MODERN CLASSICS

Franz Kafka

Metamorphosis and Other Stories



Contemplation

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Children on the Road

I heard the carts going past the garden fence, and sometimes I could see them too, through the shifting gaps between the leaves. How the wooden spokes and axles creaked in that hot summer! Labourers came home laughing from the fields – laughing scandalously.

I was sitting on our little swing, just having a rest among the trees in my parents' garden.

The activity in front of the fence was never-ending. Children ran past, and were gone; carts loaded with grain, with men and women on the sheaves, and all round the flower-beds were getting darker; towards evening, I saw a gentleman strolling along with a cane, and a couple of girls walking arm in arm the other way stepped aside into the grass as they greeted him.

Then birds flew up like corks out of a bottle, I followed them with my eyes, saw them climb in a single breath until I no longer thought they were rising, but that I was falling, and, clinging on to the ropes in my dizziness, I began involuntarily to swing a little. Before long, I was swinging harder, the breeze had grown chillier, and quivering stars had replaced the birds.

I was given my supper by candlelight. Often I slumped on the tabletop with both elbows, and took tired bites out of my bread and butter. The crocheted curtains billowed out in the warm wind, and sometimes someone passing by outside would grip them with both hands, to get a better view of me, or to talk to me. Usually the candle would soon go out, and the midges that had gathered would continue to trace their patterns for a while in the dark candle smoke. If someone asked me a question from the window, I would

Copyrighted Material

look at him as though surveying distant mountains or empty space, and he didn't seem to be very interested in my reply either.

But as soon as someone vaulted in through the window and announced that the others were waiting outside, I would sigh and get up.

'What are you sighing for? What's the matter? Is it some irreparable calamity? Will we never recover? Is everything really lost?'

Nothing was lost. We ran outside. 'Thank God, there you all are at last!' – 'Nonsense, you're just always late!' – 'What do you mean, me?' – 'You. Stay at home if you don't want to come out.' – 'No mercy!' – 'What do you mean, no mercy? What are you talking about?'

We put our heads down and butted through the evening. There was no day or night. Now we ground our waistcoat buttons together like teeth, now we ran along in a herd, breathing fire, like wild beasts in the tropics. Like high-stepping cuirassiers in old wars, we urged one another down the short lane, and careered on up the road. Some of us dropped into the ditch, but no sooner had they disappeared against the dark hedges than they stood up on the field path like strangers, looking down at us.

'Get down from there!' – 'Why don't you come up!' – 'Just to have you throw us down? Not likely, we've got more sense than that.' – 'You mean to say you're too scared to. Go on, try!' – Oh yes, you're going to throw us down! You and whose army?'

We attacked, and were pushed back, and lay down in the grassy ditch, falling freely. Everything felt just right, the grass was neither warm nor chilly, only we could feel ourselves getting tired.

If we turned on to our right sides, and tucked our hands under our ears, we felt like going to sleep. Of course, we really wanted to get up once more with jutting chins, if only to fall into a deeper ditch. Then, with our arms extended in front of us and our legs skew-whiff, we wanted to hurl ourselves into the wind, and so almost certainly fall into an even deeper ditch. And there was no end to that.

We barely gave it any thought, how we meant to stretch out properly, our knees especially, in the last ditch of all, and so we lay

Copyrighted Material

on our backs like invalids, feeling woebegone. We flinched when a boy came flying over us from the bank on to the road, with dark soles, arms pressed against his sides.

The moon was already quite high, and a post-coach drove by in its light. A light breeze got up; we could feel it even in our ditch, and nearby, the woods began to rustle. We no longer felt so set on being alone.

'Where are you?' – 'Come here!' – 'All of you!' – 'What are you hiding for, stop being so silly!' – 'Didn't you see the post-coach has gone by already?' – 'It can't have! Is it really already gone?' – 'Of course, it went by while you were asleep.' – 'I was asleep? I was no such thing!' – 'Of course you were.' – 'Come on!'

We ran closer together now, some of us linked hands, we had to keep our heads as high as we could, because we were going downhill now. One of us shouted an Indian war cry, we felt a gallop in our legs as never before, as we leapt we felt the wind catch us by the hips. Nothing could have stopped us; we were running so hard that even when we overtook one another, we could keep our arms folded and look calmly about us.

We stopped on the bridge over the stream. Those of us who had run on too far turned back. The water ran busily in and out among stones and roots; it didn't feel like late evening at all. There was no reason why one of us shouldn't have hopped up on to the bridge rail.

Away in the distance, a train appeared behind the trees, all its compartments were lit, the windows were sure to be open. One of us started singing a ballad, but we all wanted to sing. We sang far quicker than the speed of the train, we swung our arms because our voices weren't enough, our voices got into a tangle where we felt happy. If you mix your voice with others' voices, you feel as though you're caught on a hook.

So, with the woods behind us, we serenaded the distant travellers. In the village, the grown-ups were still awake, the mothers making up everyone's beds for the night.

It was high time. I kissed whoever stood next to me, shook hands with three more fellows, and started to run home; no one

Copyrighted Material

called me back. At the first crossroads, where no one could see me, I turned, and followed a path back into the woods. I was heading for the great city in the south, of which they said in our village:

'The people who live there! I tell you, they never sleep!'

'Why don't they sleep?'

'Because they never get tired.'

'Why don't they get tired?'

'Because they're fools.'

'Don't fools get tired?'

'How could fools get tired!'

Copyrighted Material

Unmasking a Confidence Trickster

Finally, at ten at night, and in the company of a man I had vaguely known some time ago, who had unexpectedly buttonholed me and dragged me round the streets for a good two hours, I reached the large house where I had been asked to a party.

'There!' I said, and clapped my hands to indicate the absolute necessity of the parting of the ways. I had already made several less energetic efforts, and was feeling quite tired.

'Are you going up right away?' he asked. I thought I heard the teeth knocking together in his mouth.

'Yes.'

I had an invitation, I had told him as much right away. I had been invited, furthermore, to come up, where I would have liked to have been for some time already, not standing around outside the gate gazing past the ears of my interlocutor. And now to lapse into silence with him too, as if we had decided on a long stay in just this spot. A silence to which the houses round about and the darkness that extended as far as the stars, all made their contribution. And the footfalls of unseen pedestrians, whose errands one did not like to guess at, the wind that kept pressing against the opposite side of the street, a gramophone that was singing against the sealed windows of one of the rooms somewhere – they all came to prominence in this silence, as though it belonged and had always belonged to them.

And my companion submitted to this on his own behalf, and – after a smile – on mine too, stretched his right arm up along the wall, and, closing his eyes, leaned his face against it.

But I didn't quite get to the bottom of the smile, because shame

Copyrighted Material

suddenly compelled me to turn away. It was only from that smile that I had understood that here was nothing more or less than a confidence trickster. And there was I, having lived in this town for months, and thinking I knew these confidence tricksters through and through, the way that at night they emerge from side streets, with their hands unctuously extended like mine host, the way they loiter round the advertising billboards we are studying, as if playing hide-and-seek, and peep out with at least one eye from behind the curve of the pillar, the way they suddenly materialize in front of us on the edge of the pavement at busy crossings when we are feeling frightened. I understood them so well, they had been the first people I'd met in the city, in little pubs, and I owe them my first glimpse of an obduracy that I have become so incapable of thinking away that I have begun to feel it in myself. The way they continued to confront one, even long after one had escaped them, when there was no more confidence to trick! The way they refused to sit down, refused to fall over, but continued to look at one with an expression that, albeit from a distance, still looked convincing! And their methods were always the same too: they stood in front of us, making themselves as large as they possibly could; tried to divert us from where we were headed; offered us instead a habitation in their own bosom, and, when in the end a feeling welled up in us, they took it as an embrace into which they threw themselves, always face first.

These old ruses I now detected for the first time after so long in the man's company. I rubbed my fingers together, to make it appear the disgrace had never happened.

My man, though, was still leaning as before against the wall, still thinking he was a confidence trickster, and his contentment with his role mantled the one cheek of his that I could see.

'Rumbled!' I said, and tapped him lightly on the shoulder. Then I hurried up the steps, and the unreasonably devoted faces of the servants in the entrance hall were as welcome to me as some delightful surprise. I looked along the line of them, while my coat was taken off, and the dust rubbed from my boots. Then, taking a deep breath and drawing myself up to my full height, I entered the hall.

Copyrighted Material

The Sudden Walk

When it seems we have finally decided to stay home of an evening, have slipped into our smoking jackets, are sitting at a lit table after supper, and have taken out some piece of work or game at the conclusion of which we customarily go to bed, when the weather outside is inclement, which makes it perfectly understandable that we are staying at home, when we have been sitting quietly at our table for so long that our going out would provoke general astonishment, when the stairwell is dark and the front gate is bolted, and when, in spite of all, in a sudden access of restlessness, we get up, change into a jacket, and straightaway look ready to go out, explain that we are compelled to go out, and after a brief round of goodbyes actually do so, leaving behind a greater or lesser amount of irritation depending on the noise we make closing the front door behind us, when we find ourselves down on the street, with limbs that respond to the unexpected freedom they have come into with a particular suppleness, when by this one decision we feel all the decisiveness in us mobilized, when we recognize with uncommon clarity that we have more energy than we need to accomplish and to withstand the most abrupt changes, and when in this mood we walk down the longest streets – then for the duration of that evening we have escaped our family once and for all, so it drifts into vaporousness, whereas we ourselves, as indisputable and sharp and black as a silhouette, smacking the backs of our thighs, come into our true nature.

And all this may even be accentuated if, at this late hour, we go to seek out some friend, to see how he is doing.

Copyrighted Material

Resolutions

To rouse oneself from a state of misery should be an easy matter, even with borrowed energy. I tear myself away from my chair, run round the table, bring some movement to my head and neck, some fire to my eyes, tense the muscles around them. Work to counter every instinct, greet A. rapturously if he should come now, decently tolerate B.'s presence in my room, and in the case of C. imbibe in long draughts everything he says, in spite of the attendant pain and difficulty.

But even if I can manage all that, with each mistake – and mistakes are unavoidable – the whole thing, however hard or easy, will eventually falter, and I will be back where I started.

For which reason, the best advice remains to take what comes, to behave like some sluggish mass, and even if one should feel oneself being blown away, not to be tempted into one superfluous step, to gaze at the other with wary animal eye, to feel no remorse, in a word, to crush out with one's hands whatever ghostly particle of life remains, that is, to intensify the final peace of the grave and not to allow anything else.

A characteristic motion accompanying such a condition is to smoothe one's eyebrows with one's little finger.

Copyrighted Material

The Excursion into the Mountains

'I don't know,' I cried in a toneless voice, 'I really don't know. If nobody comes, then nobody comes. I've done nobody any harm, nobody ever did me any harm, yet nobody wants to come to my aid. Nobody upon nobody. But that's not it either. Only nobody comes to help me – nobody upon nobody would be fine. I would quite like – and why wouldn't I? – to go on an excursion with a crowd of nobodies. Into the mountains, of course, where else? The way those nobodies would crowd together, all their crossed and linked arms, their many feet, separated by minute steps! Naturally, they're all in tailcoats. We're walking along without a care in the world, the wind is pushing through the gaps between us and our various limbs. Our throats feel free in the mountains! It's a miracle we haven't burst into song!'

Copyrighted Material

The Plight of the Bachelor

The prospect of remaining a bachelor is so awful: to be an old man and struggle to preserve one's dignity while asking to be taken in for an evening's worth of human society; to be sick and to gaze for weeks on end into one's empty room from the vantage point of one's bed; always to say goodbye at the front door; never to make one's way upstairs at the side of one's wife; to have the side-doors to one's room always opening on to others' apartments; to carry one's supper home in one hand; to have to stare at children, without always adding, unasked: 'I haven't any myself'; to model one's apparel and demeanour on one or two bachelors one might remember from one's own early years.

And so it will be, save that it will be oneself standing there, then and thereafter, with a body and a veritable head, and therefore a brow to smite with the flat of one's hand.

Copyrighted Material

The Businessman

It is possible that there are a few people who feel sorry for me, but if they do, I can't feel it. My small business fills me with worries that cause me pain behind my brow and my temples, but without giving me any prospect of satisfaction, because my business is so small.

I am forced to take decisions hours in advance, to keep the storekeeper's memory alert, to warn of likely mistakes, and to gamble in the current season on the fashions of the next, and not among people like myself either, but among obscure populations in the countryside.

My money is in the hands of strangers; I have no knowledge of their circumstances; I am unable to sense the calamity that may strike them at any moment, much less avert it! Perhaps they have grown extravagant, and are throwing parties in beer gardens, parties briefly attended by others, themselves on their way to America.

When the business closes on a weekday evening, and I suddenly see myself confronted by hours in which I shall not be able to work to meet its unsleeping demands, then the excitement I projected far ahead of me in the morning falls back upon me like an ebbing tide, and doesn't stop there, but takes me with it, to where I know not.

And yet I am unable to harness my mood to any purpose – all I can do is go home, because my face and hands are dirty and sweaty, my suit is stained and dusty, my business hat is on my head, and my boots are scraped by the tin-tacks from crates. I seem to coast home, cracking the knuckles of both hands and patting the heads of children I pass in the street.

Copyrighted Material

But the distance is too short. Straightaway I find myself in my house, open the lift door and step in.

I see that now all of a sudden I am alone. Other people, who are required to climb stairs, get a little more exhausted, are forced to wait with panting lungs for someone to open the apartment door, which is grounds for irritation and impatience, then they walk into their hallway, where they hang their hat, and not until they have passed several other glass doors along the corridor do they come to their room, where they are properly alone.

Whereas with me, the moment I am in the lift I am alone, and prop my hands on my knees to look in the narrow mirror. As the lift starts to move, I say:

'Be quiet, go away, go back to the shadows of trees, behind the curtains, into the arcade!'

I talk through gritted teeth, while, on the other side of the frosted glass, the banisters slip by like plunging waterfalls.

'Fly away; may your wings, which I have never seen, carry you into the village in the valley, or to Paris, if that's where you want to be.

'But enjoy the view out of the window, when processions emerge from three streets at once, do not make way for one another, and intermingle, and their last thinning ranks allow the square slowly to become itself again. Wave your handkerchiefs, be shocked, be moved, praise the beautiful lady driving past.

'Cross the wooden bridge over the stream, nod to the bathing children, and be astounded by the cheers of the thousand sailors on the distant battleship.

'Follow the meek-looking individual, and once you have pushed him into a gateway, rob him, and then, each with your hands in your pockets, watch him slowly turning into the alley on the left.

'The scattered police gallop up on their horses, rein in their animals and force you back. Let them – the empty streets will make them unhappy, I promise you. Already, you see them riding away in pairs, taking the corners slowly, flying across the open squares.'

Then it's time for me to get out, to leave the lift behind me, to ring the doorbell. The maid comes to the door, and I wish her a good evening.

Copyrighted Material

Looking out Distractedly

What shall we do in the spring days that are now rapidly approaching? This morning the sky was grey, but if you go over to the window now, you'll be surprised, and rest your cheek against the window lock.

Down on the street you'll see the light of the now setting sun on the face of the girl walking along and turning to look over her shoulder, and then you'll see the shadow of the man rapidly coming up behind her.

Then the man has overtaken her, and the girl's face is quite dazzling.

Copyrighted Material

The Way Home

Like the cogency of the air after a thunderstorm! My qualities appear before me and overwhelm me, though I may not put up much of a fight against them.

I march along, and I set the pace for this side of the street, this street, this part of town. I am rightly responsible for all the knocking on doors, for all the rapping on tables, for the toasts proposed, for the couples in bed, on the planking outside new buildings, pressed against the walls in dark alleyways, or on the sofas of brothels.

I weigh up my past against my future, but find both of them excellent, am unable to give one or other the advantage, and am compelled to reprove providence for its injustice in so favouring me.

Only when I step into my room do I feel a little contemplative, but it wasn't climbing the stairs that gave me anything to think about. It doesn't help much that I throw open the window, and that there's music still playing in one of the gardens.

Copyrighted Material

The Men Running Past

If we happen to be walking along a street at night, and a man, visible already from afar – because the street inclines gently uphill in front of us, and there's a full moon – comes running towards us, then we will not grab hold of him, even if he's feeble and ragged, even if someone is running after him, yelling, but rather we will let him run on unmolested.

For it is night, and it is not our fault that the street in front of us in the moonlit night is on an incline and, moreover, it is possible that the two men have devised their chase for their own amusement, perhaps they are both in pursuit of a third man, perhaps the first of them is being unjustly pursued, perhaps the second means to kill him and we would become accessory to his murder, perhaps the two of them don't know the first thing about one another and each one is just running home to bed on his own account, perhaps they are two somnambulists, perhaps the first of them is carrying a weapon.

And finally, may we not be tired, and have we not had a lot of wine to drink? We are relieved not to see the second man.

Copyrighted Material

The Passenger

I am standing on the platform of the electrical tram, feeling wholly uncertain of my position in the world, in the city, in my family. I would be unable to offer even the most approximate statement of my justified expectations with regard to each or any of the above. I am not even able to justify my standing there on the platform, holding on to a strap, being carried by this conveyance, that people step aside from the conveyance, or walk quietly along, or stop and look at the shop windows. – True, no one is expecting such a statement of me, but that's neither here nor there.

The tram approaches a stop, a girl stands by the steps, ready to get off. She is so distinct to me, it's as though I had run my hands all over her. She is dressed in black, the pleats of her skirt are almost motionless, her blouse is short and has a collar of fine lace, her left hand is pressed against the side of the tram, the umbrella in her right is planted on the next-to-top step. Her complexion is dark, her nose clumsily moulded from the sides, with a broad, roundish tip. She has quantities of chestnut hair, and a few stray wisps of it are blown across her right temple. Her small ear is pressed tight against the side of her head, but, standing as close to her as I am, I am still able to see the whole back of her right ear, and the shadow where it joins her skull.

I asked myself at the time: how is it that she is not astonished at herself, that she keeps her mouth closed, and expresses nothing of any wonderment?

Copyrighted Material

Dresses

Often, when I see dresses with many pleats and frills and flounces, draped beautifully over beautiful bodies, then I think to myself that they will not long be preserved in such a condition, but will acquire creases that it will be impossible to iron out, dust in their details so thick it can no longer be removed, and that no woman would wish to make such a sorry exhibition of herself as to put on the same precious dress every morning, and take it off at night.

And I see girls who are certainly beautiful, displaying variously attractive little muscles and bones and taut skin and masses of fine hair, and yet daily appearing in that same masquerade, always laying the same face in the hollow of the same hands, and having it reflected back to them in the mirror.

Only sometimes in the evening, when they come home late from a party, it looks worn to them in the mirror, puffy, dusty, already seen by everyone, almost not wearable any more.

Copyrighted Material

The Rejection

When I meet a pretty girl and ask her: 'Please, come with me!' and she passes me in silence, then what she means is this:

'You're not a duke with a name to conjure with, no powerfully built American Indian with square-shouldered physique, with calm impassive gaze, with skin laved by the air of the prairies and the rivers that irrigate them, you have never been to the great lakes, or sailed on them, wherever they are to be found. So, tell me, why should a pretty girl like me go with you?'

'You forget that no automobile is carrying you swaying through the streets in powerful thrusts; I don't seem to see a retinue of gentlemen pressed into livery attending you, murmuring blessings as they follow you in a pedantic semicircle; your breasts are stowed away tidily enough in your corset, but your hips and thighs make up for their parsimony; you are wearing a taffeta dress with plissé pleats of the sort that delighted us last autumn, and – garbed in this menace as you are – still you don't scruple to throw us a smile from time to time.'

'Yes, we are both quite right, and, lest we become irrefutably persuaded of the fact, why don't we now each go to our separate homes.'

Copyrighted Material

For the Consideration of Amateur Jockeys

Nothing, on reflection, is sufficient to tempt one to come first in a race.

The renown of being hailed as the best rider in the country is too strong at the moment the band strikes up for there not to be some regret on the following morning.

The envy of our competitors, cunning and fairly influential persons, is certain to hurt us in that narrow gap that we must ride through after that plain that lay empty before us, with the exception of a few vanquished horsemen, who minutely approached the edge of the horizon.

Many of our friends hasten to collect their winnings, and only shout their congratulations to us over their shoulders from the booths of various remote turf accountants; our best friends, meanwhile, haven't staked anything on us at all, since they feared their probable losing would compel them to be sore at us, but now that our horse has come in first and they didn't win anything, they avert their eyes from us and look at the stands as we pass.

Our defeated rivals behind us, upright in the saddle, try to see past the misfortune that has befallen them and the injustice that has wantonly been dealt them; they look newly determined, as for the beginning of a fresh race, an earnest one following this child's play.

To many of the ladies, the victor will look ridiculous, all puffed up and yet not quite knowing how to go about the endless round of shaking hands, greeting, bowing and waving to distant admirers, while the defeated jockeys keep their mouths shut, and gently pat the necks of their generally whinnying horses.

And to cap it all, the heavens turn grey, and it starts to rain.

Copyrighted Material

The Window on to the Street

Whoever lives in solitude and yet would nevertheless find some form of contact, whoever in view of the changing hours, the weather, the circumstances of his job and so forth, seeks some arm or other to cling on to – such a man will not be able to get by for very long without a window on to the street. And even if he isn't looking for anything in particular, and is just tired, letting his eyes drift between the public and the sky as he steps up to his window, head back, apathetically, even then the horses will take him away with them in their retinue of waggons and clatter, off in the end to some human participation.

Copyrighted Material

Desire to be a Red Indian

If only one were a Red Indian, always prepared, launched into the air on one's galloping horse, a brief tremor over the trembling ground, till one let go one's spurs for there were no spurs, and threw away one's reins, for there were no reins, and could barely make out the land in front of one opening out as smoothly mown heathland, with horse's head and horse's neck already nowhere to be seen.

Copyrighted Material

The Trees

For we are as tree-trunks in the snow. Apparently they are merely resting on the surface of the snow, and a little push would be enough to knock them over. No, that's not the case, for they are firmly attached to the ground. But see, even that is only seemingly the case.

Copyrighted Material

Being Unhappy

When it had already become unbearable – late one November afternoon – and I was running around on the little piece of carpet in my room as on a racetrack, alarmed by the sight of the lit-up street outside, then turning and giving myself a new objective in the depths of the mirror at the back of the room, and yelling – merely to hear a yell that nothing answers, and that nothing therefore robs of its force, so that it rises without any counter-weight and is unable to stop, even if it ends – a door opened in the wall, oh so hastily, because haste was indicated, and even the carriage-horses outside on the street were like wild warhorses in battle, rearing up and exposing their throats.

A small ghost of a boy emerged out of the gloomy corridor, where the lights weren't yet on, and stopped on tiptoe, on a barely swaying floorboard. Seemingly dazzled by the twilit room, he tried to bury his face in his hands, but then unexpectedly calmed himself with a look out of the window, at the level of whose crossbars the hazy glow of the street lamp encountered profound darkness. With his right elbow he braced himself against the wall in front of the open door, and allowed the draught to pass over his ankles, his throat and his temples.

I looked at him a while, then I said, 'Good evening!' and took my jacket off the fireguard, because I didn't want to stand in front of him half-dressed. For a time I let my mouth hang open, so that my excitement might take the opportunity and leave. I had a bad taste in my mouth, my eyelashes were trembling in my face; in brief, I needed nothing less than this admittedly expected visit.

The boy was still standing in the same place by the wall, his

Copyrighted Material