

Melvin Jules Bukiet

The Two Franzes

*“the four men I consider to be my true blood-relations
(without comparing myself to them either in power or in range),*

Dostoevski, Kleist, Flaubert, and Grillparzer”

letter from Franz Kafka to Felice Bauer

from Kafka’s Other Trial by Elias Canetti

PILFERING THE RUNT of the litter of pink marzipan bunnies from an open display case in Stern’s Bakery off Staromestske Nemesti Square, the boy with a sweet tooth and an empty pocket didn’t notice an elderly man purchasing a chocolate ganache. The boy’s fingers trembled as he slipped the tiny almond-flavored rodent into his short pants and sidled toward the door as the man extracted a crisp new hundred krone note from his kidskin wallet.

The image of the Emperor on the bill fluttered between the prosperous chocolate lover and the proprietress of the bakery, a heavy-set woman whose waist and cleavage bore eloquent testimony to her establishment’s riches.

Girth she had in abundance, mirth none. She was torn between conflicting impulses, greed for the white-whiskered image on the bank note and outrage at the boy whose hand reached for the knob.

Outrage triumphed. Besides, the thief would be gone in a second, the money would remain. She was around the counter in a flash, and grabbed the large ears of the young culprit.

“I’ve told you that I never want to see you again,” she shrieked as tears started down his cheeks as if a spigot behind his dark eyes had been turned on full.

“May I . . .” the gentleman began to speak with calm disdain for the shabby affair that appeared to offend his delicate aesthetic sensibility.

“Every week he comes in,” the proprietress explained to her refined customer. “Every week he steals,” she continued. “Every week a charade,” she cursed as she dragged the boy across the bakery’s tiled floor, skinning his knees, leaving a thin red smear. “This time the police.”

“No, please,” the boy wailed. “If my father finds out, he’ll kill me.”

“I’ll kill you myself.”

“May I . . .” the gentleman repeated as he tapped his steel-tipped cane at a spot of the boy’s blood, and rustled the bill.

Franz Joseph seemed to wink.

“Certainly, of course. Terribly sorry. You, sit,” she ordered the sobbing boy in the corner, and reached for the bill. “That will be three kronen for the ganache.”

“And how much,” the gentleman added, almost as an afterthought, “is the marzipan for my friend?”

“What?” Frau Stern didn’t understand.

“He’s with me,” the gentleman replied.

She looked at the boy suspiciously. “Are you?”

The boy looked at the man, who smiled to himself and nibbled off a corner of the lush brown pastry. Avoiding the proprietress’ wrath and the gentleman’s cool humor, the boy tried to effect a quick calculation between the trouble he was already in and the trouble he might be letting himself in for, gulped, and lied. “Yes.”

“B . . . b . . . but . . .” she stammered.

“But what?” The gentleman rapped his cane on the display case.

“But nothing, Sir.” She curtsied awkwardly. “Sorry for the misunderstanding.”

Again he tapped the cane, more peremptorily. “The cost?”

Still suspicious and frustrated, but unable to do anything about her suspicion or her frustration, she returned to her post behind the glass case where the hand-lettered sign above the remaining rabbits read, “Two kronen a dozen.” She smiled now, a twitching at the sinister corner of her thick lips, and said, “Fifty.”

He dropped the hundred krone bill to the counter and said, “Keep the change.”

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“Thank you, Sir,” she said, but he ignored her. He was already holding the door open for his newly-purchased dependent.

“Dirty little Yid,” Miss Stern muttered under her breath while tucking the bill into her blouse.



“I like charades,” the gentleman said as he finished the chocolate and tossed its wax paper wrapper into the street.

“I like bunnies,” the boy said, savoring the marzipan. “They make me so . . . so . . .” He was at a loss for words.

“Hungry?”

“Yes. I stare at the glass, and sometimes I think that I could starve to death right there.”

“Really?” The gentleman looked at him with even greater curiosity. “Tell me about it.”

As the boy explained his fantasy of wasting away on the bakery floor, he hardly noticed that a notebook had appeared, and that the gentleman wrote swiftly on its tiny bound pages as they walked together as if either of them knew where they were going. He kept writing until the narrow, twisting lanes opened into a plaza approaching a long low bridge. “My hotel is in Mala Strana,” the man said, gesturing to the far side of the Vltava.

“I don’t leave the Old City without telling my father.”

“But there are other things you don’t tell your father.” The man dabbed his handkerchief at the boy’s mouth to wipe away the last few crumbs of pink rabbit ears.

They started up the gentle ramp onto the pedestrian walkway that arched over the blue-gray river beside the ranks of clattering carriages. They left the dank air of the medieval quarter behind, and, as they strode, attained views of the enormous Castle that loomed in the distance to the north.

On the same shore as the Castle, but way beneath its position atop the Hradcany district, another cluster of somewhat newer but still ancient, gray-stuccoed buildings once again enveloped the odd duo. Yet the alleys were a wee bit broader, and trees and water were visible between the buildings.

“It’s very pretty here,” the man said.

“Where do you come from?”

“Vien.”

“The capital?” the boy gasped. So exotic was the notion that his companion and savior might as well have said London or Paris or the moon.

“Of course.” He shrugged.

“What’s it like?”

“Well, you see that building there?” He pointed up past a funicular that rached skyward to the vast walled enclosure that had governed Prague for a thousand years.

“Of course.”

“Well, in Vien the Emperor’s stables are that large.”

“No!”

“Yes,” he said. “Your Castle is for minor aristocracy, dukes and countesses and the like.” As if the thought of such rabble was too demeaning to contemplate, he turned away from the Castle into a building guarded by a mustachioed doorman. A polished brass sign to the left of the entry read “Pensione Opera.” He said, “Come in. I always stay here when I’m in Prague.”

Agog, the boy passed beneath the jaded eyes of the doorman into a small but elegant lobby set about with brocade sofas and marble-topped tea tables.

“Have a seat,” the gentleman plopped into a wing chair and gestured to another one.

“Well, OK.”

Immediately, a waiter dressed like a major to the doorman’s general hovered beside them. “Can I get you anything?” the waiter asked.

“Coffee for myself,” the gentleman said, clearly accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed. “And. . . will another marzipan be acceptable?” he addressed his companion.

The boy smiled.

“You’re certain it’s not too much?”

“Not at all.”

“Bunnies if you have them,” he instructed the waiter.

“I’ll do my best, Sir.”

The two of them sat, the gentleman flipping through his note-

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book while the boy pivoted restlessly in his seat, avid to take in every aspect of the extraordinary scene, beautifully dressed ladies and other gentlemen sipping tea, occasionally a trill of laughter rising above like a hummingbird, until the waiter returned and deposited their orders like offerings before tribal gods.

The man took a sip of his coffee and said, “Good, now we can get to business.”

“Business?”

“Yes, I will require an assistant of ingenuity and integrity, someone I can trust absolutely to serve me while I am in town. Can you suggest anyone?”

The boy may have been naive, but he wasn’t stupid. He leapt to the bait. “I would be delighted to be that assistant, Sir.”

“I thought so.”

The boy nodded.

“I will pay generously.”

The boy may not have been stupid, but he was naive. He piped, “Oh, you needn’t.”

“Yes, indeed, I need. Only then, when money passes hands will our relationship be clear. I appreciate clarity.”

The boy, son of merchants and grandson of merchants, had never met anyone so remarkable in his life. He felt as if he was dreaming. But a response was clearly required, and he knew that a wrong answer would be fatal. Less naively, he ventured, “I appreciate clarity, too.”

“Good. Then we think alike.” The man took another sip of coffee.

The boy bit into his marzipan.

“What’s your name, boy?”

“Franz.”

For the first time, the man’s mask of aplomb slipped. He said, “Well, this is auspicious. My name is also Franz.”

“Glad to meet you,” the boy spoke with the greatest sophistication he could muster. A decade and a quarter of drudgery—mathematics and Hebrew homework and unremunerated labor after school selling towels and sheets and pillow cases in his family’s store—had not prepared him for this. Only his infrequent

bouts of shoplifting pastries and, if the whole truth was known, magazines with bawdy lithographs and other sundries from the various shops of Prague might have developed in the child the resources to deal with the unexpected. Of course, it was these extra-curricular activities that had led his benefactor to him. The gentleman required an aide of proven abilities, and what better way to determine ability than through criminal intent and criminal activity, though perhaps criminal success would have been an even better indication. So be it; concessions were made.

“Very well,” the elder Franz went on. “Very well, indeed. One pauses for a pastry and ends up with a protégé. Life is full of odd twists, don’t you think? In any case,” he continued without giving the younger Franz an opportunity to voice his own world view, “Now that we have a business relationship, here’s what you must do.” He explained the job he had in mind—it was simple—and then concluded, “And from now on you will address me as Herr Grillparzer.”



When F. Junior arrived back home after his amazing interlude, his parents were in a tizzy. They had just obtained tickets to the hottest show in town. Hermann Kafka was so excited that he stacked a pile of beige towels together with whites.

Waving the slim tickets in front of her flushed face like a miniature fan, Madame K. gushed, “One of your father’s customers just gave them to us. Imagine. The play is set to open in Vien in two months and they wish to try it out here. It’s called *The Poor Minstrel* and it’s playing at...at...oh, let me look...at...”

“The Luria Theater,” Franz helped.

She squinted at the tickets. “Why, um, yes. How did you know?”

“I...I...” Now it was his turn to stumble over his words, not daring to admit that he was scheduled to meet the playwright in back of the theater after the performance. “Everyone knows. It’s in the newspaper.”

“Of course,” his mother said, though his father peered at Franz a bit inquisitively.

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“I have to take a bath,” Franz scurried out of the showroom and up the rear staircase to the family’s quarters over the shop.

Neither upstairs nor down could he find any peace. Nearly caught by parents in the shop, he had to contend with siblings, sisters, above. The second he lowered himself into the pool of luke-warm water he had drawn, he heard a ferocious knocking at the door. He slipped down the ceramic incline until the water plugged his ears, but the knocking came through in a series of dull thuds punctuated by fifteen year old Elli’s screechy complaint.

“In a minute,” he called.

“Now,” she demanded.

“Just a minute,” he begged.

“I have a date and have to get ready. Now open the door this second, you little insect, or I’ll smash it down.”

Dripping, he stood up, looked regretfully at the welcoming pool, and wrapped himself in one of the ragged seconds from H. Kafka Emporium that H. Kafka insisted the K. family make do with for their own domestic use, and undid the latch.

Before he could escape from the room, his sister had barged in and started removing her clothes. “What are you looking at?” she hissed as she slipped a brassiere strap off her shoulder, and he fled.



Still twelve, not yet a Bar Mitzvah, Franz owned one pair of long pants that he wore only on special occasions. He waited until the house was empty before removing the trousers from his closet and donning them along with a checkered waistcoat and his best blazer, a deep navy blend with silvery buttons. Alone in the flat, he tiptoed into the bathroom, which still smelled of his sister’s toilette, and slicked back his dark hair with a dab of pomade from his father’s medicine chest. Examining himself in the mirror, he approved of what he saw except for the windmill ears. Perhaps someday, when he was older, he could have them surgically altered.

He timed his arrival at the theater across the square by the astronomical clock on the facade of the Old Town Hall. The show was scheduled to end at ten minutes after ten, so he was

able to watch as the skeletal figure of Death raised and inverted his ominous hourglass to signify the relentless passage of time. Though he saw it daily, he was mesmerized by the performance, and waited until the last gong faded to hasten into the alley by the theater just as the audience, including his parents, began to flood down the marble steps.

The alley was dark, and a single silhouetted figure stood underneath the lantern at the far end. Franz picked up his pace, but he was so eager to make his appointment, and his eyes were so riveted to the figure, that when the figure turned into the light, revealing not the playwright he had expected, but an unmistakably female countenance dressed in a man's long overcoat and homburg, that he tripped on an uneven paving stone and sprawled at the woman's feet. She wore men's shoes of a very small size.

"Hermes, I presume," she laughed and, when he didn't respond, explained, "Messenger of the gods. It's a joke."

"I'm sorry. I don't joke."

She examined the boy at her feet. "No, I guess you don't. It's a pity. Life is quite humorous."

She said this so dolefully that he felt like sobbing as she extended a delicate hand to help him up.

It was the second time that day that he found himself on the floor. He looked at the welcoming hand. It was slim and its painted fingers with blunt-cut nails smelled faintly of tobacco.

"Or do you prefer a position of humiliation?" she asked.

He scrambled to his feet, noting with horror a hole in the right knee of his precious long trousers.

"I am..." he started.

"Franz," she said. "Of course, you're Franz. I've been told you're Franz. I can't escape that name. I'm a prisoner of Franzes. Between yourself and the renowned Grillparzer and, actually, my husband's name is Franz, too, but he is..." She paused and waved her fingers. "Irrelevant. Of course, I mean that in a humorous fashion."

He didn't know what to say.

"Here." She extracted a thin envelope from her sleeve like a magician revealing a hidden playing card. "Deliver this."

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As soon as he touched the envelope, she let go and walked swiftly to the square at the entrance to the alley. He watched her with a feeling of inexplicable yearning, and his heart nearly exploded when she turned and pressed one of her carmine-tipped fingers to her pale lips.



Ten minutes that seemed like ten decades later, Franz was still standing alone under the flickering lantern when the stage door opened and Franz Senior appeared.

“Hello, Herr Grillparzer.”

“You have something for me?”

“Here, Sir.” The messenger was a tiny bit reluctant to part with the message that still bore the imprint of the mysterious woman’s scent. He tendered it hesitantly only to have the playwright grab it out of his fist and rip off the top as heedlessly as if it was wax paper from a ganache.

Grillparzer squinted under the flickering light and snorted, “Humph, tell her that it is absolutely impossible.”

“But...”

“But what?”

“But how shall I tell her, Sir? I don’t know where she is.”

“The Castle, you fool. Here.” He whipped a pad and pen of his own from his pocket, scribbled furiously, tucked it into his own envelope and pressed a dab of sealing wax to the flap. “Ask for Madame Elena.”

“The Castle, Sir?”

“Do I have to tell you where it is?”

“No, Sir, but it’s nearly eleven o’clock.”

“Lesson number one, little Franz: love knows no curfew.” He flung several bank notes at the boy. “Take a carriage. Hurry!”



Whether the linen emporium was at sixes and sevens because the son of the house was missing, he didn’t know. Whether his parents enjoyed the play or not, he didn’t know. He only knew that he was at the mercy of implacable forces, bouncing from the

enormous courtyard of the Castle, where he had stood waiting for what seemed an interminable length of time, back to the theater, and thence again to the Castle, and yet again to the theater. What the dialogue he conveyed was, who was importuning who, he didn't know, but twice an hour for the succeeding two hours he was flung between the twin institutions like a shuttlecock.

After the first round trip, he learned to keep the carriage and driver who must have been entertained by his pint-sized passenger who ran up a tab that would sustain the driver and his six children for a week. "Back to the Castle, yer 'ighness?" he laughed with a Hungarian cockney accent.

The man had thin, pointy ears that Franz envied and a wisp of a moustache. He reminded Franz of a mouse, a curious notion that the boy tucked away in the crevasses of his mind for later consideration. He often had ideas that he didn't know what to do with. He remembered Herr Grillparzer's notebook and thought about it while the carriage jolted up the switchback trail to the Castle. Only as the carriage crested the hill onto the plateau above the city did he realize, in a blaze of moon-lit illumination, what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

All of his schoolmates were bound to enter into their families' small businesses. One would sell another cheese; the cheesemonger would buy shoes from a third; the cobbler rent a room from a fourth; and, should Franz wish it, the landlord would come to him for linens which he would buy from the sons of his father's suppliers in order to sell at a profit to enable him to buy cheese. It was such an endless, dreary cycle. Even the most ambitious of his peers saw only accounting and the law as grand opportunities for escape. Accounting and the law made Franz gag. He thought they sucked.

Now, inspired by the great man, he saw a different path open in front of him. He would write sophisticated drawing room comedies. He envied how diligently Grillparzer set his own blazing inspiration to paper. First thing tomorrow, young Franz would shoplift a notebook from Brodzki's Stationery. In the meantime, he had a mission to fulfill. "Continue," he told the

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coachman with the air of one to hired transport born.

He was almost disappointed when Madame Elena, whom he had already deemed the “Countess” in his head said, “I’ll be retiring now. You can relay that to your namesake as well as this,” and gave him her last envelope of the night.



“Bitch!” Grillparzer growled after he read the message.

Franz was shocked. “If that will be all, Sir, I have to get home and do some mending.”

“Mending? What are you, a seamstress?” The better Franz knew Franz, the harsher his remarks.

“No, I’m not. . . Sir.” The better Franz knew Franz, the more cautious his response. “But earlier, when I first met the Countess. . . I mean Madame Elena, my pants ripped. If my father finds out that I ruined them, he’ll kill me.”

“That’s the second time you said that.”

Young Franz shrugged and gazed at the light of the square.

Old Franz pursued his inquiry. “How would your father perform the execution?”

“Well, maybe he wouldn’t really kill me. Just punish me horribly. He’d probably make me write down ‘I will take care of my clothing.’ five hundred times. Or worse, he’d. . .”

“What?” Grillparzer’s pen was poised and his mouth was salivating as if he was unwrapping a chocolate ganache.

“He’d write it on me himself,” Franz laughed, noting that he was capable of making a joke. Not a very funny one, perhaps, but a start on the road to repartee and literary renown. “Take care of your clothing. Take care of your clothing. Take. . .”

“Care of your clothing,” Grillparzer murmured as he wrote the line down in his notebook as carefully as young Franz imagined it being written on his body.

Young Franz felt something eerie that he couldn’t quite grasp in the elderly playwright’s repetition. It was as if the writer was siphoning the ideas from his head. He said, “I’ve got to go home.”

“Yes,” murmured the playwright. “Same time tomorrow.” He

was already so immersed in his writing that he hardly noticed his. . . his what? his go-fer, errand boy, secretary, amanuensis. . . his muse.



Fortunately one of the windows in the storeroom behind H. Kafka Emporium was permanently ajar, and Franz, for all his perhaps preternatural instincts was still twelve enough to have frequent need of secret egress from—and subsequent ingress to—the household. He pulled up a garbage can and bellied through the window, knocking over a stack of feather pillows—all the better to leap onto from the ledge.

He tiptoed between the storeroom's linens-filled shelves and up the staircase, into the bathroom, where he swiftly removed his pants and set to work with a needle and thread that the store also stocked. There he was, sitting on the edge of the tub in his blazer and vest, thin legs exposed, frustrated with the thread that kept slipping from its eye—impossible to rethread in the moonlight—when the door swung wide, and a sarcastic voice asked, “Need help?”

“What? I...” he tried to hide the pants, but impaled his thumb on the needle. “Ouch!”



The next day, having stanchd the flow of blood and paid his second sister, Valli, a week's allowance in return for the promise of silence and five minutes of sewing, Franz wore his normal short pants to his appointment at the theater. He wondered if either Madame Elena or Herr Grillparzer would notice, and was both relieved and disappointed when neither did, at least not until two very late nights later.

This time, the romantic game—more intricate than chess, more physical than wrestling—played itself out between different venues, and, more vitally, to entirely different effect than the night before. This time, when Madame cracked open the great riveted door of the Castle to read Monsieur's message, her mouth turned up in a wry smile, and her eyes glowed.

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Franz furtively tried to read the text that had melted the Countess' minor aristocratic heart, but all he could discern through the parchment was a line that seemed to repeat itself over and over down the length of the page. What the line was, he couldn't tell, yet the obsessive repetition seemed familiar. He was trying to pin it down, figure out where he had come across such a deliberate pattern before, but just as he felt understanding tickle the edge of his brain, she spoke and eliminated all thought from his head.

"Yes," she sighed.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"Hmph, oh, you. Well, yes. Tell Herr Grillparzer that I will be at the U Tri Pstrosu at midnight. Or, better yet, let me write that down. Come." Suddenly, without warning, she swung back the thick door.

If the courtyard flanked by the three wings of the Castle felt like some natural wonder—a vast cobbled steppe, perhaps—it was, at least, outside where immensity was in order, but the inside was so vast that Franz didn't know what to compare it to. It was larger than the Jewish Quarter synagogue, larger than the Luria Street Theater. Salons that each appeared the size of Staromestske Nemesti Square sprawled to the left and right of a hallway that could have contained a dozen soldiers marching abreast. He saw pianos and harpsichords awaiting a ghostly orchestra in one room and a dining table that stretched into the distant recesses of another, and Oriental rugs and a life-size mural of an ancient battle at the city gate that practically rang with the clash of bloody sabers.

Did she live here?

He hastened to follow her clicking heels through corridors under chandeliers, each lit with a hundred gleaming tapers, until she arrived at a comparatively intimate study rather like the main reading room of the Prague Library, where she sat at an inlaid desk, removed a sheaf of paper from a drawer, dipped a fountain pen into an inset ink well, and set to composing her own letter.

Did she live here alone?

As her brow furrowed, Franz felt the gaze of scores of painted

lords and ladies on the walls between bookcases filled with thousands of leather volumes. They stared down at him as if scoffing at his intrusion into their realm. Yet he also felt the ghostly presence of an army of servants who must have lit the candles and dusted the books and mopped the marble floors to a supernatural gleam. He thought he heard the laugh of children at the top of an enormous, curving staircase.

“Drat,” she said and crumpled the paper into a ball. “Drat and drat again,” she dropped another unsatisfactory effort into a garbage can made out of a hollowed elephant’s foot. She turned to the boy and said, “How do you. . .”

“How do I what, Madame?”

“How do you manage to live with this, this. . .” Her eyes fixed on the letter from Grillparzer, which she suddenly grabbed and kissed. “This sorrow, this splendor, this. . .”

“Well, I don’t really live with. . .”

“Shut up. Never mind. I meant to say, ‘How do you do?’”

“Fine, Madame.”

“Fine, indeed. Fine it shall have to be. I cannot match his worship’s words, so I can only offer myself in return. Tell him I shall meet him at midnight at U Tri Pstrosu.”

“U Tri Pstrosu,” he repeated. “The Three Ostriches. At midnight.”



Gong! Gong! Gong! Just as the astronomical clock chimed eleven, the lead in *The Poor Minstrel* tripped over a prop in his eagerness to depart the Luria Theater for his own tryst with an obliging Bohemian waitress. Actually, it was the prop he was supposed to trip over to uproarious laughter in the second act, but this time he really broke his foot. Immediately, the stage manager called a rehearsal with the understudy, and the playwright was compelled to stay because the main reviewer from the Prazske Noviny had reserved two on the aisle for the next day. Hermes arrived a moment later.

“Alas,” Grillparzer wailed as he heard Franz’s good news. “Lesson number two,” he said. “Never trust the theater. It will

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always break your heart.”

In a rush, he scribbled a note for Franz to deliver to the café in his stead. Surely the lady would understand the delay, a matter of minutes.

And so the boy who had assumed that his duties were concluded for the night set forth once again into the darkened city. He had heard of The Three Ostriches—it was notorious—but had never ventured inside the cafe located in the cellar of a sixteenth century townhouse. At a bar beneath the mottled fresco that gave name to the place, and in dimly lit banquettes, men dressed in formal evening jackets sat, laughed and publicly cuddled with women whose dresses glittered with metallic threads and sequins. The women freely drank from bottles of champagne that sat in ice-filled silver buckets by each table. As one large man spread his arms, like wings, to possess two women on either side of him, a gun was visible beneath his tuxedo.

Franz recalled the cramped, third floor schoolroom he wasted forty hours a week in together with forty other little boys, and thought, “Now this is an education.”

As he was gaping at the scene, however, a tall, angular, stork-like man interrupted his thoughts. “May I help you?”

“Oh, yes, Sir. I have a message for Madame Elena.”

The man bowed abruptly as if he was about to peck. “I will deliver it to her.”

Franz felt the envelope in his pocket and was about to pass it along when he heard himself reply, “No. I must deliver it myself.” This was not part of his instructions, but he said it with determination.

“Hmm,” the man made a sound entirely devoid of pleasure. “Follow me.” Striding with the same mechanical motion with which he had welcomed Franz, he led the boy between the tables of the sophisticated club, and similarly pulled back a curtain to an even more private alcove within this extremely private domain.

There, the Countess sat on a red leather settee, reading a book by the light from a bronze wall sconce. The title was French. “You?” she said.

"I am sorry, Ma'am." Franz handed over the missive.

"Sorry for what?"

"Sorry that it's myself here rather than. . .him."

"And he is not coming?"

"I believe the letter will explain everything, Ma'am."

"His letters do more than explain; they illuminate," she said as she slid a knife into the flap and sliced it open as delicately as a surgeon might sever human tissue.

And yet her response changed as soon as she read the first words. No, the lady did not understand the delay, at least not as Herr Grillparzer described it.

Franz was amazed by the immediate, palpable power of words. The Countess was transformed. She trembled with barely restrained fury and stood so abruptly that a vase of ostrich feathers on her table wobbled.

Had the playwright deliberately insulted her?

"Shall I. . .?" Franz hesitated.

"Shall you what?" she snapped.

"Shall I tell Herr Grillparzer anything?"

"Yes. Tell him to take this trite claptrap back to the popular stage where it belongs." She tore the offending letter to shreds and dropped them in her wake.

Franz followed her out of the restaurant as the maitre d' commented to the bartender, "Filthy Jew."



"The woman will drive me mad!" Grillparzer continued the tirade he had begun the moment young Kafka entered the theater. It was the following afternoon, and the two Franzes hadn't seen each other since the boy had left the disconsolate playwright chewing up the Luria stage.

Nor had Franz's been a night to cherish. He had walked home alone through Prague's twisty maze, as frightened of the shadows that burly brown rats scurried into as he was of the rats that scurried into the shadows. Finally, at last, he had climbed through the familiar storeroom window, where, he should have known, both of his evil sisters were waiting for him. There went his next two

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weeks allowance to purchase their silence. Actually, it wasn't a bad deal. If only he had enough cash left to take care of his parents, he would have had a happier childhood.

Now he was back at the theater and Grillparzer picked up his soliloquy without missing a beat. "Mad, I tell you, mad!" the playwright boomed.

"I'm sorry, Sir."

"You're sorry! I'm the one who suffers. Lesson three: never trust a woman." And the creator of parlor dramas that could not have been more convoluted than his own life muttered to himself, "What to do? What to do? She makes me feel like. . ." He pulled his beard in frustration and peered long and inquisitively at his assistant. "What was it you said your sister called you yesterday?"

"Me?"

"You, you little. . ."

"Insect?"

"Yes, precisely. Grotesque. That won't do at all. Absolutely impossible." He paced back and forth across the empty stage while Franz cowered in the wings. "What sort of insect?"

"I don't know. I suppose a fairly large one, Sir."

And as Franz told Franz his awful fantasies, Grillparzer grew rapt, started writing, and only occasionally said, "Slow down. What was that part about crawling on the ceiling, let's say the ceiling of her boudoir. Yes, that's a nice touch."



Clutching the letter he didn't know he had dictated, Franz returned to the Castle where he cooled his heels for a hour in the now familiar courtyard. Only after the sun began to set in pink and gold splendor across the Vltava did Madame Elena deign to make an appearance. "Oh, you again," she yawned with theatrical ennui.

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Don't you get tired?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Very well." She opened the new envelope, and yet again she

changed before she finished reading the salutation. Her lips quivered, and she sought to calm herself by fumbling in a beaded bag for a cigarette. Clearly, the message Franz conveyed from Grillparzer was acceptable in the way that the previous was not.

Adults had always been mysterious to Franz. His Hebrew school teacher was a vicious martinet who occasionally read the students dreadful sentimental poetry he wrote about an imaginary city he must have picked off a map of America. "New Ark" he called it, after Noah. The man was nuts, and so were the customers at H. Kafka Emporium who returned a bath towel when it got wet. And Adela, the Kafka family maid, who slept half the day and then woke and turned into a frenzied cleaning machine, she too was driven by obscure compulsions. As for Franz's parents, the boy had no idea what made them tick. But the Countess and the playwright took the cake.

Talk about running hot and cold. If the Madame's response to Grillparzer's letters was to be taken seriously, one sentence was genius, the next rubbish. Fortunately for Franz's employer, this text was apparently the former. She said, "The Hotel Europa."

"At what hour, Ma'am?"

"Immediately."

"But..."

"We shall take separate conveyances. Call it a nod to bourgeois convention. Your..." she sought the correct word, "master will appreciate that."



Back at the Luria, Grillparzer wasn't taking any chances that another theatrically unlucky broken leg might keep him from his assignation. He flagged down the carriage at the entrance to the alley beneath a newly installed electric marquee that made it seem as if the moon was merely one more light in the firmament of blinking bulbs spelling out its message against the empire sky: *The Poor Minstrel*.

Franz obligingly opened the lacquered door of the carriage and stepped down.

"Where are you going?"

The Two Franzes

“Why, home, Sir.” Franz expected another long, lonely walk.

“Oh, come on. Come with me, instead.”

“What?”

“And wait.”

“Wait?”

Grillparzer patted the seat. “Good things happen when you’re in the picture. You’re my talisman.”

But perhaps he ought to have found a more portable charm, one he could wear around his wrinkled neck or tuck into his pocket like a gold watch, because minutes after they arrived amid the hurly burly of Prague’s finest, most ornate temporary residence for bankers and generals and miscellaneous foreign diplomats and dignitaries who had business in the provincial capital, and deposited his talisman in the shadow of an enormous potted fern, probably seconds after he opened his mouth, he blew it again.

Across the gilded lobby, Franz heard Madame Elena cursing like a fish wife among the ambassadors. “How dare you?” she screamed. “You fraud! You turd!”

A maître d’ stood at attention beside the table. Franz recognized the type. He might have been bred for the occupation on some farm together with his cousin from *The Three Ostriches*. Young Kafka wondered what he himself was bred for besides bafflement and dismay.

The Countess extended her arm toward Grillparzer and commanded the maître d’, “Remove him.”

“Hmph.” The object of her disdain stood his ground. “I am not an ottoman.”

Franz wondered why she called the playwright a Turk, or if he was one, and why that mattered.

Nonetheless, the maître d’ gripped the elbow of the obstreperous playwright who suddenly seemed more frail and elderly than he would have preferred.

“I.. I demand to see the manager,” he sputtered.

“I’m afraid that will not do any good, Sir.”

“And why not?”

“Because the lady owns the hotel, Sir.”

Grillparzer gasped like a fish on the floor of a rowboat as he tried to maintain a trace of dignity in the midst of clear debacle. "The door, Sir."



Oddly, the only individual who appeared mature in the elegant room full of badly acting grown-ups was a twelve year old wearing short pants. Little Franz sympathetically led Grillparzer to the carriage, and, because he knew no better remedy for heartbreak, directed the driver to Staromestske Nemesti Square where Stern's Bakery was redolent with pastry cooking for the next day. Fortunately, the witch who owned the place was not nocturnal, and a cheerful, plump waitress served them. Franz paid out of the money he had hidden from his sisters.

"Why does she treat me like this," the playwright moaned. "Me? Grillparzer, author of *Hero and Leander*, *The Jewess of Toledo*, and *Life is a Dream*." The more credits he listed, the meagerer they sounded. "*The Poor Minstrel* is going to be huge."

"I'm sure it will, Sir."

"Huge, I tell you."

"It must be a real trial, Sir."

The author halted mid-whine. Like the Countess, he knew when he heard something notable, and needed to pursue it. "Explain."

Young Franz improvised. "Well, it sort of sounds like you're accused of a crime, but you don't even know what the crime is."

"Yes, that's it precisely."

"And then you get to a judge, but he won't tell you anything either." The more the boy said, the more fervent the playwright grew, so the more the boy elaborated. His shaggy dog story didn't particularly go anywhere, but if it kept his mentor from dwelling on his own sorrows, the boy would oblige. He could do this with his eyes closed. His eyes closed. He was in a trance, and didn't notice when the famous author started scribbling on napkin after napkin from the chrome container on the table.

Every word out of young Franz's mouth since he had met old Franz had struck a note, and together the notes formed chords

The Two Franzes

that had touched both Grillparzer and Madame Elena's heart, but this was grander than his earlier songs about insects and mice. Sitting with his bare knees crossed over each other, he conducted a symphony of misery, anxiety and regret.

Somewhere in the middle of the recital, the playwright began taking care of the waiter, purchasing more and more marzipan bunnies every time Franz paused, until the sugary hutch was empty and the tale had been told.



"My Lord requests one last opportunity, Ma'am."

"Why should I give it to him?" she scoffed.

"He said that if you do him the great honor to read this, he will promise to never open his mouth again if that is your decree. I will sit here and wait." Stiffly, since he hadn't gotten much sleep the previous night, Franz set himself on the ground. He looked at the enclosure that defined the Castle and the wall that gave way to the city beyond. He looked up at the Countess and didn't know how he had such presumption.

"Only to keep you from catching a cold," she laughed. After all, life was quite humorous.

Fine, he thought; let her think what she wished for now, but he could predict her next words, which came an hour after she began flipping the napkins, which dampened with the first of her teardrops, which ultimately coursed down her cheeks as if a spigot had been turned on behind her deep green eyes.

"At last. At last. He understands everything in my soul. How could such a vulgar, tawdry... Ach, I do not care if he is a bourgeois boor. If the man is capable of this poetry, then he is my soul mate." She dabbed at her eyes with the final napkin and smeared a mixture of ink and mascara across her face.

"Should I tell him the door will open, Madame?"

"Yes," she smiled, "all doors will open."

"Maybe, but sometimes a doorway can be open and you still can't enter."

Say what you will, Madame Elena was attuned to language and usage. She knew an image when she saw one, a metaphor when

it hit her, a perception that could only come from a particular set of mind. She stopped like a clock with a jammed gear. "Come again?"

"And sometimes you don't even know what you're waiting for."

"How interesting."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Do you have any other interesting ideas, young man?"

"What do you mean, Ma'am?"

"Have you ever mentioned anything like this to Herr Grillparzer?"

"Anything like what, Ma'am?"

"Oh, any similarly curious little notion. What have your conversations been like?"

"What conversations, Ma'am?"

He wasn't exactly avoiding her question, but the boy didn't have it in him to avow himself. She had to lead in their intimate verbal dance.

"The conversations you've had regarding... me."

"Rather like a dream, Ma'am."

"A dream perhaps of insects?"

"How did you know?"

"Or hunger so fierce that you felt like dying in a cage?"

"Why, yes, that, too."

"And what about a judicial proceeding?"

"You're reading my mind."

"Or you're reading mine," she sighed.

"Life is a dream," he quoted the title the playwright borrowed from Lope de Vega.

"But sometimes you wake up, and suddenly you see the truth that you could never have imagined. Come with me, Franz."

"But Herr Grillparzer is waiting."

"Let him wait. One Franz is as good as another. In fact, one Franz may be better than another."

She opened the door to the Castle and he entered. Together, they walked along the endless corridors and eventually up the

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carpeted staircase and through another long hall, until she opened one last door to a room painted blushing pink. Inside was a bed, bathed in the glow of a single candle.

Before she drew him down, the son of a shopkeeper noticed the quality of the linens.

TEN YEARS LATER

Young Kafka never saw the playwright or the Countess again. He grew up, and, though he briefly attempted to write drawing room comedies, he succumbed to his destiny and became a clerk.

He was hard at work on the fourth floor of the Workman's Accident Insurance Institute, wrestling with a thorny actuarial problem concerning tubercular diagnoses, when he received a certified letter. Sent by one Herr Martin Prager, attorney, it requested his presence at 1414 Na Prikope near Wenceslas Square.

Terror overwhelmed the minor functionary. What could he have possibly done to draw the attention of an attorney? Authority of all sorts was unnerving to him, and none more so than the law. For the first time since he had joined the Institute five years earlier, he left work before the end of the day, and, for the first time in ten years, he hailed one of the city's black carriages.

Dreading the moment, he reknotted his thin black tie and combed his hair behind his ludicrous ears in the attorney's waiting room before he gave the secretary his name. Instead of sneering at him, however, she said, "Right this way, Sir," and ushered him straight into a wood-paneled suite that smelled of responsibility. Behind a sleek modern desk sat Herr Prager. He was a clean-shaven man with small ears and thin wire spectacles.

The attorney got directly to business. "Herr Kafka?"

"Yes?"

"I apologize, but I must ask, do you have any identification?"

More worried than ever, Kafka showed his passport as well as the letter he had received.

"Hm. Yes, indeed. This will do. Please have a seat." He gestured to one of the chairs in front of his desk. Kafka felt as if he was being called before a tribunal.

“As you may or may not know,” Prager commenced, “the renowned playwright, Franz Grillparzer, died last Tuesday in Vien. Most of Herr Grillparzer’s estate has been probated in the capital, but I have summoned you here as local executor for a fairly unusual bequest. I am empowered to convey to you the contents herein.” He pushed a heavy cardboard box across the desk.

Franz reached forward. Inside the box were several reams of typed manuscript pages.

“But first,” the attorney said, “I am to read you the following letter.”

“Franz sat back, remembering only faintly the one episode of his youth that was ever worth anything.

The attorney cleared his throat and began,

“Dear Franz,

I believe you will recognize the pages inside this box. Alas, I could never publish them under my own name, because my audience—fools—would never tolerate their likes from the author of *The Poor Minstrel* and other poor excuses for drama. Also, they are not really, or not entirely, mine, although I have worked on them to the full extent of my power and range for the last years of my life. Now I am dead, as all shall be, and I intend to make small recompense to the one who gave me the greatest gift of my life. You may do as you wish with these pages, but I strongly suggest that before you do anything so rash as publish them you seriously consider burning them instead. They are a weight that I could not bear. But you are stronger, and will do as you must.

Sincerely yours,
Franz”

“Hmph,” the lawyer cleared his throat. “Extraordinary. In all the years I have managed Herr Grillparzer’s affairs in this province, I never once had the sense of a private life. That is outside various, shall we say, affairs of the heart. But this is not my business. The box is yours.”

“Thank you,” Kafka said.

“Oh, and one more thing.”

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“Yes?”

“I have also been instructed to give you one hundred kronen to be used for the exclusive purpose of purchasing. . .” He hesitated, so absurd was the very last wish of the greatest artist in the empire.

But Franz already knew what the money was for. As an adult, he had developed the sense of humor he had lacked as a child. He finished the sentence. “Marzipan bunnies.”

“Um, yes, how did you know?”

“Lesson number one, Herr Prager. Sometimes you get cockroaches and sometimes you get bunnies. If you’d like to accompany me, I will treat you to the best bakery in Prague.”

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