country has food, the cities do not, therefore he should send supplies to his friends – all of them. That’s how they think – or, at least, it’s how their stomachs think, even if their minds are more reasonable. But with winter coming their stomachs might think so loudly that their minds won’t be heard at all.

And what is he doing? He’s enjoying the sun in an easy chair while war is raging and the harvesting is being finished – and though he has a doctor’s certificate, he has no visible symptom of disease to parade and satisfy people’s curiosity.

And what could he say? ‘I’ve begun to write aphorisms!’

Neither in Russia nor Italy could he expect the soldiers to cheer at the news.

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Dr K sets out on his daily walk, but he doesn't get far. The previous evening when he returned from the fields, he met a couple of farmers, Kunz and Lüftner – they were at the edge of Kunz's land and he recited 'the world history of his farm,' as K noted in his diary, but Kunz was a friendly man and K willingly stood and listened – as did Lüftner though he must have been all too familiar with the story.

Now K meets Lüftner alone, just by his house, and he insists they step inside as his wife is there and he wants to introduce them. In such a small village K is fearful of giving offence, and so he accepts though his body yearns to walk.

But once he's inside he is immediately impressed, and a little bewildered, for the hall is far grander than he expected from the outside, and everything is old, it as if he's stepped into a great theatre through a small entrance. And there's an old woman standing there as well, her hair quite grey.

'Anna, here is Dr K. This is my wife.'

'I've heard all about you, I'm so glad you're here,' so Anna Lüftner says, 'our neighbours have told me everything. Franz, let's sit down, I'll fetch the beer.'

Then Dr K realises that Lüftner is also called Franz, and he follows him to a great oak table, with chairs solid enough for K to need both hands to move one back before he can take his place opposite his host.

Facing him K can now look properly at Lüftner and he's impressed by the sense of nobility that's created by his deep set eyes, sculpted nose, wide spreading moustache and



firm chin. It's a face perfectly in keeping with the table and chairs and the entire hall about them.

'I was once the stable lad,' Lüftner says, 'and I rose up until I managed the farm when the farmer was ill – he was ill quite often and... then... he was very ill, then he died, and Anna married me, and I became the farmer.' And Lüftner slams his fist down on the table, lets out a high-pitched, 'Hi-hi!' follows this with a deeper, 'Ha-ha!' And shrugs mightily, though seemingly from nerves.

Then Anna re-appears with two tankards which Dr K doubts that he could carry together, and Lüftner raises one, and K just manages to return the salute, and then his host's face disappears in his beer, and K feels his face must also plunge deep, despite being a teetotaler when he arrived.

Once he's emerged K is convinced that he's staggered into a production of Schiller's, *Wallenstein*, which, with great attention to detail, is intent on bringing the seventeenth century to life.

Lüftner talks of hunting, punctuates his talk with more shrugs, shrieks and guttural noises, and the occasional dive into his tankard – which K dutifully copies.

Amongst other puzzles is Lüftner's complete silence on farming – it seems that becoming the farmer ended his interest in the farm, and now he's determined to live the life of a hunter; and suddenly K finds himself holding two dead partridges, and being ushered outside to the stables.

'The army won't take them,' Lüftner says with great confidence, and he yanks wide the stable doors. And in front of K are two horses illuminated by the sunlight flickering through a side window; and he feels that he has left the world of Schiller and entered that of Homer for the animals are giants and tower above him.

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At his desk, under the influence of the beer, Dr K writes on a scrap of old office paper.

*I've finally begun to grasp the remarkable thing, that people are excessively good to me – they're even self-sacrificing in all sorts of matters. People behave in that way only to a man who is beyond the reach of human help. People have a nose for the scent of such cases. And I pay nothing back – or I pay nothing to those who help me.*

Then his head sinks down on his chest, and he sits immobile and he thinks fondly of Lüftner, and Kunz too – he likes them far more than he likes himself; for K they are noblemen who have retreated to the land to live quiet and useful lives.

In his head it's never quiet, and he can see nothing useful in his life.

Then he hears his name called.

'I'm going to feed the pig,' Ottla shouts up the stairs, and Dr K seizes his opportunity – he will be of some use.

On either side of the swill-bucket brother and sister struggle to the enclosure and then rest the food on the low brick wall. He watches Ottla take hold of the handle with both hands, and then tip its content forward – arching her back and bracing a knee against the wall, so as to pour gently and not let the bucket slip.

'The first time I did it, I dropped the bucket and had to wrestle it away from him.'

K looks at the pig and doubts that he would engage it in a bout of wrestling. The pig pauses for a moment, looks at K, nods, and distinctly mouths the words, 'Any time you're ready,' then returns to its meal.

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Even though he walks to Oberklee along the country road, and on his way back dawdles at the bridge over the Zarch, and stares long at the water, his mind keeps returning to the encounter in the farmyard.

When he finally gets back to his desk he starts another letter.

*Dear Max,*

*Have you ever looked carefully at a pig? It's amazing. The face is a human face with the lower lip folded down towards the chin, and the upper lip folded up towards the brow – but without interfering with the eyes and nose. And with his snout-face the pig rummages in the earth. And this might seem unremarkable, but it is noteworthy – and you must believe me here, because of my close observation. For the purposes of his research, the pig, conceivably, could use a foot, or sniff at something, or, when the matter truly demanded it, have a close smell. But the pig doesn't do this, he thrusts in his snout, and if it proves to be something revolting – probably thanks to my friends, the goats and the geese, who deposit everywhere – then he snorts with delight. And yet the pig's body isn't dirty, he could even be called fastidious, though it's not the sort of fastidiousness you'd want to embrace. He has elegant and lightly stepping feet, and moves his body with a single motion – and only the noblest part of him, the snout, is unquestionably piggish.*

*Indeed there's a pig here that reminds me of Wagner, the owner of Cabaret Lucerna – the resemblance is striking. And I don't mean that in any unkind way at all to either Wagner or the pig.*

*I've put on weight, a couple more pounds.*

*Best wishes,*

*Franz*

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The surly and erratic postman comes to the house, thumps on the door, and when Ottla unlatches this and opens it, he thrusts a bundle at her, and turns away without any word, or any facial gesture, to suggest that he's delivering post to a person rather than a pigeon-hole. And on the way back down the path he kicks a goat, as if he wants to dispel the idea that it's only humans which he dislikes.

Dr K admires the purity of his spirit as he watches the scene over his sister's shoulder. Then he looks at the newspaper that the postman has consented to bring almost a week after it was published in Prague.

The front page is devoted to a speech made by the Habsburg foreign minister, Count Czernin.

**Czernin's Peace Programme –  
The 'New World Order' –  
the necessity of 'complete disarmament' –  
an appeal to the Entente**

There are also several references to the 'dogma of the monarchy's downfall,' which Count Czernin is keen to refute.

K reads in silence until Ottla says, 'But they can't even re-order their own empire to please the Czechs. And what about the territory they want in Russia and the Balkans? And

will the Germans give up the chunk of France they've taken? Without that it's all futile, it's all nonsense!

'We're very good at futile nonsense; perhaps in a thousand years it's what we'll be remembered for,' so K says.

'Vegetable soup?' she asks.

'Vegetable soup with vegetables?'

'Yes, we've vegetables.'

'That's the kind of vegetable soup I like!'

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He tries to avoid using candles or paraffin for long during an evening, and so his night-time writing is curtailed. But he burns enough of the solitary candle on his desk to write the paragraph which occurred to him as he came upstairs.

*Their choice was to be kings or kings' messengers, and like children they all wanted to be messengers, and now they run shouting through the world, but there are no kings to receive their messages, so they shout them to each other, and their words make no sense, and they would gladly kill themselves, if it wasn't for the oaths of loyalty they took to the kings.*

He has a sip of tea, wets his fingers, and closes them on the flame, and the candle goes out and the last of the smoke rises up. He sits in the dark in his bedroom.

Then Dr K feels that he has company.

Then he knows they're behind him.

He hears a match strike – they're both smoking. It's been a couple of years since their last visit and he thought that they'd been swallowed up by the war.

He turns about and faces Georg and Heinrich, his brothers, who are leaning against the far wall. Then Georg sits on the bed, and Heinrich slouches in the armchair.

But it's not Georg and Heinrich, his brothers died as infants, they are his brothers as if they'd grown up – they are the ghosts of the men they might have been. That's how K explains them to himself – that's how he explains them when he finds he has to think about them. He wants to deny them, yet, even though he never knew them as adults, he can recognise them – or, at least, he can feel who they are. But he struggles to avoid accepting this.

'No, it's not you!' Dr K says.

'We always have this conversation,' Georg replies.

'We do – every time!' Heinrich adds in a tone of exasperation.

K sits still and mute.

'Would you like a cigarette?' And Georg shrugs as if to say, why not?

K moves his head from side to side, as if to deny them and refuse the cigarette.

'Your lungs will kill you anyway, it doesn't make any difference,' says Heinrich in a helpful tone as he proffers the open packet.

'They're American cigarettes – don't ask how we got them. They are worth a fortune in Prague, and here we are smoking, as if we haven't a care in the world!' And Georg opens his arms wide in the gesture so often used by his older brother.

K shakes his head again.

'When exactly did we last have a chat?' Heinrich asks.

'It must have been... No, earlier than that. Summer, 1915, probably, because the last time we met, we were still in pike-grey.'

‘The so-called pike-grey!’ says Heinrich with a snort, ‘Introduced as camouflage!’

‘But, in the countryside, against trees and grass, the uniforms stood out, light-blue they were – light-bloody-blue! They’d only have served as camouflage if we’d been flying through a cloudless sky.’ And Georg stands up and gently flaps his arms.

‘Like angels.’ Heinrich joins him and, with their cigarettes between their teeth, they flap together.

‘But now we’re in dark-grey – as you can see.’

They stop flapping – to K’s relief.

‘And that’s much better as camouflage, generally speaking – except that we’re heading for Italy and the snow.’

‘Our regiment, the 28<sup>th</sup>...’

‘And your regiment too,’ Heinrich interjects.

‘...is being transferred from Russia to the Alps, as the Russians have given up the game.’

‘So we’re heading south, and we must be off!’

‘See you when we get back!’

They wave and depart – and he hears them going down the stairs in their boots.

‘No real ghost would behave in such a casual way,’ so Dr K tells himself, and he takes hold of his desk, he grips it firmly, and he asserts in his mind that he cannot smell any cigarettes at all; though the cigarette smoke which isn’t there makes him cough.

When he’s recovered from this, he gets out his diary and opens it. He finds a match to light the candle. But he doesn’t light it, he closes the notebook, and puts it away. K is willing to confide in his diary that he fears for his sanity, but he’s not willing to leave a record of this type of madness.

But he has to write it down, in some way, to try and exorcise the ghosts. So, on a loose sheet, he just scrawls, ‘They came again.’

He goes to the stove, opens the door, and pushes the paper against the faintly glowing sticks of wood. A bit of the sheet burns, and he keeps pushing it forward until the words have vanished. K does this even though he feels the ritual is just as mad as seeing his dead brothers as the soldiers they might have become – if the doctors hadn’t killed them as infants. At his desk in the dark he has bitter thoughts about doctors – which is more comforting than thinking about his brothers’ visit.

But this leads to another thought and he can’t stop himself being gripped by a persistent fear: in his mind’s eye Dr K sees himself standing like a schoolboy before a row of doctors, who judge him with haste, and indifference, from behind a number of folding tables – in the fantasy everything is horribly makeshift. Then two mangy lackeys hurry him off to a cage on a wagon, and this trundles along to a lunatic ward – where he’ll sit forever.

K stands up and faces his reflection in the mirror in the dark.

‘I am not mad!’

## 9

Zürich, 15 October, 1917

### ***The Truth About Sancho Panza***

*Sancho Panza never boasted about it, but over the course of the years, by telling tales of robbers and heroes in the evenings and during the nights, he so diverted his devil –*



*who he later named Don Quixote – that the poor fellow set off to perform all manner of mad deeds, which really should have had as their target Sancho Panza himself. And he, as a free man with a calm mind, clouded only by a little guilt, followed his devil to the end and thereby gained much educating entertainment.*

But is it an aphorism? Dr K isn't sure – yet he's also not sure that it matters. He is more preoccupied with the report from Café Arco that he and Max Brod have been described as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, but opinions were divided as to who was who. K doesn't mind greatly that they have been coupled like that, except that the news has carried the debate into his head, and he can't bring it to an end, for he too isn't sure – and now he is afraid that they are both Don Quixote; and for there to be two Don Quixotes without a Sancho Panza to share between them seems dreadful and dangerous.

And he is also troubled by Max's description of him in his latest letter, which asserts that K has found, 'happiness in unhappiness,' for this make him feel completely maladjusted. He believes he should strive for happiness in happiness, or failing that, settle for the honesty of unhappiness in unhappiness. Yet K fears that Max might be right – and he always finds this unsettling.

Then he re-reads his paragraph on Sancho Panza. Then he reads it aloud for the benefit of Ottla who is preparing their breakfast. She smiles and asks him to read it again. He does and she nods in approval. And K realises that for the first time ever he has managed to write something in the presence of somebody else – excluding his office work, which doesn't count at all.

Then they are both silent for a while and K watches his sister and admires her quiet confidence. She has her hair tied behind her head, and wears one of her rough indoor dresses that she uses for cooking and housework, and over that she has an ancient leather

apron which she found in an outhouse – and which K thinks is perfectly appropriate for a butcher's granddaughter.

Two of their goats are sick, and they can't afford to lose them, but Ottla has confidence in the vet, though he is almost 80, and has come out of retirement as the two younger vets – his sons – are caring for horses with the army somewhere in the Ukraine. For K, vets are little better than doctors, but at least they don't try and parade their knowledge before their patients. He has continued to help the goats by finding extra leaves for them, but he is troubled by their sickly manner, and wishes he had sufficient almonds with him to substantially change their diet. Dr K has much faith in almonds.

Ottla brings over his plate and cup, puts them before him, when he has cleared a space, and then fetches her own breakfast. At that moment they see Kunz and his wife stop at their garden gate, but the couple just pause to discuss something, and then head for their fields; which is a relief, for every time he sees Ottla or K he expands on the history of his farm – Kunz's supply of information is infinite, so K has concluded. But now he can concentrate on his food, while Ottla takes out a letter from the pouch of her apron. It's from their cousin, Irma, and she reads it beside her plate. Yet for K eating is a serious business and he never does anything else when he has food in his mouth. He is a Fletcherite – a follower of Horace Fletcher, the man who proclaims that, 'Nature will castigate those who don't masticate,' and who has three principles which K regards as vital truths: only eat when you're hungry; never swallow solid food, but chew it until it's liquid; and never gulp drinks, just sip them.

Therefore Dr K sits chewing and chewing. Ottla is resigned to this and doesn't react like their father, who often hides himself behind a newspaper. And K sips his tea – and since his enforced indulgence at Lüftner's, his sips have been even smaller than they were before.

Ottla looks up from her letter and their eyes meet.

‘Father’s been defending you.’

That stops Dr K’s mouth from chewing further – he swallows.

‘Irma says that our brother-in-law’s brother – Rudl that is, not the other one – dropped by to say farewell before going back to his unit. *As a result there was a regular idiot’s performance at the apartment. Father started running everybody down – everybody in the family. That man is a swindler! You have to spit when he turns up! And... so on and so on... in the usual way*

Ottla re-reads a paragraph, and then continues.

‘Until Rudl couldn’t stand it anymore and blurted out, *You’d even abuse your own son! And then the real pantomime began. Father rushed at him with both hands raised, and his face red, and mother had to bundle Rudl out of the room and she got him as far as the front door; where he tried to pause – he didn’t want to leave like that. But...*

Ottla turns over the sheet and reads to the end.

‘*Mother got him down the stairs. And that’s how Rudl left the bosom of our family and went back to war.*

And Ottla frowns and pours herself some more tea.

‘With both arms raised up?’ K asks.

Ottla checks the letter.

‘Yes.’

K forks some more food and resumes chewing.

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It was as if Mařenka didn't really know what to do with them. Two Hungarian soldiers – relatives of some sort – had come to stay with her family for a couple of days, and she'd brought them round to meet Ottla, and to a lesser extent, Dr K – or so he feels, considering himself to be almost superfluous.

Mařenka introduces the visitors by rank, first sergeant Földes, then corporal Markó, and there's a general nodding, and shaking of hands.

K notes how angular and grey they are – and assumes that they have been in the army for at least a couple of years. But he asks to make sure.

'Until that first spring we were both civil service messengers in Budapest, would you believe it? But with the losses of the previous winter being so bad, we were called up,' so Földes says.

'And now we're being transferred south from the east,' so Markó adds.

'But there's nowhere for us at home anymore – cousins from the country have our rooms.'

'Lots of cousins. Girls who've come to town to work in an armaments factory.'

'Our regiment's our home now. Know what I mean?'

'And now our home is going to Italy. Never would have got there otherwise.'

'It seems an eternity since we were wheeling files around offices'.

'That's what we used to do – all day!'

'Incredible!'

'We shift more bodies now.'

'In the Ukraine – corpses everywhere.'

Then they pause, seemingly unsure as to what they should say before strangers.

'Civilians?' Ottla asks.

'All sorts,' Földes says.

‘We came back in cattle trucks with plenty of wounded – plenty of badly wounded men.’

‘There was one lad – looked like a choirboy – perhaps just seventeen.’

‘Blond hair, very delicate face.’

‘Shot in the chest.’

‘Not quite dead.’

‘But suffering terribly in the jolting train, and so when we stopped at this middle-of-nowhere station – stopped for a good while – we got him off, got him away from the stink.’

‘Let him die comfortably, we thought, even though it was nowhere in particular. So we carried him out of the truck on his stretcher.’

‘And there was an old German reservist there, guarding this middle-of-nowhere station. Guarding nowhere from no one. Anyway, we put the stretcher down.’

‘But, would you believe it?’ Markó slaps his thigh, ‘It was his father!’

‘Would you believe it?’

‘Absolutely the middle of nowhere.’

‘Middle of nowhere!’

‘Nowhere!’ Markó almost shouts.

‘And the lad dies!’

The men shake their heads.

‘We delivered the son to the father’s feet.’

‘The odds against that – staggering!’

‘It’s the sort of thing that makes you believe in God!’

‘But the Jews get it worse.’

‘From the Cossacks.’

Mařenka stares with horror at Földes and Markó, and tries to warn them with her eyes.

The sergeant understands. ‘That is Jews who look like Jews, side-locks and beards and all that, not civilised people like yourselves.’

‘No, you’d be alright.’

‘A bit safer – anyway.’

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‘Jews who look like Jews,’ the words run through K’s mind. Then he thinks of the Cossacks.

He walks along the country road to Oberklee and imagines Cossacks in the woods – he imagines Zürau burning, and Oberklee too; he imagines the corpses, and then he imagines what they would do to Ottla, and then he stops imagining as his mind turns away from the images.

‘Jews who look like Jews’ – but these words won’t leave him. They take him back to his childhood, to when he was fourteen and the Czechs were rioting in Prague. For three days the authorities deserted the city – there were riots across Bohemia and there weren’t enough soldiers to hand. Jews were beaten and robbed; some were killed too – or at least died of shock and fear. And shops were looted and burnt.

But his father went down to his shop; he didn’t hide away. Hermann stood before the door – an ex-soldier who still looked like a sergeant. He didn’t look like a Jew – not a Jew as caricatured – and he spoke Czech.

‘Leave him alone! He’s alright! He’s one of us!’

Voices from the crowd – words that were still repeated in the family.

And the mob didn't kick Hermann about the street; they didn't touch him – and not even one window was broken. Then the soldiers arrived, perhaps that day, perhaps the next, and with bayonets fixed they advanced on the rioters, and peace was restored. But not security – who could be secure after that?

The father had stood before his family and all that it possessed and saved them. And yet Dr K has never written about this – not even on scraps of paper that were immediately burnt. It's the earlier memories which find their way out of him into his notes and diaries.

K stops at the bridge over the stream. It's dusk and he stops and tries to fathom this puzzle – why should his childhood memories dwarf everything which followed, and why isn't this changing as he gets older?

Only when it's dark does he head back to Zürau.

Then he hears footsteps behind him.

It's not Cossacks – it's worse, it's his brothers, his back tells him this, as it always does when they appear behind him, which is how they always come.

'I thought you'd gone to Italy.' K wants to say that, but the words, if spoken, would suggest that he believed they were real.

'We decided to wait for the Hungarians,' Georg says.

'Four of us would be better for playing cards on the train,' Heinrich adds.

After which they walk together in silence.

Zürau, 16 October, 1917

From the kitchen table Dr K can see a great cloud of dust, and at the head of this a small cart pulled by a single horse. The cart stops at the gate and Hermann the farmhand jumps down and walks up the garden path. He acknowledges K with an almost imperceptible movement of his head, and walks round the room to a cupboard. Its door is slightly too large for the warped wooden surround and Hermann pulls it hard. It opens. There's a clank of metal on metal as Hermann rummages within. He emerges with an axe and shuts the door with his shoulder. The axe is more menacing than the spade he uses to kill moles. Hermann looks at K.

Dr K often thinks of himself as an underground, nocturnal creature; and as Hermann has found him indoors in daylight, it wouldn't be a surprise if the farmhand used the axe at once – though K would regret the inconvenience to Ottla of finding his brain splattered round her clean kitchen.

Hermann says, 'Axe.'

Dr K says, 'Axe.'

Hermann pauses and looks at him, and his face suggests that there is something he wants to express, but he can't, and with another barely perceptible nod he departs, and K watches the dust rise again – then he looks at the dead deer, which ignores him; and the dead emperor's portrait merely says, 'It was very nice, it pleased us very much.' Which doesn't make much sense in the context, but still Dr K stands up and bows deeply.

Then his eyes fall to the newspaper on the table, and he sits and reads the list of names of dead officers – two of whom he knew by sight, and he wonders if he had ever



spoken to either man. K takes hold of his pocket notebook, and eventually his thoughts take shape.

*Many of the shades of the departed merely devote themselves to licking the underworld river, because it flows from us and still tastes of the salt of our sea. The river ebbs in disgust and the dead float back to life on the current, joyful, singing songs of thanks and stroking the indignant waves.*

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‘He was blinded by poison gas, and, naturally, he feared he’d never see again – never see anything,’ then Otlá’s face brightens, ‘but yesterday he could tell when the sun rose, and today he could distinguish trees and houses against the light. I want to read to him, but I don’t have the time to do it regularly – and it’s bad to start and stop. His uncle reads to him...’

‘The vicar?’

‘Yes, but he spends a lot of time sitting in his house with just his uncle’s voice and the grandfather clock to listen to. There’s the cleaner, but she never speaks more than three words at a time – and almost always the same words, “As God wills,” then she’s silent for another hour. At least the clock chimes every fifteen minutes.’

The kitchen door opens.

‘Sorry,’ Mařenka says, ‘I was coming to talk to you about the garden, but I met the postman. We hate each other but still he gave me the post – in his usual fashion. And there’s a letter for you. We can talk about the garden later.’

Ottla gets a thin sharp knife from a drawer, carefully slits it open and quickly reads the first page by the light of the window. Then she looks up and sees that K and Mařenka are studying her face and trying to guess the contents.

‘Nothing bad,’ she says, ‘in fact it’s good. He’s away from the front; he’s on garrison duty.’ Then she sits down and reads the letter to the end, and then reads it twice more.

Mařenka hands Dr K a magazine and goes back to work. But K doesn’t open it, he just thinks about his sister, and her man, Josef David, and their father, and the rest of their family, and Josef David’s family – K’s thoughts ripple out to touch all these people because Josef David is a Catholic, the son of a verger, and he’s Czech.

K has met him several times. He is an avid sportsman and he was an ambitious banker before he was a soldier. There’s something forceful in his character which reminds K of his father – but whether this means the two men will get on or not remains uncertain. But the issues of race and religion loom larger than that of personality.

Josef David found it amusing that one of his aunts had said to him, ‘Don’t get mixed up with the Jews – anything but that!’

And he even laughed when he told K and added, ‘Well, you know what Jews are like.’

K wanted to say that it was something over which he had long puzzled – the nature of Jews – but he didn’t get the chance before Josef had gone off to buy them both a beer, which K drank out of civility.

Yet until the letter arrived he wasn’t sure of Ottla’s feelings.

Their two sisters, Elli and Valli, had allowed their parents to employ a match maker to find them suitable men. This was not Ottla’s manner – as was now clear, and all his doubts were dispelled.

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Despite being glad for the freedom that has come with his tuberculosis, Dr K finds that he has fallen into a routine, which though not as rigid as the one that revolved around his office desk, has still become remarkably regular. Part of this is his walk along the country road to Oberklee, his pause on the wooden bench by the horses' trough, and his exchange of a few words with the man responsible for keeping the trough full of water; which is always a challenge, for the man is still suffering from being buried alive in a trench during a bombardment, and because of his dialect – a dialect made even more obscure by his shell-shock, for he now swallows the end of each word. Consequently they talk a lot with their hands.

Today their conversation ends with the trough-keeper remarking on how warm and dry the weather has been for autumn; or this is what K believes the odd sounds and gestures mean, and he heartily agrees, before pointing to his watch and getting up.

Yet the man won't let him go at once. He holds up his left index finger, while rummaging in several pockets with his right hand. It's evident he has something for K – and then, with a flourish, pulls out a carrot!

K tries to refuse, but the keeper of the water-trough at Oberklee insists – and so K departs a little richer than he arrived, and a little more puzzled as to people's behaviour towards him.

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Dr K passes the first farm of Zürau and the farmer's dog welcomes him back by running along the fence and barking – not with any particular hostility, but more from the

joy of having something to do. At the second farm there's a dog which is allowed to roam free, and he runs up to K, sniffs, circles him and the walking-stick which K has rested firmly on the ground, then sniffs again, gives a slight wag of his tail and departs in silence back to the open door of a barn.

In his notebook K praises the second dog as a 'rational creature,' but praises the first dog even more as being the better guardian.

Then he looks up and sees the village idiot in a tree apparently fascinated by the sight of somebody writing in the street. K hurries on puzzled as to how the old man might still be capable of climbing anything.

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Dr K had been reluctant to open the magazine earlier. He fears that his own piece might appear particularly peculiar in the pages of *The Jew*, with its monthly contributions from Zionists. He is still puzzled as to why his two animal stories were accepted – one for October and one for November. But he sits at his desk and finally turns the pages. The article before his first fable is an exhortation to return to Palestine entitled, *Homewards*.

*The teaching came from Zion and the word of God from Jerusalem. Such is the truth of the past. So it is reasonable to demand of the present, that the teaching returns to Zion and the word of God to Jerusalem.*

This is followed by *Jackals and Arabs*. His tale begins,

*We had set up camp at the oasis. The travellers slept. An Arab went by, tall and dressed in white – he'd been taking care of the camels and now was going to his bed.*

*I threw myself back on to the grass; I wanted to sleep; I couldn't; a jackal howled in the distance; I sat up again. And what had been so far away, was suddenly near. The jackals milled about me; eyes gleaming as sombre gold then closing; lithe bodies seemingly dancing before a whip.*

*One of them came behind me and nuzzled under my arm, as if needing my warmth, then moved about and spoke to me almost eye to eye.*

*'I am the oldest jackal far and wide. I am fortunate to be here to greet you...'*

K stops reading. He wonders how many people will think his jackals are Jewish settlers, and what other interpretations will be laid upon his fable, the meaning of which shifts even for himself.

He turns to the article which follows, *Rabbis and Communities*, skips over it, and then finds a reply to Max Brod's condemnation of Taylorism – the new American method of industrial efficiency. The writer says he can't grasp how anybody in the age of the telephone, submarine and aeroplane can urge a return to the methods of the craftsman's workshop. K was reluctant to argue with his friend about Taylorism, but he's glad that somebody else is doing so.

He turns back to his story, sighs, and starts again to read the opening paragraphs; but he hears Otlá's footsteps on the stairs and there's a knock at his bedroom's door. She pauses for three seconds, then comes in.

'Sad news – you know the Müllers who had been staying at the Blue Star?'

'The refugees from Minsk?'

‘Yes. I saw her yesterday, Mrs Müller – she was sitting outside the blacksmith’s on a stool. She looked very odd, and I tried to speak to her, but I just got a blank look in response.’

‘Why? She normally talks – she’s always telling me about the east. Whenever I pass the Blue Star, and she’s outside, I get a geography lesson.’

‘It’s her son – the Feigl told me today. She got a telegram.’

‘Italy?’

‘Italy. And she started pulling her hair out – she just sat there and tugged and tugged until they and the smith managed to get her back to her husband – who they found drunk and asleep in his misery. Or that’s how they understood his condition. The telegram was in his left hand as he lay face down on the bed.’

K turns his hands palms down and presses hard on his thighs. He looks at his boots – his military boots that he has only ever worn for walking about the countryside.

Then Ottla notices the magazine on his desk. Then she notices his name on the page.

‘You’re writing for the Zionists?’

‘They wanted something by me. I sent them two animal stories. They accepted them.’

‘Are you a Zionist now?’

‘No. But I’m not not a Zionist either.’

‘Not not a Zionist?’

‘I’m learning Hebrew.’

‘Are you! Why?’

‘I want to go to Jerusalem.’

‘You don’t even go to the synagogue!’

‘I thought Jerusalem might be more interesting.’

‘But why do you need Hebrew?’

‘To ask directions.’

‘Isn’t it full of poets from Berlin and playwrights from Vienna – just speak German. But why not learn English and go to New York?’

‘We’re at war with America.’

‘And the British are conquering Palestine.’

‘It will pass. It will all pass.’

‘Just like young Müller – dead in the Alps,’ Ottla says, before pulling two envelopes out of her apron. ‘A young girl, and a white rabbit, have just delivered these. Our postman left it at the wrong house.’

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K finds that he has been staring at the flame flickering within the lamp – the glass obscures it and gives it a greater fascination than a naked candle. He looks at his watch and discovers he’s been doing that for forty-five minutes, and hasn’t written a word. He could have written nothing while sitting in the dark, and so saved the fuel, and he feels a stab of guilt. But he doesn’t put the lamp out. Instead he picks up the smaller envelope. It’s from his friend, Felix Weltsch, and contains just a single piece of paper judging by its weight and feel.

K wonders why he has sent him a brief note, puts the envelope down, and considers the possibilities. Then it occurs to him that he could open the envelope and find out.

It wasn't the death or mutilation of a friend – it was cheering news. Or that's how Felix Weltsch described it. From a relative he'd heard that Professor Robert Zuckerkandl had praised one of K's slender books as, 'brilliant.'

The professor had taught them both at university, and K had liked him, for he hadn't carried the burden of his self-importance to the podium – unlike the others. Zuckerkandl had presented a lean profile, and K often drew him with just five strokes of his pen – which he found more entertaining than taking notes. And he always felt the man had more to him than he presented during lectures – the other professors had less.

So K feels he should delight in the praise. But men, like young Müller, are dying every day, and the weight of their deaths press down on him.

In escaping Prague, K has escaped the office, but he can't escape the war. It touches them all, and he craves knowledge of what's happening. Yet he believes he should free himself of the craving; his knowledge does nobody any good; it doesn't save a single life.

And, of course, he hasn't completely escaped the office. The second envelope is from his secretary, Julie Kaiser. It tells him some news of his colleagues, about a brief row over how to cope with a new responsibility, but it ends with a reminder of their first excursion together – a business trip, which became friendly – and K is certain she wants to say more, but fears revealing herself to a censor. Not every letter is read, but enough to make people uneasy.

He should reply; he would prefer not to.



Zürau, 18 October, 1917

Dr K sits reading a newspaper on a chair by a kitchen window. He shifted there from the table to save lighting a candle or turning on the lamp. And now he is no longer in the way, Ottla and Mařenka move the table to the other window. That done, using both hands, Ottla pulls open the great cupboard, and Mařenka finds a sack, and from this she pours out a small pile of straw onto the table's centre – which puzzles K. Then Ottla fetches what looks to him like two half-made birds' nests.

Yet he doesn't ask any questions, because he feels embarrassed that he was an obstacle without realising it, and wishes they had asked him to move, rather than waiting patiently. But his eyes betray his curious thoughts.

'They are boots, Dr K,' Mařenka says, 'over-boots.'

'Ah!' K says.

Ottla smiles at him. 'Mařenka's kindly showing me how to make them. Josef will need them this winter in the mountains – I assume he'll be sent there like everybody else. As I'm not allowed to shoot Italians with him from a trench, I can at least try and preserve his toes.'

Mařenka smiles, 'You'll want a man with ten toes – and other things.'

Ottla smiles even more.

K studies the main article in *The Prague Daily*.

**Capture of Ösel Island –  
German troops hold the coast –**

**the capital and other towns on fire –**

**8 dreadnoughts, 12 cruisers and 40 torpedo boats involved**

The Russian defeat in the Baltic seems complete, judging by the report. ‘The resistance to our troops has been overcome.’ It’s now just a matter of rounding up the remains of the garrison, *The Prague Daily* says.

‘So many victories, but no victory,’ K remarks to himself – not for the first time – but still the news makes him glad. He turns the page and then another.

At the New German Theatre, *The Famous Woman* is playing, ‘a comedy in three acts,’ and he feels even happier, as he’s so far away. And at Cabaret Lucerna, Schwank von Fix’s, *Brown and Blue*, will be staged. And nobody will invite him, and no excuses will be needed, and his joy overflows.

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Ambling round the village doesn’t take long, but it’s become an essential means of punctuating spells at his desk. These short strolls almost always end with K taking a seat on the village green facing the pond under the statue of St Roch. The white stone pedestal rises some ten feet above him, and the bronze statue some fifteen feet above that. As Roch is the patron saint of invalids and falsely accused people, and a man famous for not eating, K feels comfortable sitting there. Indeed he is certain he could not have found a more companionable saint.

Some ducks stare at him in the hope of a crumb or two, but most of them paddle on the pond, where they are safe from being kicked by a goat. K take out a new notebook, and is about to write down, *St. Roch, ducks, goats*, when he is interrupted by a herd of cows.

They are being driven through the village by four girls – one on each side of the herd and two behind. K admires their skill and their confidence. Then his attention turns to the animals, and he listens to the brute music of their hoofs, smells their pungent sweat and looks at the dust rise above them. It all seems timeless and tranquil – or at least restful.

They pass on their way, they're heading to the harvested hop fields for grazing, but one of the girls drops behind. She's carrying a white rabbit. It's the same girl as before. She approaches K, stops in front of him, says, 'I bet you're circumcised,' then laughs, and runs after the herd.

K walks round the village again.

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Not a word has he sent. Every day he told himself he should write. But previously the apt approach, the apt tone, eluded him – the prospect of a courier though, has helped him find a few suitable phrases. Ottla is going to Prague, and he believes his sister's presence will make his words persuasive – she's young, intelligent and attractive. And she will be politely forceful when she hands over his letter, and sits and waits for the answer. Director Marschner will be impressed – K is certain.

And, as well as asking for even more sick leave, K decides to gamble on his chief's benevolence, and ask for extra ration-coupons for Ottla as so many things were unobtainable in the country – at least in Zürau. Apples, pears and nuts, for example.

'Please could you give her a recommendation to take to the fodder-centre,' he almost writes, before deciding that he should keep the letter strictly formal, and he takes care with his handwriting – 'just like a schoolboy,' he thinks.

But he is willing to humble himself, and Ottla, to preserve his rural life. He couldn't face returning to work.

Then he pauses and thinks again. Taking the trouble to write clearly wasn't that humble a thing to do. And asking to remain exempt from all civilian duties shows a degree of pride, he accepts; particularly as his civilian duties exempt him from military ones.

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K looks at his still unused notebook. It is 5½ inches by 3½ inches with soft blue covers, and it fits neatly into the outside pockets of his overcoat. Having walked it round the village a couple of times during the day, he decides to take it out for a night-time excursion. He goes down the stairs and out the front door. He takes the heavy key with him after turning it in the lock. A precaution which wasn't once necessary – or so he's been told. But there's a trickle of men making their way back from the east – deserters and prisoners of war who have escaped from the collapsing Russian Army. K fears for Ottla, though he accepts that she could probably swing a hammer harder than himself. Yet protected by a locked, solid door she won't have to wield a hammer at all.

Thoughtlessly he turns right and heads for the road to Oberklee. It is as if without being told, his legs have set out towards the bridge over the river, and the rest of him has just gone along without complaint. He leaves the village and the dim lights of the last farm and walks into the darkness. Behind him the dog gives a muffled bark – evidently lacking the enthusiasm to come out of his kennel.

For a couple of minutes he's alone and there's no sound but his footsteps, then, on a track sloping down from his left, two figures appear. Abruptly he turns his head towards

them. With trees and bushes in the background their silhouettes aren't distinct – he can't even tell if they're children, women or men.

Then he hears them speak – they're men. He doesn't understand what they are saying, but they're using the local dialect, and he relaxes.

'Good evening.'

He understands that, and the tone is friendly and familiar. But he can't recognise them, yet K returns their greetings with equal warmth.

When they've gone past him a few yards, one of them suddenly asks, 'Mr Hermann, a cigarette?'

K stops and turns about. He doesn't try to unravel the mistake over the name, he just says that he regrets, as he doesn't smoke, he's none to offer. Then they all say, 'Good night.'

It would have taken a while to explain that Ottila's farm belongs to the husband of their sister, Elli – to Karl Hermann – and though Karl inherited it from his parents he doesn't care for farming, and so he has rarely appeared in Zürau.

Not knowing Dr K, many there assume he is the absent owner – and the explanations are always lengthy.

Whether they are debating K's identity as they walk away from him isn't clear. They're reverted to the local tongue – to words he doesn't understand; whereas the words he had understood were based upon a misunderstanding. K has no greater wish than for such communication – 'Nothing could be better,' so K thinks.

Though he accepts that eventually, if he does stay – as he hopes to stay – the village will absorb him until he is Mr Hermann no longer.

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He looks down at the river in the dark. He can see blackness, nothing else. He can hear the river, sense how shallow it has become, and he knows how worrying this is for everybody who works the land. Only someone like himself, an outsider who has no part to play in the village, could enjoy the endless fine weather.

K gazes back along the road. There's no sign of the village. The old manor house which stands alone to the south of Zürau can't be seen across the fields. If fuel were abundant K assumes that a light or two would be visible from the highest windows – but the constraining war makes the dark even darker.

He stands looking at what he can't see, and as he's peering into the night he hears, 'Dr K,' spoken softly behind him. His back doesn't react as it normally does when his dead brothers approach, so he assumes he's being addressed by somebody alive. He turns to face the voice.

It's a wedding guest – or that's how he appears at first glance – a wedding guest who's about forty years late for the wedding, judging by the style of his top hat and frock coat. Then he recognises the village idiot. Yet the man's face doesn't look idiotic, and he is standing upright – he is nothing like the crumpled figure he saw during his first week in the country, and he's a lot smarter than he was when lurking in the tree.

'I thought I should introduce myself. Schwarzenbach is the name. Gustav Schwarzenbach. Sometimes called Swiss, as that was where I lived until I ran away to join the circus. Sometimes called Rain, due to my habit of wandering about indifferently in all weathers. Sometimes called other things, more derogatory, particularly during my bad days, and because my wardrobe is limited and I can appear eccentric. But today is a good day and I must be hurrying along.'

He pulls out a handkerchief and coughs violently, as if exhausted by his introductory speech – the eloquence of which has taken K by surprise.

For a few moments Schwarzenbach looks like the dismal figure that K first saw leaning on a hedge in seeming imitation of a scarecrow. Then he resumes his upright stance.

‘Where are you heading?’ K asks.

‘Mustn’t be late. No. That wouldn’t do at all.’

He moves sideways for a couple of paces, nods a farewell, raises his hat, lowers it, goes to the end of the bridge, turns off the road and disappears into the night.

Dr K stands with his own hat raised.

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He looks at the candle on his desk and sees how much is left. He is going through candles too quickly. He gently rocks the lamp from side to side to feel how much paraffin remains. He is also using paraffin too quickly.

K lights the candle and when the flame has flickered into life and risen high, he reads a few sentences that he wrote about half a year ago in Alchemists Alley.

*Everybody has a room within them. This can be proved by the ears. When walking fast in the stillness of the night, and listening carefully, it's possible to hear a mirror rattle – one that hasn't been fastened properly to a wall.*

K licks his fingers and puts out the candle. When his eyes have adjusted again to the dark, he gazes out over the village green and looks at the pond and the statue of St. Roch. Then he looks to the left and studies the church and the graveyard. And then he

looks into the distance, at the house opposite beyond the green, at its neighbours, and then at the fields and hills beyond – though mostly these are lost in the night.

Walking home from the bridge he once more experienced the sensation of there being a room within him – and in that room lived a man like himself; and within that man there was another room; and within that room another man; and so on. And now he is also aware that he is a man in a room with a mirror just dangling on a chain – and he looks towards the glass – but he feels he is also within somebody else, and that person is also in a room, and so on. In both directions there is an infinity of men, rooms and mirrors. And the rest of the world has gone to sleep and might as well be dead.

He re-lights the candle. Picks up his new notebook and finally writes something on the first page.

*Fear of the night; fear of the not-night.*

It's a sentence into which his life could be collapsed. And so he feels he can go to bed with a good conscience. He's written his sentence.

## 12

Zürich, 20 October, 1917

As Ottla is still in Prague he must face the postman alone. Since K arrived the amount of post has increased considerably, and judging by the man's outraged look he would rather stick a bayonet into K than hand him a newspaper; but K suffers nothing



worse than a slight psychological wound, and so survives the delivery of *The Prague Daily* – indeed today it is only three days late.

### Entente Offensive on the Isonzo?

The main article is devoted to the probability of a twelfth assault on the Austrian lines in the Alps before winter sets in – to be conducted as part of a series of attacks in Flanders, Macedonia and Italy. And it gives the response from Berlin, ‘If the Entente thinks it can discover weak spots in our defences then it is due for a bloody surprise.’

K wonders if Othla’s man has been transferred south already. And he thinks of the Hungarians who sat at the table where he is reading the news. And he thinks of Georg and Heinrich – but he is confident that his dead brothers will emerge unscathed from any Italian offensive.

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He shouldn’t do it, K feels, but he goes into Othla’s bedroom. She’s only been away since the previous morning but the house feels lopsided without her – it’s as if it no longer sits solidly in the earth and has shifted slightly.

He looks at his sister’s cardigan on a hook on the wall, at her farming boots, at her brushes on top of the chest of drawers, and at her various bags dangling from three nails. And he studies the spines of her books – some on agriculture, and some bought for her by himself as presents, novels and vegetarian tracts, and at the end is his first, very slender published work, *Contemplation*.

A floorboard creaks by the bookshelf and he steps back as lightly as he can. There's nobody else in the house, but his intrusion feels criminal and he tries to be silent and to avoid touching anything. He wants to leave no trace that he has been there – it's not even something he could mention in his diary. And yet he doesn't think Ottla would be angry with him if she knew he was in the room, in her absence, thinking of her.

He approaches her wardrobe. One door does not close properly, and he's able to put his eye to the gap and study the first dress on the rail. It's blue and pretty – perhaps it's the only pretty thing she has to wear in Zürau. And probably it hasn't come out of the wardrobe since she unpacked on her first day in the village.

'Will she wear it for Josef?' K asks himself. 'Will she get the chance?'

And he can't help but think of her man taking it off her – undressing her. And he's a Christian, he's Czech, and a member of Sokal – the nationalistic, gymnastic association.

'A strong mind in a sound body and beat up the Jews!'

Not the official slogan. No. But something heard often enough from young thugs – and from thugs not so young. He thinks of the annual parades when he was a child – of the nationalists demonstrating on the square by their apartment. They rallied round the column which marked the execution in the seventeenth century of dozens of Czech leaders. The Habsburg triumph burning in their minds three hundred years later.

Wise Jews hid away. But one time he was caught, along with his closest boyhood friend, Hugo Bergmann. They were both perhaps thirteen and curious, and three older Czech lads grabbed them and kicked them about the pavement. Then a policeman emerged from a tobacconist – he was putting away his packet of cigarettes, so K remembers. He appeared just as Hugo was knocked to the ground, and he shouted, 'What the Hell are you doing!'

And the oldest of the Czechs said, 'We're just kicking about!' And his puzzled expression is still vivid in K's mind. The lad found it strange that a policeman would trouble himself over such a pastime.

Yet being kicked in public hadn't made K feel Jewish.

'I've nothing in common with the Jews.' He believes the thought first crossed his mind during his Bar Mitzvah.

And K thinks it again as he moves away from the wardrobe. Despite his Hebrew studies, and his reading of the Bible and the Torah, he has not closed the gap. There is always a gap as far as K is concerned – trenches and barbed wire are nothing compared to the barrier which keeps him isolated. And whatever he does, he always feels he is making the barrier more impenetrable.

Then he catches sight of the small pile of letters that Ottilia has kept. They're on a shelf and secured by nothing more than a pebble. They are just protected against a breeze, not against a prying brother – he's trusted. He looks hard at the small stone, then reads what he can of the topmost sheet. K struggles with Josef's Czech handwriting, but still he can understand it, and wants to turn the page and see how intimate the letter becomes.

He lifts his hand. He touches the pebble. He takes his hand away.

'Don't!'

If Ottilia has found a man who suits her and loves her, then he's glad. The details are not for him to know – unless she decides to speak.

And despite his fears he can't find in himself any resentment that she is happy with a man who isn't Jewish. He fears the Czech mob; he fears what will happen if the Habsburgs lose the war and the empire breaks apart; he fears the day when there will be no imperial policeman on the street as he is being kicked about the pavement – but he doesn't fear Czechs individually.

The only individual he really fears is his father. And against him Ottla's man may prove to be an ally. And certainly in moving outside of their Jewish world, his sister has heightened her rebellion – and K knows that he must support her. And therefore Josef David is giving them both strength – and so he must be an ally. It's not possible for anybody to come close to Hermann without either becoming subordinate or taking a stand against him. Their father allows no neutrality.

K hears the front door open and as lightly as possible steps to the landing. He closes Ottla's door and calls down the stairs to hide the noise of its hinges.

Mařenka answers, 'Hello, Dr K, I'm just delivering some potatoes. Mr Kunz has been kind enough to give us a gift – after first giving me a lecture on his great-grandfather.'

K hurries downstairs. After last year's turnip-winter the gift of even a small bag was a markedly friendly gesture. He watches Mařenka unload her rucksack. She hands him a potato. K holds it and admires it and smiles his peculiar smile. None of the potatoes he's dug from the ground have come close to its majestic appearance.

'But it's not all good news though. Mrs Müller – the woman who got a telegram about her dead son – she's died in her sleep. Heartbreak probably. Her husband's left alone. A refugee with no family.'

K puts down the potato.

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'Excuse me, you're from Prague, aren't you? Prague? And you write. My brother read something by you. And praised it. I've seen you there, I'm sure.'

Caught by surprise, extracted from his own thoughts, Dr K comes to a stop.

The man called to him from his left, from the garden of the Blue Star, and in the twilight he was only vaguely visible until he stood up and approached the pavement.

‘I’m not mistaken, am I?’

He smiles and thrusts forward a hand, which K automatically shakes and he returns a smile and studies the face of the stranger. He is in his twenties, has the trace of a scar along his left jaw, and his penetrating eyes give him an air of authority mixed with anxiety. Therefore K assumes that he is a junior officer on convalescent leave. But as to who he is, K has no idea; yet K has often been recognised and approached – or at least, recognised too often as far as he is concerned. K attributes this to being tall and distinctive and, beyond that, to the habits of a narrow city, where only a pinch of literary success is needed for people to point a finger.

‘No, you’re not mistaken. I’m from Prague and I write a little.’

‘You must let me buy you a drink!’

To Dr K there seems no necessary connection between writing and drinking, but he can think of no reason to decline, and he is being watched by a small group of farmers. To turn away would be to insult a man who is being friendly and complimentary. So he accepts.

‘Flitsch is the name, Lieutenant Flitsch, acting captain, field promotion, not yet confirmed, paperwork lacking, so just Lieutenant Flitsch for now.’

K notices that his head twists slightly to the right, every few seconds, while he speaks. Aware of this, Flitsch feels the need to explain the spasm.

‘I got shot up – thigh, arm, face. Three bullets. Perhaps a section opened fire at me all at once, I don’t know.’ His head twists again. ‘Spasms, odd spasms, I’m still having them. Anyway, I’m here to buy you a drink – and have another myself!’

He carries his beer glass in his left hand, pushes the oak door with his right shoulder, and they go in.

‘It’s getting a bit chilly now, and I left my coat at the Feigl’s, I’m their nephew – had enough of being cold in Italy. Let’s drink in here. Barnabas!’ he calls to the barman, ‘Another beer and one for Dr K.’

K thought he was going to drink an orange juice in the garden. He wasn’t sure what the locals would think of a Jew from Prague sitting down amongst them. But he can’t retreat, and he sees a small corner table unoccupied, and goes straight there, pointing his intention to the lieutenant.

The faces around him appear more rounded, more knobby, than those he’d seen before, but it’s a village pub, and therefore most of the people must be villagers – so why their faces should seem different, K isn’t sure.

Curious glances seek him out in his corner.

‘A Jew!’

‘Hermann.’

‘No, Hermann’s relative.’

‘Not Hermann?’

‘Still a Jew.’

There are no young men there – apart from Barnabas, the lieutenant and himself – but most of the old men seem solid; they have an earthy solidity which makes K feel slight and capable of merging with the pipe smoke: capable of fading into the blue haze with its peculiar tang. K puzzles over what substitute the authorities are using now for tobacco. Yet it’s a question he can’t answer, though he suspects it’s nettles – the universal substitute.

Lieutenant Flitsch weaves his way amongst the tables with the two glasses held peculiarly high.

‘Here we are! Barnabas got shot on the same mountain that I did, but a year earlier. It’s a small world. He won’t run again, but that’s no obstacle to a barman.’

Flitsch raises his glass in salute. K does the same. A third of the lieutenant’s beer disappears at the first gulp. K swallows what he can. He’s glad that it’s so watery.

‘At least they haven’t adulterated the schnapps!’ Flitsch says and hurries back to the bar.

While the locals continue their scrutiny, K has something to do now – he can drink. Then the chasers arrive – again held high by Flitsch – and an unfamiliar taste assaults K’s throat.

‘He’s drinking schnapps!’

‘The Jew’s drinking schnapps!’

‘With an officer!’

‘It’s the war!’

‘Here’s to peace!’

The alcohol seems to help Flitsch for his head stops twitching to the right, and for this K is grateful.

‘Peculiar news about Müller’s son, isn’t it?’

‘I heard he died – and that his mother had a heart-attack in her sleep.’

‘Yes, but a card’s arrived. One of those dreadful army cards – you know type, you must have received one, the type printed in nine languages, that says, *I’m fine and everything’s going well*, and which a soldier can’t add to without being punished. It’s terrible. You’re not allowed to say anything – officially. Anyway, a card’s arrived from corporal Müller, dated after the telegram which said he died. The father is in a state. Hadn’t you heard?’

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‘The pale sniper... the pale sniper, dressed in white, you see, picks away at sons, fathers, brothers, lovers, husbands – even husbands!’ Flitsch pauses to swallow his double measure of schnapps.

‘The snow turns red. Women weep far away – once the telegram gets through – but before then we will have dealt with the body, as best we can surrounded by rocks and ice. Rocks and ice everywhere... and therefore a corpse in the snow is a problem... you see that, don’t you?’

K manages a nod.

‘It’s much better to have the man next to you annihilated by a shell, than brought down by a sniper’s bullet. You see?’

K still manages to see, though the Blue Star is beginning to turn on its axis, and the smoke is far denser than it was earlier, and he is glad that the lieutenant is close to him, and that they both have their backs to a wall. Yet they are in danger of sliding down, dissolving and seeping away through the cracks between the floorboards, or so K feels.

For two minutes the lieutenant is silent, and K concentrates on remaining solid, and then Flitsch announces, ‘It’s time to go – the Feigl will be wondering where I am.’

Heroically they get to their feet. Yet their route to the door passes the bar, and they have one more schnapps each, before tackling the door handle.

‘Good night, gentlemen, try to avoid the pond,’ calls Barnabas to their vanishing backs.

‘The Jew drinks,’ comes a voice.

‘But not very well,’ comes a reply.



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‘Try to avoid the pond.’

This advice continues to go round and round inside K’s head. He cannot see any disturbance on its surface. Its depth is not great, or so he suspects, and although there is certainly enough water to drown in, he doesn’t think that Lieutenant Flitsch could have vanished completely below its surface, without having left any trace.

Should he wade in and check?

K is against this idea. It looks a very wet kind of pond. Though he would like to know where his companion of the evening went after they left the pub – after they turned right and right again, and circled the church a couple of times. It’s quite possible that Flitsch has found himself a comfortable grave to lie on – he said something about, ‘Graves looking different now.’

Though his exact words, and the sentiment beneath them, were beyond K’s current ability to grasp.

All that he is certain about, is that he spent the evening with Lieutenant Flitsch, and that mostly it was the officer who talked, and that then they strolled a few hundred yards together, and now he is by himself, and they never said, ‘Good-night.’

And this troubles K hugely.

Sitting under the statue of St Roch, and alternately looking down at the water and up at the stars, it seems an unbearable sorrow that they could have drunk so much and parted without a word – indeed parted without even knowing they were parting.

Millions of men were fighting across Europe, and even as he sat there, guns were firing somewhere and soldiers were dying, and they parted without a word!

The bleakness of it all strikes K deeply.

Until he starts to feel cold. A chill wind is blowing across the village and he decides to go home. And he knows the house is not far away. It's further than the pond, but closer than the stars. And this thought makes him sit upright.

'Home is further than the pond, but much, much closer than the stars!'

He mouths this aphorism several times, before saying it loudly into the night, and he finds it reassuring. And he calculates that if he walks round the pond and then sets off, so that the church is behind him to the right, and the pond is behind him to the left, he should collide with Ottla's front door.

After three circuits round the water anti-clockwise, K feels capable of escaping the pond's gravitational pull and crosses the grass. And finally he encounters a garden fence. K fails badly with the gate's hook, but he surmounts the fence, without damaging it or himself. And finds a door, just where a door should be – in a wall.

It seems miraculous, but he then finds the great heavy key in an overcoat pocket, and he gets the key into the lock, turns the key and opens the door – and K enters the house thanking God for his mercy.

## 13

*Komotau, 27 October, 1917*

Dr K has long suspected that many of the things which were part of his existence could be discarded without any loss. This thought crosses his mind again as he sits in the small lecture hall of the small Jewish community of a small town near the German border. Max Brod is talking about *Jewish Art* – that is the title of his talk, but K thinks it would be

better described as a lecture on the art of some Jews, because his friend's words leave him no closer to any feeling of unity.

He looks up at Brod on the wooden platform. The lectern couldn't be adjusted and so he was forced to stand on a box. K worries that it might collapse. If it did, he would be sorry for his friend, but for not himself.

He takes out his notebook and writes down, *Thoughts of suicide are the first sign of wisdom*. Brod glances at the audience, sees his friend with a pencil in his hand, and briefly smiles – seemingly encouraged by the idea that K is taking notes.

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He follows behind the group down the dusty road towards the restaurant. Max Brod is surrounded by the committee which invited him to talk – and he is still talking. K and Elsa, Brod's wife, are perhaps ten yards behind the others.

'Max doesn't understand me, and when he does, he's wrong.' K wrote that to Felice some years before, and he still feels it is true. She is Elsa's cousin, and it's possible she repeated the words to her, and she to her husband. But K thinks it unlikely. There would have been a protest.

K is tempted to make the remark again, as there were some allusions to his fiction towards the end of the lecture, and it was described as, 'essentially Jewish' and somehow linked to Exodus, and, 'above all,' it was claimed, 'it showed the universal in the particular.' But the universal for Brod was a Jewish universe.

K looks at Elsa as they walk, and she turns her handsome face towards him. 'Max gives a good lecture, doesn't he?' says K.

'Yes, he has lots of practice at home,' Elsa says with a smile.

And in the presence of that smile K is unable to say anything discordant. Instead he turns away to drop a coin in the old army cap of a veteran sitting between his crutches.

‘I write differently from how I speak, I speak differently from how I think, I think differently from how I ought to think, and so it all proceeds into deepest darkness,’ so K reflects – as he’s reflected before.

He also reflects on how impressive Max looks leading an entourage. He was born with a curved spine, and for a year as an infant he wore a steel brace to straighten his back, and it didn’t completely work. From behind he still looks mishappen, but all of the larger, grander men about him, are clearly enthralled by his words, and glad to be in his company. And K admires him, and acknowledges that he owes him much – his friend knows how to bustle in the world, and his loyalty and enthusiasm have pulled K out of the obscurity in which he would otherwise be sitting.

And Max has found a loving, attractive wife, and one that K finds it easy to talk to – when he feels like talking to anyone. Yet Max isn’t loyal to Elsa. He has hinted to K in self-defence that his curved back is to blame, that it forces him to approach women, to prove himself to himself, by proving himself to them. K has never argued the point, he has always just turned his right hand over, uncurled his fingers and raised his palm. And this has always made Max’s words trail away into silence.

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Elsa sits besides Max. K though has taken a place away from the couple; he has a corner seat which allows him to watch the dinner and avoid getting entangled in conversation. His neighbours direct their comments up the table to the Brods at its head.

‘You must talk again tomorrow!’ the bearded, sweating man to his right says loudly, almost shouting at Max.

‘Yes, to the Blue-White!’

‘You must!’

‘We’ll get more tomorrow – you’ll see!’

‘You can’t come all this way and just lecture once!’

In the cramped space of the restaurant’s back room, the committee members appear all the more forceful. But not much force is needed, indeed K watches his friend glow in pleasure. He takes off his round glasses, mops his brow with a theatrical air, and puts his glasses back on.

‘Is it unanimous? Do you all want another talk?’

‘Yes!’ Comes the response through the beards and moustaches into the cigarette smoke.

So it’s decided – he will be lecturing to the Blue-White hiking club, and no doubt to the Maccabees as well, the Jewish gymnasts; and for K their company would be worse than going to the synagogue. Not that he was averse to exercise – swimming, rowing and Müller’s physical training were part of his life. But he didn’t feel the need to wear a badge in order to exercise, and he always was ill at ease when surrounded by club members – the hearty spirit of companionship made him itch. And tomorrow Max and Elsa had been due to get off the train with him and take a cab to Zürau. They had been planning to break their journey to Prague, so that K could show them his home in the country. The schedule had been tight, yet it would have been possible. But evidently the Blue-White came before Zürau.

K wonders at what hour the telegraph office will be open in the morning, so that he can wire the change of plan to Ottla.

Prague, 29 October, 1917

‘Dentists are no better than doctors!’ thinks Dr K as he looks up at the man holding half a tooth in one of his hands. He was trying to fill a cavity when he slipped.

‘Well,’ says the dentist, ‘that wasn’t meant to happen. Sorry!’

He studies what’s left of the tooth in K’s mouth.

‘There’s not really any choice, now, I suppose, the rest of it will need to come out – I’m very sorry. I’ll just charge for a filling; not for an extraction.’

K stares at the half of his tooth lying on the small table beside him. He hopes there’s enough left in his mouth for the pliers to grip.

‘I do have some anaesthetic. I would need to charge for that though.’

‘How did you get it?’ K asks.

‘By... an... unorthodox route.’

K is not tempted by black market anaesthetic. Not only due to his devotion to natural medicine, but also because he’s sure his dentist has no idea about what he’s been injecting into his richer patients.

‘No anaesthetic – just be quick.’

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Professor Gottfried Pick asks how he is.

‘In pain. I’ve just had a tooth pulled out.’

‘First the dentist, then the doctor?’

‘Yes.’

He undresses so that Pick can examine his chest. It’s the moment of fear – of fear of the office. If he’s declared fit then he’ll have to leave Zürau and return to Prague and his job – and his family. Or, almost as bad, is the threat of exile in a sanatorium, if his tuberculosis has got worse.

‘Have you been putting on weight?’

‘In the country I’ve gained some – living there helps. The food is good; the air is good. There’s health in the country for me!’

‘Though is there more health elsewhere?’ the professor mutters, but as the question seems to be addressed to himself, K doesn’t respond.

Not trusting his patient, Pick weighs him, and discovers that he is a few pounds heavier than before. He listens to his chest and asks some further questions. Then he writes down his thoughts on a couple of cards and makes K wait for his verdict. Finally, the professor lifts his head.

‘Another three months. Another three months in... where did you say?’

‘Zürau.’

‘Normally I’d recommend the south. However things aren’t normal. Not at all normal.’

K gets dressed, gives thanks, and leaves quickly in case some second thoughts cross the professor’s mind.

On the other side of the door is Max Brod in the clinic’s reception. He is sitting directly opposite, as if he has been trying to stare his way into the examination room. K smiles, raises a hand in a manner that is reassuring, but which also says that K must see the receptionist first. Max follows him with his eyes – which gaze with desperate inquisitiveness.

K turns his back on his friend, pays his fee and asks for an appointment for next year. The receptionist is new – a benign looking middle-aged woman with a hat with three small flowers made of silk, now somewhat jaded. She is troubled by the layout of the doctor's diary. K tells her to take her time and studies the fading flowers. He can feel his friend's impatience behind him. Yet he doesn't turn round. Instead his gaze shifts to the photograph which has replaced the painting of Lake Garda. It shows a Gotha bomber rising up from a field with the sun low in the sky in the background. It's a biplane with wide wings and a machine gunner in a forward cockpit whose head is silhouetted against the dawn. The Gotha looks capable of carrying a bomb big enough to destroy a street.

The receptionist finds an empty hour in January and writes down Dr K's name.

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'Their burnt bodies smelt like Satan's shit!' says a veteran with a hedgehog haircut and a hook instead of a left hand – a cruel hook with a point. Squashed beside him is a half-moon of a man, curved and defeated – or so he looks in the corner of the café.

Dr K glances at them, and at the sign on the wall which says, *Danger of Spies! No idle talk!* And he orders an orange juice, and then he studies the men a little longer in the mirror behind the bar. They sink into silence and both seem to be steeped in bitterness, which, K surmises, has left one aggressive and the other passive. He drinks the watery drink that has only the slightest trace of oranges, and yet it helps to clean his mouth of blood. He gets out a pencil and some paper from a jacket pocket, makes a brief note of Gottfried Pick's remoteness, Max Brod's anxiety, and the receptionist's confusion, and he pays, pauses at the door to give the men in the corner a last look, and then crosses the road to his office. He must go in – so he tells himself as he walks along the pavement.



As if aware of Dr K's reluctance, the doorman swiftly opens the door, removes his pipe from his mouth, smiles a warm smile from beneath his wide imperial moustache, and booms, 'Dr K!' in the most benign and avuncular manner.

'Sir, it's a pleasure to see you!'

Abashed by this, Dr K can only smile back and raise a hand in a gesture of gratitude.

'The lift, sir?'

K shakes his head and goes up the stairs.

Now he can feel, ever so slightly, that his lungs weren't as good as they were – or he thinks he can feel it, for he is comparing his current alert state with a time when he didn't need to think of his lungs. But once he's past the first floor the noise of the typewriters above distract him. Their sound reminds him of the days when he was lost in dreams in the office – when he wondered, for instance, if the ascending dead, rising from the earth, hear the noise of the angelic bureaucracy in just such a way. Is the heavenly choir now a typing pool? Does the heavenly hymn consist of nothing but clickety-clickety-clack? The old questions!

And the clicks and the clacks are louder than they were – they are more metallic as even typewriters need lubricating oil to work smoothly. Experimenting with animal fat as a substitute did not give satisfactory results.

K doesn't like the sound of massed typewriters, but he knows he should be grateful, they helped him imagine the machine of torture in his tale, *The Penal Colony* – the machine which writes on its victims until they are dead. He even made an ink drawing of the device – so strong was its grasp on his mind.

'You're back!' the glad words of surprise, and the hand thrust towards him from the corridor, bring him into the present and out of his true world.

K is being greeted from behind another moustache – Gustav Kubasa's reaches across his face from the edge of each cheek, but the ends aren't curled, they are just slightly raised in the Hungarian style. And Kubasa now has a long goatee, and his lower face makes K think first of a crucifix, and then of the Gotha bomber he saw at his dentist's.

While K is trying to decide if his colleague has blacked his moustache, the man takes him by the arm and draws him into his cupboard of an office.

'I'm so relieved you're here.'

'But I'm just back to give Pfohl my medical results – I'm still ill.'

'But you're here now, and you can help.'

Kubasa hands Dr K a letter from a labourer protesting at the decision made by the institute after he suffered a number of injuries – it's in a large script, written with a grey pencil on yellowing paper:

*Learned Judges!*

*I, an old man, appeal, for justice, for my broken leg which wasn't my fault at all. I had no broken bones because of my own fault. None of the accidents was because of me. Ask Gütling he was there as long as me thirty years we joined together as lads...*

Dr K looks at Kubasa's face, then he re-reads the first paragraph. 'I like the exclamation mark after *Learned Judges* – it's a nice touch.'

'It's dreadful, it's illiterate, and he'll lose – but the judgement is unfair.'

K raises his left hand and twists it forward and back, so as to ask why Kubasa is surprised and why he has pulled K into his room.

'We could help!'

K puts down the appeal and twists both of his hands so that the palms face the ceiling. At the sight of this the Hungarian moustache frowns.

‘If you drafted an appeal... your words would win. You draft it. I’ll type it. I’ll get it to him and make him submit a proper document.’

‘We’re to work against our own institute?’

‘Yes.’

K decides that Kubasa has blacked his moustache: it’s a shade darker than the rest of his hair. And now he wonders if the blacking gets into his food.

‘Fine.’

‘You’ll do it?’

‘Give me the papers. I’ll look at them before I leave, before I get back to the country, and return them to you.’ K pauses to think when he’ll be able to do it. ‘I’ll return them late tomorrow afternoon.’

‘But you’ll do it? You’ll write his appeal?’

‘Is he a relative of yours?’

‘No. I just feel sorry for him. His boss is a particularly unpleasant creature. I know him, you see... he...’

‘I’ll look at the papers. But I must find Pfohl – he’s expecting me.’

And with the folder tucked under his arm Dr K walks down the dark corridor to his own office. The door is open and he stands in the doorway and does his best to smile at Treml.

Treml doesn’t smile back, though he manages a nod as he stands at their pencil sharpener; then he starts turning the long handle of the metal cube noticeably faster. The shavings drop into the tray below, and some fall to the floor.

‘He is torturing that pencil to death!’ so Dr K thinks, and wonders what he can do to save it.

‘I have a meeting with Pfohl – that’s why I’m here.’

Treml keeps their boss’s diary. He stops turning the handle, walks to his desk and looks at the book.

‘He received an urgent phone call from Vienna. He’s talking to the minister. He won’t have time for you today.’

Treml strikes out Dr K’s appointment – and then all of the other appointments on the page. Each receives a slash from the pencil. His desk is close to the window, and in the light, it seems to K that his fair hair is more yellow than it was previously. Evidently Treml has dyed it, and now it’s the colour of urine.

Though they have shared an office for a couple of years, K refrains from saying this. Everybody finds Treml difficult and touchy on certain unpredictable days. Pfohl said that he was putting them together in the same room, as an acknowledgement of K’s tact and courtesy. K replied that he didn’t know how to thank him.

‘Does he have any time free tomorrow?’

Treml turns the page.

‘Five o’clock.’

‘Five o’clock, then please.’

He nods; Treml nods; K turns about and walks back down the corridor to the stairs. But before he can get there, a sudden squeak makes him pause, and a trolley emerges from the filing room pushed by Mergl – who smiles and shakes K’s hand; yet as he does so he twists his head slightly in order to read the reference on the folder under K’s left arm. However Mergl doesn’t want to talk of files and the office.

‘First Russia; now Italy! We are winning, sir, we are winning! *What is a battle? It is a conflict waged with all our forces for the attainment of a decisive victory.* This is the year of battles! I’ve missed our discussions, Dr K, I’ve missed them! But how are you? How is your health?’

‘Thank you for asking – I’m stable, I believe, perhaps that’s the best way of putting it.’

‘You’re looking well, sir.’

‘Country air – the more, the better.’

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‘Starvation means that your own body feeds off itself – first the fat, then the muscle and finally the internal organs. I looked it up in a medical dictionary – that’s the hazard of being a librarian, there’s a book to stimulate every fear. Sadly, one can’t eat books, but at least one can burn them to keep warm. There’s a hard winter coming.’

K nods and looks at his friend, Felix Weltsch, and notes how far his hair has receded. It makes him seem much older than K, though Weltsch is also weighed down by caring for his wife, whose nerves have not proved equal to a world war. Yet he has moved to a spacious and elegant apartment, and he is continuing to create his philosophic system and write his thesis, *Ethics*.

‘Is book burning a subject you’re going to cover from an ethical perspective?’ asks K with his usual ambiguous smile.

‘I wasn’t until now, until that hint, but perhaps I should try and establish the point on the thermometer where it becomes justifiable for a librarian to burn his stock. Or

perhaps one might say that a toe must first be lost to frostbite – a small one would do – before any book might be put into the stove. Would it be ethical then?’

Felix Weltsch returns K’s smile.

‘I suspect you would freeze to death before you burnt a book.’

Weltsch’s expression suggests that K is right.

‘And you?’

‘I’d burn mine – I’ve burnt some already. And I would burn others – of the writing of new books there is no end. The shelves wouldn’t be empty for too long.’

‘Goethe?’

‘There are a few I would put aside, but not many.’

K looks about him and feels perturbed by the expensive furniture. Every chair and table he would gladly burn even in the height of summer. Yet he just nods in a way that could be mistaken for approval. Is it all some sort of psychological barrier needed because of the emotional storms his friend has suffered since he was married? K asks himself the question, as Weltsch hinted at this in a letter, but he is dubious – he can’t find an excuse for philosophy amongst luxury, for marble pen holders, even if his friend, like everybody else, will be cold and hungry in the months to come.

K doesn’t feel comfortable there, and his mouth is hurting and he says it’s time for him to leave.

‘But do come and see me in Zürau.’

‘Yes, that would be interesting.’

K is sure that Felix Weltsch, the philosopher-librarian, would never stay in a village – unless it was a smart resort by a warm sea.

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Dr K promised Max Brod that he would meet him late that afternoon, yet he doesn't want to walk straight to his apartment. He already talked more than is comfortable for him in one day. K needs to linger in solitude, or for what passes for solitude on the streets of Prague.

By twists and turns and detours K avoids chance conversations and makes his way to a narrow lane and stops at a corner house – at the place where Weltsch once lived with his family. K risks being seen by the parents, but even so he pauses and looks up at a window. Amongst other memories, he recollects throwing a snowball one winter's midnight to rouse his friend, and then they'd set off with no purpose but to walk together in the snow in the dark.

And next door was The GoGo – Prague's best brothel in the opinion of the city's writers. Brod called it an 'intellectual establishment.' Though as far as K knew, the girls weren't tested on their knowledge of Schopenhauer and Schiller before being employed there. And yet he never heard a single writer complain.

Dr K walks on into the evening, and there's barely enough gas to fuel the streetlights, and wounded men loiter in the deep shadows and their regrets are more profound than his.

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*The Great Exploit* – that's the title, or just the working title, of Max Brod's latest novel; and Max is standing at the table and reading, and K has pushed himself as far as he can into the sofa, and he has closed his eyes. He finds the experience similar to being in a windowless room with somebody who is continually turning an electric lamp on and off. There are Jewish sections and non-Jewish sections and the switches between them are

abrupt, and they were made even more jarring by Max staring at him hard before each Jewish paragraph – as if he wants to declare that something significant is about to be said.

And though he's sunk down and been forced to close his eyes, K has adopted an I'm-listening-carefully posture, and the reading continues. Judging by the draft, the novel is partly based on the anti-Freudian psychiatrist and drug addict, Otto Gross, and a Zionist girl with whom Max had an affair. Both are covered by only the lightest camouflage, and K wonders if Max will be sued by Gross, or maimed by his own wife – indeed he winces at the prospect of Elsa reading the book.

Yet regardless of the merits of *The Great Exploit*, and its possible legal and marital consequences, K can't help but again admire his friend. As well as having a demanding job in the Post Office, he's a rising Jewish politician, a book reviewer and a prolific writer. K is certain that if his own back was as twisted as his friend's, he would just find some corner and be forever silent.

And K would like to remain silent now – he would like Max to continue reading until he can think of something to say which is neither totally dishonest nor totally devastating.

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She still doesn't know, and she is happily surprised by how well he looks. K's mother, Julie, is content with the thought, that her son needed to rest because of the strain of long hours in the office – a few months in the country after the administrative burdens of the war seem altogether justified to her.

And Dr K is glad that she isn't any thinner. The family have their connections and food has been finding it's way to their kitchen – only some of it from Zürau.



‘And Ottla’s managing – she’s managing!’ Julie says in a tone of surprised pleasure. ‘She’s lived here all of her life, but she’s running a farm and it hasn’t collapsed.’

K wonders if his parents had imagined the house descending into the cellar with both Ottla and himself in the rubble. Given their parents low expectations, success wasn’t hard.

‘Your father, well... he didn’t think Ottla would survive even the start of the harvest.’

‘I can remember what he said.’

‘But he is impressed, but he doesn’t let too much show, does he?’

K thinks that Hermann is always willing to reveal anything negative, that he only hides the positive notions which occasionally cross his mind; but K lets his mother continue without arguing.

‘Now you can see it, he thinks that there’s a bit of him in Ottla – there’s that tenacity. But is she really seeing a Czech man – a Catholic? Really! There’s no shortage of Jewish men... A Christian! I couldn’t imagine myself with a Christian – a stranger and all those crucifixes!’

K believes it is typical of his father that when he admires his children, he’s only admiring his own reflection. However he thinks it’s more important to defend Ottla, than attack Hermann.

‘Josef David suits her, so she tells me, and so I believe.’

‘You’ve met him?’

‘Yes.’

‘You didn’t say so.’

‘It’s for Ottla to speak of him, but...’

‘You’re on her side in this?’

K didn't expect to reach the point so soon, yet he couldn't now avoid an answer. There was no oblique way of responding without failing his sister.

'Ottla knows what's best for her. She's sensible, intelligent, capable. If Ottla likes him, and he likes her, then I'm glad.'

Her mother looks down at her hands – red and wrinkled but with an expensive ring on each index finger.

'The war and everything... I won't discuss it with your father just yet. The business... well, the business – it's a business.'

'How are things?'

'If we keep the shop, the warehouse, then our name is on the street – it's a Jewish business with a big sign outside. Things are getting worse, more vicious. The war, shortages, wounded men on the streets... when will the riots return? Twenty years ago, back then, your father could stand outside our business and defend it. Stand there! Stand in the street! He was healthy – and just a typical man among all those men. The Czechs left him alone. But now... he's an old Jewish merchant. But he'd still try and keep back the mob – and they would trample over him.'

'So – what's to be done?'

'Our life has revolved round the shop...'

She pauses.

'Yes, it has.'

'Our life has... it's got to go, we've decided.'

'How do you mean?'

'Before things get worse, we'll sell it, and invest the money in property – buy a block of apartments, it's a good time, and live on the rents. Your father has started

negotiations. He's not happy. He's away at another meeting now – another haggling session.'

Yet evidently the haggling ended sooner than she expected. The front door opens and shuts in a way that reveals K's father has returned. The living room door is flung back. Hermann stalks in – a once robust man with a heart which now troubles him, and with his concerns all too evident in his face. But he glances at his son with some contentment.

'You've returned! Holiday over, or is this just a gracious visit to your old parents? You've caught the sun, haven't you, resting on the farm? Bad nerves have turned you brown!'

'Digging potatoes helps.'

This changes Hermann's expression. There had been a trace of welcome in him behind his words – a hint in his bearing that he was happy to see K back home after returning from a difficult meeting. Yet it's clear that the image of his son working in the countryside is too much for the end of the day. It seems that Hermann never envisaged K doing anything on the farm except lazing.

'Did you say potatoes?'

'Potatoes!'

'Digging potatoes! I put you through university – ten years wasn't it? Felt like ten years. And you dig potatoes out of the ground! Peasants dig potatoes. A doctor of law... a doctor of law, you, who digs potatoes? It's all... it's all... all just useless!'

Hermann turns about, goes slowly back across the room like a man lost, but gathers himself at the door, and with a well-practised swing of his shoulders slams it behind him. A few seconds later comes the sound of the kitchen door slamming, and finally there's the distant thud of a bedroom door – and the dull ache in Dr K's mouth becomes sharply painful.

The only consoling thought concerns the blood from his throat – K is certain that he'll bleed in the night, but he is also sure that his mother will attribute what she finds on his sheets to his missing tooth.

15

Prague, 2 November, 1917

‘Have you seen my son? You’re from the east, aren’t you? Do you know any of them?’

The white-faced woman pushes a picture at Dr K. It shows a young man in uniform amongst other men smiling and waving. Presumably it’s from the early days of the war, because they all look confident and clean.

‘I’m sorry, no, I don’t know him, none of them – I’m not from the east.’

‘But you’re a Jew, you’ll have contacts there.’

‘I’m sorry – but his regiment, don’t they know?’

‘Missing in action – but he’s been working on a farm somewhere, somewhere remote, I’m sure, I can feel it, I always know where he is.’

A group of Jews with crumpled clothes and cardboard suitcases wander across the concourse from a train that’s just arrived. They look like they’ve been travelling for weeks. The woman rushes towards them rather than any of the soldiers in the crowd.

Near to where K is standing there’s a bench that was packed, but is suddenly free. Everybody sitting there was waiting for the same man – a young captain without a left leg, but with a pair of bamboo crutches, which he uses with the dexterity of a gymnast; it’s a joy to watch him, until he’s brought to a halt by friends and family.

Dr K sits down quickly at the end of the bench, and within seconds the rest of the places are taken as well. Two sergeants sit beside him.

‘Steinweg was his name, Hans Steinweg – young lad, just been with us a fortnight, but the battalion had him down as Hans Stein. Anyway, he catches most of the shrapnel from a mortar, and he’s carried away to the field hospital. He dies. Steinweg dies. First point. But the battalion must have had him down as Steinweg and as Stein, and... well, to get to the second point, the battalion’s clerks get in a state because they can’t find Stein, and our major insists that he’s court-martialled for desertion. He’s found guilty though he never existed.’

‘But...’

‘Exactly!’

‘But I issued six hand-grenades to Hans Stein last week.’

‘Third point. You issued those grenades to the Hans Stein who joined the battalion only last week. Who’s now guilty of desertion!’

Dr K’s train is announced.

K walks to the far end of the platform, and manages to get a window seat in the first compartment, and to put his bags on the rack before anybody else. Only then does he look at the front page of *The Prague Daily*.

**180,000 Prisoners –**

**1,500 artillery pieces captured –**

**60,000 Italians disarmed at Tagliamento**

The Austro-German attack continues according to the report. 180,000 soldiers taken in the last week, and 60,000 in the latest battle, and the Italians are still retreating and

in their wake there are trucks, supplies and all manner of weapons. Even allowing for the exaggeration of a patriotic reporter, and the slanted information provided by Vienna, something significant seems to be happening.

But will the Italian government collapse like the Russian regime? If not, how great a victory is it? Even if the Italians retreated to Verona but carried on fighting, there would still be a fourth war-time winter. Could the empire survive that?

*Learn never to look forward to anything – that's the way to find the strength to endure everything.*

So K writes in his pocket notebook, while the carriage fills with people, and a blind veteran's dog manages to find space enough to lie down on the floor. Though K can't help but be touched by hope. Peace and bread and no pogroms – the stuff of dreams.

As the train rumbles out of the city K looks through the smeared window, and sees a man who has managed to climb up a mound in the middle of a dozen railway lines. On this waste-ground-island he's standing with a sickle and a sack, and he's surrounded by cut grass and weeds. He's found a route to get food for his rabbit to fatten it for his Christmas dinner – or so K guesses. The man has risked his life amongst the tracks for a little bit of meat.

The train lurches on with a squeak and a belch of brown smoke, and the man gathering fodder is left behind. Despite the number of people in the carriage K manages to turn the page and to start reading the article entitled, *The Capitulation*. But the train goes through a junction, and a jolt makes the farmer standing in front of him lean backwards, and K's newspaper is pushed against his face.

When he resumes reading his eyes are caught by another article which tells of the recent rain and the flooding rivers, and the desperate attempts of the Italians to escape by the solitary surviving bridge. An army is reduced to *ruddle*. And across the page there's derisive mention of *fairy tales* – or that's how the claims of treason in the Italian press are dismissed. In Berlin it's asserted that the Italian general, Cardorna, *simply didn't grasp* the size of the German, Austrian and Hungarian reinforcements which had moved south.

The train goes round a bend into a particularly dense cloud of smoke and the stout officer beside K leans into him and coughs at the same time – and K twists his face away and it's pushed against the glass. When he's able to sit upright again he looks at the article on *Official Marriage Brokerage* – which is what its author, Dr Placzek is recommending to supplement the efforts of traditional match-makers and private marriage bureaus. Dr Placzek is keen on efficiency. Yet before K finishes this piece, he is interrupted by people getting out at the first stop, and, thankfully, by a fewer number of people getting on. K tucks his feet back as far as possible to avoid having his toes crushed.

No longer is there a solid officer next to him, instead there's a veiled, guant widow in black. Having glanced at her profile, K's eyes return to the page and now look at its two small maps – one showing Udine in detail, and the other all of north-east Italy. The names of Trieste and Venice stand out – they stand out for him, because four years ago, during a particularly difficult phase of his engagement, he travelled on from an insurance conference in Vienna and took a holiday by himself. He went by train to Trieste – a train which seems luxurious in his mind's eye compared to his current squashed and dirty circumstances – and he stayed in the city overnight. He wandered up and down the quays, ate in a café, and remained sitting at his small table in an alcove, because he didn't want to return to his hotel room. K gladly remembers this peaceful world where people only had to suffer ordinary heartbreak.

And there – he's sure it was there – he watched a boisterous crowd gather. 'Irlandesi,' he heard a waiter say, though some looked Italian, but the ring-leader, the chief entertainer, was clearly foreign, and after a few drinks he performed a peculiar dance – 'La danza del ragno!' or so the same waiter said to a younger colleague. And with the aid of his dictionary K discovered, to his surprise, that this was the dance-of-the-spider, and the older waiter added it was an Irish custom on drinking neat spirits – or that was how K interpreted his words, with a large degree of doubt; yet the Irishman's antics entertained him, lightened his mood, and in his alcove he made a drawing and gave it the inevitable title – *The Spider Dance!*

While he's wondering where that sketch might be now, he's distracted by the crying from the veil beside him. And the lady twists her fingers together and apart – together and apart repeatedly. Then she holds her hands before her face and tries to keep them still. Then she lowers her hands to her lap and her sobbing slows, until it becomes a quiet murmur barely audible above the rattle of the train.

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Again the seat beside him is taken. The man limped along the platform and climbed up with some difficulty, then twisted and almost fell into the place next to Dr K. He has two duelling scars on his cheek which must be forty years old judging by his white beard; and his eyes are tired and his face lined. Yet he's amiable and apologises to K for making the seat jolt when he sat down. Then he borrows his paper, as it is lying on K's lap, and studies the news from the front.

'My oldest boy is in Siberia, the middle one is in a grave in Poland, my youngest lad, just eighteen, is there in Italy. It's obvious to me their rear-guard is still fighting –



they'll be defending that bridge – and he wants to win a medal. He told me. He pointed to the scars on my face as a sign of bravery. What could I say? Join the catering corps – could I have said that to him with these marks of my own youth?

‘No, you couldn't,’ K replies and his hand expresses his sympathy.

Then the scarred gentleman apologises to the man opposite because he needs to stretch out his injured leg – ‘Sorry, broke it on the farm. I was trying to repair a roof with just the help of my granddaughter. She wasn't big enough to hold the ladder when I slipped. Not her fault – mine!’

The man opposite nods and shifts to provide space for the damaged limb. The gentleman thanks him, then turns the page of the paper.

‘The French are coming! They're sending reinforcements across the Alps – and so it all continues! Still, no defeatist talk – you never know who's listening.’

The gentleman hides his face behind *The Prague Daily*.

And K looks at his leg. It has brought back to his mind the appeal he wrote as urged by Gustav Kubasa. He did it. He worked against his own institute. Kubasa's sympathy for the labourer persuaded K to draft something more appropriate than the victim's efforts. And K felt sympathy for him too – he wished the man well. And Kubasa was correct, K could write persuasively – but Kubasa's words weren't going to appear in the appeal. If Pfohl sees the document, or any of the other senior managers, won't they recognise the author?

One of the marks of K's writing is the perfect grammar. This is even true of the dialogue in his fiction – all of his characters speak without mistakes, and their vocabulary is always precise. In the strange worlds that he creates, regardless of the horror and confusion, the language is always immaculate. Even in the lowest level of Hell the demons conjugate their verbs and decline their nouns with the perfection of angels.

Therefore he faced a problem when writing on behalf of an aggrieved workman. He's solution pleased Kubasa, but he wasn't sure he would deceive Pfohl – even though the appeal read as if it were written as a series of telegrams. In K's draft the sentences were abruptly short – 'military,' he thought. And it did make for an appeal with punch.

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Nothing could have pleased him more than the slow ride in the cart back to the village. For the first time he is heading home. K is returning from his first trip away from Zürau – and never when returning to Prague did he feel like this. The hills and woods soothe him and make him sense that he belongs; only the people make him feel alien, the terse driver, for example, but not alien in a way that he finds upsetting. The people would always regard him as a curiosity, this he can accept, as long as the land accepts him – and the goats.

And the goats seem glad because of his return – as far as he can tell from their goatish expressions. No doubt they missed the man who bends down the branches of bushes for them – without Dr K too many leaves would have remained out of reach.

The cart goes round the green, pauses for K to get down, and then departs at a walking pace; and K gazes at Ottla's house, and goes in, drops his bags by the front door, looks for Ottla, doesn't find her, then goes out of the back door into the garden. It's overgrown. It's been left to grow wild, and K resolves to tame it – to cut down and root out everything that's not wanted, and prepare it to become a vegetable garden in the spring. If digging potatoes upsets his father, then he'll grow them as well as dig them, and watch his father eat the product of his hands.

The only thing which disturbs K is the faint rustling he notices as he climbs the stairs up to his room. When he stops moving he can hear something he hasn't heard before, and has no idea what it is. Slightly louder and slightly softer by turns, but still always faintly there – he can hear the rustle. He goes downstairs. The noise vanishes. He faces the dead deer and turns over his right hand, as if asking for an explanation. The deer's expression remains enigmatic.

## 16

Zürich, 6 November, 1917

*Like a path in autumn, no sooner is it swept than again it's covered in dry leaves.*

So Dr K writes as he considers his first efforts in the garden. The initial task was to clear all the paths, and they evidently weren't swept the year before, and so he needed the hoe to free some of the compacted matter, before transferring it to his compost heap. Though, of course, they might need the old leaves for fuel for their stoves, they may not be able to keep them for compost, yet he doesn't like to think how much smoke the leaves would produce. There's not much point in heating a house and being smoked out of it. They'll just have to experiment, or so K reflects, as he watches the trees lose more leaves and sees them drift towards the back garden – more leaves, more compost, more fuel, and ever more sweeping, that's what autumn means. And last autumn he was sitting in an office! K examines his red palms – they're beginning to show the signs of manual labour. He's glad for the marks on his skin.

He's also glad for the letter he's received from Kurt Wolff, who wrote to tell him how many copies his first book, *Contemplation*, had sold in the previous year.

'102! Amazing!' That's what he said out loud on first seeing the figure and the words still echo in his mind. As 258 copies were sold in the book's first year, that meant 360 copies had been purchased altogether. Dr K tries to imagine who these people might be – and he feels a trace of anxiety because strangers are spying on him. They're reading his words!

He never expected to reach such a total for one book. He's a writer who is being read, and his hands are marked by physical work – Dr K feels alive. He looks out of the window once more. There are two people from the office standing on the green.

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K hadn't expected the visit and he sits once more in his room trying to digest the experience. Ottla had invited Julie Kaiser – and she had invited August Kopal. Kaiser and Kopal. That constituted a visit – whereas Julie Kaiser alone would have been different.

She was still, officially, his secretary. In a certain respect he was glad. Her command of the typewriter was extraordinary. K was particularly impressed by her adroit handling of the carriage return – with his back turned to her while dictating he could not detect any pause when she reached the end of the line: there was no clunk of travelling metal being brought to halt by a bracket. She didn't distract him with any clumsiness which might interrupt his flow of words. First in the typing pool, then as a shared secretary, and finally as his secretary alone, she worked for him and they became friendly, very friendly. And that friendliness coloured the day's visit.

Between his two engagements to Felice, he bought Julie presents, saw her outside of work, gave her signed copies of his books – and even that didn't put her off! There were weekends they enjoyed secretly away from their colleagues, which took some effort in Prague. And he knew then that he just needed to ask and she would be his – irrevocably his. They could have now been together – engaged, even married.

But here he pauses, his thoughts are becoming extravagant. He only gets engaged to not get married, so K believes.

And August Kopal is cheerful company, K is content to work with him – Catholic, but divorced, and always ready with something interesting to say about Prague, he is a careful observer. And he was devoted enough to Julie not to want her to endure the long trip to Zürau by herself. And when Julie managed to get K alone, she asked whether she should marry August, and K said she should, but without conviction in his voice.

Jealousy, a jealous ache – that's the clearest feeling left to K by the visit. Otherwise it was all dull and disturbing – a day spent drifting downhill amidst talk of the office, and taking photographs. They evidently felt that a visit without a camera was no visit. Therefore K obliged and recorded her in that long black overcoat, and him in his heavy wool travelling suit and patriarchal beard.

With her alone K could have talked of other things, and with him alone – but the office was what the three of them had intrusively in common. And this filled K with resentment, and yet a sadness hung over them all when they left – an utterly nonsensical sadness which K attributes to a stomach complaint.

Can he preserve his personality against the office and against the wrong marriage – which could be all marriages? He would like to believe that one day his personality might be useful, perhaps not to him, but to somebody, so he feels that he should strive for its preservation.

He gets out his diary.

*A cage went to find a bird.*

17

Zürich, 8 November, 1917

‘Do you think the Italians will ask for a ceasefire if we reach Venice?’ Ottla asks while reading a report about the threat to the city.

‘Our victory was miles from there. The ferry from Trieste took hours to cross the sea – I was sick. It’s a long way.’

‘Tagliamento was decisive; wasn’t it decisive?’ Ottla’s voice carries both the hope she has of peace in the south – for then her man might not have to fight again – and her fear that the war will drag on.

K shares the same hope – the same fundamental excitement – though he can’t prevent his pessimism spilling out. ‘It might be decisive for this winter. The Italians might pull back and slowly rebuild their army. But would they stop fighting completely? I don’t know. Would the French let them? I don’t know. Even if we got to Verona would they stop? I’ve wondered that. And beyond Verona there’s Bologna; and beyond...’

‘Don’t!’

‘But it is a great victory after all these years of Italian attacks.’

‘It’s only two years since Italy joined in.’

‘I thought it started soon after Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt.’

‘There was a pause, I believe.’

Then brother and sister look at the paper together in silence, reading the war reports, and trying not to let their emotions lift their hopes to a precipice from where they might collapse and tumble.

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He hears the house rustling again, or the rustling sound within the house, or the rustling which surrounds it. K slowly shifts his position in his room and tries to discover the direction of the noise. It seems constant. Then he is struck by the thought, that if he can hear it everywhere, might it not be coming from within him? Perhaps it's not the house. K listens to himself. Then he realises that to test this theory he would have to go outside – he'd have to find some quiet solitary spot, and then listen to himself with all his strength.

Yet, for a few seconds the noise seems louder above. 'Birds!' he thinks, and puts his head out of a window, and twists about; but before he can reach a conclusion, a cow appears, and behind the cow comes the girl with the rabbit. She is also carrying a switch, and this she points at K, and then she puts her tongue out, wiggles it left and right, pulls it in and smiles. K forgets about the rustling.

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*When a sword cuts into one's soul it's important to keep calm, to lose no blood, and to accept the cold sword with the coldness of a stone. And so, through being stabbed, to become invulnerable.*

K sits in the garden shed, reading and re-reading this note from the night before, and compares it to his reaction to the young girl's switch and the sight of her tongue. Then he decides he should do some work, but he doesn't. As always, he's drawn to staring out of a window. And through the broken glass at the rear of the shed he can see the hills in the distance and the trees turning brown. He is altogether familiar now with the landscape, but still it seems different through this dilapidated frame. It's more fitting to a country at war. And he fears that the war, or the war which will follow the war, will come to the village.

It is a dreadful thought when his normal view of the Bohemian countryside is so remarkably tranquil – indeed, it's fundamentally peaceful and he would be glad to enjoy the prospect forever. In Zürau his needs have diminished; he is certain of this; earlier he'd merely indulged in fantasies of a minimal life – what he wants now is a small house, a stove, fuel, food, books, paper, ink and time to himself.

Yet though he doesn't desire much, he still prefers what he has to be kept in good order. Therefore he is annoyed with his brother-in-law because of the condition of the garden shed. Indeed he will no longer trust him in any practical matter. The window could easily have been repaired, or at least blocked in such a way to keep the rain out; and the roof could have been fixed so that the hole was covered; and the tools could have been wrapped in oiled sacking to protect them from the weather.

Then his thoughts go back to the asbestos factory. When Karl Hermann married Elli he gave the appearance of being a spirited businessman, and K suggested to his father that Elli's dowry should be a factory. Thanks to his job K was aware of the benefits of asbestos, of how it slowed the spread of fire, and how the demand for it was rising. For once his father listened to him; he was impressed by his son's stroke of imagination – and both of them still regret it. However sound the idea, the factory still needed a manager with nous and enthusiasm. Karl Hermann proved to be inadequate; K's father looked to his son



to take on the responsibility; K didn't want to devote his spare time to industrial concerns when his office job already cramped his writing. And so the asbestos poisoned them all.

And now Karl Hermann is a soldier. But not a soldier who is doing any fighting. He is in the rear echelon – he is a lieutenant of supplies. He is warm and dry and fed and nobody is shooting at him. K is not surprised by this – and nor is K's other brother-in-law, Pepa, who is in the infantry.

Dr K smiles bleakly, finds a small axe and a saw which are not overly stained by rust, and goes outside to attack the weeds.

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'The stained glass is the most beautiful thing in the village except for the village itself,' so Dr K reflects and makes a note. Ottla, sitting beside him, doesn't turn her head as she is deeply familiar with her brother's habits. Then they are both distracted by Mrs Kunz, who hurries in to join her husband in the front pew, smiles at the Lüftners beside him, and nods across the aisle to the family of the boy – the epileptic who was found in the well. But she evidently feels that a nod isn't sufficient, crosses the church, squeezes the mother's hand, touches the husband's shoulder, and scampers back to her place.

The family live in a one room, one chimney house at the end of a rutted track. It was a home for five people, now just four – plus three goats and a dog in winter. The husband is an odd-jobbing labourer who Ottla occasionally employs – and who she has visited to get his advice on goat-keeping.

Dr K wasn't sure if they should go to the ceremony – if Jews should attend a Christian funeral in the country. But Ottla asked Kunz, and he said it would be fine, indeed appreciated. Given the long absence of the lord of the manor – the nominal mayor – Kunz

sees himself as the spokesman of the village and its arbitrator. He is the current representative of the oldest family of Zürau. Things there matter to him.

And K and Ottla watch Kunz and his wife – unsure as to what to do, they copy carefully each gesture, they diligently take up their hymn books and put them down, and mutely follow the words that the others sing.

The priest starts to read from the Bible with a voice that is far stronger than K expected given his aged body, and his words resonate in the small church. For K the words and the voice are as solid as the iron cross on the stone column by the altar.

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The sexton starts to shovel soil onto the coffin, and the mother and father approach Ottla and Dr K and thank them for coming. Very briefly and shyly they shake hands.

Then Kunz approaches the man, tells him that he'll need help on his farm in the months to come, and pushes a small bag of coins into his hand.

'Let me give you an advance on your wages up to Christmas. Tomorrow morning, seven o'clock.'

'Sir...' the man begins to say and searches for words that can't be found.

'My cows are waiting.' Kunz smiles, nods and turns, collects his wife from the Lüftners, and then departs.

The red-eyed mother unties her dog from the drainpipe. The silent father watches the sexton fill the pit. Dr K and Ottla cross the green to their home.

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'Could we be buried here?' asks K.

'If we were dead,' Ottla suggests.

'Would they still regard us as Jews, if we were dead?'

'I think so, but I doubt if they would leave us lying around while not being alive.'

'I would like to be buried here.'

'If you were dead?'

'If I were dead.'

\*\*\*

He has already written to Max Brod to say that he won't send anything to Frankfurt. But now he questions that decision. An actress wants to read some of his pieces from his first book as part of a theatrical recital. Yet *Contemplation* is so remote from him, that he feels he should just let the old stories be – he doesn't want to re-awaken them, even though he was delighted by the news that more than one hundred copies were sold last year. It is as if he's satisfied with just a sliver of recognition – that to risk sales soaring to 500 would provoke the gods. Before the war broke out, he seriously intended to resign from the institute, move to Berlin and live on his savings for a couple of years and establish himself as a writer – which meant writing for money. And he still wants to escape the office. So, what's to be done?

He looks down the garden path to the goats on the green, and thinks about writing. Goats don't write! K grasps this and thinks some more. Nor do cows! Out of all the creatures in creation only men write – only men feel the need to write. Why should they be cursed and blessed like this? And should this calling be transformed by money into something that is no more spiritual than meat?

‘Meat!’ He says this out loud, and then he says it again even louder, ‘Meat!’

In his favourite vegetarian restaurant tipping isn’t allowed. For K that is truly vegetarian.

If he could retire on a pension due to ill health thanks to tuberculosis, then would he need to earn money as a novelist? And there is the interest due to him from the government bonds he bought to help the war effort. That investment should help him live until 1930. Couldn’t he find a one room, one chimney house at the end of a track, and just write and burn? He could fuel the fire with whatever he’d written the previous day. A sublime dream!

And yet – he resists the thought, but he cannot subdue it – there is a joy in touching the minds of others: there’s a joy in reading his work aloud, and a joy in seeing his work in print. Why write at all if the pages just go into the fire? Blank pages would burn equally well.

He knows the answer. Writing – the feel of the pen, dipping it in the ink, the black words appearing on white paper – has a magic to it! It touches the spirit, it can be spiritual, except in the office, where writing is blasphemy.

Then K looks at the closest goat – the one leaning over the gate. It’s chewing, and for all K knows it’s having sublime thoughts. Again he asks himself the question, if he is not to share his work with others, why not just emulate the goat?

And again he rejects the thought. Publishing isn’t mere vanity: there’s something in the appearance of words that calls for a response from a reader – or an audience. And though the primary wonder of writing is feeling his blood turn into ink, this depends on the secondary wonder – or at least its possibility – which is having his blood mistaken for ink in the eyes of others.

Will he then change his mind, and send some work to Miss Leontine Sagan of Frankfurt for her to recite on stage? No. He doesn't want to harm her career. K is certain she can find better material.

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The evenings are starting earlier and K has no choice but to light a candle if he is to re-read his notebooks.

*A Life*

*A rotting, stinking bitch – mother of countless litters – who was everything to me as a child, follows me faithfully and I can't bear to beat her away, though I shun her breath, and if I can't decide otherwise, I'll continue to retreat step by step to the corner of the wall, which is already close by, and there on me and with me she'll decay to the end – an honour perhaps – and her tongue is riddled with worms and pus, and already it's licking my hand.*

Dr K always thought that he would write his autobiography when he escaped the office. And now he is – in his own oblique fashion. Or perhaps it's better to see it as an autobiographical novel where the silence is more pronounced than the words. It's a wide canvas marked by just a few dots. How few are the marks that are needed to say anything! So K reflects on his aphorisms.

Yet the gaps are sufficiently wide that his fragments might seem unconnected, or at best a collection of impersonal notes unrelated to his life. K is aware of how the aphorisms

reflect things he has seen and experienced, but he is no more inclined to explain them than he is his stories. K hates to discuss his work.

He puts out the candle. He re-lights the candle. He dips his pen in the ink.

*You don't need to leave your house. Sit at your desk and listen. Don't even listen, just wait. Don't even wait, just be still and alone. The world will offer to reveal itself, it has to, it must writhe before you in ecstasy.*

He puts down his pen; he puts out the candle; in the dusk he laughs.

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There's just Ottla and him in the room – and the dead deer and emperor – and they are all silent while there's still soup and bread to be eaten. Only when they've pushed their bowls forward a little, and she has refilled their cups with nettle tea, does she speak.

'I wrote to Josef today. I hope he's still on garrison duty – somewhere warm, and somewhere he won't get shot. I think he is. Anyway, I told him that I thought God had been kind to you in making you ill. He's freed you from Prague. You'd never have escaped otherwise. And it was killing you – killing your spirit! You'd be a happy in a small house in some village somewhere. You need so little – perhaps your director, Marschner, he seems a kind man...'

'He is.'

'Perhaps he'll let you escape with a pension. Houses in the country cost so little.'

'Very little indeed,' K agrees; then he sits quietly amazed that his sister has understood him so quickly and so well, without him expressing any of his needs – except to odd scraps of paper on his desk.

And he gazes at her in the flickering lamp light – and she at him.

## 18

Zürich, 11 November, 1917

And he's arrived! At Tagliamento – and the battle is in the balance. But he's not fighting. He's with a crowd of civilians – all agitated and ready to run forward or back as the struggle unfolds. And he can see the river plain, but the river itself is out of sight, and moreover his attention is fixed on the plateau beyond the water, where the Austrians are skirmishing among the tall but scanty bushes. And then two platoons of Italians advance and open fire and Dr K retreats, but soon his anxiety makes him turn about – for the Austrian soldiers are in trouble and are running left and right, and this all seems inevitable, and their cause hopeless, for how can they ever overcome such stubborn defenders fighting in their own land? And Dr K is in despair and watches for the retreat. But a major is standing beside him. A Prussian major has appeared. A Prussian major! But he was there all along; but he's different now; he's stepped forward and seems to be an apparition suddenly emerged. And he whistles with two fingers in his mouth, as if to a dog, but not as if to a dog – it's a friendly whistle, a whistle as if from man to man. And men appear! Prussians all! Prussian Guards! Silent young men, perhaps a company of them – not a decisive number, but they have a decisive character, and dark uniforms and sabres and a quick-stepping march which carries them across the battlefield and promises victory! And

with a feeling of relief Dr K follows the Prussian major until he wakes up in his bed in Zürau.

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Irma, their cousin, jumps down from the cart and embraces Ottla. To K she has always seemed a smaller version of his sister, particularly since she started working in their father's warehouse. And as the two women hold each tight K feels that she is much more of a sister to Ottla than her actual sisters. Though Irma is quieter and more subtle in her assertiveness – perhaps because she's always slightly ill.

After he got to know her, K described Irma in his diary as, *efficient, bright, diligent, modest, trustworthy, generous and loyal*, and nothing has given him reason to change this opinion. Though thanks to his father's *crushing habits* she has acquired a *gallows' humour*.

'He's being prosecuted! Taken to court!'

That's the first thing she says to Dr K, and then she kisses him on both cheeks.

'He,' could only refer to Hermann.

And before Ottla has a chance to open the garden gate, Irma has begun to explain what's happened. 'It's slander! And it was – I heard it! He said something wicked about the man – you know him, the one with the curly hair, Konrad. I'm sure he's never worried a sheep in his life! To say that about somebody who works for you! And now Hermann's going to have to prove its truth in court. But sheep won't testify – even if they're promised anonymity!'

Dr K realises how much he's missed Irma.



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The two women want to talk, and Ottla takes Irma round the village, while K looks at the newspapers and magazines that she brought with her. The main news in *The Prague Daily* is that the car carrying the emperor and the Bulgarian king got stuck in the mud in Italy, and because the road was awash with flood water, a servant, *the faithful Tomek*, carried the emperor out of the car to some dry spot. It seems that the king was left to wade in their wake.

Judging by the size of the headlines, the other news is less significant, though there has been another revolution in Russia. And not only have the communists seized power, but they have also issued peace proposals to every country involved in the war.

‘Father prosecuted, the emperor stuck in the mud, communists running a government!’ K exclaims to the deer’s head.

‘But will the war end by Christmas?’ it asks.

K doesn’t know how to answer the deer, because somebody predicts peace every autumn. Finally he says, ‘There must again, someday, be a Christmas without a war.’

With a look of disdain, the deer closes its eyes.

And K turns to the magazine pressed into Irma’s hands by Max Bod – a copy of *The Jew* with a story by K. He checks to see if it does truly contain his story – for he is always doubtful about being published – but when he’s satisfied that it’s there, he reads the previous article on the development of the Jewish theatre, which brings to mind his friend, Isaac Löwy – a man K often thinks about.

When Löwy arrived in Prague with his Yiddish company, he opened K’s eyes to the world from which his father had spent his life trying to escape. The company was poor, lacked time for rehearsals, lacked a proper theatre – indeed they lacked everything except

passion, but that had been enough for a revelation for Dr K. And he was still in touch with Löwy as he wandered from city to city, indeed he is writing Löwy's autobiography for him – K is working from the notes he's provided, and from what he remembers of their conversations. K has at least made a start in a notebook, but he's not sure he has captured the voice of his friend – and that voice is the key thing he wants to record.

*My aim is simple – to avoid dates and numbers, but instead to present a few memories of Jewish theatre, with the plays, actors and zealots which I have encountered, indeed which have been my life; or, in other words, to lift the curtain and reveal the wound. Only when a disease is known can a cure be found – and then perhaps a true Jewish theatre could be created.*

K fears that he is making Löwy sound too much like himself – but he'll continue to ghost-write his life for him. It might even one day appear in *The Jew*. It doesn't seem impossible. He would like to help his friend – though it isn't easy to assist a man who is so erratic, contrary and elusive. And K realises he sounds like Max Brod talking about himself.

He makes some nettle tea – which seems to have even more nettle and less tea than it did before – and then K glances over his story which has just been published, which is another autobiography.

### ***A Report to an Academy***

*Esteemed gentlemen of this academy!*

*You have honoured me with an invitation to give a talk on my previous apish life.*

The story tells of the ape's capture, imprisonment, and conversion to human conditions – of an enforced transformation.

'How many people will read it as a story of my own life?'

K wonders aloud.

'All of them!'

The deer is certain.

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Irma also brought a letter from Max with an awkward request. He wants K to find a job for a mutual acquaintance, Georg Langer. As ever Max is trying to help people by milking his contacts, and he's asked K to find him a place in his institute, and Irma is expected to carry a reply back to Prague. After some thought at his desk, K dips his pen in the ink.

*I cannot help Langer in this way. The institute is closed to Jews. It wouldn't delight me to impose on my director and ask him to give a place to somebody who wouldn't work on Saturdays – and I won't do it. It is incomprehensible that there are two Jews employed in the office already – and they only managed it with the help of a third highly influential Jew, and this won't happen again. But perhaps in my father's business some work could be found. Langer should speak to my mother, one of my sisters or cousin Irma. Yet Langer is strong – why doesn't he find a Jewish farmer who needs help?*

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‘Of course, there’s no way I could have done what Max asked – the suggestion was mad, and he must know that. I wish I could have helped but...’

Ottla is only half attending to what K is saying as her eyes are on the vanishing figure of Irma, twisted about in the wagon and waving with a white handkerchief. Only when the wagon disappears out of sight behind the church does Ottla turn to him.

‘I wish she could have stayed for a few days rather than a few hours. But, well, because I’m here, there’s even more need for her to be there. If he’d just learn to value her – value her as she deserves – then...’

‘So I sent an answer back with Irma.’

‘An answer?’

‘About Langer – he can’t work in the institute. I said it’s impossible. But I said father might help him if he approaches the matter through mother or...’

‘Father and Langer!’

‘In the warehouse there’s a need for a man to lug things about.’

‘Father and Langer would fight – they would never get on. And that’s the message Irma’s carrying?’

‘Yes.’

‘Another court case – or worse!’

Ottla goes indoors.

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In the dark the rustling is louder than ever, and he can hear a nibbling below him – below the bed! Then the chaos begins.

Everywhere and all at once – a night-time invasion.

‘Mice!’

Running round and round the floor, over the coal box, through the coal box and about the stove; then a platoon of them jumps down together, and Dr K shrieks. Then he shouts – he shouts because he’s afraid to step on the carpet and find his lamp. But the mice do not care for his shouting. It’s as if a proletarian race has emerged in the dark and are claiming the room as their own – this thought crosses his mind as the mice scamper, and nibble and peep to each other.

And K doesn’t like to think what they’re peeping about him. Are they debating how edible he might be? How long would it take mice to eat a man alive?

In horror he lies in his bed – it’s a horror which overwhelms his sympathy for the lowly creatures of this world.

He needs a cat!

## 19

Zürich, 24 November, 1917

He hates the cat!

The cat loves him.

This creates a terrible tension.

In particular the cat loves him when he is writing, for then, it would seem, no place in the world is more comfortable than his lap. Dr K finds writing hard enough without needing to defend himself against leaps, claws and purrs – for if he does relent and allow the cat to sit where it desires, then the purring grows in volume until it can be heard on the other side of the pond, and it makes the house vibrate! It’s that kind of purring.

And, furthermore, the cat – who is called Agatha, but K refuses to get on first name terms with her, for fear of what it might encourage – is fascinated by his flesh, and watches intently when K gets undressed, and stands and watches when he does his exercises. This scrutiny makes K topple over when he performs his knee-bends.

But the cat does eat mice. It arrives thin in the evening, and departs fat in the morning. And somehow, despite the slaughter going on around him, and the cat's ardour, K does contrive to sleep.

There is an alternative to Agatha. There's Hermann the farmhand, who offers to catch mice, and make mice-pies.

'Hot mice-pies are good on a cold morning!' so Hermann says.

Yet Dr K is a vegetarian.

Agatha only kills in the dark.

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Dr K sits at the table while Agatha sleeps, and studies what he can see of her face, and writes down her dream.

*'Ah!' said the mouse, 'the world is narrower every day. At first it was so wide that I was afraid, but finally, to my joy, I saw a wall in the distance stretching left and right, but then, ever so quickly, another wall got closer and closer, and already I'm in the last room, and there in the corner is the trap to which I'm running.*

*'You only need to turn aside,' says the cat and eats him whole.*

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The wind is increasing when Dr K steps outside. 'It's throwing itself about,' he thinks, 'between the hills and through the trees,' which he suspects is a quotation from Dickens, but he's not sure, and he hesitates, looks at the sky, and then decides against his usual walk. Instead he follows a track through the woods – a route he's been thinking of exploring for some weeks.

After the first hundred yards, where some trees have been felled, the going becomes more difficult – the way more overgrown. And leaves drift past him in greater number and birds' nests can be seen in abundance – in one tree he counts six.

Dr K wonders where the birds are now – sunning themselves, he imagines, far in the south; in the sort of place where the doctors would like to send him into exile. But in a Bohemian wood K is content.

Judging by the occasional milepost, the track was previously of some significance. K assumes its overgrown state is a change wrought by the railways – for many once busy routes have lost their traffic. The posts are now askew or horizontal. And in some places he has to take a detour due to brambles and gorse bushes. Dr K's boots get muddy.

And it's no surprise for him to come across a deserted house. It's a small place – just one storey and perhaps three rooms. Looking through the grime on the window, he thinks it might have been a tavern for travellers. K imagines it crowded on a summer's day; though when he gazes up he can see the sky where the roof has collapsed – it must have been a long time since somebody drank there. He's tempted to go in. Yet the front door is shut and locked with a padlock that's rusted solid. So K just peers through a gap in the wood.

'My home appeals to you, does it?'

The voice behind him makes K spin round.

'Not much of a home, but better than a hedge.'

The man is stocky and dressed in an old military jacket and a leather jerkin, which are belted with a canvas strap, and from this hangs a scabbard for a bayonet. And K wonders if he's used his bayonet to cut his own hair and trim his beard. There's nothing neat about him.

'I didn't mean to trespass. I'm sorry.' Dr K tries to step back, but he just steps into the door.

The man studies K and seems to decide something, judging by the slight nod he makes. K is certain he couldn't out run him, nor fight his way free; therefore he's relieved when the man speaks, after what feels like a very long pause. Particularly as the words are more articulate than might be expected from the man's appearance.

'Well, if you didn't mean to trespass, then perhaps you didn't – perhaps you can only trespass with intent; otherwise you just happen to be wandering, until you've been warned by a competent authority. I think that's the law. I used to know the law – I used to know the law rather well. But in Siberia I forgot a lot. You can walk for days and days in Siberia without any danger of trespassing.'

'You were there? A prisoner of war?' K feels much calmer now, as the man appears to be more inclined to talk than nail him to the door with his bayonet.

'One day I decided to travel about in Siberia – I was bored of our Siberian camp, it was boredom itself. Even our guards were bored of guarding the fence.'

To tell his tale the man moves a little closer. He's pungent but there's intelligence in his eyes – yet also some derangement. K smiles his most charming smile.

'I tried to follow the path to the only town nearby – to see some different people and some buildings that weren't just forest huts. But as I made my way through a wood – much bigger than this one, indeed a forest, a great forest – a bear started to follow me. I saw a bear behind me in a forest – it is the truth! The truth!'



Dr K hadn't denied the bear.

'A brown bear?' he asks.

'A great brown bear, and I started to run, but the bear could run faster, but a man with a rifle was suddenly by my side – he just stepped out from among the trees – and he shot the bear, and he shot him again, and again. Then the bear was dead. And we ate him. It took a long time. I don't think I'll eat bear in the future. No, thank you. But I couldn't refuse in the circumstances. Perhaps you understand?'

'I do, certainly,' K assures him, and refrains from saying anything about the benefits of a vegetarian diet.

'And the man told me there were many bears about – before he finally disappeared into the forest. So I went back to the camp – not having a gun. But it had been abandoned. While I was away everybody left. Though there was some food in the kitchen. It was as if everybody rushed away. So I ate and set off once more, and skirted that forest, and here I am.'

'You'll stay in this place – through the winter?'

'No. Not here. How can I stay here?'

'But you've been living here, haven't you? I'm sorry if I misunderstood.'

'I can't stay here now the leaves are going. This place is no good without leaves. I'll be seen too easily. I don't want to be seen – but I decided to make an exception for you. Aren't you glad?'

'Yes, much obliged, thank you.'

'But I have a cousin in Dresden and I must be on my way. Though it's fortunate I didn't go earlier, otherwise we wouldn't have met. I was hoping we'd get to talk, Dr K, before I went, and finally it happened. Dresden! I'll be hidden there – there's a hideaway waiting for me. I won't have to go back to the army.'

The man nods, again as if he's decided something, and turns abruptly and walks round the house and out of sight.

K opens his mouth to speak, but he is too slow, and closes his mouth again, and stands feeling puzzled and relieved. Though, of course, the man might suddenly re-appear. K waits a couple of minutes, then starts to return the way he came; but before he's gone twenty yards, he's brought to a halt by the sight of the village idiot, Schwarzenbach, in a tree. An encounter which is equally unexpected. He is standing on a branch, in his decayed wedding clothes, and must have seen what happened – so K reflects. Schwarzenbach raises his top hat and bows ever so slightly. Dr K raises his hat and bows slightly in return.

With remarkable dexterity Schwarzenbach descends.

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Outside Otlá's house K finds a dead goose in a basin. 'It looks like someone's aunt,' is the thought that goes through his mind.

The geese are the most violent animals in the village, and they also seem to suffer the most in the perpetual strife which lies beneath the surface of rural tranquillity. They are nasty creatures and they are victims. Yet, despite the trace of sympathy which runs through his thoughts, he would rather see a dead goose in a basin than a dead aunt.

Agatha is by the wall. Some blood has dripped down onto a paving stone. Evidently Agatha can guess how much meat is suspended above. A goose must be worth two hundred mice. However, the basin is held clear of the ground by three straps, and it's beyond the range of any leap she can manage. Then Mařenka appears with a towel, and

shoo Agatha away, and she runs inside and up the stairs. Mice might be small, but they're not suspended in basins, and they'll emerge as soon as it's dark.

Not wanting to sit and write while suffering the attentions of Agatha, K settles in the ground floor room. Ottla had first taken this as her own, before moving to a room above. It has iron grills on its windows, and one of the walls is crumbling, but once over the threshold and seated he finds it comfortable as long as it's bright outside.

Despite the pleasure he derives from walking, and his curious encounters, K feels that he should concentrate on writing, that is, his aphorisms, during the hours of daylight. In the darker months of the year he should only walk at night. Yet rather than get out his notebook, he begins drafting a letter to Max Brod on a scrap of paper. He tells him he's writing nothing. Perhaps he'll be believed, perhaps not, but it's an effective block which will prevent his friend pestering for a glance at the draft collection that is beginning to take shape.

And K wonders if Max has cornered Ottla. Though she is in Prague, she's not there to see his friend; but K fears that Max will try to go with her to his director. He'll no doubt believe that he can influence Marschner in a way that is beyond her ability. Yet K has more faith in his sister.

And Ottla is also going to talk to their father. She is going to tell him about his tuberculosis – for their parents still don't know. As everybody else knows, it's almost inevitable that somebody will let slip a revealing word. And this news coming from Ottla, might soften their father's grumbling – they might even enjoy a few weeks without his reproaches. Yet perhaps this is going too far – even the envelopes of his letters carry a gibe. He writes 'Temporary Address' on each one he sends to his daughter. He still regards having children in a village as a stain on his character.

Ottla is K's ambassador – he couldn't wish for anybody better. But his thoughts of praise are interrupted by the jackdaws outside the window. Mařenka re-appears with a wider, heavier cloth to cover the basin, and the jackdaws skip out of her way, then rise up protesting towards the roof.

She goes in, and after a while K pushes the half written letter aside, and retrieves his notebook from one of his pockets.

*Human judgements on human affairs are true and nothing; that is to say, first they are true, then they are nothing.*

*Through the door on the right men push their way into the family council, they hear the last word of the last speaker, and then they stream out of the door to the left, carrying this word and shouting their judgement upon it. They judge this word truly; their judgment is worth nothing.*

*If they'd wanted to make a valid judgement, they would have had to sit in that room forever, and so become part of the family council, and therefore embroiled, and therefore incapable of judging the concerns of the family.*

*Only a man who is part of something can judge truly, but if he is part of something he can't judge it. And so there is no true judgement in the world; there's merely a glimmer of understanding.*

K doesn't think it's an aphorism – he regards it more of a short story that collapsed into a fable before its time.

Then he notices a new hole by the door. And he listens carefully until he hears a revealing squeak – which is soon answered by a series of squeaks seemingly all about him. He picks up his pencil again.

*Jackdaws on the roof,*

*mice in the walls,*

*village music.*

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Embarrassed as he always is by his slight contribution to the work of their home and the farm, Dr K takes a pot and a box to the kitchen table, then decides he should cover it in old newspapers first, and then he goes in search of their tin of blue paint, and the latest copy of *The Prague Daily* to arrive at the house.

Ottla wants the box and pot to be re-painted as she thinks they are too shabby. K is glad to oblige, particularly as he can paint and read at the same time, though the article on the Russian Revolution gets sprayed with blue dots. Yet it doesn't matter – he still discovers that the revolutionary leader is called Lenin and not Zederblum, and therefore those spreading rumours about a Jewish master-manipulator must look for another man to give colour to their tales.

Then K turns the page and learns that the British are advancing on Jerusalem, but have stopped at Jaffa; and that the Hungarians are driving the Italians out of the delta of the Piave at the top of the Adriatic.

Despite the images that these events create in his mind – of dusty British soldiers, and Hungarians wading through water and mud – he still manages to improve the appearance of the box and the pot.

On reflection however, he suspects that in bright light his painting might appear uneven, indeed thin in places – when he was particularly engaged by the news. Therefore

he gives them both another coat of paint, and only stops when the paint-tin is empty. He feels his painting has been extravagant, but the pot and the box are unquestionably blue.

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*It's conceivable that Alexander the Great, despite his youthful military triumphs, his creation of a magnificent army, and his passionate desire to re-make the world, might have sat at the Hellespont forever, not from fear, not from indecision, not from the want of willpower, but from the weight of existence.*

General Allenby has not marched on Jerusalem – he is sitting in a small town on the coast. Is Allenby responsible for his aphorism? No, K can blame nobody but himself.

And what exactly does he mean by *the weight of existence*? He has an inkling, but feels unable to express it better.

The cat looks at him, as if to say, it's time you put out the candle, went to bed and let the mice come out.

Yet K returns to the page in front of him, and writes one more sentence.

*His exhaustion is that of a gladiator after a fight; his task was to whitewash a corner of the office.*

Dr K snuffs the candle, goes to bed and, very soon, he hears Agatha pounce.

Zürau, 26 November, 1917

It's a wretched fence – which Dr K immediately feels is an unfair judgement. It must have been a solid fence when first put up, but it's been neglected, and like everything that's built, it's being dismantled by time – only constant attention can arrest this, or so K reflects, but as he tries to develop this thought he is interrupted.

'It should all be torn down,' says Hermann the farmhand. 'Torn down!'

'But we need a fence for the animals.'

'Torn down and a new fence built!'

Dr K and Hermann drop everything to the ground – stakes, nails, cords and the spade and hammer. Hermann has been due to repair the fence for weeks, but he disdains the task, feeling that the fence is now too shoddy for his attention. Yet he consented to help carry things across the fields, so that K can attempt somehow to bolster the fence to get it through one more winter – for it's only a stretch of fifty yards that's unequal to a shove by a determined goat. But if one goat leads, others will follow and stray on to their neighbour's land. The farmer has complained about it several times, and used the goats as a justification for his outbursts; though K believes that he is really irritated by having his land bordered by something so decrepit.

Hermann looks at the fence, looks at K, puts his hands in his pockets, and walks off. Evidently K is going to be fixing the fence solo. He studies the wooden posts and the bars resting precariously between them.

'Thank you!' K says out loud towards the vanishing farmhand. He agrees what remains should be replaced, but they can't afford that now, and their brother-in-law won't

pay for it, and he fails to reply about the fence when Ottla writes to him. So, what's there presently, has to be propped up and strengthened.

K gazes at the sky. It doesn't look like it will rain – there's no hint even of drizzle in the wind – and the ground isn't frozen yet, though soon it will be. If K is to mend the fence, he should do it now.

He finds the post that looks most likely to fall, and between that and the next post he places the spade on the ground, then drives it in by resting a boot on top of the blade. K rocks the spade forward and back until he's worked a slit in the soil, then he fetches a stake, and drives it into the gap using all his weight and both hands.

This leaves a red impression in the palm of his right hand. He likes the mark and he removes a splinter. After years of wrangling and writing about woodwork, he finally can show its traces on his body – and, satisfyingly, a dot of blood appears where the splinter went in. He straightens his back, feels the wind on his face, looks across the green and brown landscape, and up at the grey sky, and smiles, and then laughs at the joy of it. He studies the fence and realises how much work there is ahead. Yet he remains glad for the task. And using a cord he binds the stake to the three crossbars, and then he fetches the hammer and some nails.

After he's finished hammering K gets another stake and decides at what angle he should rest it against the first, and then he gets a third stake, and places it on the other side of the fence at the same angle. He thinks it will work, while accepting that his handicraft will be unique in the village.

K nails the slanting stakes in position. Then he rocks the fence gently. It's more secure than it was. Then he collects three more stakes and goes beyond the next post and props up the fence there.



When this is done, he turns about and sees a crow perched where he began. He fears that the crow will destroy his repairs, and grasps the absurdity of this, but still regards it as possible. K studies the crow and the crow studies K. Then the bird spreads its wings and flies just above the ground until it reaches a small wood – where it soars up to a new perch on the highest branch of an oak.

And K wishes that he too could skim over the land and soar as high as a tree – and even higher, far higher than that.

Then he collects three more stakes from the pile and moves along the fence – but feels now that the crow is his judge.

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Ottla embraces him.

‘I’ve talked to father and your director,’ she says.

‘I’ve painted the box and the pot, and I’ve started work on the fence. I like hammering I’ve discovered.’

‘It was as if I’d hammered father. I’d never seen such a reaction before – he clearly had no idea. He couldn’t have given it any thought. His face changed so quickly – it was like I stabbed him. Yes, more like a stab than a blow.’

‘He was convinced I was malingering, wasn’t he? I was here to spite him under the influence of another of my “extreme ideas” – that’s what he thought!’

‘More or less, probably; though now he’s worried that you’re not in the best place. “Is it warm enough there, is it warm enough?” That’s what he asked, that’s what he kept asking. He’s worn down with business worries, he...you know it all! Anyway, he promised not to tell mother.’

‘Mother mustn’t know!’

Ottla pauses before replying. She looks at K and it’s clear she thinks he is being naïve.

‘Father blurts things out – doesn’t he? And it can’t be kept secret from mother – unless you’re instantly cured, and TB isn’t like that. Is it?’

K turns from her.

‘Marschner was friendly, and he’s let his hair and moustache grow a bit, and with those eyes of his, he now resembles a schnauzer. A very friendly dog. He even suggested a visit.’

‘Coming here?’

‘Yes, and we could introduce him to Lüftner’s schnauzers.’

‘And they could romp in a field together!’ says K brightly. ‘I’m sure few directors can romp like Marschner.’

‘I’m sure he’d love it. But as to retirement and a pension...’

‘Not that friendly a dog then.’

‘He likes you and admires you.’

‘And I like and admire him, but he could set me free... I could stay here.’

‘It is not possible. During the war he can’t let a senior official go that easily. But you can stay longer.’

‘How long?’

‘Until it’s spring and Prague is warm – until the fumes are blown away. He didn’t say exactly when... he didn’t say anything precisely... he hinted heavily at spring.’

‘I should be able to fix a few fences by then.’

‘Yes.’

‘And get the garden in some sort of order.’

‘Yes.’

‘I belong here – I feel I belong here. Though evidently not in your farmhand’s eyes, but I could never change that. No matter. I just need lamps for the night, and a cat that can protect me from mice, without using my carpet slippers as a toilet – that’s the latest!’

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Dr K puts the cat next door. There is a small room next to his, and he hopes that Agatha’s appearance will seem imminent to the mice, that her smell and her scratching will deter any intrusion, while he burns a little oil in the lamp to scribble on the back of some office stationery.

*The crows maintain that a single crow could destroy Heaven. Undoubtedly – but this says nothing against Heaven, for Heaven simply means the impossibility of crows.*

As his name is derived from the Czech word for jackdaw – a most common crow in Bohemia – the aphorism could be seen to be autobiographical.

He turns towards the stove. He re-reads the two sentences. He decides not to burn them – not yet.

Zürau, 17 December, 1917

The pond is frozen. Dr K watches the geese and the crows walk over its surface. The birds are white or black with nothing in between – and, as if to emphasise the point, a magpie lands in the garden. K wonders what's happened to the ducks, then turns his attention from the village to the book review on the table in front of him. It's written by someone he knows slightly, Josef Körner, the editor of the magazine – *Danube Land* – and the article is about Prague's German writers, and it concludes with two paragraphs on K's published work – his four slight books.

*K's noble bright language is unparalleled in the German prose of our time: it is an indefatigable preacher against individualism, and it is a hater of all isolation. There is only one kind of sin for the characters of his tales – which develop with astonishing directness and consistency – and that is the sin of being alone, of being detached from any kind of community, and of lacking brotherly feelings towards fellow creatures.*

*Metamorphosis, a grotesque novella, and K's deepest creation to date, is one of the greatest things that modern narrative art has produced: a strange fairy-tale-like event, that is neither rationally nor mystically interpreted, and whose development runs in the strictest causality, and whose every gesture and expression is seen and reproduced so sharply, it's as if a factual event is being faithfully reported. And this praise should be emphasised (because the accusation of confusion and coarse language is so frequently made against the literary youth): in K's books there is not a single vague or inaccurate expression, and*

*nowhere is there a non-illustrative image. What Nietzsche demanded of the word artist, to work with prose as if he were creating a pictorial column, is really the essence of K's art.*

It was odd to read that he was a hater of isolation, when he was sitting happily alone in a kitchen in a village – with no company but the head of a dead deer, an old portrait, some birds outside the window, a gorged cat upstairs asleep on his bed, and a tribe of mice in the walls. And he is certainly not an ‘indefatigable preacher’ about anything – he lives in a constant state of ambivalence. Yet he can’t help but be astounded at the praise of his writing – and proud as well, though his pride shames him. And then he compares himself to such writers as Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse who have written so much, and his amazement grows further. And he imagines the works of Mann piled on top of each other, and his books – pamphlets really – put beside them, and he smiles at the sight. A reader would need a rucksack to carry Mann about – K’s works would slide into an overcoat’s pocket.

And he doesn’t think *Metamorphosis* is very good. It could have been, but he was forced to undertake a legal excursion at a vital stage in the story’s development. He represented his institute at the commercial court in Kratzau on 26, November, 1912 – the date is firm in his memory. And he was persuasive and he won. Pfohl praised him; Marschner praised him. They saw the judgment as a vital victory in the struggle with the Association of the Toy Manufacturers of the Erzgebirge – which had attempted to trump the institute by directly contacting the Ministry of the Interior in Vienna.

‘Dr K in court was masterful.’ That was the comment that found its way back to Prague – together with the court’s ruling, which condemned the toy manufacturers brutally, and imposed a fine far higher than K’s annual salary.

‘In just this case alone you’ve justified what you’re paid for an entire year,’ so Marschner said when K returned to the office. And K smiled his usual smile and, in his heart, cursed when he thought of his story half-done.

Yet *Metamorphosis* was praised by all the writers he knew – and Körner is praising it in print to a wide public. However, K could never be comfortable with the story’s shift of perspective – for when he killed his suffering hero, Gregor Samsa, K still felt the tale wasn’t complete; and he made Gregor’s sister the point of focus at the end. And this switch of the narrator’s view, from the inside of Gregor’s head to the shoulder of the sister, is disastrously clumsy in K’s opinion.

‘And who’s to blame? The Association of the Toy Manufacturers of the Erzgebirge! And will a court fine them for this? Never!’ K says out loud.

And to be sociable the dead deer repeats the word, ‘Never!’

And K nods in agreement.

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Before he can go out, indeed just as he is about to open the door, there comes a light knock, followed by a firmer one – as if the person outside feared that the first attempt was insufficient. K opens the door to find the girl with the white rabbit facing him.

‘Hello, Dr K, the postman is getting wilder.’

She hands him a small bundle of post.

‘Hello. Thank you.’

‘He’s delivered the wrong post to four houses, so we all have to re-deliver it. Perhaps you have some for us.’

‘No, not yet, at least – he hasn’t been here today.’

‘Still, it gives me an excuse to stand here and talk to you, and I would like to know, Dr K, are you married?’

‘No, I’m not – and perhaps I never will be.’

‘Nor am I.’

The girl with the white rabbit wiggles her tongue and widens her eyes, and turns and walks away. K gazes after her, and he is still standing at the door with the post in his hand when she stops, glances back and waves to him. K raises a hand in return, and he watches her until she’s out of sight.

K steps back inside and closes the door – and it’s a while before he notices his boots and remembers where he was going.

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He has never collected berries from holly before. His arms are tired, his hands are cut and stained, and his feet are numb in the slush. He has rarely been happier. He accepts that for a man with TB, it might be killing work, and he is sure that there will be blood in his mouth in the morning, but K simply shrugs his shoulders at the thought.

And he doesn’t hurry home once he’s plucked every berry he can reach. Instead he pauses in one of Lüftner’s hunting-hides, throws a handful of berries on to the untouched snow nearby, and waits for the crows and magpies to start to eat.

He studies them carefully, then throws out a couple of handfuls more. The birds are startled and take refuge among the encircling birches and beeches. Yet K waits, despite the cold; and only when the magpies descend, and the crows follow, and they eat the second helping, does he lug his bucket back to the village – thinking all the while of the advantages of being a crow, or a magpie.

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There's still nobody else at home on his return, and he sits in the kitchen in his overcoat trying to get warm. K is glad for the heavy country suit he's taken to wearing. It's roughly cut, but the wool is thick and warm, and the jacket is large for him, and Ottla has insisted that he wear a cardigan underneath.

In Prague he is known for his elegance. Dressing correctly there was something he could never neglect. Suit, shirt, tie, cuff-links, shoes, hat – they must all combine harmoniously. There were times when he failed to meet Max Brod because of his indecision – when getting dressed and re-dressed took precedence over the appointment he was dressing for.

Yet now K is content in the rustic suit of the former farmer – the man who ran the farm until he was called up for the army and a sniper put a bullet through his head.

K puts more wood on the fire, finally takes off his coat, and then retrieves his notebook from a pocket; and he looks at his jotted thoughts from the last few days. K is struck by the ugliness of his pencil scribble, and doubts that his words could be read by anybody else. But it doesn't matter. Most of his notes are just for him and the fire – and the fire doesn't object to bad handwriting.

*Earlier I couldn't grasp why my question got no answer, today I can't grasp why I believed I could ask a question. But I didn't truly believe, I just asked.*

*He runs after facts like a novice skater who risks thin ice and ignores the sign saying forbidden.*



*The Messiah will come only when he is no longer needed, he will come one day after his official arrival, he won't come on The Last Day, but on the last day of all.*

Dr K imagines the Messiah arriving with an apology. And there is more in the same spirit, and K is tempted to rip out the pages, but puts the notebook away without destroying his work. Then he looks at the bundle of post which he left on the table. There are two letters for him, and both have the name of the sender on the back - Josef Körner and Felice Bauer.

It's not a surprise that Körner has written to him, and he can guess why – he suspects it's to reap some reward for his praise. But he's puzzled and worried by receiving something from Felice. K thought she wanted nothing more to do with him – that she simply regarded him as a hopeless man, as a mess of confusion and indecision. He pushes her letter into an inside pocket of his overcoat, and thinks it might be best if it rested there forever.

K opens the letter from Körner. It contains the expected invitation to write for the *Danube Land*. But K isn't pleased, indeed he feels he is being pushed into a corner. For six months the magazine has listed him amongst its contributors, but he's contributed nothing, and doesn't intend to; though so far he's been able evade giving a blunt answer.

The outside door opens and Ottla comes in.

'I'm sure we could spare a bit more wood for the stove, if you're that cold,' she says referring to his coat.

He takes it off.

'I was lost in thought – which is a place where I'm often lost.'

Ottla unpacks her bags and shakes her head.

'You have a sharper mind than anybody in Prague, and you know you're special.'

‘As special as a freak in a freak-show, and now I’m embroiled with this magazine.’

Ottla takes the copy which K was waving about, and flicks through it, and reads the odd paragraph.

‘So, what is wrong with it, it looks professional?’

‘It’s editor, Körner, is a conscript. The authorities ordered him to edit it, and it’s official, and an orifice of propaganda, and much of the writing is clichéd – and he wants me to contribute some nonsense about civilian life in Prague. I’d much rather write for Otto Gross.’

‘The anarchist?’

‘Yes.’

‘Has he started a magazine?’

‘Not yet, but the magazine he talks about sounds marvellous.’

‘But it doesn’t exist, and a magazine run by anarchists is unlikely ever to exist – anarchists are like that - and you’re not an anarchist yourself; indeed you support our army, so why not write for a military magazine?’

‘Because I won’t write like that – I won’t pretend I’m writing freely when I’m writing to order. It wouldn’t be like writing for the office, where my position is clear.’

‘And you would never write a cliché?’

K doesn’t answer.

‘You wouldn’t write a cliché even if it could save the empire?’

K doesn’t answer.

‘You wouldn’t write a cliché even if it could save Jerusalem?’

K doesn’t answer.

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By candle-light in his room, while Agatha sleeps by the stove, K takes Felice's letter out from his pocket. He holds it a few inches above the candle so that the envelope begins to scorch. All he has to do is lower his hand, just an inch, and then it would catch alight, and he could hurry across the room and fling it in the stove. Yet he doesn't want to rouse the cat.

He remembers the countless times when he was desperate for a letter from her – when he would badger the messengers in the office until they were as grateful as he was when one arrived. Their love letters were the best part of their love. That's the conclusion he reaches at his desk. He has spent vastly more time writing to her, and reading and re-reading her words, than he spent with her physically.

Would he rather read a woman than undress her?

No!

But when he considers how he behaves, and ignores his idle desires, he's not so sure. Indeed, he fears the answer is actually, yes – at least with regard to women who can write coherently. If a woman can't write – 'Well,' he thinks, 'that's a different matter.'

K puts the letter down. He doesn't have to open it. He has a ready excuse in the cantankerous village postman, should he ever be confronted with a complaint about his silence. He picks it up, turns it over, and scorches it on the other side.

Then he realises that he's torturing a letter, and feels ashamed, and reaches for his pocket-knife.

The news is what he dreaded to read. Felice intends to be in Prague for a couple of days at Christmas and wants to see him again. She assumes he will be with his family.

To K this is a pointless and painful prospect. Why meet? They have no hope and nothing to add to the thousands of words they have exchanged. But K can't see how he can avoid the encounter.

In his notebook he writes, *Adam's first pet after being expelled from Paradise was a serpent.*

He's not sure as to the connection between this and Felice's letter, but in a vague way it feels fitting.

Then he writes, *Theoretically there's a chance of perfect happiness – believe in the indestructible within but don't strive for it.*

But he fears that one more drubbing from his ex-fiancée might destroy the indestructible within.

*In the struggle between you and the world, back the world.*

And he thinks that might be the best thing he's written, and he puts the letter back in its scarred envelope and shoves it under the others in his desk drawer.

Then he hears a match strike, and his back tells him he has company – his brothers have returned. A letter from Felice and a visit from them – it's a very poor combination.

He's tempted just to get up and walk out, but he doesn't want them following round the village. So he twists in his chair and looks at Georg and Heinrich, and through the cigarette smoke they look at him.

'It makes all the difference – German officers,' Georg says.

'And German support,' Heinrich adds.

'All of our best officers were lost in the first few months of the war.'

'And the best corporals and sergeants – the old regulars.'

'Their replacements have mostly been decent men, but the wrong type – too excitable, too unsteady under fire.'

'A question of experience mostly – and so many men who might have helped with training are dead or in Siberia.'

'And if the men don't trust their leaders, they don't fight well.'

'They look for ways to get out.'

'But with a sprinkling of German officers...'

'...and sergeant-majors and sergeants...'

'...our men fight excellently.'

'And we thought you'd like to know.'

'Thank you,' K says, and then regrets – as he always does – that he said something which implies that Georg and Heinrich are real.

'And we chased the Italian for miles.'

'We even got to see the sea.'

'The Adriatic!'

'We saw the sea at night by the lights of phosphorus flares.'

'An eery image in battle.'

'Suddenly everything is white.'

'And then it's black...'

'...because you can't see once the flare goes out.'

'But you've got to take care when one comes down.'

'If it's still burning and it lands on your back it'll burn straight through you.'

'And the screams!'

'Terrible screams in the dark!'

'The screams make you want to find the wretch and put a bullet through his head.'

'But with machine guns firing through the dark, you can't do it.'

'No!'

K wants to ask them where they're heading next, and whether they'll have leave at Christmas. But he resists, he struggles with himself; even though he can smell their cigarettes, he denies their presence.

'We're going east,' Georg says.

'We're going to guard the chaos in Russia and make sure it doesn't spread west.'

'Or that's what we've been told.'

'Communists are fighting royalists and anarchists...'

'...and there's bread to be had in the Ukraine.'

'We want to save the bread from the chaos.'

'And that's better than heading west and fighting with English tanks.'

'Armoured engines on tracks!'

'Nasty!'

'But we held them off at Cambrai!' K says and again wishes he hadn't opened his mouth.

'We read that in the papers too,' and there's scorn in Heinrich's voice.

'But how many poor bloody soldiers were turned to mincemeat?'

'The papers didn't address that question, did they?'

'But now...'

'...the Ukraine.'

And with that prospect they get up, smile and wave, open the door, go out, close the door, and go down the stairs as quietly as they can in their boots.

Agatha is still asleep by the stove.

Michelob, 23 December, 1917

At a careful pace the cart moves through the snow. The driver doesn't want to urge on the horse when there's ice under his hooves, and Dr K is happy to let the countryside pass by slowly. There are just two silent men in a muffled world – indeed for a long stretch of the journey the only sounds are those of the horse walking and the wheels turning. Both men have their collars turned up and their hats pulled down low, and they are wrapped in blankets – they are warm enough, and K feels that if their journey continued forever he would be content.

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He expected there to be more people on the platform. It is far from empty, but it isn't packed. He even finds a place in the waiting room. There's a soldier with a bandaged hand at one end of a bench, wrapped in an overcoat and a fur shawl, but otherwise the seats are free. K sits down, puts his suitcase by his feet, and holds the food-bag on his lap.

'Total death, you could call it that!'

K looks to see if he is being addressed. He isn't. Nobody is – nobody that's visible. Therefore K assumes that the man in the fur shawl is talking to his dead brothers.

'Nothing alive at all – as we picked our way forward... picked our way between the corpses and the tree stumps. The reek of gas... that was everywhere. And corpses everywhere too. Yes! Everywhere! Animals had come out of their holes to die.

Everywhere there were rabbits, rats, mice – just corpses now. And dead birds – not all the

birds escaped, just some. And when we got to the French lines the bodies were all contorted. Men collapsed trying to flee. Everywhere – dead soldiers! Hundreds, thousands perhaps. Some had clawed their faces, their throats, trying to get breath inside them. Some had shot themselves. For hundreds of yards – corpses! Yes! Nothing but corpses and the reek of gas. Yes! The horses were dead too, of course, and the chickens in their baskets, and even the insects. Even the insects! Dead insects everywhere! They never looked so sad before – dead insects.’

A train pulls into the station.

Dr K gets up.

The soldier marks this, looks round, notices where he is, and says, ‘Merry Christmas!’

K wishes the man the same, and hurries to get himself a seat for the journey to Prague.

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The brown smoke, the squeaks of unlubricated axles, and the general shabbiness are all the same – but there’s twice as many carriages as he expected. The railway authorities seem to be moving their stock to the city – perhaps in preparation for troop movements in the new year. Dr K doesn’t give the matter much thought, he’s just grateful for the extra space. And it’s specially surprising given the announcement about the service in 1918 – from January there will be fewer trains running on the line and it will no longer be possible to travel from Prague to Zürau and back in a day. Working locomotives are getting scarcer and scarcer – everything is getting scarcer and scarcer.



Though deteriorating transport does mean he'll be less bothered by chance visitors. And given that he's now heading back to the city by compulsion – returning to his family, the office, and his literary friends – the idea of being even more remote in the village next year seems the best Christmas present he could wish for – and there's no telephone! Nobody can call him. And this is a joy. A particular joy given his need to escape, and a general joy given his dislike of the phone. His father made him shudder by suggesting, in a letter, they have one installed – then he could shout down the line. Dr K believes in wartime this is nothing but an idle fantasy.

Even when not speaking to his father, the phone's abhorrent. K could never adjust himself to the idea that a man's body could be present in one place and his voice could be in another. It reminds him of a magician's act in Cabaret Lucerna, in which a young woman was sawn in two and separated, and put back together, before leaping almost naked round the stage. Dr K preferred this to the telephone, but he thought the trick was essentially the same.

And there was that director in the office! Who, whenever he spotted K using the institute's general line, would rush up to him, and offer advice as to how a telephone should best be handled. Even when he was talking to Felice in Berlin, the director would suggest that he changed the angle at which he held the mouth-piece! And he would stand and watch until he was satisfied. That director was now dead on the Eastern Front!

Such is K's happy reflection as the train lurches towards the capital. Yet, as if aware of his thoughts, the women behind him start talking of the same topic.

'If the telephone allows us to speak to people beyond the horizon, why shouldn't the Ouija board allow us to speak to people beyond the grave?'

'I agree! I couldn't agree with you more. And it's true – honestly true! I proved it. After I got in touch with Joachim, I found the coins.'

‘His collection?’

‘Yes!’

‘You’ve found them – you never said!’

‘I’m telling you now. I suddenly thought of the cellar. And one paving stone wobbled! It occurred to me, just like that! And I went down and wobbled on it myself. And I called Hans, and he lifted it – and there they were! And it was the morning after the man came with his Ouija board. It came to my mind!’

‘Just like the telephone!’

‘Exactly like the telephone! And now – but keep this to yourself – now I’ve spoken with him I sleep in his shirts. I feel so close to him. When I’m in a shirt of his I feel we’re together. The man’s coming again tonight.’

To Dr K’s regret, the train reaches the next station, and the women get out, without him ever seeing them.

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An eastern Jewish family appears running hard – through the gate and on to the platform they come. A door is yanked open by the lad in the lead, and he helps the rest of the family clamber aboard, grabbing bags, and throwing them to the hands within – until a huge, if elderly porter, seizes the lad on the platform, shoves him inside, and slams the door: despite the vehement protests from the family.

Dr K can only understand odd words in the torrent of Yiddish, but he guesses that somebody has been left behind. Then a man appears – the father presumably, who’d been buying tickets. And the lad pulls down the window, just as the train starts, and the father

runs even faster – despite the ice – and leaps and tumbles in head-first and rolls and stands up and raises his hands.

And K finds that he is also on his feet, and he claps three times, and he exchanges a smile with the father – and he has the impression that it's something that the man must regularly do to keep his family entertained. And K sits down thinking that he could not imagine a father more unlike his own.

But not everybody approves. A lady's opinion cuts through the carriage, 'I do not like the Jewish voice. I do not like the Jewish laugh!'

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'My first sergeant said to me, "You don't sing anymore," after I'd been at the front three months – three months or thereabouts. I remember his words, and his face – a good face it was – when he said it. A week later his corpse was draped over some barbed wire. I remember that too – it didn't make me any more musical.'

'But when we joined we were twenty – young men. Our bodies had developed a bit, but now...'

'Now they're children!'

'Yeah! One in ten of them – new recruits, that is – one out of ten is an old man dragged in from some office. The rest are seventeen at most. The youngest in the last batch was fourteen. An orphan! He lied to escape the orphanage. Then wished he hadn't. They were rushed to the front line. They were in our company. Confused, terrified, useless when the first shells come down! "Mother!" one of them cried, "Mother!" Can't blame 'em though.'

'From the school bench to the trench!'

‘To the grave!’

‘Poor bastards!’

Dr K follows the two corporals out from the carriage onto the platform at Prague. He spots a newspaper-boy, and buys the Sunday edition of *The Prague Daily*. There are no headlines about victories; instead the main news is of a German peace offer – though the article admits this is just based on a report from a newspaper in Cologne, which in turn was derived from reports abroad. K suspects that it is just one journalist’s wishful thinking passed on by others until it’s hailed as news. Peace has become the standard Christmas rumour – and no more to be believed in than Santa Claus.

Though when he stands and turns the page, he does find a seemingly solid report of an armistice with the communist government of Russia; and, it’s suggested, there’s some sort of agreement with the emerging independent Ukraine. But more space is given to complaints about the failings of Austria’s central economic administration, and the plight of small firms given the increasing lack of raw materials. The cotton traders are lamenting loud – and K knows what this will mean for his own office.

Then, having had his dose of news, he puts the paper away, picks up his bags and heads for a café some hundred yards outside the station.

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‘The changing of the guard!’

As arranged, Ottla’s man, Josef David, is waiting for him, and he stands up, and shakes his hand and hurries away to buy K a beer and a ham sandwich.

‘Don’t worry – it’s not really ham! I don’t know what it is, and I’m not going to ask, but it’s not ham. And the beer is water.’

Dr K is hungry and thirsty and eats and drinks.

In uniform, back from the front, and to all appearances uninjured – and lean and hard – Josef sits facing him.

‘After Zürau – after Christmas – I’m heading east. Our regiment will try and keep some order out there, and stop communism coming here, and the Czech nationalists as well. Have you got a paper?’

K pulls it out from his bag, and Josef points to a small article about an independent Czech-Slovak army being formed under French command.

‘There was a time when that would never be reported. But things are shifting too far. So there’s a Czech-Slovak-French army on the Macedonian front, as well as the Czech Legion in the east. And I’m in a Czech battalion officered by Germans. And if we end up facing a rebel Czech force, what will happen? I don’t know. I don’t... But, it’s Christmas, and I’m going to Zürau. Do you like it there?’

‘I never want to leave!’

The words came out of K’s mouth without him thinking. It’s not usual for him to express himself so emphatically. Though what he said was true.

‘And I probably will feel the same. However, if I don’t leave, I’ll be arrested for desertion. I doubt if Ottla could hide me well enough.’

‘She would like to – I’m sure.’

‘Would she?’

‘Yes.’

K was surprised by the doubt in Josef’s voice – Ottla was allowing him to stay with her as if they were married. Few other Jewish women would have the courage to do that. The war had changed things, and she was away from her family, yet still she was a Jewish woman, in a German village, entertaining a Czech soldier. It was a bold thing to do.

Until he sat down with Josef, K hadn't thought of the trust they must have in him to share their secret. By traditional standards he should be outraged at this assault on his sister's virtue and his family's honour – and he knew that many Jewish men of his age, despite their fondness for brothels, would react in such a way. And six months before K knew that he would have been uneasy, but having lived with Ottla, he couldn't begrudge her the happiness of Josef's company. And next Christmas he might be dead.

'I've got to go – run for my train – it's time!'

To K's surprise Josef grasps him tight before hurrying out of the door. K orders a tea – which tastes of nettles. In fact, he thinks its flavour is much the same as the beer – the former was cold, the latter is slightly warm, and that's the difference.

He is in no hurry to move. He's staying with his parents and his father has let slip that he's ill with tuberculosis – and now he must face his mother's anxiety.

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'Mending a fence!' His father's voice, despite his reputed heart trouble, is still as loud as ever.

'Yes, I've been mending fences.'

K thought the news would soothe his mother's mind – make her realise that he wasn't an invalid, that he was capable of physical exertion. And it might have done, if his father hadn't taken the news as an insult. From Hermann's face it was evident he thought that the fence was conspiring against him – that it aimed to reduce his heir to the ranks of common labourers.

'He's ill – and so are you – don't go on like that, please.'

Julie calms Hermann – and K is grateful for the shield of sickness. And he makes his excuses and goes to bed.

23

Prague, 25 December, 1917

The same game of chess appears to be continuing between the two long grey beards – behind which there are grey faces and grey suits, made even greyer by the cigarette stains. Their coffee cups are empty, their ashtrays are overflowing, and the table's third seat is piled high with the café's newspapers. Dr K saw them begin in the summer, and he wonders if they will play for a year.

Then a young poet – the son of a colleague in K's institute – walks in, sees him, grabs hold of the *Austrian Morning News*, which happens to be on top of the pile, and hurries across to his table.

'Congratulations, Dr K! It's wonderful! The story is a revelation!'

'Revelation?'

'Oh, yes. It wasn't me who said that first, but I agree completely.'

K is tempted to ask, who did say it first, but before he can speak, the young man suddenly blurts out. 'And your drawings! Your drawings! I'd love to see some more of them. Are you sketching much in the countryside?'

K looks up at the young man, unsure if it would be better to accept his company and invite him to sit down, or to suffer his torrent of words from above. K shifts the chair beside him invitingly, and the lad sits with an expression which suggests he's received an honour. And K smiles and says, 'I just scribble my matchstick men in the office.'

‘Why?’ he asks in a tone of disbelief.

‘I can’t write there, so the only alternative to drawing would be to do some work. Consequently, there are thousands of matchstick men in the drawers of my desk – I listen to them marching forward and back; they appear to delight in holding parades.’

‘But father says you’re highly respected.’

‘My colleagues respect my ability to keep my job without doing anything for months at a time. Indeed in 1913 I did nothing at all from 1<sup>st</sup> January until 31<sup>st</sup> December. And then we had a little celebration.’

The lad’s mouth opens slightly as he is evidently uncertain as to whether Dr K is telling the truth; and then his mouth opens even wider as a girl appears at the entrance of Café Arco. She is perhaps fifteen and blonde, and K’s mouth also opens, because it’s the girl with the white rabbit – but she’s without the rabbit, and then he grasps that it’s not her, though it could be her sister.

‘It’s my girlfriend!’ The poet says as he gets up abruptly and sends the chair back a yard into the path of a waiter; who, with a scowl and a swerve, manages to round the obstacle without dropping any of the dirty plates he’s taking to the kitchen.

‘Bastard!’ he says under his breath, but audibly enough.

‘Sorry! Sorry!’ And the lad rushes to the girl – and then brings her to meet his friend, the esteemed author. To the poet’s surprise, K has the courtesy to stand up and shake hands. It seems he expected nothing more than a brief nod from a writer famous enough to have a story published in the *Austrian Morning News* on Christmas Day.

‘I’d love to stop and talk to you,’ she says in a tone calmer than that of her boyfriend; who explains, ‘I’m due to meet her parents. It’s my day of execution.’



‘It will be nothing worse than a gentle castration,’ she says. ‘My mother and sisters will take you in hand. It will be over in five minutes.’ And she sticks her tongue out at him.

‘I’m sorry,’ she says, then shakes Dr K’s hand again; and so does the young poet, before following her out of the café and towards his fate.

‘Charming!’ K thinks. ‘So charming!’

He sits down, looks at the paper, and wonders why the editor decided to publish his ape story at Christmas – and it’s particularly puzzling as it’s already been published before. Yet he is distracted from this mystery by the spectacle made by a decayed playwright across the room at a table behind a column. And K takes out his pocket notebook.

*He gobbles up whatever drops from his table and so is fuller than others for a little longer, yet, because of this, he forgets how to eat at a table and so nothing drops from it anymore.*

K looks at his watch. There was a time when he set it an hour and a half early – always it was ninety minutes ahead of everybody else’s time. Then, on one of the rare occasions when they were together, Felice set it right. And K left it like that – his private quirk had been tainted by her correction. He should have run away, left the watch in her hands, and never seen her again. How could his hope have survived such a monstrous violation of his true self?

Dr K sits smiling, amused and despairing at his own weak and blind nature – and here he is, he reflects, waiting for her still!

The previous evening was only a brief encounter. He met her at the station, accompanied her to a hotel, and they ate a meagre dinner in the restaurant on the ground

floor. She was tired from the long and frequently delayed journey, and their conversation was difficult – it faltered more than it flowed. But she rallied and brightly suggested they meet in Café Arco, as it was the famous centre in Prague for writers and painters, and she was sure that it meant much to him, ‘...a place of happy memories and a pleasant change from a village room with a view over a pond.’

And because she was making an effort to be sympathetic, he agreed without any hint of how he felt about the prospect, and her comparison.

And Felice appears at the café’s door – smart and brisk, and showing no sign of yesterday’s fatigue. Dr K gets to his feet and they kiss.

Curious about the unknown lady, a waiter hurries over, then goes away and returns with two black coffees – though coffee is now chicory mixed with sugar beet.

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Walking through a riverside park in the snow, and not wanting to talk about their engagement, Dr K finally gives her some notion of his feelings about the cafe. ‘So many glorious futures were discussed there, around those tables – futures so glorious that Florence of the Renaissance was to have been nothing in comparison to that little place.’

‘And what happened? How many of them succeeded?’

‘They succeeded in talking – on and on they talked until the war came. But even then their table talk remained concerned with such matters as the significance of colour for the abstract artist. But, gradually, more important topics took over. Writers and painters began to argue about where a dozen eggs could be bought without ration-coupons and without the risk of arrest. And they became interested in what was the best type of self-injury to inflict to avoid conscription.’

K pauses and looks at Felice's down-turned eyes, before continuing. 'Many men who'd lived in a vague world of paper were confronted with a reality more brutal than anything they'd been able to imagine. And I think they were annoyed as much as they were afraid.'

Felice looks at him doubtfully. 'You don't normally talk of people like that.'

'That's why I don't normally sit there. I'm much happier in my room overlooking a village pond.'

She stares at him hard. Then, in silence, they look at the gulls gliding through the sleet to land on the water. And, still in silence, they walk on.

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'In Berlin the tyres are made of iron – it's strange to see the rubber tyres that are still being used here.'

'Iron tyres!' Dr K is impressed.

'Yes – they make a terrible noise and rip up the roads, but the cars keep running.'

The news weighs him down. All of the papers talked that morning of the new Austro-German peace offer – but if the Berliners were willing to roll along on iron tyres, he assumes that nothing will stop them fighting until everything is obliterated.

And Felice is a Berliner!

In his mind's eye he sees her driving over him and then reversing.

And this is love!

'And some women have been reduced to using tracing paper for underwear. As there is so little proper paper to trace on to, tracing paper isn't much use.'

'Except as underwear?'

‘Except for underwear.’

K lapses into a silence ever so deep.

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That morning Max Brod finished writing *The Great Event* – and he is happy, so happy that he reads a few pages aloud to his wife and Felice and Dr K. He picks an intimate scene involving the hero and his girlfriend, who his audience know to be his former mistress.

The reading isn't a success, though politely appreciated, but Max's enthusiasm for his own creation carries him buoyantly through the evening.

And as carol singers go by in the street below, and Max joins in their drunken rendition of *Good King Wenceslas*, Dr K sits marvelling at his friend's joie de vivre, and wishing he was in Zürau gathering winter fuel.

## 24

Prague, 27 December, 1917

And he'd wanted to know so much – before they were first engaged. That thought goes through K's mind as he watches her train screech and belch its way north. Before the first bend it disappears in a fog of brown smoke, and he turns towards the street, and he walks quickly away, trying to distance himself from her, even though she is undisputedly heading for Berlin.

He can't walk as quickly as he could before in the cold polluted air – he feels the tuberculosis in his lungs. And after a mile or so he stops at some tiny, deserted bar, for a little warmth and some imitation tea; and he sits by the window, and contemplates the wall opposite, stained like every wall in the city by cheap fuel – and the dirt has been left to accumulate and it's accumulating still under the gloom of the sky. In Prague all he sees are stains and grime – so he reflects, amidst his fears for his future.

Yet, eventually, his thoughts find their way back to Felice and his past.

'The questions he asked of her then!' These words keep appearing in his mind – referring to the first few months of their correspondence.

'And now there's nothing – nothing to be said.' And that's the refrain that keeps following the exclamation.

Then his letters demanded information – and if she told him one thing, he wanted to know all the surrounding details. If she saw a play, he didn't just want to know what it was and where it was staged, but what she wore, and what route she took to the theatre, and what and where she ate, and who she went with, and what the weather was like, and if the experience disturbed her sleep and entered into her dreams.

*Of course, it is impossible to tell me everything, but then everything is impossible.*

So he wrote to her more than once.

Then he was a tyrant of interrogation; now he's a tyrant of silence.

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K walks up the stairs of the block of flats. The apartments are smaller and shabbier as he rises higher. Ultimately he's at the top and faces a door which is out of keeping with all of the others. He knocks and a postman answers.

‘I’m here to see Mr Brod.’ The postman points down the hall, before stepping past K and going out. The former flat is now an office, and has been knocked-about with the intention of making it more official in the eyes of the Imperial and Royal Post Office. It is dusty and files are stacked here and there, and in what was the lounge there are four desks shoved together.

Max sits at one of these and, while he finishes talking to one of his colleagues, K takes the little chair from the wall, which is meant for clients and petitioners, and he sits by his friend.

Suddenly tears run down his face. K doesn’t normally cry, and certainly not in public, but three days of silent futility, after five years of futile correspondence, have worn him out. ‘She’s gone and she understands – but I thought she understood before. Perhaps it will happen again – how many engagements do we need to finally not get married?’

‘She must understand – with TB it isn’t possible.’ Max tries to be reassuring as the phone rings. A colleague picks up the receiver.

‘Isn’t it terrible that such things must happen? I want to be married; I have to work; I must write.’ K pauses to wipe his eyes. ‘Two things I can manage, but not three. But... but indeed... but I can’t stop myself wanting to get married – and so torture follows. I find a woman, I torture her, I torture myself, we agree to get married and set up our own domestic torture chamber. What could be more natural than that?’

Dr K stops crying, gets up and says good-bye; though before Max can respond his colleague asks him for a file, so he can satisfy the caller on the phone. As Max rummages in the mound by his desk K walks out of the door.

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‘Yes, I know I made an appointment for January, but my office wants an official update on my health. Therefore, as I’m in Prague for a few days, I thought I would come here and ask if Professor Pick had some time free for a patient this week.’

Professor Pick’s receptionist looks at Dr K as if she thinks he is deranged. The idea that somebody would simply walk in, and ask to see the professor, is beyond her comprehension.

‘Professor Pick has gone away.’

‘Will he return?’

The receptionist looks at her diary.

Dr K looks at the photograph of the Gotha bomber which still adorns the wall behind her.

‘Yes.’

‘When will he return?’

‘After the New Year.’

‘Could I make an appointment then.’

‘You want to change your appointment?’

‘Yes, please.’

She gives him another quizzical stare, before ostentatiously crossing out the old appointment, and writing in a new one.

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Gustav Mühlstein’s receptionist is more accommodating. Indeed it seems that the doctor is free for most of that afternoon. And when K goes into his surgery Mühlstein looks at him warmly through his small round glasses, and his deep moustache rises so as to

suggest that there's a smiling mouth behind it. His crown has even less hair than it had before, but his beard now reaches down to his chest.

'Dr K! How good to see you! How's your health?'

'About the same – Zürau is holding things in check and I'm gaining weight slowly. But I'm due to talk to my director about retiring on grounds of ill-health.'

'On a pension?'

'Yes, on a pension.'

'On a pension indeed!'

Again the moustache rises up, and Dr K gets undressed so that Mühlstein can listen to his chest. In the third drawer he checks he finds his stethoscope. After clearing away the wax left by his previous examination, Mühlstein pushes the ends of the two tubes deeply into his ears, and places the cold metal disc on K's chest, and then on his back – and then once more on the chest, and once more on the back.

'Well, I have to say that I can't hear anything, but the x-ray will give us more conclusive evidence, and if working in Prague has made you ill, then you've absolutely every right to ask to be pensioned off. And I hear you're about to be married. I am glad for you! Tell me about your plans – but who is your lucky lady?'

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The mahogany always seemed deadly dull in winter – it was a gloomy choice of wood for an office, and, of course, the official standard – but now when the gas jets are struggling to provide illumination due to the low pressure, and the sunlight is filtered by brown smoke, the headquarters of the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute is particularly miserable in the eyes of Dr K. And all the staff are working in their coats, due to the lack



of fuel for the fires. Marschner has allowed this irregularity, as work would be impossible without his staff being wrapped in thick layers of wool. But to K it seems that he is amongst cave dwellers struggling somehow to survive after their world has collapsed.

But these reflections are interrupted by Gustav Kubasa, who draws him aside in the general office. 'It worked – the appeal worked. That document you drafted was perfect. He'll get the money!'

Kubasa's Hungarian moustache is blacker than it was before, or perhaps his goatee is greyer. K can't decide – either way though, K wonder why he doesn't black his beard as well. But he has a more pressing question.

'Have you burnt my draft? Everybody knows my handwriting.'

'Not yet, no, but...'

'Now, do it now – right now!'

It's rare for anger to appear on K's face, and his colleague is surprised – and obedient. Kubasa hurries to his desk, and then his stove – and Dr K checks that every scrap has been consumed by the flames. Only then does he smile and say, 'I'm glad he won.'

However, before they can discuss what happened during the appeal, they hear Marschner's voice in the distance, and join the gathering which he has discretely arranged. Except for the murk and the cold and the coats, it's like every other leaving ceremony – but the circumstances of this one make the departure seem particularly sharp.

Wottowa, the Czech messenger, is retiring on a pension due to ill health – and he does look grey, even greyer than most.

Marschner speaks well, and it's evident that he cares for the man – that's emphatically conveyed – and he hands over the obligatory leaving present of a mantelpiece-clock, neatly boxed and wrapped.

Then Wottowa says a few words of thanks. He speaks first in German, and then Czech – and that has not happened since the war began. For all office ceremonies, official and unofficial, German has been used exclusively. Yet at such a moment nobody can object, though Mergl does walk out, which prompts Marschner to start the applause and clap loudly. And because their director is clapping with enthusiasm, most of his staff feel obliged to do the same, though it might seem that they're applauding a rebellious irregularity.

Then the crowd disperses and Wottowa seeks out a few individuals.

Lastly, he goes up to Dr K, and pulls out a certificate from his pocket. He doesn't open it, he just holds it before him, 'Sir, I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to tell you, to... to show you this; and... and... the crisis, let's call it that, sir, will be next year. That's what the doctors tell me. In case you didn't know, sir, I wanted to say that. You might have wondered why I didn't drop in to see the old place – in case I don't.'

'I'm sorry, very sorry – and doctors are often wrong.'

'I can feel in my case they haven't made a mistake – but, sir, it's been a pleasure working with you, you've made such a difference.'

'I can't...'

'Sir, it's true – but I must go. My time's up, and I've been given my clock, and a man... a man in my condition, so to speak, is glum company.'

And they shake hands and Wottowa heads for the lift, with his package under one arm, and his old brown bowler in the other hand, and the worn leather patches on his elbows facing the office. The youngest junior presses the lift button, and drags open the iron grill, which is almost too heavy for him, and he has to use all his strength to slam it shut.

The lift descends, and K catches a final glimpse of Wottowa's bald crown, before he disappears from sight.

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K opens the door of his family's apartment and steps into the hall. He can hear his father in the lounge bellowing his favourite Christmas song.

'It was Christmas Day in the workhouse,  
The snow was falling fast,  
We don't want your Christmas pudding,  
Stick it up your arse!'

K is not tempted to join in – instead he heads for Ottla's room, where he is sleeping now. His failure to say good-night will probably be added to the list of his other crimes against the family, but he doesn't feel equal to his father's red, roaring face.

In his pocket notebook he writes, *It's wrong to cheat anyone, including the world of its victory.*

## 25

Prague, 29 December, 1917

'In his armchair he rules the world,' so Dr K thinks looking at his father's face enflamed once more by brandy. K wasn't able to avoid the family meal this evening – nor

was he able to refuse trying the brandy himself, and he is concerned about what it's done to his temper.

'If it wasn't for the blockade, and the indifference of certain members of the family, that asbestos factory would have been a success. A success! And the British blockade is a crime! God strike England down!'

Hermann empties half of his glass.

'I never said I would manage it,' K quietly protests.

'Sons and sons-in-law – there the same!'

Julie tells her grandchildren that they should go to bed. She doesn't want Felix and Gerti to hear what's going to be said about their father – and she bustles them out of the room. But, although K dislikes doing so, he manages to defend the man.

'Thanks to his position at headquarters, you get to eat army supplies. And the game and bacon on the table this evening wouldn't have been there without the farm – and the Lüftners' generosity.'

'What are the Lüftners?'

'They also have a farm in Zürau – and he hunts and gives away part of what he shoots. Therefore, to a large extent, because of him, we're not having a turnip and nettle Christmas, like so many others are.'

'You're a vegetarian!'

'You aren't!'

Hermann drinks some more.

'Well, idle though he is, that son-in-law, perhaps now the Russians have given up...' He pauses for a slight belch, '...perhaps that son-in-law of mine will get his hands on some decent Ukrainian bread. Good bread! Good brandy! Life! He'll have to make sure

that he doesn't get shifted west. But we'll smash them next year! The British and the French.'

'And the Americans?'

'What do they know about war? They're no compensation for the Russians! And the Italians have run away from the fight! The Allies are finished! Next year in Paris! But still there are Czechs forming their little legion to fight for a lost cause. Traitors! And there are Jews who want to escape to Palestine and be ruled by the British. Traitors! And there are Austrians in Vienna who want to stop now that we are winning. Traitors!'

'We can't survive on turnips and nettles – and men are dying every day. Enough bloody victories and we'll be defeated!' As K speaks he regrets the brandy, but it's too late now. Fortunately, before they can get truly heated, Julie comes back in the room; and her husband merely mutters at their son.

'If you don't keep your voices down, they won't sleep,' she says.

Hermann slips further into his armchair and looks at his wife.

'When will our daughter give up her mad game in that... in that... bog of a village! Do you know? And what's she doing with a Czech man? Why doesn't she let us use a match-maker and get her a decent husband, like her sisters? What does she know about men – or farms?'

Hermann empties his glass, gets up and refills it, and so empties the bottle.

'Hermann! Your heart!'

'It's Christmas!'

Julie looks troubled.

K thinks she would look even more troubled if she knew that Ottla was now entertaining her man, and doing her best to comfort him, before he returns to the war. But he's determined to praise her before their parents, and so doesn't change the subject.

‘Ottla is doing well in the village, she’s learnt a lot, earned the respect of the farmers, and she is the best judge of the man who is suitable for her. And she wants the same sort of experience you had when you were young – the sort of experience that gave you your... strength of character, shall we say?’

Sensing trouble, Julie hurries to the sideboard and pulls a package from the back of a drawer.

But Hermann’s not distracted.

‘What do the children know! What do the children know today! When I was seven I had to drag a cart from village to village. We all slept in one room! Every winter – chilblains! We were lucky when we had potatoes!’

‘We’re still lucky when we have potatoes!’

Hermann glares at his son.

‘And when I was a boy, a little boy, I was apprenticed to that bastard in Pisek! Apprenticed as a little boy! They pissed on me in Pisek! Pissed on me! And you are encouraging her with your mad ideas! You’re not normal!’

‘As normality is a world at war, there’s something to be said for abnormality.’

Hermann opens his mouth wide. Julie inserts her husband’s favourite cigar.

‘I got six from a refugee tobacconist from Kiev. Six!’

Hermann forgets his son as his wife strikes a match – and he inhales and then disappears in a small cloud.

Prague, 01 January, 1918

Dr K runs for the tram heedless of the ice underfoot and the disease in his lungs. He doesn't slip, but he can feel his tuberculosis, and he's relieved when he hauls himself up on to the platform and gets inside and finds an empty seat. He rubs the window-pane so that he can see out, but his attention is caught by the conversation of the officers in front of him.

'There's something very spiritual about a shelled-out chapel.'

'I know what you mean.'

'Particularly if it's near the front line.'

'I've experienced the same myself.'

'God in the ruins!'

K wonders where else God would be.

'And near the ruins – it's in France, this place I'm thinking about – the trenches came close together, ours and theirs, and they had a professional singer – he sounded professional. One night he gave us an aria from Rigoletto. And in our trenches, while he sang, the war stopped. And we applauded. And so did the French.'

'And the next day?'

'Exchange of artillery – heavy exchange – never heard him again.'

'But the birds sing after a barrage. A puzzle really!'

'Yes! They've got wings. Why don't they fly off? I would! If I survive, I'll learn about birds – even crows!'

K feels every public mention of a crow to be somehow personal.

‘But it’s obvious why they hang around.’

‘Yes – no puzzle there.’

‘The crows must think they are in Heaven.’

‘And the rats, of course.’

‘And they’re completely cosmopolitan – they’ll eat any corpse from anywhere.’

‘Watching crows and rats eating men – men you’ve laughed with, drunk with – well, we’re used to it now.’

‘Sadly true!’

‘And you’ve got to scratch your head and ask yourself if you’re the same man you used to be.’

‘And if there’s any way back to what you were.’

‘I suspect there isn’t.’

‘What are your nightmares like?’

‘Some mornings I wake up screaming – and find I’ve terrified my wife and the maid. They’re very good. They don’t blame me.’

‘You can’t control them, can you, nightmares?’

‘No. I’ve led a battalion over the top in France, but I can’t master my mind at night.’

And K shares his regret.

‘You can’t put nightmares on a charge – can’t court martial them!’

‘Sadly not – but here’s the ministry. We need to get off.’

K too gets off the tram.

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It's almost 500 feet tall, the Laurenziberg, the hill across the river from the heart of the city. K used to roam energetically up and down its slopes – or at least that's the picture in his mind's eye. Now, attentive to his lungs, he plods up a path carefully. Yet though he is taking care, K wants to feel his tuberculosis before his meeting later that day – it's his manner of psychological preparation. He needs to go in with the sense of being an invalid – and so he walks on to the top.

However, his mind strays from his purpose, he stops thinking about the future, his memories intrude – in particular the memory of himself on the hill, in warmer weather, some fifteen years before. Then he was considering his vocation as a writer, because even when he had just written a few scraps he still felt compelled to be that, and essentially nothing else.

And what had become of his vocation? More scraps and botched efforts!

Yet he still feels obliged to continue – not only to write, but also to try and achieve in his writing what he aimed to do while he was still a student. He decided then that he must somehow express *life's grave and gentle fluctuations* – that's what he noted down; he wanted to capture how lives rose and fell and rose and fell again. He wanted to capture the pain and joy. Yet, he also wanted to express, *the nothingness of life, its floating nature*, its resemblance to dreams and nightmares. He wanted to show that life was solid and terrible, and nothing more than, *the fleeting shadow of a dissolving cloud*.

It was similar, K now thinks, to wanting to hammer together a fence with precise craftsmanship, and at the same time to do nothing in earnest, and yet to do it in such a fashion that people would not say, 'Hammering is nothing to him.' But rather so they would say, 'His hammering is truly hammering and it's nothing.' Then spurred on by such praise he would hammer freely – in a way that was more daring and resolute, but also more senseless.

Perhaps the collection of fragments and incomplete chapters, which he calls, *The Trial*, is the closest he has come to touching the mark he set himself. Yet it's still a long way short – and that's the conclusion K reaches at the brow of the hill. Then he turns to face the city below him. He gazes at the towers and mist and fumes – at the hundreds of columns of smoke rising up from the chimneys – domestic, official and industrial chimneys. It wasn't like that, according to his memory, when he made his writer's resolution. He remembers the river catching the sun. Now it's a wide grey ribbon – a mournful sight. Particularly as it's being used by boats carrying coffins – cheap coffins, mass produced, in anticipation of mass death.

And though he conceived it as an absurd comedy, and laughed aloud when he read the first pages to his friends, *The Trial* is a wartime novel. It was begun as the war was starting, when there were thousands of arrests by the police – when informers had a wonderful time naming people they wanted to see locked up – and, indeed, eighteen people were sentenced to death in Bohemia. But also, it is a wartime novel in a deeper sense – it is about a man caught up by a great organization – an organization as great and obscure as an army – and he doesn't know why he should suddenly be in peril, nor how he can escape, and he is swept along to his death. A knife finishes him.

Just as his friend and colleague, Albert Anzenbacher, was later finished by a Russian bayonet. K can't remember Albert ever saying a word about Russia. Yet his life was ended in a deadly fight with Russians. K can imagine Albert smiling at the absurdity – if there is an afterlife in which smiling is allowed.

And an even closer friend was killed – Oskar Pollak. He was at school with him, and when K started writing as an undergraduate, it was Oskar who saw every first draft. He was a more astute critic than Max Brod. But Oskar Pollak moved to Vienna and then

Rome, where he became ever more expert on the Italian baroque. He loved Italy and the Italians killed him by the banks of the Isonzo – on 11 June, 1915. K remembers the date.

How could K finish *The Trial* so that it did justice to the deaths of Albert Anzenbacher and Oskar Pollak? And the hundreds of thousands of others?

How could he capture the gravity and absurdity of life?

K doesn't know.

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'But Wottowa is dying of cancer. It will be a miracle if he is still alive next Christmas. And he was a messenger. He can be replaced with no trouble at all – it sounds harsh, I like the man, but it's true, he's replaceable. Dr K, you are an expert, and nobody here can write like you – nobody can, like you, absorb such a vast amount of detail, grasp the essence of a subject, and express a compelling conclusion. You cannot be replaced! And you are not ill enough for me to pension you off in wartime. It would be vetoed in Vienna.'

Friendly, avuncular, considerate Marschner, is adamant. Dr K can't play the role of the helpless innocent with him. He is simply too effective in his job – single-handedly he slaughtered the Toy Manufacturers of the Erzgebirge, he was vital for the Frankenstein work, and so on and so on. The air of naivety could work with Max – who is more than happy to bustle about on his behalf – but Marschner is more astute. He might look like a schnauzer, but he doesn't think like a schnauzer.

'So, I must return?'

'You know, I'll do whatever I can to help you – grant you sick leave whenever possible, and keep you out of the army – but, Dr K, there are limits!'

‘If death was coming within a year, would you let me go with a pension?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re very kind.’ And K immediately regrets the sarcasm, because Marschner is kind, and is not free to give K what he wants – and K knows this, and still he’s pestering his boss, who is overwhelmed with all manner of administrative difficulties, while K strolls about a village and writes aphorisms.

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The organ-grinder’s organ needs re-painting. The dancing Balkan peasants have faded badly – a couple of them have disappeared, except for their black boots, which are now performing a disembodied dance. And the organ-grinder’s monkey is painfully thin, and the collar round his neck has rubbed a raw wound, and the animal pulls it aside every time that the owner yanks the leash, while turning the organ’s handle and clunking out *The Blue Danube*.

A couple stop before the man. They look at the monkey. She whispers to him. He pulls out his wallet and waves at the organ-grinder. He stops grinding. He sells his monkey. He packs up.

K has no doubt that the couple will be having monkey soup that evening.

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Since their brandy fuelled argument, Dr K and his father have barely exchanged a word. As he lies in bed at night K wonders how things will develop. Hermann has been helping the farm financially, as it belongs to his son-in-law, and so is a family concern.

And while they are entangled in this way a complete break is not possible – and, more importantly, if the family broke in two it would destroy his mother.

His thoughts, however, do not linger long in the future – as almost always happens, he starts thinking about his past: about how his father seemed to him when he was a boy. And one incident stands out above all the others. It was a night when he was whimpering for a glass of water – not out of thirst, K believes, but out of a desire for entertainment of some sort. And his father threatened him, yet still he whimpered – until his father lifted him out of bed, took him to the balcony overlooking the inner courtyard, and locked him outside in the dark and cold, and went away.

Dr K lies in bed fearing, against all reason, that the same thing will happen again, and he tastes blood in his mouth.

27

Zürau, 5 January, 1918

‘When Max introduced us, at once, I appreciated your courtesy. I felt your hair on my forehead. Though I’m blind you’d lent forward and bowed just as you would for a man who could see.’

Dr K touches the hand of his friend, Oscar Baum.

‘I’m sorry that others don’t do the same.’

‘Please tell Elsa what I said.’

Embarrassed though he is to repeat the praise, K translates Oscar’s words from German to Czech.

Elsa smiles and says, ‘You are only telling me what I suspected.’

And K translates this from Czech into German – and fears that he will spend all morning translating comments about himself from one language to the other.

Elsa, the sister of Ottla's man, is staying with them, and fast becoming Ottla's friend.

Oscar, is also staying with them – the only one amongst K's literary circle to do so. The steep stairs, odd angles and sharp implements in the house, cause K much concern as he guides his friend about. But still he is glad for his company – for a few days.

Though worse than the problems with the house are the difficulties of nationality – Not only do Oscar and Elsa lack a common language, but Oscar is blind because he isn't Czech. He was born with only one good eye, and in a street fight a Czech boy threw a stone in his face, and he never saw again from that moment.

‘And they shouted abuse at me as a German, and not as a Jew!’

That's a lament that Oscar has often made, because the Czech boys hadn't recognised that he was Jewish – though if they had the fight would have been just as vicious.

K is anxious that Oscar will want him to explain what happened to Elsa, and does everything he can to keep the atmosphere happy, despite the freezing weather and the meagre rations.

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‘You see, it's impossible,’ Oscar says in K's bedroom. ‘When I'm with my wife at home I feel crowded, cramped – even breathing is difficult.’

‘She doesn't like you anymore?’

‘She loves me!’

‘You don’t share a bed?’

‘We’re happiest in bed together!’

‘Then... what? What is it, that’s wrong?’

Oscar finds it hard to say – but he is writing a novel about a man who marries a series of women and girls and fails to make a tolerable home with any of them. And K sits and listens as his friend explains the plot, which, like a piece of baroque music, consists of a theme and variations. Yet when he has finished, K still doesn’t know why his friend is tormented by the temptation of leaving his wife and son, when he has no hope of finding a better woman for himself elsewhere, nor of being content living alone.

Listening to Oscar is like listening to his own thoughts – indeed he feels that some of his bleak ideas have escaped him and formed a blind body in his room. And K is relieved when Oscar wants to sleep, but he fears that the two of them are going to spiral round the problem of marriage every night during his stay.

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*Everywhere there are married people; everywhere to be married is impossible.*

K finds it hard to write with somebody near him. Only with Ottla can he have company and feel free as a writer. Yet Ottla has a fiancé and is getting closer to his family; and there is a desk in an office in Prague that is beckoning Dr K. And it’s the middle of winter, and soon it will be spring, and in the spring K must leave the village, and he has nowhere to live in Prague except at his parents’ apartment, and his father’s temper is worse and worse.

He re-opens his notebook.

*This feeling, 'I can't drop anchor here,' and at once there's a sense of a floating tide all around.*

*A reversal – lurking, fearful, hoping, the answer stalks the question, looks despairingly at its unapproachable face and follows it along the most senseless tracks, which always take the question far, far away from the pursuing answer.*

He closes his notebook, puts it away, and as quietly as possible gets into bed. Finally he arranges the towel over his pillow. It saves Ottla and Mařenka extra washing should he bleed in the night. For the first time ever K is relieved for Baum's blindness, because he won't be able to see this precaution and talk about it with Max Brod.

## 28

Zürich, 13 January, 1918

He waves good-bye to his friend who can't see him, and Oscar waves back. Ottla is accompanying him all the way to Prague, and the cart is taking them to the station. And K walks across the green and waves again, and Ottla says something, and Oscar raises his hand one last time.

K stands awhile looking at the place where the cart disappeared from sight, feeling troubled, but mostly glad because he has regained his solitude; then he turns his attention to the soldiers making their way round the church with a trolley. Under the supervision of Kunz, they are removing the church bell. The ground is uneven and covered with snow and the soldiers slip as they shove and manoeuvre. They are evidently worried about the bell



sliding off, because it would be a daunting task to lift it back up. Finally they get the trolley to the road, and one of the soldiers fetches their wagon; and after they've kicked the snow and ice off their boots, they drag the bell from the trolley to the wagon's back, turn it on its side, roll it forward, and lash it with ropes.

Then the bell leaves the village, and Kunz comes over to K.

'They're late taking ours. Almost all of the other churches round here lost theirs last year. One of the men said they are now the army's main source of copper. What will happen when we run out of bells?'

'Perhaps the communists in Russia will sell us theirs,' says K and shrugs.

Kunz shrugs back, says, 'Yes, that's possible,' and then he frowns at the thought of what was happening beyond the East Front. He looks troubled and K isn't sure if Kunz wants to be left alone with his fears, but then he starts to talk about what's on his mind.

'The communists are shouting for peace, freedom and bread, and so are the Czech nationalists – it's an alliance of sorts. We've defeated the Russian army, yet... well... Russian ideas are moving west. Whatever happens, Vienna will make a deal, and people like us, German-Bohemians, will be sacrificed. And what then? What then? Will my choice be between dying as a German or as a landlord? Which placard will they tie to my corpse as it swings from a tree by my farm?'

After a pause K says, 'It might not come to that. They might shoot us instead.' And he smiles, and so does Kunz, before continuing, 'If President Wilson's words mean anything, if it isn't just propaganda,' and the look on his face shows this is what Kunz suspects, 'then national self-determination means that the Germans of Bohemia, all three million of us, would come under German rule, if we lose the war. I'm sorry, Dr K, but I would prefer Berlin to Prague.'

'So would I – there's no apology needed.'

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The chapel is small. There are seats for twenty people, and a few more could conceivably squeeze themselves between the pews and the walls. But at the moment it doesn't matter, as Dr K has the place to himself. Freed from the constraints of walking with his friend, K left the village and trudged west until he crossed the Goldbach, and then turned north and followed the road until he came to Zarch, as Kunz calls it, or Cárka, as it's known to Mařenka. It's a hamlet of four farms and two names.

Everybody else is working but K is sitting alone, and looking at the snow on his boots gradually turning to water; and he hopes he'll be forgiven for any slight stain he might leave behind. And he's feeling grateful for his solitude and these months of peace in the countryside. And he thinks that even if he must return to Prague and the office, he will have Ottla to visit in Zürau – he will have a second home. Assuming, of course, that the dark premonition of Kunz doesn't come to pass, that German-Bohemians aren't all driven from the land when the war ends – should it ever end.

K gets up, leaves the chapel, and continues walking north to the next village, Lischwitz, before turning about, re-crossing the Goldbach, and heading east.

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The letter has only reached him indirectly. It was sent to his publisher, and then forwarded to his parents' address – despite K's instructions to Kurt Wolff – and now it's been forwarded again. It's the first letter he's received from a reader – or, at least, a reader he didn't previously know.

*Dear Sir,*

*You have made me unhappy.*

*I bought a copy of Metamorphosis and gave it to my cousin. But she doesn't know how to understand it. My cousin gave it to her mother and she is also confused. The mother then gave it to my other cousin and she is confused as well.*

*Now they've written to me. I'm expected to provide the explanation, as I'm the one doctor in the family. But I can't.*

*Sir! I spent months in the trenches fighting with the Russians and I wasn't disturbed. Yet, if my reputation with my cousins were to sink to the floor, I would be deeply upset.*

*Only you can help. You got me into this mess. Therefore, please tell me what my cousins are supposed to think while reading your Metamorphosis.*

*Most sincerely and respectfully yours,*

*Dr. Siegfried Wolff*

Reading the story is worse than fighting on the Eastern Front. Never has K received such praise!

But he is averse to explaining his work – even, at times, to himself. So he sits at the kitchen table watching the light fade on the pond and wondering how he might answer the man.

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Elsa was kind enough to leave them a dozen candles in return for staying with Ottla, therefore K can write at his desk in the night.

*Sensual love distorts our view of heavenly love; by itself it couldn't, but unknowingly sensual love has a trace of the heavenly – so it can.*

In other words, he again found the girl with the white rabbit waiting for him. She was there, by the side of the road, when he returned to the village. And she gave him a look that lacked any ambiguity, before vanishing into the shadows of the trees.

K feels as if he is now involved with her – yet this seems also ludicrous given their slight contact. The last time he was involved with a girl so young was in Riva, on holiday, when he was making one of his attempts to escape his entanglement with Felice.

She was Swiss and unhappy, and they started to talk, and found they had a lot to talk about; and they took walks together, and chastely they were intimate. In their hotel, she was staying in the room above his, and he banged on her floor with the handle of a broom. For Dr K this was safe sex.

But the girl with the white rabbit does not give the hint of being in any way innocent.

## 29

Zürich, 09 February, 1918

Lüftner approaches the pond with his winter-stick and a sack. The stick's iron tip is a great help on frozen paths, and now he uses it to crack the ice – he raises his right arm and drives the stick down four times, and only stops when he has broken the crust. Then he pokes the fragments, moves them aside, and makes a hole.

Dr K notices that the sack is alive. It wriggles when Lüftner picks it up and holds it above the water. He drops it and pushes it down with his stick and keeps it below the surface, until he is sure that all movement has ceased. Then he drives the spike into the sack and lifts it up. He puts it back on the grass, kneels down and undoes the cord round its neck, and pours the dead pups onto the snow.

‘For the crows,’ he says, ‘spring won’t be here for some weeks yet. Have you ever eaten crow pie? They are much better than mice pies – whatever your Hermann says!’

‘As a vegetarian, no, I’ve never been tempted by either.’

Lüftner shakes his head and walks home, and so does K – the pond now seeming far colder than it did before.

\*\*\*

It’s a letter from the office. Dr K doesn’t like to receive them, because they always induce the same reaction – a fear of being recalled to Prague at once. So he doesn’t open it, he pushes it aside, and looks at the front page of the paper, which contains a denunciation of the communist negotiators at Brest Litovsk, *Who want neither peace nor freedom, but world revolution.*

And there’s the suggestion that Germany and Austro-Hungary can calmly wait for the emergence of an independent Ukraine to bring about more reasonable talks. Though the communists’ threats against, *White, bourgeois, murderous Finland*, suggest that an eastern peace treaty will remain elusive, and at best temporary.

Troubled by this – by the thought that the war will continue for years to come in one guise or another – K decides to read the letter. But he delays the moment by looking

for his sharp pocket-knife, so that he can neatly slit the envelop open. It should be in his pocket, but it isn't.

'You left it in the drawer by the window,' says the deer's head – guessing what he's rummaging for.

K nods his thanks, finds the knife, open the blade, cuts the paper, and unfolds the pages within. There's a friendly note from Marschner, and a copy of his official recommendation.

*To the Imperial and Royal police Headquarters in Prague.*

*In respect to the proposal pertaining to the honours for those wounded in service in the war, we request that Dr K, vice secretary of the Workers' Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia in Prague, is also included amongst the honourees. In addition to overseeing the agenda of the Actuarial Department, Dr K has also been responsible for the preparation and execution of the agenda of the Committee of Treatment and Therapy since 1915. He handles the correspondence relating to the establishment and operations of the sanatoriums. He bears particular responsibility for matters pertaining to the military psychiatric hospital operated by the State Office in Frankenstein.*

As K is all too aware, the reward is dependent on the police in Prague, and their colleagues in other cities, checking their files to ensure that there are no incriminating records. Should there be a mark against his name – even an anonymous accusation – he might not be rewarded; he might instead be left with a sense of uncertainty, that somewhere, someone has recorded something malign against his name.

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‘Irma’s engaged to be married!’ Says Ottla coming into K’s room with a letter from her cousin.

‘And he’s also Czech. She was given courage by my example, so she claims. It’s Gustav – Gustav Vesecky. Do you know him?’

‘No. Does that mean she’ll be leaving the shop and father?’

‘Yes, but I don’t think she’d get married just to escape.’

‘I hope not, though I fear she will, yet as I don’t know her Gustav perhaps I shouldn’t have any opinion.’

‘Anyway, father’s selling the business. And he’s signed the last document to buy the apartment block. Half a million crowns! He can afford that!’ To re-assure herself that was the price, Ottla re-reads the paragraph. ‘Yes – five hundred thousand.’

‘If I worked for fifty years without spending anything, and got some interest on my savings, I might have that much money,’ says K with a smile and a shrug.

‘Father could free you from the office – if he wanted. You spend so little.’

‘But he won’t, will he? He thinks I’m deliberately snubbing him by not trying to be rich. He thinks that writing books that sell 102 copies a year is the sign of a perverse son. And...’ K turns towards his desk, ‘And what will he think when he sees the dedication in my latest collection?’

And K shows Ottla the proofs he’s received from Kurt Wolff, which bear the subtitle: *Short Tales for my Father*.

Ottla laughs, kisses K on the crown of his head, and goes back to the goats.

\*\*\*

With a spade, a hatchet and a saw, K resumes his attack on the garden. Cutting away the taller weeds and thorn bushes is the most useful thing he can do while the snow persists; and it's warming work with the temperature below freezing and a sharp wind blowing. Before he returns to the city he wants to have a vegetable garden established. This now seems as important as writing his aphorisms. To grow food for the family, and defy his father with manual labour, would be a double triumph – he reflects again.

'Truth can be found at the end of a gardening spade!' The idea crosses his mind – but then he notices the shadow of a hat: a top hat.

'Rumour has it that he's fled – the Kaiser!' So Schwarzenbach says.

K straightens himself, and considers what he's just been told. 'Where?' he asks.

'It's because of the strikes in Berlin, and the thousands and thousands of people on the streets. He's taken fright! And fled south. Some say he's in Bohemian lunatic asylum. It's probably Frankenstein, as it's just over the border. And he receives his mail by Zeppelin.'

'That should make it easy for us to discover where he really is.'

'It should. Yes! You're right!'

And this thought is clearly a revelation; and he takes off his top hat, scratches his head, put his hat back on, and walks off – as if he's going to search the skies for an airship.

\*\*\*

Sitting by the kitchen fire, K remembers how he felt when he looked at the proofs of his first collection of short prose – of odd sketches that couldn't really be called stories. They all seemed insubstantial; it was as if he was trying to pass off vaguely recollected dreams as literature, and he expected exasperation and derision.



And now he feels the same looking at the sheets of *A Country Doctor*. Even though it's his fifth book, the print run won't be large; and for the first time K is glad for the lack of paper. A hundred readers or so, that would be enough to satisfy him. Then he thinks of his ambition to be able to live by writing – and he wonders if he could contrive to do this without troubling people with his books. If he devoted himself to writing obituaries – which were always anonymous – he could perhaps live as an invisible author. And it was a boom time for obituary writers.

Indeed, his collection contains a sort of obituary – and he starts to read it aloud. Ottla shifts in her chair to hear him better, though she doesn't interrupt her sewing; and K waits for her to get comfortable, and then starts reading again.

### *An Imperial Messenger*

*They say the Emperor, from his death bed, has sent you, a most lowly, distant subject, a message – and the message is only for you, they say.*

*And the messenger knelt by the Emperor, and the Emperor whispered in his ear, and he told the messenger to repeat the message: and the Emperor nodded – and only then did the messenger depart. He freed himself from the ceremony of the imperial death, for which even the walls of the imperial chamber had been broken down. And he went through the chamberlains to the first staircase. He swam through the crowd, a mighty swimmer; who, with his great arms, pushed people aside; and for stamina he had no equal; and on his chest he wore the imperial mark, and no one opposed him.*

*But there was no path to your gate, and so no fist beat upon your door.*

*Instead the messenger faced the inner palace. And the crowd was immense: it stretched as far as his eyes could see. And he forced his way through this endless throng, down the endless stairs, and across the endless courtyards.*

*But all to what avail? The crowd was ever pushing upon him. And the first palace lay within the second palace; and the second palace lay within the third palace. And there were ever more courtyards, ever more stairs, and ever more people – and so they stretched for an eternity.*

*Yet finally the messenger broke through the last door – but no, it could never happen: beyond the last palace lay the imperial city, and nobody could carry a message from a dead man across that, even in the span of one life.*

*And all you can do is sit at your window in the evening light, and dream of these events all too far away.*

And Dr K gives a slight bow to his sister.

And the imperial portrait behind him declares, ‘It was very nice, it pleased us very much.’

And Otlá and the deer’s head agree.

## 30

Michelob, 13 February, 1918

Across the train carriage, by the other window, there are two soldiers – a corporal and a lance corporal.

‘Guess what she showed me,’ the lance-corporal says.

'The usual?'

'You're wrong!'

'Fine,' says the corporal, and pulls out an almost empty packet of cigarettes. He takes one, and after a pause, stretches out his arm to offer the last to his comrade.

'She showed me her X-ray!'

'Never!'

'Stole it from the hospital, she did – no girl more naked!'

They finish their cigarettes in quiet contemplation.

'What will you do if they send you back to the front?' The corporal asks.

'The same as you – whatever you decide.'

'Even if I went for a walk – a long walk away from things.'

'Yeah!'

The corporal nods pensively, as if he's trying to decide what would be best.

'Have we got any orders, then?'

'Not yet; but we will.'

'And then we walk?'

'We walk.'

\*\*\*

The soldiers get off and a mother and two daughters get on. As the train lurches forward and gathers pace, the girls start to chant.

'Little red apple,

Round and round you go.'

And they stand up and turnabout twice.

‘The emperor fights,

But why he doesn’t know!

Once they staked Silesia and lost,

Now it’s everything – that will cost!’

And they throw themselves down as if dead.

‘No more today,’ the mother says, ‘I’ve heard it enough.’

\*\*\*

Given the contrast with the girls in the carriage, the two boys on the embankment look particularly ragged. K fears what’s about to happen – and it does.

As the train slows before a junction, the lads rush down the slope, leap across one railway track, and grab hold of some brackets by the train’s buffers and hoist themselves up – and then climb on to the roof and race forward, judging by the noise above K’s head.

But, as he expected, they’re spotted. There are two rifle cracks, and a third after a pause. And a few seconds later, K sees the boys on the ground with a few pieces of coal beside them.

The train goes round a bend, and he doesn’t know if they ever get up.

\*\*\*

A woman with a sack struggles to get off the train. Before K can ask if she needs help, another man has done the same – and is rewarded by a startled and fearful look. Yet then the sack gives way. A rent opens near the bottom and potatoes cascade out, bounce on the platform, and roll among the feet of the passengers.

There's mayhem. Ladies and gentlemen forget their gentility – they remind K of the pigeons in the yard squabbling over Ottla's rare kitchen scraps. And just as quickly all the food vanishes – as the woman with the sack screams. Then she runs after one man with bulging pockets, who walks quickly, and then runs himself. And taking their chance, and despite their clean coats and the danger of the train shifting, the two girls who sang the rhyme, slide off the platform, pass two potatoes each to their mother, who squashes them into a bag, before helping her daughters back up to safety.

'I can remember,' says the one-armed colonel beside K, 'when there were men here selling potatoes. And people would walk by indifferently. Now a potato seller would be ripped apart!'

'Yes, he would,' K agrees. 'A potato seller today could get a medal for bravery!'

'A posthumous one!'

And the colonel walks on with a shake of his head – until he sees a sergeant with no legs selling shoelaces. And he stops and buys a pair, and they exchange a few words.

And K stops too – saddened by the sight of men left as fragments of their former selves.

'How many whole men will be left in Prague by the end of the year?'

Asking himself that, he walks out of the station.

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After the film and before the newsreels the lights in the cinema are turned on – as far as the electricity supply allows. And while the pianist stands and stretches himself, a man in a greasy sheepskin coat gets up from his seat, hurries to the front, turns to face the audience, and waves his arms. People talk and ignore him.

‘Listen! Listen! Things are happening in the east!’ He shouts as loud as he can. ‘Now the maximum social programme has been implemented by Lenin, the resurrection of the Deads will begin!’

‘What!’ Somebody cries in amazement in the front row.

‘Communism means that the graves will open and the Deads will mingle with the living! The Deads will emerge! The Deads will return! A new world is here!’

‘The Deads!’ Comes a quizzical voice from behind K.

‘He can’t even talk proper!’

‘Looney!’

‘Lock him up!’

‘String him up – and let’s see him come back!’

‘The Deads are coming! That’s what communism means!’ Bellows the man in sheepskin.

And the shouts in reply get even louder, and the audience are far more entertained than they were by the film. And an elderly constable hobbles down the side-aisle.

Normally he’s powerless to do anything because comments are made in the dark, but now he can act, and arrest an agitator – though his face betrays that he is as amused as everybody else.

Seeing that he’s failed to stir people to rebel and embrace the Deads, the man in the greasy coat allows the policeman to lead him away by the arm; though not before he’s

shouted, 'You'll see!' a couple of times at the jeering faces – 'It's all going to be different! You'll remember me when it's too late!'

And dozens of voices answer him with a wide variety of insults, which continue to be repeated long after the velvet curtain has swung closed behind him.

Despite the hubbub the pianist returns to his stool, the lights are turned off, and a newsreel shows old footage of Austro-German forces advancing into Russia – and Russians surrendering behind a couple of fallen men. Then the film shows a long line of Russian prisoners waiting to be led somewhere, and the pianist plays Chopin.

'They always surrender when Chopin plays!' shouts the voice behind K.

'But when we tried it on the Eastern Front, they shot the pianist!'

The second voice is greeted with laughter, and further away his words are repeated, and the laughter rises up to the stalls and leads to cries of, 'Shoot the pianist!'

And the newsreel changes, and Austro-German forces are shown advancing into Italy. And Italians are shown surrendering amongst corpses. And the pianist plays Mahler.

'They always die when they hear Mahler!'

'So do I!'

'Mahler is worse than poison gas!'

'Yes! It's true! Mahler is deadly!'

'At least there are gas masks!'

The pianist plays on through the uproar – with such composure that K wonders if he has lost his hearing. And K studies his hands as they glide left and right in the flickering shadows cast from the screen. K rarely listens to music – indeed he says he 'watches music' as he is always fascinated by the way musicians move whilst playing; and if they could sway like that without the music, he would be even more content.

Around him the shouting and screaming continues.

\*\*\*

It is one of the most uncomfortable readings that K has experienced. And he isn't participating. He is sitting in the front row of the gathering of the Women and Girls' Jewish Club – which is well attended because it is held in the basement of the Palace Hotel, and it's a warm venue near the boiler room; and nobody disturbs those who doze at the back, as long as they don't snore too loudly, nor shriek too violently in their nightmares.

Though it is not the heat of the room which troubles K, nor the lack of attention to his story being read by Elsa Brod. It is the left hand of Max Brod that causes him concern, as it has found its way on to the right thigh of Hania Gerson. And Max has already mentioned that he is taking this new girlfriend to Vienna for a few days, to celebrate her birthday and also the acceptance of a theatre in Königsberg of Max's play, *A Queen Esther*.

K fears that Elsa Brod will interrupt the reading to assault her husband and his mistress. He accepts that for many of those present it would be more entertaining than listening to his words, but he suspects the repercussions would trouble them all for years.

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K is relieved to have escaped his friends, and feels little excitement over the praise heaped on him after the reading. He just sits in the spare bedroom in his parents' apartment and yearns for the countryside – until he rummages in a drawer, finds a scrap of paper, and pulls the stub of a pencil out of a waistcoat pocket.

*The decisive thing about this world is its transience. In this the centuries have no advantage over the present moment. The permanence of transience gives no consolation –*



*that new life flourishes out of the old, doesn't prove the tenacity of life, but rather the vitality of death.*

Can he struggle against this transience by some form of hope and faith? Dr K is extremely doubtful. Yet he feels less claustrophobic in his parents' home after scribbling some words.

## 31

Prague, 19 February, 1918

'You're going back to Zürau this morning?' His mother asks hoping he'll stay for one more day.

'I must get back,' says Dr K – which isn't true, except in the sense that he wants to flee the city. Prague in late winter seems a terrible place with its grey snow and grey people.

His mother kisses him, and sets off to take the place of the maid in the bread queue – which the girl joined at midnight.

'Take care,' he says, for recently two women died, and a dozen or so were taken to hospital, after somebody tried to push in.

'There are soldiers there now – it will be alright.'

Dr K remains standing at the window and watches his mother cross the square at the heart of the city, and go past his school and head towards his university.

'And my office is just five minutes away,' he reflects, and he raises his right hand and with his index finger makes a circle in the air.

‘My little world!’

Indeed it feels smaller than Zürau, which opens out to the fields and woods; whereas the centre of Prague is a village of stone surrounded by a desert of bricks.

Out of all the memories which clamour for attention, it’s those of his school which disturb him the most. He remembers when he was a little boy and escorted by the cook to its gate. She was a shrunken, dry, thin woman with a pointed nose, who had escaped from a tale by the brothers Grimm for his special torment – she threatened to tell his teacher how bad he was at home. Though he wasn’t particularly bad, just stubborn and contrary – or so his memory tells him. Yet he was certain she could concoct something out of his contrariness to impress the teacher; though he wasn’t certain she would have the courage to speak to a man who was widely respected, as the respect she enjoyed was as narrow as their home. But, whenever he said something to this effect, there would come from her meagre lips an assertion of her resolve – which had been tempered by his malicious nature, so the cook said.

And Dr K remembers that this struggle was repeated on every school day for a year – her threats and his pleading and then his resistance to going a step further. And she never did tell. Yet the fear, indeed the horror, seeped into his soul. And remains with him, whereas the taunts, threats and violence of the Czech boys in the school opposite were now faint – they were no more than an ugly back-drop to the drama of the cook’s torture.

However, in marked contrast, the person who stands out from his final school years is Adolf Gottwald – his teacher of physics and natural history. K’s preoccupation with him is relatively recent. Gottwald was a scientific preacher who claimed that, ‘Man is on the point of ascending to a higher cultural level.’ It was rare for a lesson to go by without him making this assertion.

Now K would like to ask him if he sees the world war as just some kind of awkward prologue to this great leap forward, or whether he has come to curse Darwin as some curse God. Since 1914 man has evolved into a trench dwelling creature – none of those experts who peered into the future saw such an animal looming.

‘Even the bread queues are deadly now,’ so Dr K reflects.

\*\*\*

‘Nothing in Prague is as valuable as this!’ says Max Brod when Dr K hands him a thick envelope containing all the fragments of his second failed attempt to write a novel.

‘I’m so glad to get it back. If this survives, it will all be remembered!’ And Max sweeps his right arm sideways to take in the concourse of the railway station.

K looks at the railway station and then at his friend.

‘Then burn it,’ he says.

‘You don’t value your own work enough; you’re the voice of our age.’

K sighs, looks at his shoes, and feels weighed down by the incessant praise. When he finally returns from Zürau, and resumes his office chores, will he have to face it every day? It’s a daunting prospect.

‘Our age deserves silence, nothing more is eloquent enough; so let’s be silent – and now I must certainly shut up and catch my train.’

And they shake hands, and K puts a coin in a beggar’s cap, buys a pair of shoelaces, and hurries to the platform.

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## **The Germans are Marching!**

According to *The Prague Daily* the new Ukrainian government has requested German help against Russia. Communists have seized Kiev and are attempting to return the country to the control of Moscow. Consequently, the German army is heading east and reached the outskirts of Kovel.

‘Peace on the Eastern Front, doesn’t seem to be any different to war on the Eastern Front,’ so Dr K reflects, ‘The abattoir is still in business. When will our victories bring victory?’

Like millions of others, K asks himself that each day.

The brown smoke rises up and finds its way through the gaps in the windows; there’s a dry screech of protest from every axle on the train; and then the carriages lurch forward as the engine accelerates, and the standing passengers lean back and hold tight.

\*\*\*

Dr K looks up from the horse drawn carriage at the bare branches overhead. The magpies are busy – as are the rooks further down the road. He marvels at the sight of creatures building their nests, when so much that is human is being destroyed. These birds of Bohemia know nothing of the world war – to creatures in black feathers, spring is spring. Dr K would like some black feathers. Thinking about the joys he might experience as a crow, he sways past the few houses of Zarch while the carriage negotiates the ice and potholes; but then his thoughts shift, and he studies the road ahead, and he wonders if she will be there.

And she is!

She holds up the white rabbit as a salute – though her pet doesn't seem to be altogether delighted. K smiles and waves.

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‘The doctor is a goodly man,  
God will forgive him all He can.’

That's their opinion in the Blue Star. They composed the lines in your honour.’

Ottla tells K with a laugh.

‘You were in the Blue Star?’

‘I was. I was there, by invitation, drinking!’

‘So – we're...’

‘Accepted. Yes. When I arrived some of them didn't regard me as worth talking to – and those that did talk to me, like Kunz and Lüftner, treated me like a little girl. Now I'm a farmer – in their eyes. And they like you too.’

‘Do they!’

‘They do. They'd be happy for you to stay – and me.’

‘Why shouldn't you stay?’

‘Well... I'm not sure how long I can carry on here. After all... what's our brother-in-law's intention for the place? Do you think he's going to invest any money in it?’

‘No – he'll just treat it like the asbestos factory. He'll pass on the burden, and complain if things go wrong.’

‘Therefore, it will always remain a little farm, I'm afraid to say. At best... perhaps it might just support itself – it will never make profit and expand. Staying here means depending on father's money in the bleak years – of which there'll probably be many.’

‘It won’t get any bigger; but I like it as it is.’

‘I do as well, for now. And I’m grateful for the opportunity. And I’m sorry that the man who should be running it got killed. Because he died in Serbia, I have his job. Naturally, I didn’t want that. None of us did – the women who’ve taken over. In some villages, half the farms are run by women. Some are widows; some aren’t. For a girl like me it’s a chance to be something else. I’m sorry it took a war; I’m sorry for all the dead. But it is my chance!’

‘Yes,’ K agrees again, ‘and you’re taking your chance.’

‘Kunz and Lüftner both think I could manage something bigger, if I studied at an agricultural college then moved elsewhere in Bohemia.’

‘Leave Zürau?’

‘Ultimately – yes.’

‘But... but it’s our other home... our home away from Prague.’

‘It’s not the only farm; it’s not the only village.’

‘It is the only farm; it is the only village,’ K says steadfast in his absurdity.

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Alone in his room K re-writes a story which he’s attempted before, but which has never taken a satisfactory shape.

## ***The Bridge***

*I was stiff and cold, I was a bridge, I lay over an abyss – on one side my hands, on the other my toes, fixed fast to the crumbling clay. By me dangled my coattails; in the*

*depths below murmured the ice-cold trout-stream. No tourist was fool enough to wander over these trackless heights; I was not marked on any map. So, I lay and waited; I had to wait; without crashing down no bridge can cease to be a bridge. But one evening, perhaps the first, perhaps the thousandth, I don't know, my thoughts were ever whirling, ever going round and round – but, towards an evening in summer, when the stream was already in the shadows, I heard the footsteps of a man. To me, to me! Brace yourself, bridge, get ready, you've no railings, but you must win the trust of the doubter, steady his insecure steps, and if he sways you must throw him to safety like a mountain-god! He came, his stick had an iron spike, I felt it; he straightened my coat tails, and rested his spike in my bushy hair while he gazed, most probably, far and wide. And then – while I was lost in his dream of mountains and valleys – he jumps with both feet onto the middle of my body! I'm shaken by the wild pain, bewildered. What is he? A child? An acrobat? A vagabond? A suicide? A hunter? A nihilist? And I turn myself about to see him. A bridge turning over! But before I've turned round, I've started to fall – down I go, and I'm torn and shattered on those rocks which always gazed up so peacefully amongst the raging water.*

32

Zürich, 05 March, 1918

'He looks shipwrecked!'

'Long way from any ship here!'

'But he's like some sort of stowaway. I used to sail to Shanghai from Trieste – I know the type. Where's he going?'

'Doubt if he knows himself.'

‘Does look completely lost.’

The man found sleeping under the statue of St Roch attracts a small crowd from the village, and he glances from face to face, as if he’s trying to decide who will be the first to hit him. He’s dressed in what might be the remains of a Russian uniform, but he appears to be Chinese.

‘Has he been working on some farm?’

‘Is he an escaped prisoner?’

‘Is he a spy?’

‘A spy! Here?’

‘Pretty hopeless spy if he is!’

Then Kunz arrives with his two Russians – men captured in 1915, who have been working for him since then. There’s a brief conversation which K doesn’t understand, but which makes the stranger appear a little less anxious.

‘He’s walking home,’ one of the Russians explains.

‘Where’s home?’

‘Mongolia,’ the other Russian says.

‘Each morning he walks towards the sun – if I’ve understood him.’

‘And he begs or does odd jobs each afternoon.’

‘Or steals, I bet,’ the blacksmith remarks. ‘I’ve lost tools – you can’t leave things out like you used to!’

‘He must have been in Germany.’

‘And he’s got this far in a month.’

‘If he follows the sun too far each day, he’ll make his journey even longer.’



‘He’s barely begun,’ says Kunz. ‘Take him home, give him something to eat, and he can sleep in the stables if he wants.’ And the rest of the villagers seem happy enough with that decision, and go about their business with only a few backward glances.

Yet Kunz lingers and catches K’s eye – he is somebody to discuss the news with, somebody who listens.

‘There’ll be many more. There are hundreds of thousands of Russian prisoners. If they all decide to head east, who’s going to stop them? Our authorities can’t even cope with our own prisoners returning from Siberia or wherever. In some places in Moravia, I’ve been told, they’ve formed bands and taken over districts – they plague farms.’

‘Our authorities are occupied with Galicia,’ K remarks.

‘Yes, true – they’re panicking at the strikes and the insubordination. And people there, so I’ve been told by someone reliable – very reliable – want an independent police force, and some officials have filed the crowns from their buttons. Filed the crowns off their buttons! Can you imagine that?’

‘And they have so many buttons on their uniforms – particularly ticket inspectors,’ says K and his smile passes to the lips of Kunz.

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The weather has turned for the better. Indeed K writes down the word ‘glorious’ three times, and he wants to get into the garden – after the cold and hunger of the winter he feels he should be out and making himself busy, and his body yearns for the light. Yet he owes Max Brod a letter. His friend has been complaining about the lack of post from Zürau. Max evidently resents that K has been in the countryside so long, and feels that he is entitled, at the very least, to weekly notes.

K has tried to write. Three times he has begun a letter, though he couldn't find his way to writing something, when he really wants to say nothing. Max has been trying to debate marriage with him – in particular the notion that marriage is the central problem for Kierkegaard. And K doesn't know how to respond, given his own inability to get married, and Max's inability to stay loyal to his wife. Kierkegaard and weddings isn't a subject to which his mind will respond willingly. Though K has been reading him in recent weeks, and in the past considered that 'his case is similar to mine' – but now he regards the Dane as, *a distant star shining over a land which is almost inaccessible*. Or so he jotted down in a notebook.

Yet somehow K manages to write a long letter, and he tells Max that he is right, and blames the 'stillness' from which he suffers as the cause of his failure to finish a letter before; indeed he blames this on the barrenness of his life; though actually he thinks it is his life – his natural life – and that a remote cottage, and just a monthly visit from a postman, would be ideal.

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Dr K is shovelling goat shit and he's happy. The goats look at him with some incredulity, but still he continues, and loads his wheelbarrow with all he can find. If he knew how, he would encourage the goats to contribute a little more, but he's uncertain as to how he might explain himself. So, grateful for what he has received, he stows his shovel, grasps the barrow's handles, and trundles to the vegetable garden and sweats in the sun.

Yet he discovers that he can't manure the garden as deeply as he would like. Below the surface the soil is still cold and hard, therefore he can only mix the shit with the top couple of inches. He assumes it is still doing some good, and doesn't want to interrupt his

work to go and discuss what would be best – for above all he wants to feel his hands get sore and for even more sweat run down his back: K wants to be a labourer.

Fortunately, there are still some bushes that need to be cleared, and cut up small for kindling for their stoves; and after he's done that he scratches the planned divisions of their garden in the earth – ensuring, of course, that many square yards are reserved for potatoes.

And then he comes to a halt because, sheltered from the wind by the garden shed, he finds three snowdrops opening. They are enjoying the sun as much as he is – and Dr K kneels down to study them closely.

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*The actions are brilliantly executed, so that all of our forces, directed in the same direction, serve the same goals.*

Or, at least, that is what *The Prague Daily* claims is happening in the Ukraine. Dr K is sceptical as to whether such co-ordination could ever be achieved in any sphere under the control of the Viennese government – having men move in the same direction in pursuit of the same goal is an utter contradiction of the Viennese spirit, in K's experience.

And, significantly, the article doesn't hint as to when peace in the east will mean the withdrawal of Habsburg soldiers, and the appearance of more and better bread in Bohemia. Though a mention of *violent communist gangs* on page three does suggest that these things are remote: that violence and hunger will continue.

And next to this article there is a blank space – which reveals a last-minute act of censorship, and K's imagination can't help but try and fill the gap. Did the article say that peace will require more soldiers than war, as the collapse of all authority meant that there was nobody to protect the farms and the grain-trains?

It's a concern that has become sharply pressing for K and Ottla, as Irma's latest letter from Prague tells of a hunger riot aimed at Jewish traders – which spread to engulf all those who looked Jewish and happened to be passing-by.

‘If the authorities can't control the streets of Prague, what chance do they have of imposing peace on the vast farms over there?’

K doesn't have an answer to the question, and Ottla just frowns.

And he is also perplexed by a comparatively trivial problem. Kurt Wolff seems to have lost interest in his latest book. Since last summer he's allowed the publication to dawdle, and now all motion has come to a stop. He hasn't responded to K's first set of corrections – not even with a postcard. In itself this wouldn't be so troubling; yet K has received an offer from another publisher, Erich Reiss, for a work of fiction, and he has nothing else to send apart from his *Country Doctor* collection of tales. Therefore he has to make a decision. And he does owe Kurt Wolff a degree of loyalty – but if the man doesn't want his work anymore, then switching would make sense, yet to write to Wolff and make the suggestion would amount to an ultimatum however it was phrased, and all delays might be a consequence of the war and not indifference. Sitting in their kitchen in Zürau it was hard to tell. If Max Brod were there he would tell K what to do. But he isn't, and in any case K would rather talk to Ottla. And having already explained the matter to her three times, K doesn't need to go into the details.

‘Wolff or Reiss?’ he asks.

‘Give Wolff until the middle of the month to contact you again. It's possible our postman has taken to eating letters – he's that savage. Perhaps Wolff wrote and the letter didn't arrive. Send him a brief note with a few words about our postman. If nothing else, it will amuse him.’

‘Ottla knows best!’ So says the deer's head and the dead emperor agrees.

\*\*\*

Flitsch is a lieutenant no more. He wears the insignia of a captain, but as he explains to K at their corner table in the Blue Star, his promotion to major has been confirmed now that he is in charge of a training camp. Yet the change has left him no happier.

‘Lads marching to the station before dawn, and singing as they pass through the gate, and on down the hill – singing in the dark. It makes me cry. The recruits think I’m a bastard. I’ve got to convince them it’s no game, you see. They’re only lads. Just lads! Schoolboys dressed as soldiers. Boys singing soldiers’ songs! Some I’ll see again as instructors – in this war you become a veteran quickly. A good wound! A wound that leaves you able to teach but not fight, that’s a good wound. I got mine and a medal to match. You see this?’

Captain Flitsch points to the decoration, and K congratulates him, then asks, ‘Was that won in Italy?’

Flitsch just nods before continuing. ‘Saved my life – I’m sure. A medal and a wound. And those lads, going to the same thing – I can’t help it, being tearful, when they can’t see me. Bloody war! And the Russians have given up, Serbia has been occupied, and the Italians were beaten at Tagliamento – why is Austria still fighting? Why are we fighting any more? Yet what use is peace to us? Family business, you see. A family business with my brothers. My brothers... you see...the oldest in Palestine, he got a slight wound – a severe infection followed. He’s in a grave I’ll probably never see. Not even his grave! And the youngest has shell shock – he’s in an institution; he’s in Frankenstein. Have you heard of it?’

‘I helped set it up.’ K says looking down, reticent to claim any merit for himself.

'You're a writer?'

'At night. During the day, in Prague, I work for the Workers Accident Insurance Institute, and we have wide responsibilities during the war.'

'You set up the psychiatric hospital?'

'I was one of the committee.'

Captain Flitsch looks at K in gratitude, shuts his eyes to try and prevent his tears, and pours his double schnaps down his throat. But the tears come.

'I'll have to stop this when I'm a major.'

To give him some moments to dry his face, K goes to the barman, exchanges a few words, then comes back with two more doubles.

In his embarrassment Flitsch drinks quickly. And evidently wants to escape and be alone to weep. 'Time to go!' he says, 'We mustn't get hammered as we did before!'

K drinks up and follows him out – and Barnabas waves cordially from the bar.

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He has four large sheets of thin paper, a ruler and a sharp knife; and soon he has a pile of slips that might be mistaken for the skin of onions, but they will serve his purpose. K starts to work his way through his notebooks and copies out those aphorisms which seem to have some value. For now he doesn't need to worry about the order of them, he can just jot down and revise any which appeal. He picks one up at random.

*Our art results from the blinding nature of truth – the light on the grotesque face as it slips away is true, nothing else.*

Is it really worth keeping? K asks himself and holds the slip of paper above a candle. A dog barks in the dark and K gets up to see if another wanderer has arrived in the village.

He can see nobody – not even the dog.

K decides to postpone his work, puts all of the slips in the drawer of his desk, and goes to bed.

Agatha the cat keeps watch.

### 33

Zürich, 18 March, 1918

*‘That’s why your father worries about you both being poor.’*

Ottla glances up from their mother’s letter and looks at K standing by the kitchen window. He’s gazing out towards the pond and the church, yet he’s listening.

‘But I’m not poor,’ he says turning to face her.

‘By his standards you are – and for him money offers a way out.’

‘A way out to where?’

‘Anywhere – that’s the old thought, isn’t it? If you’ve money, you can bribe the border guard, bribe the police in the new country, pay for the necessary documents, and set up shop and start trading.’

‘He regrets not going to New York when he was young – like so many of our relatives – or somewhere else in America. Instead he stayed in Prague.’ K sits down.

‘Has he ever said that to you?’

‘No – but judging by how he talks of Jews who moved there, I suspect he’s troubled. He has his regrets, I’m sure.’

‘Then you’d be writing in English.’

‘And we’d be on the other side in the war.’

‘They have more food.’

‘I’d still be very thin.’

‘But being thin in English doesn’t seem so thin as doing it in German,’ says Otlá with a smile. And K is slightly perturbed that his sister has started to talk like him. He is concerned for her future – so her next comment is not completely unwelcome.

‘With a skill though, with knowledge of some trade or occupation – farming, for example – we’d also stand a chance of being accepted elsewhere, and starting again. If I went to agricultural school, I would have something to offer – Palestine, Australia, the Argentine, or wherever – I might be allowed in and I could get by without knowing the language to start with. You see that, don’t you?’

‘Could I stay on your Australian farm?’

‘Yes.’

‘With a kangaroo?’

‘Yes.’

‘Would he talk to me – this kangaroo?’

‘Yes.’

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The soil is a little softer and K can work the manure a little deeper into the ground. Then he stands back to admire his progress. His coat and jacket are hanging from nails that



he bashed into the side of the shed, and he's rolled up his shirt sleeves, but he's kept on his country cap to shield his eyes from the sun.

Then he sees a top hat moving above a distant hedge, and then his friend steps into the light and makes an impressive silhouette before striding down the path.

'I've been reading!'

'That's good,' K says guardedly.

'I found a book in that ruined house by the abandoned track. It's an ancient and holy book. Listen to this, *He's in prison now, being punished, and the trial doesn't even begin till next Wednesday, and of course the crime comes last of all. And naturally, they'll find a crime for him that fits his punishment. It's much easier that way round.* What do you think – isn't it all so true?'

K smiles and asks, 'Would the name of the ancient and holy book be, *Alice Through the Looking Glass?*'

'It would – and I think there's a religion founded on it. But you're working, and I'm chatting, and so I'll leave you and go and read some more. I also found a copy of *Little Dorrit.*'

'Now there is something which is unquestionably holy – I would rather take an oath upon that than any other book,' says K as he touches his cap deferentially, before shovelling some more shit and digging it in.

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Now he's without his waistcoat. It's dangling from a third nail. But he believes he's finished for the day. He's used all of the manure, and his hands are sore, and he can feel his lungs labouring. And he thinks of the doctors, and his friends, who would have

him dispatched to a sanatorium, and he frowns at their blindness. Enough money to live on modestly, time to himself, and a garden – that's all he needs and all he wants.

He turns towards the shed and there he sees the girl with the white rabbit. And she has evidently been watching him – and judging by her face, she's enjoyed the spectacle.

K drives his fork into the soil as she approaches, and she hands him a small sack. 'The postman left them in a kennel. I think he's going mad. But we won't get a replacement during the war.'

K takes the sack, looks inside and sees a package and three letters, and he looks up, and she kisses him on the lips – as if it was the most natural thing to do – and walks away without a word.

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In the kitchen Dr K considers the postman. He delivered letters addressed to Ottla to their house, but the post addressed to K, he put in a kennel. Is the postman a symbolist, or a hater of civil servants, or just an honest-to-God lunatic? K tries to answer this as he takes out everything from the girl's sack.

One of the letters is from his boss, Pfohl, thanking him for the meat from the village. Again Lüftner's hunting has come to his aid, as K was able to answer an urgent request with a present of partridges – and some eggs as well, which his boss doesn't mention. Therefore K wonders if they didn't reach him – he suspects that their courier had to bribe a policeman guarding against the illegal import of food from the countryside. And if senior officials are reduced to breaking the law to starve a little less, then what hope is there for the regime?

Dr K is surprised that he's heard no reports of cannibalism. However, he muses, when people are thin they don't appear appetising. Even so K suspects that soon the empire will devour itself.

He makes a pot of tea from nettles. The official tea has now no tea at all, so the villagers simply go into the woods and help themselves to nettles. Will any nettles be left after another wartime winter? He wonders about this, as he eats two cold turnips, which he saved from last night's dinner. Yet he has gained weight in Zürau, but he expects to lose it again when he returns to Prague. Then perhaps somebody will try and drive him into the hands of doctors at a sanatorium. K would prefer tuberculosis and starvation – but he never says this to Ottla. He keeps his recalcitrance to himself.

The second letter is something of a mystery – K doesn't recognise the handwriting and it's bears the post-stamp of a city where he knows nobody. He turns the envelope about to look for further clues, but finds none. Finally he takes his pocket knife and slits it open – then he peers in, and sees it's a typed letter with the letterhead from some office. He holds the envelope so that the single sheet inside slips onto the kitchen table.

Given his former delight in letters, his behaviour in Zürau is odd, but now the outside world seems a threat. Yet this letter is superficially something pleasant. Another publisher, Paul Cassirer, has written to him to ask about his current book – for he has assumed that K is always busy writing – and he offers to consider it favourably for publication.

And he still hasn't replied to the offer from Erich Reiss!

People now, without any contact from him, are scrambling for his work. K looks at the geese and the ducks on the pond – he watches them slowly circle each other. Then he thinks about the publishers in their offices in the dust and dirt of cities.

And he opens the package – it's what he was hoping to find: the corrected version of his short stories from Kurt Wolff. K doesn't have to make a decision – he can continue with his current publisher. It's a great relief.

The third letter is from Max Brod – who praises the sanatorium in Davos, urges K to go there, and then complains that K's previous letter to him lacked any personal details. His friend doesn't insist explicitly on weekly reports covering all aspects of K's life, but under the surface the demand is there.

K has a little scream.

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It's dusk and the black water becomes even blacker – the Zarch looks cold and fierce now it's swelled by melting snow. And Dr K looks down from the bridge and regrets that soon he will be crossing the Charles Bridge in Prague – which, though widely famous, has no appeal for him, and if he were never to see it again he would be glad.

Slightly to his surprise, the prospect of a return to his old life has spurred him to draft a communist manifesto: *The Brotherhood of Poor Workers*. Though it's more a set of regulations, than a proclamation to inspire others. His rules stipulate that members should have no money and no valuables, and should work for the common good as the needs of the brotherhood required, and that they should eat the simplest foods and wear the simplest clothes.

It's a wartime fantasy – in that it assumes a soldierly discipline and sense of comradeship. Yet it could also be called a monastic manifesto – but it would be a monastery without God.

Writing it was a brief escape from the present and the immediate future – a holiday inside his head. But as he thinks about a society governed by his rules, the idea begins to take on a new form – K sees a man inside this brotherhood, a wayward brother. He sees him in his mind's eye.

Then a cart comes down the road. It's an old four wheeled vehicle, pulled by two lean horses and occupied by one ragged man, who stops the cart and leans over perilously far towards K. He wears a fur cap that seems to have been chewed by a dog, and his beard is equally dishevelled, but it's his glasses which particularly catch K's attention, as their frame is tied together by string, and they also seem to be tied to the man's ears – for the strings disappear under his cap on both sides.

'I need to go to the railway station!' he says as if K were an obstacle – and now his smell becomes evident, it's the odour of damp hounds. Surprised by the abrupt question, K takes a few seconds to think which station is closest, and the delay makes the man stare all the harder.

'Just follow this road to Zürau,' K finally tells him, 'and take the turning to the left at the church. And that will take you over the Goldbach and on to Lischwitz. And there ask the way to Michelob.'

'Zürau! Lischwitz! Michelob!' says the man with such vehemence that he seems to want to leave the words and the places wrecked. And he sits up straight and looks down at K. 'I had a farm, you know!'

K didn't know – the man's a stranger.

'A good farm in Galicia,' he continues, 'until the Hungarians arrived, and they brought the Russians, and they brought the Germans. My farm was a battlefield twice over! When will you have enough of this? When will the Jews have made enough money out of the war to let us have peace? Jews!'

And having spat out his last word, he flicks the reins, and the horses trot on, and the carriage rolls away.

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Night is always the best time to read over his notebooks and wonder about the things he has written – the ideas he has explored. K has found he can write his aphorisms during the day, but for editing he prefers the night. Yet he isn't only concerned with creating a collection to make into a new type of book. There are the longer passages to reconsider.

*I've vigorously absorbed what is negative in this age – an age which is unavoidably close to me, and which I have no right to struggle against; indeed, I can only represent this age. Its few positive features, and those which are extremely negative – yet which capsize into the positive – are matters of which I have inherited nothing. I haven't been guided in life by the now slack and failing hand of Christianity – as Kierkegaard was – nor have I managed to catch hold of the hem of the Jewish prayer shawl – as the Zionists have. I'm an end or a beginning.*

After which he finds something more characteristic.

*He felt it at the brow of his head, as the wall feels the sharp end of the nail which is about to be hammered in – so, he didn't feel it yet.*

And then his notebook has three entries on the same theme.

*Death's cruelty consists of it bringing the real sorrow of the end, but not the end.*

*The greatest cruelty of death – an apparent end brings a real sorrow.*

*Death is our salvation, but not this death.*

Should he include any of those in his collection? He's tempted to leave them out. Yet he decides to include the note which follows.

*With the strongest light it's possible to make the world vanish. Yet for those with weak eyes it appears solid; for those with weaker eyes still it grows fists; and for those with the weakest eyes, if they dare glance at it, then – out of embarrassment – it will smash them with those fists.*

K is ever more convinced that the world is just some distortion of another world elsewhere. Therefore Agatha and the mice she eats are merely symbols – just like himself. K gets into bed and wonders if the mice could be consoled by such a thought. And thinking of a story to encapsulate their fate, K slips into a dream – within the dream of the world.

Zürau, 09 April, 1918

‘There were five of them in the hamlet, in Zarch, and they demanded food. They didn’t ask for it – they demanded it!’ Lüftner is agitated and flicks the whip at the pair of horses ahead of them, and they accelerate from a walk to a trot, and K sways back slightly in his seat.

‘Five Czech deserters roaming about and living off the land – our land! They had knives! Fortunately the farmers had guns. They gave them food and a warning – and the deserters vanished. But where are there now? And how many more are working their way west?’

‘All the reports I’ve heard, are from further east,’ Dr K says in a reassuring tone, which evidently doesn’t reassure Lüftner.

‘They’ve even taken over some districts – gangs descend together! There is going to be trouble. The shotgun is in that compartment. Loaded!’

Lüftner puts the whip in its holder, and lifts the lid so that K can see the gun within, and he points to the safety catch.

‘Just flick that back and squeeze the triggers – let him have both barrels!’

‘Who?’

‘Whoever tries to stop us.’

‘And you’ll find a revolver in the box at the end of the seat. And I’m carrying two – one in a holster; one in a pocket.’



K looks at the rolling hills on either side of the valley, and tries to see them with Lüftner's eyes – and spot places where desperate men will be lurking in ambush. But it seems unreal. All he can discern is the countryside in spring.

K is still glad that he accepted Lüftner's offer – to go with him to deliver a mare to a stallion some fifteen miles away. Yet he is surprised to find himself riding shotgun. K studies Lüftner, and notes the seriousness that now marks his face – he is evidently a hunter who feels hunted, and peers at every corner and every bush with suspicion.

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### **Attack on Amiens –**

#### **New Success in France : German Offensive in Palestine**

*The Prague Daily* of a few days before is lying on the kitchen table when K returns home. He glances at the news of a massive attack against the British in the west, and a much smaller operation in the Middle East. And another article tells him of the German support for the Whites in Finland against the Reds. There are triumphs everywhere, so Dr K reads.

Then he picks up the two letters that are waiting for him. One is from his office. He puts this aside. K studies the other envelope. It has been forwarded from Prague. On the back is the name of the sender – Otto Bretschneider – and a return address. K doesn't know anybody called Bretschneider, and he puts the letter down carefully, eats half a dozen almonds and has a sip of water.

Having composed himself he takes out his pocket knife and slips open the envelope. He shakes out the letter on to the table. It's typed. K unfolds the two sheets of paper.

Otto Bretschneider begins with praise. It seems as if he writes as one of K's small number of devoted readers. Yet all his terms are general and he makes no reference to any of K's work. Indeed so vague is the enthusiasm that it could be addressed to any number of contemporary authors. But the second sheet gets to the meat of the matter. Dr K is invited to join a Greater Austria Association – aimed at uniting all the German speakers of the empire in one state. The suggestion is that this would be an entity within the Habsburg realm, but implicitly there's the idea of breaking away and forming a new country.

And K wonders if Bretschneider is a police spy trying to test his loyalty given his nomination for an imperial award. K puts the letter back in its envelope, and this in a pocket of his jacket.

The second letter is the one he has been dreading ever since he moved to Zürau. It's from Marschner, confirming the date of his return to work, and expressing his director's joy at the prospect.

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At twilight K reviews his aphorisms again – 'The achievement of my days here,' he remarks to himself in his room with a tone of irony. He decides that he should allocate the slips of paper to one of three categories: outright rejection, possible rejection, grudging acceptance.

Those K rejects completely he burns at once – to avoid the possibility of an appeal. And Agatha, by the stove, is content at each slight addition of warmth. Those aphorisms he possibly rejects, he strikes through with a pencil, and so indicates that each needs to be revised. The ones he can tolerate he shoves in a drawer.

All those that mention God go straight to the flames, with one exception.

*A man can't live without faith in something indestructible within him; though he might be unaware of this indestructible thing and this faith; and this lack of awareness can lead to faith in a personal god.*

To K's mind it suggests that faith in a god is a misunderstanding, but an error that hints at something essential. K isn't satisfied with it, and puts a line through his words, but the aphorism does begin to say something he wants to express.

Then he lights his desk lamp as the last traces of daylight are vanishing, and his two candles are no longer sufficient for him to read his own handwriting. And he puts all of the aphorisms that need to be re-worked into a large envelope, and gets out the tolerable aphorisms from his drawer. K is struck by the number that refer to the Garden of Eden and the expulsion of Adam and Eve into the world. Yet the story in Genesis has God at its centre, but K has burnt the aphorisms that dealt with God. Man's fall without God – the exile from Paradise without a divine eviction – doesn't make much sense. Who ordered the expulsion if not God? K has left a gap at the heart of the story. It's an absurdity. Yet K feels he is consistently absurd. His story called *Metamorphosis* was about an insect-son who wanted, impossibly, the love of his family; his first attempt at a novel, *America*, was about the attempt to start a new life by a character for which this was clearly unachievable; K's second attempt at a novel, *The Trial*, was about the search for justice from senior judges who could never be found. Always K is drawn to write about the pursuit for something which is out of reach – about a futile quest.

He smiles, dips his pen in his ink, and writes a new aphorism.

*Nothing is harder than searching for a black cat in an unlit room at night, particularly if the cat is not there.*

The hunt for the non-existent creature matches his scepticism about the world about him as he sits in a small circle of light in an obscure village – the solid, fleshy world is a comforting dream, when it's not a nightmare, or so K thinks.

Yet he puts this new effort in the stove, even before the ink is dry. Then he sits down again, but his back tells him that he is about to suffer another delusion.

'You do not exist,' K says before turning round to face Heinrich and Georg.

'That's right, we don't,' they say together with smiles that are very similar to their brother's.

'We don't exist in this world anymore,' Heinrich says.

'We're just soldiers,' Georg adds.

'Couldn't imagine anything else now.'

'We've found our vocation.'

'But we're on leave.'

'But we'll go back.'

'Unlike some.'

'Unlike many.'

'We've reached a lull.'

'In the Ukraine.'

'Our comrades won't advance any further.'

'We've taken over a convent school.'

'Without the schoolgirls.'

'Unfortunately!'

'But with solid walls.'

'And wide grounds...'

'... which we've filled with barbed wire and machine gun posts.'

‘And in the territory beyond we let the enemy fight.’

‘But the enemy isn’t our enemy anymore.’

‘There are communists...’

‘... and socialists.’

Ukrainian nationalists...’

‘... and Russian nationalists.’

‘And anarchists...’

... and bandits.’

‘But we’re neutral...’

‘...as long as we’re fed.’

‘So it isn’t really soldiering...’

‘... not compared with the past...’

‘... and the future.’

‘It’s more like theatre.’

‘The same actors keep appearing in different uniforms.’

‘A Ukrainian nationalist can turn socialist...’

‘... and then anarchist.’

‘And there are refugees...’

‘... moving in all directions.’

‘Seeking refuge...’

‘... where there is none.’

‘And there’s a shortage of vodka...’

‘...and men have taken to drinking eau de cologne instead.’

‘And we’re supposed to impose order on chaos.’

‘We just impose a sort of tax.’

‘Because our own bread ration has been halved...’  
‘... since last year.’  
‘And our uniforms are falling apart.’  
‘Even the new uniforms disintegrate.’  
‘And too many men have seen too much.’  
‘There’s a pilot, to give you an instance.’  
‘There was a pilot.’  
‘Who told wonderful tales of fights above the Alps...’  
‘... of planes spinning down burning...’  
‘... onto glaciers.’  
‘But he’d lost his nerve...’  
‘... and needed a desk job.’  
‘Yet with so few pilots...’  
‘... they kept him flying.’  
‘Though he said he’d come to feel like a dragon-fly.’  
‘A giant insect...’  
‘... up in the air with wings about him...’  
‘... killing other insects that buzzed and hummed.’  
‘His mind was sorely troubled.’  
‘And his plane didn’t help.’  
‘Fokker Dr1’  
‘A triplane...’  
‘... which is notorious for its wings dropping off...’  
‘... in mid-air.’  
‘And the ersatz engine oil often seizes the engine...’

‘... thousands of feet above the ground.’  
‘And in this death-trap this pilot performed...’  
‘... aerial acrobatics...’  
‘... seemingly intent on suicide.’  
‘Yet the engine didn’t over-heat...’  
‘... but the wings came off...’  
‘... and he fell to earth.’  
‘We watched...’  
‘... and cleared up the mess...’  
‘... and buried him.’  
‘Nicely done, it was.’  
‘Though didn’t you write a story about a man-insect?’  
‘You did!’  
‘Now life is imitating art.’  
‘You must be proud!’

And they smile in a teasing sort of way.

‘I’m not!’ K cries out; then he looks from face to face as his brothers light their cigarettes, stand up, nod good-bye and leave.

‘I’m not!’ he shouts after them – and disturbs the cat.

Then K goes to the window, and watches Heinrich and Georg walk across the green until they are briefly silhouetted by the pond; and there they stop and wave to him. And he waves back – concerned about their fate amongst the anarchy of the Eastern Front.

Zürau, 27 April, 1918

‘Aim lower!’ Lüftner shouts at Otlá.

She fires again and this time – her third attempt – she hits the flower pot; and Lüftner is satisfied. He takes the snub-nosed revolver from her hands, spins the chamber, shows how to reload, and makes her take all of the bullets out, put them back in, and click home the safety catch.

K watches and admires his proficiency and her ability to learn at once.

‘And don’t go anywhere without it – and without these!’ And Lüftner hands over a small bag, which K assumes to be spare ammunition.

‘I doubt if I’ll need it, but thank you,’ she says.

‘If they know you’re armed, they’ll probably just fade away and rob someone else.’ And Lüftner shrugs and turns and goes, without explaining exactly who ‘they’ are – but given the increasing number of men roaming the countryside, trying to get home, or trying to get anywhere with food, he doesn’t need to. ‘They’ are outsiders – who he assumes are always marauders.

Then Lüftner stops and turns and says, ‘That’s all the ammunition I have for that, but I’ve plenty of other guns if you need them. Would you like a hunting rifle?’

‘No! That’s fine. Thank you. I’m fine with this,’ and Otlá smiles in an attempt to reassure Lüftner, who finally leaves.

Brother and sister look at the revolver, which neither of them had requested – but accepting it was easier than arguing with their anxious neighbour.



‘I’ve got a small bag, a satchel – I’ll carry it in that. Then, if he sees I’ve obeyed his instructions, perhaps he won’t load me down with rifles.’

K picks up the pieces of the flower pot and takes them to the shed.

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It’s planting day – planting day for carrots, turnips and radishes. It’s their second planting day – the first was The Day of the Potato. A day specially marked by K in their calendar. They’d picked Good Friday, because Mařenka told them the Devil had no power over potatoes if they were planted then. And K thanked her, and accepted that it was a danger he hadn’t considered – though several of his aphorisms did mention Satan’s influence.

And now, with the potatoes growing beneath their feet, brother and sister devote hours to sowing their next crop. K is sad because he won’t be in the village to harvest them, but he’s happy to be doing such vital work – even if his back creaks after an hour of bending and digging. And sweat is running down the faces of both of them. They pause and rest.

‘Do you still want to leave here and study farming?’ K asks.

Ottla looks at him, before replying, evidently concerned that her answer might spoil the harmony of their day.

‘I feel I must if I’m to have a future as a farmer.’

‘Then you should do it – and I’ve money enough in the bank to help you.’

Ottla’s face shows amazement and gratitude and she holds K tightly.

‘Wherever I am – on whatever farm – there’ll be a room for you.’

‘Thank you,’ he says – and he is grateful to know he can always escape Prague. ‘But what about your man, Josef? Will you run a farm together, and would he want me there?’

‘He likes you. He’s told me – more than once. And I’m sure he’d be glad for your company. And we’ve talked of farming, but everything is so uncertain, isn’t it? I just pray that he survives and comes back to me. And then we will get married.’

Ottla had never spoke so directly about this, and she studies her brother’s face for some sign of distaste – of aversion to the prospect of a Christian and Czech brother-in-law.

‘Congratulations!’ he says and smiles without any ambiguity, ‘May your future be happy and fruitful.’

And they plant more radishes, more carrots, and more turnips.

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K is standing in the shed with his hands in the small of his back. He’s put away their tools and now he is trying to stand straight – but it’s hard.

The door opens, and K assumes it will be Ottla, with some tool he has overlooked; but it’s not, it’s the girl with the white rabbit. And, for the first time, he sees her put the rabbit down – on a table. And she pulls out a cabbage leaf from a pocket, and offers it to her pet. Then she goes back to the door, closes it, turns the key in the lock, and approaches K without saying a word.

He remains half bent forward with his hands behind him, which means his head is at the right height for a kiss without her having to stretch.

Rabbit interrupts his snack, and says, ‘I’ll avert my eyes, and close my ears as far as I can – and if that doesn’t work I’ll munch loudly.’

Dr K's back hurts.

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There are not many more nights left before K must return to Prague, and he wants to complete his last work of fiction before he goes – which means checking the proofs of *A Country Doctor* so that they can be posted to Kurt Wolff. K is still being pestered by other publishers and magazines – despite the war the demand for his work is increasing. He can only assume that those pamphlet-books which bear his name are being passed from hand to hand. There have been some re-printings, yet he feels that the interest in him is excessive for the number of copies sold. And he has reached the end – he has resolved to write no more short stories, and certainly won't make another attempt at a novel.

K wants to get this final book published and then announce his retirement – or just vanish as a writer. However he wants his last book to be as polished as possible, and again he reads the fable called *Before the Law*.

*Before the law stood a doorkeeper, and before the doorkeeper stood a man. And the man asked to enter, but the doorkeeper said, 'No, not just now, but perhaps later. Perhaps.'* And the man looked past him impatiently. And the doorkeeper invited him to try and enter without permission. 'But I am powerful,' he said. 'And before the next hall is a doorkeeper more powerful than me. And I cannot even face the gaze of the third doorkeeper.' And the man was puzzled by this entrance to the Law, but he accepted the offered stool, and sat and waited. For days and years he waited. And slowly, piece by piece, he handed to the doorkeeper everything he possessed. And the doorkeeper accepted each gift with the same words, 'I take this only so that you will not feel that something has

*been left undone.' And the man wasted away, but the doorkeeper remained upright and strong. And finally, when the man had shrunk to almost nothing, he said to the doorkeeper, 'Tell me, in all these years nobody else has approached this door. Why is that?' And the doorkeeper, seeing death nearby, bent down and told him, 'This door was for no one but you. And now I'm going to shut it.'*

For K this contains all that he was trying to say in his botched novel – *The Trial*. So why strive any more with all those fragments – all those disjointed chapters? The door closing in this story marks the end for him as a public author. He might continue in private to strive with his aphorisms, and so define his ideas – but it will be a solitary struggle until the end.

So Dr K resolves.

## 36

Prague, 2 May, 1918

In bed in his parent's apartment K searches for a handkerchief, finds one in a pocket, and spits out some blood. Then he stretches out an arm, and his hand touches his notebook and a pencil; and he props himself against his pillows and starts to write.

*The African who became deranged through homesickness at the World Exhibition was sent home to recover, and there, in his village, in obedience to tradition and duty, and with a solemn face, he demonstrated the antics with which he had amused Europeans – who had been convinced they were watching the ancient rites of Africa.*

K has written this before, with slightly different words; but he wants to keep writing it, until he has a version he's satisfied with – and that might be never.

Then he jots down one final note.

*What's an aphorism compared to a potato?*

And yet, he can't stop writing. Even as he dresses K's thoughts turn to the ideas that have long preoccupied him – life is a delusion and words are defective – and to the paradox of a man of such convictions trying to live as an author. And he knows he will continue to write. From his dreams words will flow onto to paper – as long as there is any paper left – and what better place is there for dreaming than the office? Or so K thinks, to cheer himself, as he changes his tie to one that is more formal. There have been moments in the office when his dreaming life has seemed more dreamlike than the dreams of his sleep.

Dissatisfied now with the knot of his tie, he re-ties it so it fits neatly between the points of his collar. Then he goes down the spiral staircase, round and round, and out into the street – an author disguised once more as a civil servant.

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'When I looked at myself in the mirror this morning – when I shaved for the first time in weeks – I didn't recognise me. Didn't recognise myself!' says the man in front of Dr K at the newsagent's. It's not clear who he's speaking to, but he's half-turned towards K, and there's nobody behind him in the queue.

‘You see,’ and now the man with a cut face looks directly at him, ‘some Hungarian scientist has calculated that if we lived on the official rations for five years, even if we did nothing but eat and sleep, we’d starve to death! We don’t get enough food even to sleep and live. And when I looked in the mirror, the face looking back was horribly thin – it took me a minute to realise I was looking at me, and not a stranger! Perhaps I am a stranger – even to myself. Lack of food makes me strange. Know what I mean?’

And the man’s face does look oddly gaunt and grey – except where it’s covered by white plasters.

‘I recognised myself in the winter. Back then I did. But did I? Did I truly? Or did I just recognise my coat? I was so cold I didn’t take it off for four months. Froze, I did!’

‘It was a bad winter,’ Dr K agrees.

The man stares at him harder, ‘But you’re well dressed, and you’ve got a good colour in your face. Been living well? You? Jew?’

The man doesn’t wait for an answer, but jerks his left thumb down the street, and with his right hand grabs something in his pocket. K suspects it’s his razor, and follows the suggestion of the thumb, and heads down the street without delay.

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At the second newsagent’s K approaches, he is surprised to see a copy of *The Prague Daily* on the counter. German papers are now habitually hidden. And it’s particularly striking that there is just one copy. He looks at it, but, thankfully, doesn’t stretch out his hand before he notices three men looking at him. Each looks capable of wringing his neck. K fears that the paper is bait for a trap, and he raises his hat, wishes them all, ‘Good morning,’ in Czech, and walks on.

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Dr K has known the third newsagent for years – a man of dirty nails and nicotine-stained fingers and racing tips, though K doesn't bet. The man reaches under the counter, as if he is about to sell a pornographic magazine, and starts to fold it so the title can't be seen; but K asks him for *The National Newspaper* as well, so that he can hide his German news inside the best selling Czech daily.

And then K heads for his office.

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'Sir, it's a pleasure to see you!' the doorman says, and these are the first German words K has heard since leaving home, and the smile beneath the moustache is particularly welcome; yet K notices that the moustache has been trimmed back, and is no longer in the wide imperial style.

'But I'm afraid the lift is broken. There are no spare parts to be had – officially. So we might have to find another broken lift, as it were, and help ourselves – assuming that it's something else that's broken there. My brother knows about these things.'

'That's very kind of him,' K says, 'but I can walk up.'

However he notices an ex-soldier with two crutches and a bandaged head, who is sitting and waiting in the lobby, presumably for an official.

'But what about him? He can't be asked to climb to the top of the building in his condition.'

'It is difficult, sir.'

'Until the lift is fixed we must have a desk down here. I'll arrange it.'

‘Very good, sir. It’s a pleasure that you’re back again, Dr K.’

And he climbs the steps – slowly so as to avoid troubling his lungs.

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It’s a relief to Dr K that Tremel is not at work. There is a note from him, evidently written on one of his better days, that tells K that he’ll be absent until the following Monday, and lets him know of the meeting which have been arranged with Pfohl and Marschner to discuss a report on *The Prevention and Containment of Explosive Fires in Petrol Powered Laundries* – which puzzles K as he didn’t think there was any petrol left for civilians. However he doesn’t need to trouble himself for the while, as neither of his bosses are in the building; indeed, he is almost alone on his floor, and he doesn’t attend to any of the files or correspondence which have been left for his return. Instead he puts *The National Newspaper* aside to read later, and looks at the front page of *The Prague Daily*.

## **Further Chaos in the Ukraine –**

### **Wider Assistance Required**

According to the report, Kiev was descending into anarchy, and the German and Austrian armies were expanding their role in the newly independent country. And further east they had reached Sevastopol in the Crimea and occupied the port.

And on the Western Front the German artillery is pounding the British, but in Prague disaster has struck in the form of a fire in a storehouse that threatens the city’s supply of bread. The nearby bakery has been saved, and the governor has assured people that they would notice no interruption in baking, but K finds it hard to believe.



And he picks up a pencil and makes a note to discuss fires in warehouses and bakeries with his colleagues – as this strikes him as being more important than combustible laundries. Yet before he can get down all his thoughts, he hears the squeak of Mergl's trolley coming along the corridor.

Quickly K hides the Czech paper under three files, and puts the German paper on top of these. But the messenger brings his own news with him – a report on the increased production of Gotha bombers and Fokker fighters. And Mergl has a military pamphlet with combat pictures.

'Dr K, it's a joy to see you again. And you've come back to Prague just when we have gained a decisive advantage with the decisive weapon! *Wars are settled by decisive weapons*, so Clausewitz wisely said, and for us it's the warplane. When it started, sir, this war, thousands and thousands of men were trained to ride horses for the first time to fight cavalry battles. Now thousands of men are being trained to fly – to fight in the air and bomb enemy cities. And we do it better than anyone. From the horse to the bomber in four years!'

'And still, Mergl, there are people who don't believe in progress,' says Dr K.

'It's true, sir, they don't. We must bomb them into progress!'

And Dr K smiles a smile like a scar.



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