

KAFKA #LONDON VARIATIONS

By Jerold London

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Photo from Wikimedia

For 15 male speaking parts

(which can be “doubled” into as few as 4 or 5)

And 8 female speaking parts

(which can be “doubled” into as few as 3 or 4)

10 Scenes

... in the dialogue indicates a thoughtful break.

... // signals the starting point of interrupting (but **not** overlapping) text.

SCENE 1: BUS STOP

Eight actors (ONE through EIGHT). A sunny afternoon. Boarded-up buildings. A bus stop. Graffiti in the nature of:

YOUTH IS HAPPY BECAUSE IT SEES GRAFFITI AS BEAUTIFUL
EYES LIKE THAT DO NOT GROW OLD

START WITH WHAT IS RIGHT
RATHER THAN WHAT IS SOCIETY

BY BELIEVING PASSIONATELY IN SOMETHING THAT DOES NOT EXIST
GRAFFITI CREATES IT

TO CREATE IS DOING SOMETHING
WE WERE NEVER ABLE TO DO BEFORE

GOD GIVES THE NUTS
BUT HE DOES NOT CRACK THEM

YOU CANNOT BE THE TRUTH IF YOU CANNOT SEE THE TRUTH

A STEP WORN BY FOOTSTEPS OF WISDOM IS NOT BORING

EVERYTHING WE LOVE IS LIKELY TO BE LOST IN LIFE

THE THEATRE WE NEED IS OF A KIND THAT MAKES US SUFFER
LIKE THE LOSS OF SOMEONE WE LOVE MORE THAN OURSELVES

I HAVE SPENT HALF MY LIFE
RESISTING THE URGE TO END IT

LIFE PULLS ME AWAY FROM MY INNER WORLD



Photo from Pixabay

Center stage: A dead tree, with a bench on either side. A bus stop comprised of 9 or 10 chairs in a row. An abandoned building with what used to be side-by-side storefronts, numbers 666 and 668, at one time covered by rolling metal security gates, now each showing a gaping hole. Former business names are recognizable: T. J. ECKLEBURG, OPHTHALMOLOGIST over one storefront. EMPEROR NERO'S ALL-YOU-CAN-EAT BUFFET over the other. Visible behind each metal gate is an elevated cage with bars.

The eight actors enter, carrying laptops, and seat themselves along the bus stop chairs.

ONE

It's time for a new play.

TWO

It's always time for a new play, in your book.

THREE

Any ideas? Shakespeare?

ONE

Anybody heard anything new? lately?

THREE

Nope.

TWO

In this place?... Hardly.

THREE

It doesn't *have to be* about this place. But, of course, right now, it does.

ONE

Right now it's time for a play that makes us suffer,
like the loss of someone we love more than ourselves.

FOUR

Well, there *has been something* troubling me. On my mind. But not that heavy.

FIVE

Hear ye. Hear ye. I do declare this bus stop meeting called to order.... Proceed.

FOUR

There was a couple, recently, who used to encourage their 10-year-old daughter,
and their 6-year-old son, to walk home, alone, a mile through this park ... //

SIX

You call *this* a park?

FOUR

You've got it.

SEVEN

Alone? By themselves?

FOUR

That's the point.

SIX

Shit! And they got killed or something? Right? That's what you're going to tell us?

FOUR

No. Nothing like that. It's just, they got picked up by the police one afternoon.

TWO

What else would you expect? How irresponsible can parents get?

FOUR

Who kept them in their squad car two hours, with *no* phoning home.

THREE

They must have been about to lose their freaking minds.

ONE

And their parents, too.

FOUR

It didn't end there.

The police turned the kids over to child protective services,
who didn't give them back until 11 pm.

After intimating charges of parental neglect would be brought.

TWO

That's what I said: What else would you expect?

ONE

My parents wouldn't have expected that.

SEVEN

Welcome to the age of helicoptering.

SIX

Whatever....

Isn't it better for the police to stop them, than something worse to happen?

THREE

It takes a village, to raise a child.

SEVEN

It takes more than *this village*, to find something to write a play about.

ONE

Do we want kids to spend their childhood all "bubble wrapped"?

FIVE

Helmets, masks, and pads, before a kid can put a foot on a skateboard?

THREE

Teddy bears, sold without eyes.

EIGHT

They come off, and can get caught in throats. Or haven't you heard?

SIX

What about teddy bear noses?

EIGHT

Same thing.

SEVEN

The whole thing is *Kafkaesque*.

FOUR

That's exactly what *I've* been thinking.

SIX

Which means what? Exactly? What is *Kafkaesque*?

EIGHT

Kafkaesque is "non-arrival."

A parade that starts in the city, but winds up in the country with no explanation.

SIX

Which means what? Exactly?

SEVEN

Like the kids in that cruiser, I guess.

And their parents, giving them too much freedom to walk home.

ONE

The parents certainly went through Hell for it.

TWO

The kids probably had a ball, looking at guns, and bullets, and tasers.

EIGHT

I think it would have been more *Kafkaesque* if one of them got a finger shot off.
By accident.

SIX

Ew. That's sick.

It makes no sense.

ONE

Kafkaesque is making no sense. Like government, most of the time.

EIGHT

Kafkaesque is a nightmarish, self-perpetuating bureaucracy,
that unravels every string of what was once a seemingly rational world.

FOUR

There's a story *there* to tell. *Kafkaesque*, the surreal. The bizarre. Our town.

SEVEN

The banal.

People mindlessly following habits down blind alleys that make no sense.

ONE

People mindlessly banging their heads against graffiti-ed walls like these.

FOUR

Every main character of his getting trapped in situations beyond their control. Finding themselves totally confused, frustrated, and feeling helpless.

EIGHT

Kafkaesque is like an actor being trapped on stage, isn't it? Forgetting all his lines.... And naked.

SIX

I'm afraid I still don't get it.

EIGHT

You have to see it, to get it.

FOUR

That's my point, I guess.

ONE

You've got it! The only way to describe *Kafkaesque* is to show *Kafkaesque*. **Here**. And that's what we'll do. *Kafkaesque* is what Franz Kafka told about. And we'll tell the audience about *Kafka*.

SIX

Kafka in *this* dead neighborhood? Are you kidding? Where would we start?

FOUR

There's one place I can think of: I had a professor say once that one Kafka story was impossible to make into play. Successfully.

EIGHT

Which one is that?

FOUR

The Hunger Artist.

SIX

Which is what? What's the plot?

FOUR

I don't remember exactly.
There's this man who makes a living out of starving himself.
Professionally.
In public.

TWO

Wow! Great start for a play.

FOUR

Attending the funeral of a good man who starved himself to death,
is like starting a play in the middle.
But you get my professor's point.
Who's going to want to see a man telling his reasons for going on hunger strikes?
Voluntarily.
Just to make money out of it. For what?

EIGHT

It's bizarre. It's truly *Kafkaesque*.

THREE

What happens to him?

FOUR

People get sick of the sport. They stop coming to watch him.
And he winds up in a circus.
Where he's left off, by himself, starving to death, until ...

THREE

Until what? What happens?

FOUR

They feed him to a panther.

THREE

What??

FOUR

No. Not really.
I don't remember what happens to him.
Except ... there is a panther in the story. At the end. I just forget why.

ONE

Let's do it!!

SCENE 2: THE HUNGER ARTIST

A frosty afternoon **on the same stage**, except on the floor of the T. J. Eckleburg cage lies a still body, on straw. A white sheet thrown over it. In the dark at the back of the second cage seems to be crouching a wild animal. Occasional traffic sounds and shadows from time to time moving along the outside of buildings. Toward stage right of center stage stands a large, unkempt, HOMELESS MAN next to a makeshift fire in a 55-gallon steel drum. His back is toward the audience; and he is holding a long, wooden shepherd's staff. Behind him is a tall hand-truck (dolly), strapped to which are his worldly possessions wrapped in blankets.

A PRIEST enters, walking toward the Eckleburg cage, accompanied by two fellow mourners. Each in black robes. All with their backs to the audience.

PRIEST

[while walking, slowly] The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul.
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.
For thou art with me.
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

HOMELESS MAN strikes the stage with his staff.

The PRIEST stops in front of the cage.

PRIEST

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies.
Thou anointest my head with oil.
My cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The PRIEST kneels for a few moments in prayer before the cage, then stands and faces the mourners (and the audience).

PRIEST

For those gathered here to pay respect to the memory of my brother,
let me say a few words.
Some of you may remember us. When we were boys here in this neighborhood.
In the 'hood.

[beat] He was a strange bird. Like me.
Like our neighborhood.

Those who knew him probably know that he turned professional, ten years ago.
A hunger artist like no other. A perfectionist....

[beat] Why do perfectionists always make a nightmare out of life?
He could have been a priest like me.

Or a writer. Like Kafka.
But no. A hunger artist.

And, to be fair, he did make decent money in the beginning.
But this isn't the beginning anymore, is it?
Priests and mourners do not enter at the beginning, do they?

I loved my brother.
More than myself
And to witness his life's work wane away to nothing.
It's been heartbreaking. With nothing I could do. He wouldn't listen to me.
There was a time, once, people would pay half a day's wages to sit near his cage.
Whole towns would come out to watch. Eagerly.
Each morning the excitement would mount.
Everyone wanting to know if he would make it to the end of the day.
Even at dusk tickets were sold.
The effect of it all being heightened by torches and a little night music.
But that's quite impossible now.

Daytime was best for the children.
They'd come and stare at him.
O! my God! Holding each other's hands! Some in tears for him.
Some downright afraid of him, sitting in there on the straw. Not even on a chair.
Sometimes stretching his arm out, to show how thin he was getting.
Now and again taking a sip of water.

But why am I telling you this. You must believe me by now.

Even though they didn't, back in the day.
Hiring guards to watch him, day and night,
to make sure he wasn't tapping some secret source of food.

PRIEST

Local butchers, mostly. A mere formality.
For the sake of the public.
Anyone who knew my brother, or most any hunger artist, for that matter,
knew full well that none would ever betray the honor of their profession.
No. Never.
He could fast as no man alive, and would let nothing diminish that.
What's the point, otherwise? Making himself a skeleton for nothing?
Like these stores.

A panther's growl.

PRIEST

The planned end of his fast was always pre-announced, by the impresario.
With no guarantee, of course, he'd make it.
But when the day arrived, flower girls would come.
To deck his cage with hydrangeas and amaryllis, carnations and dahlias.
There'd be a band.
Two doctors would go in first, to measure the effects of his starvation.
Followed by two of the town's prettiest young women, to help him out of the cage,
down the steps, to a table prepared before him of carefully chosen foods,
so as not to confuse his weakened state of clarity with food.
That was the moment my brother hated the most, and would turn stubborn.
He'd willingly let the young girls take hold of his bony arms, bending over him.
But stand up for them? No. No way. He flatly refused.
Why forty days? Why not go on? Forty-one? Forty-five? Fifty even?
Why stop now when he was in his best form?
Why be cheated of what might become the greatest fasting feat of all time?
Beyond human imagination. He was a hunger *artist*, wasn't he?
He'd shake his head, No, at them. Emphatically. Poor things.
Sitting at their feet was this starving man, acting like an obstinate little boy.
Until the impresario would go in, to lift my brother, up, into their arms.
And it was no mean task after that for two pretty girls, who had no idea the job
would entail so much labor, to half drag him out to the table.
Imagine. Each stretching her neck as far away as she possibly could,
to keep her face from coming anywhere near to touching his beard.
Who knows what might be living in there?
Then would come the food.
What little of it the impresario could force between my brother's lips.

He confessed to me how those were the worst moments of his life.
Being compelled to eat like that, in the presence of his enemies.
With photographs taken of it all.

**HOMELESS MAN strikes the stage again
with his staff.**

PRIEST

My brother was a troubled man, to be sure.
Even though he had several years of fame and glory. Remember?
But it was this neighborhood.
The thoughts of it starving itself into ruin the way it did. For what?
And nothing he could do about it.
And how we were treated when we were boys.
It was his feeling that the world never took him, or us, seriously.
No matter what we would do.
And he never believed the world understood him.
That *he* was the greatest, of all time, at what he did....

[*beat*] And then the last, fateful day.
When the public lost interest in hunger artists altogether.
Like they didn't matter anymore. It happened almost overnight.
The impresario did what he could, to stage new events. Higher stakes.
But people were streaming to other amusements.
I say, streaming to other amusements, and my brother found himself deserted.
First by the people. Then by the impresario himself.
What could he do? Really? At that point in his life?
Become a politician?... Hardly.
No. He made peace with his fate, and sold himself to a circus.
A large circus, specializing in animal traffic and bizarre reputations.
And his was bizarre enough for them, claiming, as he did,
that he was prepared to fast all the way to the limits of human endurance.
And so it went, with my brother. No matter what I'd say.
He had a cage, not in the main ring, mind you,
but outside, near the animal cages, where there was ample passage of feet.
Large, colorful signs were placed all about, proclaiming his history.
All of his feats of fasting. And for a while he enjoyed the noisy crowds.
But inevitably his old melancholy set back in.
I'd talk with him, in the evenings. And cry. Inside.
To see what he was doing to himself.
I'd tell him the people weren't really interested in him, or what he was doing.
Just passing on their way to the menagerie. Children might throw him bonbons,

but what they really wanted to see were slabs of meat thrown to a wild animal. I asked him, begged him to come with me. He said he didn't want my pity. He said that I never understood him. Or his meaning in life.

Another panther's growl.

PRIEST

Try explaining fasting. To a child.
They find it incomprehensible....
I hope that animal in there can't get loose....
In time the colorful signs around my brother grew dirty,
and then disappeared entirely.
The board recording the number of his days without food,
which, in the beginning, was carefully changed every morning,
had long stood at 39.
My brother alone knew the record he was setting. It was like Kafka.
Then, one day, the attendants were told to move his emaciated body out.
So they could use his cage for something new. A panther.
He asked to be brought here.
Said it was the only thing he could do to help our old neighborhood.
On the way one of the attendants said how proud my brother must be.
"Proud?" he whispered back.
For the Guinness world record he surely must have set.
"Who knows?" my brother wheezed.
"Why *did you* become a hunger artist?" the attendant asked.
It's a question *I'd* often asked *myself*. Why?
Thinking it was just his mulish stubbornness to do something that pissed us off.
Like, when we were kids, he once stuck his left arm up in the air,
and wouldn't put it down again for two weeks.
Even after it went numb. Even in his sleep.
Finally it drove Dad mad, and he physically wrestled the arm to the ground.
The only thing he ever told me was ...
"Maybe I never found anything I liked enough to eat."

That wasn't the panther in his cage's problem.
He gladly ate whenever he could. To a flock of cheering onlookers.

**HOMELESS MAN strikes the stage again
with his staff. The PRIEST turns back to
the cage.**

PRIEST

God bless you, my Brother, and watch over you.

May you find peace and fulfillment in the house of the Lord.
And an answer why a beautiful little city like this would starve itself to death.
It's unexplainable.

SCENE 3: HALFWAY TO JUSTICE

TIME AND PLACE

Same neighborhood. Same stage. Roughly the same time (if it matters).

Center stage: A GUARD on duty (the HOMELESS MAN of Scene 2) holds a long spear, or rifle, outside what was T. J. Eckleburg, Ophthalmologist's, now having an imposing door, open over its gaping hole. Instead of a cage showing inside, there stands an enlarged photograph of Franz Kafka lit and clearly visible. Over the door is a large, official sign on which is printed "JUSTICE."

CHARACTERS

The GUARD.

A MAN, clean shaven at the rise.

A WOMAN, of the street.

The MAN enters, walking toward the GUARD. The door of the "JUSTICE" building stands open. Just as the MAN approaches, an attractive WOMAN, wearing a slit skirt and laughing, gets up from the bench, walks past the GUARD, and drops something on the ground. She exits, and the MAN takes notice.

MAN

[*to the GUARD*] Is this Justice?

GUARD

Do you have a pass?

MAN

No. I've come halfway across our country to see Justice.

GUARD

You may not enter without a pass.

MAN

What do you mean?

The door's wide open. Can't you see?

I could just walk in. If I wanted to.

**The GUARD picks up the dropped item
and puts it into his pocket.**

GUARD

You could. If you wanted to. But think of the consequences.

MAN

Or I could just take a look inside.

GUARD

You *can* do that.

MAN

[*looking in*] Looking in doesn't help much, does it?

GUARD

How do you mean?

MAN

Well, out in the country, where I come from,
the way things are, Justice is an uncertain wind.
It's more a presumption than a fact.
A Conundrum, if you get my meaning.
Country justice. But that's not justice. Surely.
And *some people* question whether Justice has any real roots at all.
In History. Like everybody's told. Or even exists.
And it's little comfort to me, coming halfway from nowhere,
to find a guard, and an enlarged photograph of that guy, what's-his-name ... //

GUARD

Franz Kafka ... //

MAN

Hanging in the window.... If you call that metal gate a window.

GUARD

What's that to me?

MAN

[*still looking in*] What's Kafka got to do with Justice?

GUARD

He waits for it. Like everyone.

The MAN turns to face the GUARD.

MAN

How do I get permission? to go inside?

GUARD

You wait.

MAN

Where?

GUARD

Anywhere you want.

The MAN makes as if to walk through the door. The GUARD block access.

GUARD

But not in there.

The MAN points at a bench.

MAN

Here?

GUARD

Why not? That's as good a place as any.

The MAN sits down on one of the benches to wait.

MAN

[*pause*] Any idea how long?

GUARD

Ask *him*.

MAN

Who? [*pointing*] Kafka?

GUARD

He was here yesterday, with a friend, sitting on that very bench.
He'll be back. Taking off boots.
Well, one of them, anyway. While they're waiting.

MAN

Kafka? Here? Waiting here?
For what?

For the issuer of permits. **GUARD**

Who's that? **MAN**

The Postman. **GUARD**

The issuer of permits is a *postman*? **MAN**

His name is Jobe. **GUARD**

Jobe? You said? How do you spell that? **MAN**

J. O. B. **GUARD**

You mean he's Job. Pronounced "job," don't you? **MAN**

His job? **GUARD**

His job is postman, you said. **MAN**

His job is losing things actually. **GUARD**

Whose job? **MAN**

Jobe's job. **GUARD**

Are you calling him "Jobe"?
Or are you calling him "job"? **MAN**

"Jobe." Like Scriptures. **GUARD**

MAN

The Book of Job?
We pronounce that “job” where I come from.

GUARD

People can be bloody, ignorant apes.

MAN

[beat] They were waiting here for him?
Just waiting?
Just yesterday?

GUARD

And taking off boots.

MAN

Just waiting? And taking off boots?

GUARD

Nothing to be done.

MAN

Where did they go, for the night?

GUARD

They always sleep in one of those ditches down the street.
For years.
They were younger when they came. Now they have beards.

MAN

They’ve waited years? And never tried to go in?
Even with his picture hanging inside?

GUARD

No one ever tries to go in.... Are you the one?

MAN

Not me. Now without a pass.

The Guard closes the door.

MAN

Why are you doing that?

GUARD

Because it’s time.

MAN

Why?

GUARD

The door was meant for a man of the country. And that was *you*, I believe. That's *my* job. Spotting the chosen one. And since the door was meant only for you, and you don't have the balls to go through, it will never be opened again.... It's beyond me why people like you, bloody, ignorant apes like you, even care to go looking for justice in the first place.

MAN

Never's an awfully long word, Sir. For somebody from the country. Like me.

GUARD

So you've said.

MAN

[*beat*] What will Kafka and his friend think, when they come back?

GUARD

They'll just wait. Like before. It's what they do. And get a laugh out of it.

MAN

They must be exhausted by now, waiting.

GUARD

Don't worry about it.

MAN

And suffering.

GUARD

They only suffer with their boots. One of them does.

MAN

Nothing to be done?

GUARD

Nothing to be done.

MAN

Did I fuck it up for them?

GUARD

Aaa [*sound of "at" without the "t"*] no problem.

MAN
[beat] You're right.
People *are* bloody, ignorant apes.
Who only sit and wait.

GUARD
And take their boots off.

MAN
And take their boots off.
And sleep in ditches.
And for what?

GUARD
For Judgment Day, I suppose.

MAN
Judgment Day gets delivered here?
By the Postman? Are they sure?

GUARD
Who?

MAN
Kafka and his friend.

GUARD
Judgment Day will come when Judgment Day comes.

MAN
If the Postman brings it. Right?

GUARD
Jobe.

MAN
There you go with that "jobe" stuff again. Isn't it his *job*, to deliver here?

GUARD
By the tree.

MAN
This tree?

GUARD
See any others?

MAN

This one's dead.

GUARD

Come back tomorrow.

MAN

And the day after that?

GUARD

If you like.

The WOMAN enters, walks past them, crosses the stage, and exits. The MAN watches her.

MAN

She reminds me of something. Have you ever heard about the Englishman?

GUARD

No Englishmen in these parts.

MAN

An Englishman, a trifle pissed, goes into an Irish brothel.
And the madam asks him,
"Would it be a fair one, a dark one, or a redhead, ye wants?"

GUARD

I've heard it.

MAN

Don't be angry. Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. Forgive me.

GUARD

Not while I'm on duty.

MAN

I'll wait.

Pause while the MAN looks up and studies the tree.

MAN

Do you ever get off duty?...
[beat] You never do?...
[beat] Maybe I'll just hang myself. I've spent half my life resisting the urge.

GUARD

Judas hanged himself.

MAN

No, he didn't. He bought a field of stones, and fell, and broke his skull.

GUARD

Judas *hanged* himself.

MAN

And all his silver pieces couldn't put his dumpty back together again.

The field was named the bloody acre.

Look it up. In Acts.

GUARD

Let's just say, he died. Okay?

MAN

Leaving everybody waiting.

GUARD

Who did he leave waiting?

MAN

The disciples.

GUARD

What for?

MAN

Their money.

GUARD

Their money? What are you talking about.

MAN

He was their bag man, remember?

GUARD

I have no idea what you're talking about.

MAN

Judas. He was the disciple in charge of keeping all their money for them.

GUARD

I doubt it. If he had all that much money, why would he need thirty pieces more?

MAN

[*beat*] Now there's a question for the ages.
I can see how you got *your* job.

GUARD

My job? [*musings aloud*] I've never looked at it that way.

The MAN pulls out a collection of photos, and begins looking through them. The WOMAN again walks past, more slowly and deliberately this time. The MAN looks up, puts away the photos, stands, and goes to her.

MAN

Pretty lady, would you like some company?

The WOMAN stops.

MAN

I've been waiting here a long time.

WOMAN

For me?

MAN

What's your name?

WOMAN

I'm sorry. Do I know you? Your accent promises nothing of gentility or adventure.

MAN

You're right there. I'm no well-heeled, world traveler. Just country folk, waiting, perfectly innocently, for Justice. I say I am perfectly innocent.

WOMAN

Then why would I want to go walking with you?

MAN

Oh! I beg your pardon. City ways are a mystery to me.
You're in one of the pictures I bought. But I must have neglected to observe the throng of escorts panting there for your company.

WOMAN

You're crass. Do you know that?

MAN

Those legs, and eyes, and that dress alone.
They would promise more affable conversation in the country.

WOMAN

We're both right in this. And to save any hatefulness ... //

MAN

Hatefulness? ... //

WOMAN

Nothing leads to nothing in this place. Your words are not worth the price.

The WOMAN exits, slowly.

MAN

[*to the GUARD*] Well, I'm no beggar. I guess I'll start back home.

The Man sits back down on his bench.

GUARD

You could have had her, you know.

MAN

Easy for you to say. You're from this neighborhood. You know their ways.

Time passes. The MAN falls asleep. Darkness. Daylight. Noises (including dogs howling) come from inside the Justice building. The MAN wakes up, runs to the door and pounds on it.

MAN

Open up. Open up. I heard you in there.

The GUARD goes to the MAN, and takes his arm.

GUARD

Stop that! I didn't know you were still here.

MAN

Why wouldn't I be?

GUARD

After all this time?

MAN

Get your hands off me. You're insane.

The GUARD throws the MAN to the ground.

GUARD

Who do you think you are? Some hero?
Yours is the heroism of a cockroach in an apartment building.
You've been here too long.

MAN

I've been here *one night*.

GUARD

You've been here ten years.

MAN

Ten years?!

GUARD

Touch your face, if you don't believe me.

The MAN touches his face, finds a long, unkempt beard there, and stands up.

MAN

Who am I? What am I doing here?

GUARD

Pretending to be perfectly innocent.

MAN

This? This is the Justice I came looking for?

GUARD

How can a man who knows nothing about justice,
ever claim himself to be perfectly innocent?

The MAN rubs his beard and exits. A spot on the tree. It is green with leaves.

SCENE 4: INVESTIGATIONS OF A DOG

TIME AND PLACE

Same stage. Same time.

Stage left: A speaker's lectern and a large screen are brought onstage.

The LECTURER enters **stage right**, wearing a partial mask and a riverboat captain's cap, and carrying a large, stuffed toy dog. He walks across the stage to the lectern, howling along with the audience, and puts the stuffed toy dog down on it. The audience continues howling a few moments longer, with approval and enthusiasm.

LECTURER

Thank you. Thank you.... Thank you
Eight. Nine. Ten. Okay. Okay. Enough, now. Enough of this, Owoooo!
Just so you know, I am morally an actor.
And a writer. And a riverboat captain, you can see. It's my day job.

Touches his cap in a token salute.

However, spiritually, I'm a dog.
Witness the mask. Witness the mind.
An honorary member of the canine constituency.

**Clicks the remote, and a picture appears of a lovable dog,
with pure blue eyes. Blue-eyed dog**

So, think of me like your favorite pet, snuggling in your arms. Okay?

[talking through the stuffed toy dog] And what if I'm not okay with it?

[talking to the stuffed toy dog] Well, think about it. You should be.

[again through the stuffed toy dog] But if I'm still not.

[again talking directly to the stuffed toy dog] Consider the alternative.

[again through the stuffed toy dog] Which is?

[again talking directly to the stuffed toy dog] Becoming human.

LECTURER

[*again through the stuffed toy dog*] O, Heavens no. Those poor creatures. Humans. Hounded by debts, drugs, doubts, and firearms. That's no life for me.

Puts the stuffed dog down.

One of the worst things that can happen to a dog, me at least, is seeing a naked stray walking by on its hind legs. It drives me apoplectic. Which is to say, my agent has learned to protect me from all such sights. Thank you. But what my agent *can't* protect me from is melancholy. The kind a talking dog like me feels. Being surrounded by humans almost all of the time. I get lonely. So I'm asking, could you please treat me like I'm just a run-of-the-mill mutt. Even though I do have the strange ability to speak English. A mildly depressed *hund* with a propensity to speak out, like Franz Kafka, on topics of the day.... Which brings me to my first point.

Clicks, and on the screen –

1. ANIMALS HAVE MORAL STANDING.

How do *you feel* about God's creatures who can't speak? Do they have souls to you? Moral standing? Love? Can they be slaughtered, wantonly, for skins and tusks? Think about it. If you've acclimatized yourselves to regarding animal life as having little worth, well, you're not as spiritually developed as a dog. I can tell you that. And you're in danger of losing appreciation for human life as well. If you don't see through to the soul, you can lose the love. So, do animals have moral standing? A resounding, *Yes, we do.*

Again clicks the remote, and on the screen –

2. DOGS DON'T COVET WEALTH.

Dogs are at peace with Mother Nature. The one thing a dog yearns for is the pack. And food, of course. Let me illustrate. When I was in my tail-wagging youth, an event happened to me, so extraordinary, I can still feel it clearly today. I encountered a small band of other dogs, the first I'd ever seen. And instantaneously there was music, and wonderful smells, and sweet fragrance in the air. Birds in the sky. It's impossible, I know, for humans, except maybe Mozart, to comprehend the essence of a dog's combined sense of music and smell.

LECTURER

Again clicks the remote, and on the screen – 3. TO DOGS, MUSIC HAS COLLECTIVE MEANING.

The sound of *collective ... emotional ... meaning....* All that.
And Owooo, kicking ass in a crowd.
It calls the meeting to order.
It robs one of their wits!
I shouted at them, “What’s the name of that wonderful sound you make?”
[beat] But the most awful thing happened to me then.
They never replied. They never even acknowledged me. It’s unforgivable.
Dogs who ignore another dog’s greeting are guilty of a sin,
which neither the humblest nor the greatest of our kind will pardon.
But why? Why would they do such a thing?
I have no answer.
Have I exaggerated the memory? I don’t think so.
Admittedly, when I was a whelp, I understood as a whelp.
And saw things as a whelp. So possibly, I got things wrong.
It might simply have been seven world-class musicians,
seeking privacy for a jam session.
And there I was, an uninvited pup, implicating myself into their space.
Maybe they were using their celestial woofs and howls to show me my place.
And I was just too stupid to get it.... Possibly.
What did I know about the intricacies of dog pack riffs?
All I know is, that I compounded my foolishness by commencing an investigation.

Again clicks the remote, and on the screen – 4. QUESTION: DO YOU HAVE TO BE NAKED TO INVESTIGATE THE CONDITIONS OF NUDITY?

Do you? Have to get naked? to do a dissertation on nudity?
Every new friend I made, I dragged to that place.
I told them about the Magnificent Seven, and their music.
I showed them exactly where everyone stood.
And *then*, I made the killer accusation:
Some of them stood, bare-assed, on two legs,
unforgivably exposing their genitals to a pup. And they knew it.
And I demonstrated it, graphically.
Corrupting my new friends in the same way by *my* deplorable immodesty.
Far too much of my childhood was spent, preoccupied with that incident.
Thinking about it. Discussing it. Analyzing it, ad nauseam. Shame on me. Shame!

LECTURER

Again clicks the remote, a dog with its: [Head in a cone](#)

My foolish obsession stole my childhood innocence from me.
But, in turn, it opened doors to me to the art of investigation.
And after I had exhausted the matter of the Snub of the Seven, I progressed,
quite naturally, to the rudimental, philosophic question of a dog's life:

Again clicks the remote, and on the screen – 5. QUESTION: WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, ANYWAY?

I suppose, to bipeds, there's nothing to the question.
To them, a dog's life is about serving Man. Like Man is dog's god.
But from a dog's standpoint, the question burned countless evening hours for me.
Isn't the purpose of life the pursuit of happiness? As the greats have claimed?
But dogs don't have to be happy to have a purpose.
Chasing happiness is like chasing tail. Going in circles.
What makes us relevant, and gives us purpose in life, is love.
Appreciative hands and faces awaiting our tongues every day.
And, of course, music. The kind of music only dogs can make.
It's the meaning in our music which gives dogs a deeper meaning in life.
A responsibility greater than self.
A burden that has to be borne universally, by all dogs.
As a community of the whole. In toto, so to speak.
A mouthful too large for any one dog's mouth to hold.
I, for one, like to gulp down food, without the slightest thought of its socio-
political-economic significance. But that's me.
The desire to eat, simply outweighs the desire to think about what eating implies.
To ponder whether dogs treat the Earth with the dignity and respect it deserves.
Water the Earth, as often as we can, and the Earth will feed us.
That's what mothers teach.
And in this aphorism is not the all of everything expressed for a dog's life?
As long as we are dogs, what more can be said?
Water the ground as often as you can. And it will feed you.
And there, my friends, is a dog's ultimate purpose in life.
A dog's proper pursuit of happiness.
Maybe not man's. And certainly not a lady's.

LECTURER

The biggest difference between dogs and people stems from ...

Again clicks the remote, and on the screen – 6. THE DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD.

Indeed. The distribution of food.

For dogs the compulsion of eating takes care of worrying about anything to share.

For people, my God! half their lives have to do with the distribution of food.

Just think how they leave each morning,

just to bring us home food at night.

And if you make enough of a nuisance of yourself, they'll feed you to shut you up.

So, if you're hungry, keep begging them for knowledge.

The hunger for knowledge, properly expressed, gives you all your daily meat.

Which is why hungry dogs have more interest in learning than fat, fed ones.

If you want to eat, keep asking questions. If you want knowledge

Well, you don't solve that problem by asking about it. Do you?

If you really want answers, give answers. Right or wrong, you'll get a response.

That's right. That's what this dog is telling you.

If you want the truth, tell it. Find it yourself, and tell it.

Stop reproaching all the Scouts and Rovers out there.

Be a smart Alec on your own.

Don't expect another dog's teeth to crack the hard bones for you.

All the research of my life has led me to this one, inescapable truth ...

Again clicks the remote, and on the screen – 7. DOGS ARE BOUND TO PHILOSOPHICAL SILENCE.

Dogs will never divulge a crumb of philosophical truth.

Which brought me to one, distressing, personal question:

How long can a dog like me endure the silence?

And since I have found absolutely no answer to that,

where did my life-defining error occur?

Was it some elementary fallacy? Was it deficient education? I don't think so.

Did I lead a reckless, shameful lifestyle? No. Absolutely not.

From my earliest days I've renounced vain dog pleasures,

burying my head between my paws to avoid even the slightest of lewd sights.

Or was it simply because I'm a freak, like soaring dogs are?

Throws the stuffed dog into the air and catches it, putting it back onto the lectern.

What? No one here's ever heard of soaring dogs?

LECTURER

Again clicks the remote. [Flying dog](#)

They are dogs so light they can fly.
I sneered, too, the first time I heard of them.
But I didn't let that prejudice me.
And, although I've yet to actually see one, I've discovered a great deal about them.
For example, they don't just hover in air, they spend their lives up there,
having almost no contact with dogs on the ground after birth.
Now, what's the point, letting their legs atrophy through nonuse?
The point is, they are metaphysically free, to observe life evolving.
They are the hunger artists of un-walking and un-running.
They just soar, like clouds that don't rain.
And if I ever spot a living, soaring dog, then surely I can find another talking one.
It's what freaks do. We hope for tomorrow, and ponder the question of the ages:

Again clicks the remote, and on the screen – **8. WHY KEEP ON LIVING THIS TEDIOUS LIFE?**

Why keep bearing life's slings and arrows, Hamlet?
Why keep searching for a soul mate, if only to weep over her in the end?
It's times like now I simply want to starve until I can't anymore.
Or until food is forced into my mouth.
But I'll tell you: I tried it once.
And I'm too defeated to try fasting again.
Besides, humans may earn Brownie points for watching their diets,
but dogs certainly don't. And dogs don't do hunger strikes either. Period.
My one attempt at fasting stripped me of my courage.
I went into a delirium of starvation, where my forefathers came to me.
“Dogs don't fast. It's forbidden,” they told me.
“Only when you have food in your mouth can it be said,
that you've solved the question of existence.”
I was besieged with guilt, barely able to drag myself a few yards in any direction.
I wept. I snapped at empty air. And I fainted.
When I came to, a strange hound, maybe a wolf, was standing in front of me.
And he was talking to me, in English, like this. Not bark talk.
It must have been delirium. Yet, I seemed to understand him exactly. Every word.
He had brought a newly caught hare; and I was to eat it.
And get the Hell out, and stop stinking up his hunting ground with my starvation.

LECTURER

In a way, you see, food did force itself into my mouth.
And from that experience I learned the error of fasting alone, on your own.
I still bear the effects of the near-death experience.
And I'm still bothered by never getting an answer to our universal silence....
Unless it's wolves.
Strange, isn't it? how nature can add insult to silence....
[beat] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you all for your attention.

**Exits with Ruff, Ruff, Ruff, Ruff, Ruff, Ruff, Ruff, Ruff,
Ruff from the audience, carrying off the stuffed toy dog.**

[to the stuffed toy dog] I'm not all that good, am I?... Just different.

SCENE 5: THE THIRD FLOOR

TIME AND PLACE

Same time. Same stage, except, **stage right**, is the outline of a room on the third floor of an apartment building.

A YOUNG MAN in shirtsleeves is sitting at a table, **facing stage left**, typing on a typewriter, a jacket on the back of his chair. Behind him is a window looking out onto the street below. To his left (**toward upstage**) is a “wall” on which “hangs” an enlarged photograph of Franz Kafka. Across the room from him (**toward stage left**) is a doorframe – the door standing open, into the room – and a hallway beyond.

CHARACTERS

A YOUNG MAN.

A YOUNG WOMAN.

A NEIGHBOR, male.

Women who accompany the NEIGHBOR in the hallway past the young man’s room – non-speaking parts.

After a few moments, the YOUNG MAN gets up, pulls the page out, crumples it, throws it on the floor, and walks to the window to stare out. Sounds of the NEIGHBOR coming down the hallway, accompanied by a woman, both laughing. They stop outside the young man’s door, and look in, laughing.

YOUNG MAN

[*going to the door*] Can’t you see I’m alone?
Can’t you leave a man alone? Really?

With that, the YOUNG MAN firmly closes the door, takes a few steps back, turns, and after a pause, begins taking off his pants. The door opens; and the YOUNG WOMAN enters, on tip-toe, her hair drawn up on her head. She covers her face with her hands and supports

herself with her elbow against the doorframe. A draft ripples her clothing. Sensing her presence (but not looking at her) the YOUNG MAN hurriedly pulls up his pants, fastens his belt, takes the jacket from the back of the chair, and puts it on. She takes her hands down from her face. They pretend not to know each other.

YOUNG MAN

[hopefully, but not looking at her] Hello.

The YOUNG WOMAN runs her fingertips over the surface of the invisible wall. The YOUNG MAN still does not look at her.

YOUNG MAN

Are you looking for someone? *[hopefully]* Are you looking for me?

The YOUNG WOMAN stares at him.

YOUNG MAN

Or is it some mistake?
Nothing easier than confusing doors in this building.
I'm Franz.... On the third floor....
Am I whom you've come to see? I'm alone, you see. I stay alone.

YOUNG WOMAN

Hush. Hush. It's all right.

YOUNG MAN

Then, shut the door, please.

He turns, to look at her; and the moment he does, darkness, followed by the YOUNG MAN again sitting at the table, typing on the typewriter, in his shirtsleeves – the door standing open into the room – the hallway across.

After a few moments, the YOUNG MAN again gets up, pulls the page out,

crumples it, throws it on the floor (near the earlier crumpled sheet), and walks to the window to stare out. Sounds of the NEIGHBOR coming down the hallway, accompanied by a different woman from before, both laughing. They stop outside the young man's door, and look in, laughing.

YOUNG MAN

[going to the door] Can't you see I'm alone?
Can't you leave a man alone? Really?

With that, the YOUNG MAN firmly closes the door, takes a few steps back, turns, and after a pause, once again begins taking off his pants. The door opens; and the YOUNG WOMAN enters, on tip-toe, her hair still drawn up on her head. She covers her face with her hands and supports herself with her elbow against the doorframe. A draft ripples her clothing. Sensing her presence (but not looking at her) the YOUNG MAN hurriedly pulls up his pants, fastens his belt, takes the jacket from the back of the chair, and puts it on. She takes her hands down from her face. They pretend not to know each other.

YOUNG MAN

[in anticipation, but not looking at her] Good afternoon.

The YOUNG WOMAN runs her fingertips over the surface of the invisible wall. The YOUNG MAN still does not look at her.

YOUNG MAN

Are you looking for someone? *[hopefully]* Are you looking for me?

The YOUNG WOMAN stares at him.

YOUNG MAN

Or is it some mistake?
Nothing easier than confusing doors in this building.
[beat] I'm Franz.... On the third floor....
Am I whom you've come to see? I'm alone, you see. I stay alone.

YOUNG WOMAN

Hush. Hush. It's all right.

YOUNG MAN

Then, shut the door, please.

He turns, to look at her; and the moment he does, darkness, followed by the YOUNG MAN again sitting at the table, typing on the typewriter, in his shirtsleeves – the door standing open into the room – the hallway across.

After a few moments, the YOUNG MAN again gets up, pulls the page out, crumples it, throws it on the floor (near the other two crumpled sheets), and walks to the window to stare out. Sounds of the NEIGHBOR coming down the hallway, accompanied by yet another woman, both laughing. They stop outside the young man's door, and look in, laughing.

YOUNG MAN

[going to the door] Can't you see I'm alone?
Can't you leave a man alone? Really?

With that, the YOUNG MAN firmly closes the door, takes a few steps back, turns, and after a pause, once again begins taking off his pants. The door opens; and the YOUNG WOMAN enters, on tip-toe, her hair still drawn up on her head. Again she covers her face with her hands and supports herself with her elbow against the doorframe. A draft

ripples her clothing. Sensing her presence (but not looking at her) the YOUNG MAN hurriedly pulls up his pants, fastens his belt, takes the jacket from the back of the chair, and puts it on. She takes her hands down from her face. They pretend not to know each other.

YOUNG MAN

[with pent up emotion, but not looking at her] Good evening.

The YOUNG WOMAN runs her fingertips over the surface of the invisible wall. The YOUNG MAN still does not look at her.

YOUNG MAN

Are you looking for someone? *[hopefully]* Are you looking for me?

The YOUNG WOMAN stares at him.

YOUNG MAN

Or is it some mistake?
Nothing easier than confusing doors in this building.
I'm Franz.... On the third floor....
Am I whom you've come to see? I'm alone, you see. I stay alone.

YOUNG WOMAN

Hush. Hush. It's all right.

She shuts the door.

YOUNG MAN

Then, shut the door, please.

**The YOUNG MAN turns to look at her;
and she looks back at him.**

YOUNG WOMAN

It's shut.

YOUNG MAN

No bother. It's just that, a lot of people know me. I mean, they all do, of course. On this floor. And they often take the liberty of walking right in, uninvited.

YOUNG WOMAN

What's the matter?

YOUNG MAN

It's just their way, walking by, looking and staring in.
I hate it. When people walk by, and stare in. Here, let me lock it.

YOUNG WOMAN

What's the matter with you?
I don't care if the whole third floor walks in to watch us.
Anyway, I've already locked it.

**The YOUNG MAN, in a long, motionless
pause, assesses the significance of her
lie.**

YOUNG MAN

Make yourself comfortable....
Or go, if you want. Just go. You're free to go any time. You know that.
Do I have to tell you that? Or do you already know?

YOUNG WOMAN

No.

YOUNG MAN

No, what?

YOUNG WOMAN

I want to be comfortable with you. More than you know.
Because I like watching you. I walk by. And I look in. Haven't you noticed?

YOUNG MAN

No.

YOUNG WOMAN

You interest me, the way you write. What you throw on the floor.
It tells me a lot about you.
And I know I can leave. But that doesn't mean I know I can trust you.
Yet ... it's my choice, to stay, even if I don't trust you. Even if you threaten me.

YOUNG MAN

Threaten you?

YOUNG WOMAN

Even if you *should* threaten me.

YOUNG MAN

But I'm *not* threatening you ... //

YOUNG WOMAN

I'm just saying, even if what you say or do might threaten me at some point.

YOUNG MAN

I'm telling you, *I'm not threatening you.*

YOUNG WOMAN

And I'm telling you, I read what you write.

YOUNG MAN

I don't mean to quarrel. Because I *do* want you to stay.
So, if I say something, anything, inappropriate;
or you take something as off-putting, please don't let it ruin things.
It's been so long; and I feel so dreadfully alone.
I can't tell you how happy I am to see you ... and your hair.

**The YOUNG WOMAN walks past him,
gently touching his cheek with her
fingertips, and then lets her hair down.**

YOUNG WOMAN

Hush. Hush. It's all right.

**The YOUNG MAN winces. There is a
sudden shift in his mood.**

YOUNG MAN

How can you say such things? To hurt me so?
Why spoil what little time we have together?

YOUNG WOMAN

If that's what you want, to quarrel, I'm leaving.

YOUNG MAN

No, don't leave, please. Don't be a stranger.

YOUNG WOMAN

I'm no stranger. How many times have we been through this?
What stranger walks in, and comes as close to you, as I do?

Kisses his lips for a split second; then steps away.

So why the charades? This may our last time together. You never know.

YOUNG MAN

But, you don't even know my name.

YOUNG WOMAN

Franz. That's all I need to know ... before

YOUNG MAN

Before?

YOUNG WOMAN

Before we do more.

YOUNG MAN

Aren't you being a bit bold? I mean, considering

YOUNG WOMAN

Considering what?

That you'd prefer to waste yourself alone, than share yourself with me?

That's not what you're thinking when you write about me. Not what *I* read.

YOUNG MAN

That doesn't sound very friendly.

YOUNG WOMAN

Friendly, is it?

Friendly now; or friendly later?

YOUNG MAN

How do you know about later?

YOUNG WOMAN

I know nothing of it. I only know what you've written up till now.

And what you're dying to write of, later.

YOUNG MAN

You know what I want to write of later? How?

YOUNG WOMAN

Your words....

"Oh, the suffering, pain, and cruelty that hides like knives in the human heart."

**The YOUNG MAN goes to the table,
covers the typewriter, lights a candle,
and sits, staring into its flicker. The
YOUNG WOMAN stands by the "wall,"**

rubbing her fingers along it as though it were her lover's back. After a little while the YOUNG MAN restlessly stands, puts on an overcoat, blows out the candle, and leaves through the door, tripping over the leg of the chair. (Yes, he does NOT unlock the door before going out; but he does close the door behind him.) While he is leaving the YOUNG WOMAN stands again on tip-toe, with her arms outstretched, head thrown back, inviting the world to see her victory. Just as the YOUNG MAN leaves his apartment he meets the NEIGHBOR in the hallway

NEIGHBOR

Going out?
This late?
Alone?

YOUNG MAN

There's a ghost in my apartment.

NEIGHBOR

You mean, like a hair in your soup?

YOUNG MAN

Don't make fun of me. I'm not in the mood.

NEIGHBOR

Well, we shall have a see.

The NEIGHBOR pulls out a cellphone and walks into the Young Man's apartment. He looks around, and then comes out.

NEIGHBOR

Nothing there.
Nothing to take a picture of.

YOUNG MAN

She's too thin to for you to see.

NEIGHBOR

Oh? A female ghost, is she?

YOUNG MAN

It's none of your business.

NEIGHBOR

Well, fatten her up. That's my advice to you. Fatten her up.

Walks on; and over his shoulder.

Yeah, fatten her up. Fatten her up. Fatten her up. That's what I'd do.
If she's a keeper, that is.

Exits.

YOUNG MAN

[*to himself*] Like your kind always knows everything....

[*beat*] You keep out. *She's mine.*

You've got enough women of your own.

Keep away from mine.

The YOUNG MAN locks the door to his apartment, and walks off, while the YOUNG WOMAN begins opening the crumpled sheets and reading them.

SCENE 6: THE STOKER

TIME AND PLACE

Same time. Same stage, except, **stage left**, light, as from portholes distantly above, illuminates a miserably small ocean liner cabin in which there is a bed, a cabinet, an armchair, and the STOKER, crouching uncomfortably, busying himself with a small trunk, attempting to press it closed with both hands, but not yet getting its lock to snap shut. The door to the cabin **faces stage right**.

CHARACTERS

KARL ROSSMAN, seventeen, from Germany, whose parents have shipped him off to America because a cook in their house seduced him and got pregnant with his child. Wearing the suit and jacket his parents got him for the trip.

The STOKER, an enormous man with dark, thick hair, wearing wrinkled, dark gray trousers. The ship's chief stoker.

KARL approaches the partially open door of the Stoker's cabin, and knocks, causing the door to swing further open.

STOKER

[*calling out*] It's open. Come on in.

KARL stands, motionless, outside the half open door.

STOKER

[*barely glancing at KARL*] I said the fucker's open, whoever you are....
What are you waiting for?

KARL opens the door all the way, starts to enter, and then backs out.

KARL

I'm ... I'm, sorry. I'm so sorry. I've lost myself.
These steamers get overwhelming, when you're all turned around, below deck.
A frightful labyrinth of passageways, and I don't have any idea where I am.

STOKER

Continuing with his trunk.

That's how the world is, my lad.
Things get bigger, the further you get away.

KARL

Still indecisively stepping in and then out of the Stoker's cabin.

Bigger?

STOKER

Waving his hand.

The hold.

KARL

The *hole*?

STOKER

That, too.
But who gives a rat's ass?
Come in, and shut the fucking door.

KARL remains unsure, standing in the doorway.

STOKER

Get the Hell in here. Right now.

KARL

Won't I bother you?
I'm afraid I will.
My father wouldn't ... //

STOKER

Getting suddenly to his feet.

You are bothering me.

The STOKER goes to the door; jerks KARL inside; and slams the door shut.

STOKER

And I'm nobody's father. You can bet on that. But if I were,
I'd have enough sense to teach my son not to stand in open doorways.
I can't stand open doorways. People looking in.

KARL

Cramped uncomfortably next to the bed.

The passageway's empty.

STOKER

**Goes back to attempting to get the lock on his small trunk
to snap shut.**

Ja [*“yah”*], for now, maybe.

KARL

[*tentatively*] Are you German?

STOKER

I am, ja.

KARL

You sound it. But you don't *look* German.

STOKER

Here, sit on the bed. You'll have more room. Stretch your legs out.

**KARL hesitates, then uneasily sits down
on the bed. But noticing the Stoker's
trunk, he abruptly stands again.**

KARL

O my God! O my God! My trunk. I completely forgot.

STOKER

You have a trunk? Where?

KARL

[*pointing up*] Up, on deck.
I was waiting to get off. And just saw the Statue of Liberty.
And I thought of something I'd forgotten.
And when I came down to get it, I got lost ... down here.
[*frenzied*] Can you help me get back? Up on deck. Please?

STOKER

Left it standing ... by itself?

KARL

No.... With a friend.... What's his name?

STOKER

A long-time friend?

KARL

No. No. Just someone I've met.

STOKER

Well, calm down.

KARL

Digging into a secret pocket his mother had put into the lining of his jacket for the trip, and pulling out a calling card.

Butterbaum. His name's Butterbaum. Franz Butterbaum.

STOKER

And getting your trunk is all that important?

KARL

Of course it is. Everything I have is in it. And all my pictures.

STOKER

Then why did you leave it with a stranger?

KARL

I'd forgotten my umbrella; in my cabin; and ran down to fetch it.
And the crowd, rushing to get off the boat.... *O, my God! O, my God!*

STOKER

With a gentle hand, pushes KARL back down onto the bed.

This is a *ship*, Sonny.

KARL

Yes. Yes. Okay. Okay. Rushing to get off the *ship*.
And I asked Butterbaum to watch it.

KARL puts the card back into his pocket.

KARL

And I got all turned around.
So many people pushing me about, blocking the passageways I knew to steerage.
So I tried to go around....
God in Heaven, I'm so confused.

STOKER

Poor little immigrant, in steerage, eh?

KARL

I had no idea ... //

STOKER

You've got a lot to learn.

KARL

Calming down.

Quite.

STOKER

You're alone, I suppose ... except for Butterbaum, of course.

KARL

Quite.

STOKER

And lost a trunk *and* an umbrella, as well.

**The STOKER sits in the armchair,
KARL's business, all of a sudden,
becoming more of interest to him than
getting his trunk locked. KARL
continues sitting on the bed.**

KARL

But it's my belief my trunk's not lost, yet.

STOKER

Scratching at his dark, thick hair.

Believe whatever you wish. It depends on the port.
In Hamburg, maybe your Butterbaum would still be standing watch.
But this is New York.

KARL

Standing.

So I have to go after it, right away.

STOKER

Stands, and pushes KARL, somewhat less gently, back onto the bed.

Just relax; and sit down.

KARL

Looks around the cabin for a way out.

Why?

STOKER

Still standing.

Because there's no sense, hurrying now. Either the trunk's long gone. Or your Butterbaum's an idiot, and will stay with it till Judgment Day. Or he's left, and nobody else, in their right mind, will bother it. And why would they? They have trunks of their own to wrestle with. So, if your trunk's still there, we'll have an easier time looking, later. When all the passengers are off.... And finding your umbrella, too.

KARL

That's how my father thinks.

STOKER

I'm no one's father. I'll guarantee you that.

KARL

But you make me think of him.

STOKER

Sitting back down in the armchair.

He understands you? When you get like this?

KARL

He's strong, and keeps control. Like you. But he doesn't listen to me. Not like you.

STOKER

Ja?

KARL

It makes a difference, when people don't shout at me.

STOKER

I don't shout. When I'm not working.

KARL

He does.

STOKER

Shouting frightens little birds.

KARL

I don't like it either.

STOKER

Is someone meeting you in New York?

KARL

I was hoping for my uncle, maybe. But I'm not sure.

STOKER

Sounds half-baked, coming to America and not knowing anybody.

KARL

I got sent away from home, you see. Sort of, spur of the moment.

STOKER

Why? Why were you sent away so young?

KARL

Waves the matter away in the air.

Reasons.

STOKER

We all have our reasons.

KARL

[*beat*] What do you do? when you work?

STOKER

I'm the ship's *chief stoker*, I am.

KARL

[*joyfully*] You're a *stoker*? Really?!

STOKER

Ja, that I am.

KARL

In the engine room?

STOKER

Ja, that's where I work.

KARL

That's what I've dreamed of doing.

Working with stokers. Alongside their strong, muscular bodies.
On a famous ship. Traveling the world.

STOKER

It's, maybe, not that grand.

KARL

If my uncle's not there, possibly you could put a word in for me?

STOKER

A cinder monkey, *you*?

Do you have any idea?

Of course you don't. Heat destroys delicate birds like you.

KARL

[*emphatically*] *Not!* You have no idea how strong a spirit I have.

STOKER

Stands, and gently brushes KARL's hair back with his hand.

Your father would never allow it.

KARL

My parents don't care *what* I do, anymore. I'm my own man, now.

STOKER

Well, the ship may need someone.... *My job* will be free.

The STOKER jams his hands into the pockets of his wrinkled, dark gray

trousers, sits down, and stretches his legs across, onto the bed. KARL inches back, closer to the wall.

KARL

Your job?!

STOKER

When I see the Captain.

KARL

You're leaving your job?

STOKER

[nodding] Ja.

KARL

But why? Don't you like being a stoker anymore?

STOKER

Too many questions, my lad. You'll make a much better student than a stoker.

KARL

Father would say that.

But being in a classroom all the time. That's not for me.

Besides, I don't have the money.

And American schools don't like foreigners who don't speak English well.

STOKER

You've learned some things, have you?

KARL

Just common sense.

STOKER

Takes his feet off the bed and his hands out of his trouser pockets.

A boy after my own heart.

KARL

But why? Why quit?

STOKER

It's a German ship, you've noticed.

KARL

Nods, and moves forward to sit on the edge of the bed.

So?

STOKER

Then why is the head engineer Romanian? Who only likes Romanians? Tell me.

KARL

I don't know.

STOKER

A damned Romanian named Schubal, who abuses Germans on a German ship. Now doesn't that start you thinking?

KARL

[*looks unsure*] Unbelievable.

STOKER

**Bangs several times on the arm of his chair, startling
KARL.**

Ja! Ja! It's unbelievable.

I've served on many a steamer. A dozen of the great ones. Ja! Ja! I have. Stripped down to my skivvies, wetted down by the fires and boilers. And never went a bit crazy from the heat.

Stands and counts on his fingers, KARL staring at him.

The Imperator; the Vaterland; the Bismarck; the München; the Mauretania; the Lusitania ... //

KARL

The Lusitania?

STOKER

Ja, the Lusitania. And the Frisia; the Carmania; the Umbria; the Cleveland; the Koblenz; and the Empress of Scotland. All of them. I stoked on all of them. And distinguished myself. Their captains all praised me, every one of them. I can stoke eight tons a day. *Eight tons, mind you.* I'm the best, and the strongest.... And now this. What do we have here? I'm useless. I slave away, only to have Schubal call me lazy.

KARL

[excitedly] You must. You must go to the Captain.
He *must* be told. You can't let this keep happening to you....
I'll go with you. I'll help. And maybe then he'll let me work with you.

STOKER

Sits back down.

I haven't the words.

KARL

Kneels on the bed.

But, your words were perfect; what you just said to me.

STOKER

And you're no captain.

KARL

Don't be silly. Just let your story come out. And I'll be right there, at your side.

STOKER

You'd do that? for me?

KARL

Trust me. I'd be honored.

STOKER

But how would we do it?

KARL

Stands up, on the bed.

I'll show you how. Let's both close our eyes.
And imagine being where the Captain receives his most important guests.

STOKER

I can't. I can't close my eyes like that.

KARL

Eyes closed.

Why not?

STOKER

I have my reasons.

KARL

Reaches his arms out.

Imagine standing in the doorway of the ship's grand cabin.

It's bright and sunny. See?

There are three huge windows, looking out over the waves, rolling by.

STOKER

You don't know what you're talking about.

A small bell rings intermittently throughout the remainder of the scene; and then a cannon shot. The STOKER does NOT close his eyes.

KARL

[eyes closed] We'll hear bells. And cannon shots, saluting us in the harbor.

We'll see huge ships, flying colorful flags.

And behind them, New York's famous skyline.

STOKER

You're hallucinating.

KARL

Not at all. Keep your eyes shut.

I'm not hallucinating. I'm imagining. There's a difference.

And I can see a round table in the room.

It's where the harbor authority clerks are sitting, with the ship's officer, who's dressed in blue. They're pouring over stacks of documents.

At one window, an accountant is busy with the ship's logs.

At another, two tall men are standing, in quiet conversation.

One in uniform, with medals across his chest, playing with the hilt of his sword.

That would be the Captain.

The other is wearing a fabulously expensive suit,

holding a thin bamboo stick in his hand. Get the picture?

STOKER

Where's this going?

KARL

[opening his eyes] What would you say to the Captain?

STOKER

[*standing*] I don't belong here.

KARL

Jumps down from the bed.

No! No! You can't go say that. You *do* belong ... //

STOKER

And what? Interrupt the Captain?

KARL

If you don't, I will.

STOKER

They'll throw us off the ship.

KARL pulls his passport out of his secret pocket, along with Butterbaum's card.

KARL

I'll take my passport, out of my secret pocket ... //

STOKER

With Butterbaum's card?

KARL

And that will be my introduction.

STOKER

This is preposterous.

KARL

And I'll take the liberty of saying that you, the ship's number one stoker, have been wronged.

STOKER

This is insane.... But I'm listening.

KARL

And the Captain will look, and motion for you to come forward. What will you say then?

STOKER

That ... ur ... that Schubal oppresses me, for being German, I think.

KARL

Might I suggest? calling him *Herr* Schubal. It's better courtroom conduct.

STOKER

Are we in a *courtroom*? With *lawyers*? I thought the Captain's cabin.
I haven't spent years of my life avoiding lawyers for nothing.

KARL

We *are*, in his cabin. But respect the circumstances; they're all we've got.

STOKER

Ja?

KARL

And I'll tell the Captain you've served on many fine ships.
And never been found wanting.... Correct?

STOKER

[*nodding*] Ja, that's true.

KARL

And that you're an industrious, conscientious, loyal German.

STOKER

[*nodding even more emphatically*] Ja. Ja.

KARL

So?... What do you say?

STOKER

It's true. It's all true. Every word he says.
Herr Schubal has slandered me.... See?... Here, in my trunk.

Opens his unlocked trunk.

My collection of papers. My proof.

KARL

Will you look at that!

STOKER

Not wishing me good morning in the morning.
Giving me orders in Romanian, when he gets excited.
Favoring foreigners. Ordering me around in the machine room.
Making me clean toilets, can you believe?
Ja, ja, his competence is superficial; and I've told him that, many times.

KARL

Holding his head in his hands, as a sign of disappointment.

Maybe it's not the best thing to say.

STOKER

What's the problem? What are you saying is the problem?

KARL

Well, let's just say.... How can I put this?...

What would you think, if, at that moment, you heard the gentleman with the bamboo stick in his hand, give a long, low whistle, and begin tapping the stick, impatiently, on the floorboards?

STOKER

[*speaking more loudly*] What are you saying? in your so clever way? That I'm boring everybody? Is that it?

KARL

Puts his hands over his ears.

No. No.

STOKER

Or I'm sweating? and have a foul odor? Is that it?

The STOKER pulls a handkerchief out and begins mopping his face.

STOKER

[*with a normal voice again*] Or I'm muddling everything up?

Puts a hand down inside his trousers.

Oh, what's the use? I told you I haven't the words.

Kicks the trunk.

KARL

Touches the Stoker's arm gently.

I was wrong. I wasn't seeing it your way, was I?

But, look! The whole room's watching now, and listening to you.

STOKER

Are you playing with me?

KARL

Sits back down on the bed.

Let me tell you my most personal story ... that I haven't told another soul.

STOKER

Sits back down.

What is it?

KARL

Pretend we're still with the Captain,

STOKER

Ja?

KARL

And the gentleman with the bamboo stick?

STOKER

Ja?

KARL

All of a sudden he turns to me ... the gentleman, and asks,

"What's your name?... exactly?"

And I tell him ... "Karl Rossman."

"But," he nearly shouts, and steps right up to me,

"But then, I'm your uncle, Jakob."

And he starts hugging me, and kissing my forehead.

STOKER

And I thought things couldn't get more preposterous.

KARL

I agree.

And, besides, what in the world does it have to do with your case? you wonder.

And I'll tell you.

I ask him to prove it. That he's my uncle.

And he does.

By telling my most guarded, shameful secret. That I am now sharing with you.

Why I left Germany, the way I did.

STOKER

Your secret story?

KARL

Indeed.... We had a cook, who was large, and strong, and powerful, like you.

Thirty-five.

Johanna Brummer was her name.

And she would follow me with her eyes, every time I went into the kitchen.

Make a show of jumping back, as if she were in my way.

Sometimes she'd close the door, and hold the handle so I couldn't get out.

And she'd touch me.

And finally pressed me into her sleeping quarters, and onto her bed.

She undressed me with such startling force I didn't know how to resist.

And herself, as well. And laid herself on top of me, totally naked.

And reached down, and pressed me inside of her.

I wept, when it was over, right there, in her bed, and told her I'd never return.

But the damage was done. She got pregnant ... with my child.

The STOKER laughs, heartily, stands, and shakes Karl's hand, as KARL also stands.

STOKER

Congratulations. And they say, faint heart never fucked a cook.

KARL

[laughing as well] That wasn't my father's reaction....

But that's the true explanation, why I had to leave, with shamefully little luggage.

And the cook told me she would write my uncle, and tell him everything.

And given that, what can I say?

STOKER

What?

KARL

I have to believe him.

What's more, my uncle's supposed to be fabulously wealthy.

And with the Captain's blessing, he'll lead me away,

down a small corridor, to a hatch in the side of the ship,

which will open onto a slender metal staircase, and down to a boat.

STOKER

What's happening? What's happening to me, in all of this?

KARL

Your fate's in the Captain's hands, as it's always been.
But we did what we could do, didn't we?

STOKER

You'd walk away, and betray me? Just because your uncle shows up?
When you promised you wouldn't?

KARL

What choice do I have?... at my age?

STOKER

You'd just leave me, standing there?

KARL

On the way off, I'll look up, at the windows of the grand cabin,
where you'll be stranding, and weep for you.

STOKER

That's how a man can trust you?

KARL

What choice would I have?...
What would you do?

STOKER

I'd be a stoker, like I always am....
[beat] This "uncle" of yours ... //

KARL

Yes?

STOKER

What's he going to do with you?

KARL

I don't know.... Why?

STOKER

Lock you away? until he can fetch your bride to come and claim you?

KARL

[pause; then softly] O, my God.... He might.
And I could wind up in her clutches forever....
Unless

STOKER

Unless what?

KARL

Unless I run away.
And wind up in a place like Oklahoma.
Where no one will ever hear from me again.

STOKER

You're a strange bird.
You're a sweet, strange bird.

KARL

What am I supposed to do? I'm so confused.

STOKER

What do you want to do?
You're never going to have a chance like this again, you know.

KARL

I'm not?

STOKER

Trust me, you're not.

KARL

[*beat*] Stay with you?

STOKER

And see the world.

KARL

And you? You'd stay, on this ship, and let me be your helper?

STOKER

Stoking? under Schubal?

KARL

I could help you with Schubal.

STOKER

Herr Schubal?

KARL

Herr Schubal.

STOKER

Puts an arm around Karl's shoulders.

Come. Let's go find your trunk.... *And* your umbrella.

**As they exit through the cabin door,
KARL jumps elatedly into the air, his
arms spread out.**

KARL

Is it always this good?

SCENE 7: METAMORPHOSIS

TIME AND PLACE

Same time. Same stage, except **stage right** is transformed into the first floor apartment of Gregor Samsa and his family. **Far stage right** is Gregor's bedroom, bed, and closed bedroom door leading into the main room of the apartment, which itself has three other doors (in addition to Gregor's closed bedroom door) – two closed doors across, and a door (**upstage**) into the hallway outside their apartment. In the main room is a leather sofa, a leather ottoman in front of it, and an end table with a lamp. On a wall in the main room hangs an enlarged photograph of Franz Kafka. Near to the outside door is a dark corner.

CHARACTERS

GREGOR SAMSA, in his late 20's or early 30's.

GRETE, his sister, 22.

Their MOTHER, in her 50's.

Gregor's BOSS, male.

Grete's male GUEST. Late 20's.

A prospective RENTER, female.

Two masked EXTERMINATORS – non-speaking parts.

At the rise, sounds of a rainstorm. From Gregor's bedroom comes an alarming screech; and GRETE (in her underclothes, clutching a robe) rushes through one of the opposite doors, across the front room, and to Gregor's door

GRETE

Gregor? Gregor?

What is it? What's the matter?

GRETE knocks several times at the door; tries to open it (it is locked); and listens with her ear against the closed door, as she is putting on her robe.

GRETE

Tell me what's wrong.

In the bedroom GREGOR is thrashing about under the covers of his bed.

GREGOR

[in a raspy voice] I don't know what's happening, Grete.

GRETE

What's happening?

GREGOR

There's something on top of me.

GRETE

Dead, or alive?

GREGOR

It's hairy. A huge bug. And I can't get it off.

GRETE

You don't sound so good. Did you bring a girl home? with the croup?

GREGOR

I'm lying here, desperate, like a cockroach on its back, and you're asking me if I brought a girl home last night?

GRETE

Oh! It's just a nightmare you're having, isn't it? You were scaring me.

GREGOR

You better be right, because if you're wrong, your brother's a monster, with six puny legs, no hands, and can't roll over.

GRETE

Open the door. I'm coming in.

GREGOR

No you're not. I'm naked as an ape.

GRETE

Of course you are. That's why you're having a nightmare.

GREGOR

What do you think you are? Some psychic, or something?

GRETE

It doesn't take a psychic to guess that your Boss'll be here soon enough.
If you don't get your ass in gear. You're half an hour late for work already.

GREGOR

My Boss?

GRETE

I bet he'll be here any minute.

GREGOR

You don't know him. You don't even know what he looks like.

GRETE

Never had the pleasure.

GREGOR

Ugliest man on Planet Earth. And half deaf to boot.
Now, get away from my door, and let me get some more sleep.

GRETE

Till when?

GREGOR

Till this nightmare goes away.

GRETE

[*with a raised voice*] Get up. Get dressed.
We don't want you getting into trouble at work.

GREGOR

[*with a raised voice*] Go away.

GRETE

Gregor Samsa, you listen to me: Get out of bed; right this instant.
Put something on, and open this door.

GREGOR

You can't make me.

GRETE

O yes I can. I'm getting my violin.

GREGOR

Shit!

GREGOR, dressed entirely in puppeteer's black, emerges from the bed, holding and manipulating a two to three-foot-long puppet cockroach. He goes to the door, and opens it.

GRETE

[*shrieks when she sees*] O my God, you're a ... you're a ... you're a ... //

GREGOR

A nightmare. I told you.

Their MOTHER peeks her head out through one of the doors across from Gregor's bedroom.

GRETE

We don't have clothes for nightmares.
And your Boss can't see you like this. You'll lose your job.

GREGOR

I can still work.

GRETE

Like that? How?

GREGOR

I'll just sell to buyers who can't see so well.

GRETE

You're crazy.

GREGOR

I'm not *that* crazy.
I'll be a far better salesman as a cockroach than you'll ever be as a violinist.

GRETE

Fuck off, you creep.
You wouldn't know Itzhak Perlman if he poked you in the eyes with his bow.
Let me just get a bag, to put over you.

GRETE turns, passes their MOTHER, and hurriedly exits through the outside door, which she closes behind her. Their MOTHER walks into Gregor's room, sees

GREGOR, screams, runs out, and exits back the way she came in. After a few moments, the doorbell rings. A lengthy pause, and it rings again. Another pause, then knocking.

GRETE

[outside the closed front door of the apartment] Hi. I'm Grete....
[in a raised voice] I'm Grete, Gregor's sister. Pleased to meet you.

BOSS

Where is he? *[remaining outside, out of sight]*

GRETE

[in a raised voice] Here, let me take that.

GRETE opens the outside door and steps inside with a wet umbrella and a 42" pet carrier, covered. The BOSS remains outside and unseen to the audience throughout.

GRETE

[in a raised voice] He'll be right out. He knows it's business. He understands.

Still wearing her robe, GRETE puts the umbrella down on the floor, and takes the pet carrier into Gregor's room, where she puts the puppet cockroach inside it. GREGOR, as a speaking puppeteer, moves alongside the carrier. MOTHER enters, comes over to look out the door.

MOTHER

[in a raised voice] Hello. I'm Gregor's mother.
Pleased to meet you.

BOSS

Where is he?

GRETE carries the loaded pet carrier to the door. GRETE, GREGOR, and their

MOTHER use raised voices when speaking directly to the BOSS.

GRETE

[*in a raised voice*] He's not quite himself, today.

BOSS

Not quite himself? Not presentable, you mean.

GRETE

[*in a raised voice*] Sick, you might say. But not contagious. Not like that.

MOTHER

We don't think.

BOSS

Have you called a doctor?

MOTHER

[*in a raised voice*] No, not yet. It's just a bug. He's our only breadwinner.

GRETE

[*in a raised voice*] He's actually not *that* sick. Just, sort of, cramped up ... contorted you could say.

BOSS

Aborted?

GRETE

[*in a raised voice*] **Contorted.** I said "contorted."

MOTHER

[*in a raised voice*] He doesn't quite look himself.

GRETE

[*in a raised voice*] Ever since he got up. Early, like he always does for you.

GREGOR

Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man a stinkbug.

BOSS

He has a stinking hangover, doesn't he?

GREGOR

Shit! I'm itching all over.

BOSS

What's that? In that thing?

GRETE

[*in a raised voice*] Oh this? It's our pet ferret.
I just got him this new carrier, from our neighbors, who also have a pet ferret.
He's not used to it yet.
Making some strange, scratching noises. From his throat.

BOSS

Your brother's just a slacker. And probably *does have* a hangover.

MOTHER

[*in a raised voice*] I don't know what you mean. My son's no slacker.

GRETE

[*in a raised voice*] And, no, he's not hung-over.
[*to GREGOR, in the carrier*] Do you want me to show him?

GREGOR

Are you crazy?

GRETE

I hear you.
Who wants to see a three-foot-long cockroach? This early in the day?

GREGOR

No one will ever let me touch them again. Not even you, Mom....
You know what did this to me, Grete? Do you have any idea?
It was working, night and day, doing my job. The stress of selling.
All the time selling. Selling. And always traveling.
Piss-poor connections, and miserable food.
Ah hah! Ah hah! That's it! That's it, isn't it? The food! We are what we eat.

BOSS

He thinks he's so important.
He needs to be taught a lesson. From on high.

GREGOR

I'll tell you what I'm going to do.
I'm going to go up to him, looking down on us peons, like he does.
And shout out just what I think of him. No words minced.
And watch him tumble, right off his chair.
He's as faint hearted as he's hard of hearing.

MOTHER

What are we going to do? He's sure to get a pay cut. And we're dependent ... //

GRETE

Dependent? I'd call us desperate. Now.

MOTHER

You don't think he thinks ...

GRETE

Thinks what?

MOTHER

That we're trying to pull something over on him, do you?

GRETE

Like what? Concealing Gregor in an oversized band aid bag? I don't think so.

MOTHER

Then, what are we going to tell him?

GRETE

The truth?

MOTHER

There has to be something better than that.

GREGOR

There must be something better than the truth.

GRETE

Who knows? Maybe this has happened to him before.

MOTHER

Are you *nuts*? How could *anything* like this have happened before?

GRETE

[*in a raised voice*] We're sure it's nothing serious.

Nothing he can't overcome, for the sake of your business.

GREGOR

Let me out of here! Let me give him a good look!

See what *he* can overcome, for the sake of his holy business.

Just watch. He's going to start shouting, any second, in his Romanian accent.

How I'm hiding myself in my room like a troll, neglecting my duties.

Always trying to bug somebody. Just you hide and watch. That's how he is.

BOSS

[in a raised voice] That's what he's doing:
Hiding himself in his room, like a troll, neglecting his duties.
Making a disgrace of himself. Always trying to bug somebody.

GREGOR

[in a raised voice] Let me at him.

**The flap at the end of the carrier opens,
and GRETE grabs the puppet as it
emerges, flopping awkwardly around in
her arms.**

GREGOR

[in a raised voice] What do you think of this, duck face?

**MOTHER screams. The BOSS screams,
and we can hear him leaving. GRETE
closes the door.**

GREGOR

[excitedly] Did you see him? Did you see his face?
How he ran? His hair standing straight up?
Did you see how he looked back at me, twitching all over?

GRETE

Now you've done it.

**GRETE puts the Boss's umbrella back in
the dark corner.**

MOTHER

[to GRETE] I thought we were set for life. Now what are we going to do?
What, with my asthma, and your father's bad leg? And you, 22, with no skills.

GRETE

I play the violin.

GREGOR

He'll be back.

MOTHER

I don't think so.

A knock at the door.

GREGOR

I'll answer it.

MOTHER

Don't be an idiot. Get back in your room.

GREGOR retreats. GRETE opens the door, and dodges a folded newspaper that swats in. There is a large, pink slip attached to it. MOTHER picks up the pink slip, and lets out another scream.

MOTHER

No! Not my son. Not my son. You can't fire my son.

Two masked EXTERMINATORS, dressed in white with white surgical masks rush in and seize the puppet. GRETE screams. Their MOTHER looks up and screams again. The EXTERMINATORS place the puppet in a massive pizza box, close it, and exit. GRETE and MOTHER chase after them. Brief darkness. A Voice from offstage –

VOICE (offstage)

Emergency Roach Control. Giant cockroach on the loose. Escaped two months after its capture. At large, and presumed disgusting. Be on the alert.

When lights return it is nighttime in the apartment. GREGOR, now a cockroach of human size, crawls out of his bed, across the room, stopping at the door to feel with his feelers, and to listen. Suddenly the outside door blows open, and in a gust of wind GRETE and a male GUEST enter – GRETE dressed as a nurse in white, wearing a black, bandit's half-mask, and her GUEST dressed as a doctor in surgical blue scrubs, wearing a white, bandit's half mask. The two of them push to close the door against the wind. GREGOR watches from his room.

What in Hell was that?
GUEST

The wind wants an autopsy.
GRETE

An autopsy? Of what?
GUEST

Of my life in here. It's dead.
GRETE

You're not happy here?
What's going on?
GUEST

I can't begin to tell you.
GRETE

Tell me what?
GUEST

Takes GRETE by her shoulders and looks into her eyes.

Your eyes are shining like two pearls. Are you crying?
Kisses her gently, on the cheek.

GRETE

I couldn't be happier.
Lights a lamp on the table, and then returns to him.

Do you know why I dropped my wine glass, at the party?
GUEST

You did it on purpose?
GRETE throws her arms around his neck.

GRETE

To get you, to myself. And see what's behind that mask.
MOTHER enters on tiptoe, with a flashlight and an umbrella.

MOTHER

Oh! I thought it was robbers.

GRETE

Good night, Mother.

MOTHER

Or exterminators, again.

Lays the flashlight on the table.

GRETE

Good night, Mother.

MOTHER

You can't be too cautious, these days.

GRETE

Mother, go back to bed. Please!

MOTHER

Good night, you two.

Opens and shuts the umbrella a couple of times. And exits.

GRETE

My Mother..... Here. Sit down.

They sit down on the sofa together.

GUEST

You're acting odd. What's going on?

GRETE

I told you, I can't.

GUEST

You can trust me.

GRETE

If I tell you, will you promise never to tell anyone?... Anyone?

GUEST

Of course. I promise.

GRETE

And not to walk out on me. You have to promise that, too.

I promise.

GUEST

It's my brother. He frightens me.

GRETE

Your brother frightens you?

GUEST

The way he looks.

GRETE

How he looks at you?

GUEST

Haven't you ever been frightened, just looking at somebody?

GRETE

No....

GUEST

[*thinking*] Except for mutants.
Things that are deformed scare the shit out of me.
Ever since I was a kid, and saw the boy at school who looked like an octopus.

GRETE

You should see my brother.

GUEST

What?

GRETE

No. I didn't mean that.

GUEST

What happened to him?

GRETE

To whom?

GUEST

Your brother.

GRETE

He got ... uh ... awfully strange looking ... and left for a couple of months.
And, well, he's back now.
And even bigger.

GUEST

His ...? What is it? Cancer?

GRETE

No. It's all of him that's bigger.

GUEST

Strange.

GRETE

He was so handsome, before.

GUEST

But, you still love him, don't you?

GRETE

He's so ugly he lost his job.

GUEST

You're joking.

GRETE

He's so ugly we can't stand to let him eat with us.
We just leave food out for him.
What food we have to spare....
[beat] If it weren't for his 401(k), we'd be starving.

GUEST

Is he coming home, tonight?

GRETE

You won't be seeing him. I promise you that.
You don't know what it's like.

GREGOR emerges suddenly out of his room.

GREGOR

You don't know what it's like being a cockroach.

GUEST

O my God! What in O fucking mighty *is* that?
That ... that ... that monstrous ... cockroach.
I told you I can't stand mutants.
Abominations like that.

They stand. The GUEST runs to the outside door, opens it, and slams the door behind him.

GRETE

Gregor! Why did you leave your room?
You know what it does to people.
I can't understand you.
Don't things like you give a damn about how anybody else feels?

GREGOR crawls up, onto the sofa.

GREGOR

I have to talk to you about a few things.

GRETE

What?

GREGOR

First, I don't want to sleep in that room anymore.
I'll be far more comfortable sleeping under this sofa.
You'll have to raise it up, some, of course.
And put down white satin for me, underneath.

GRETE

You're out of your mind.

GREGOR

Second, stop treating me like a cockroach.

GRETE

What do you think you are?

GREGOR

And the food! My God! You've got to do better.
Surely you can find some half-rotted apples, moldy cheese, and Turkish delight.

GRETE

You're disgusting.

GREGOR

And last, I need a new wardrobe. I can't parade around commando forever.

GRETE

Commando? Stinko, you mean.

GREGOR

What do you mean, stinko?

GRETE

I mean the smell of you.

GREGOR

The *smell* of me?

GRETE

You can't smell anymore?

GREGOR

Did I ever?

GRETE

Well, you certainly do now. Can't you smell yourself?

GREGOR

Smells okay to me.

GRETE

Like that means something? You being ... what you are.

GREGOR

You don't know shit, Sister.

GRETE

You're sick. The dirt and filth you leave everywhere, piled up in your room?
It's ruining us.

GREGOR

There's no filth in my room. Nothing big, at least.

GRETE

The biggest filth in your room is *you*.
You're what's ruining things around here.
You've robbed us of our peace of mind.
Mom won't even come in here, if she thinks you're around.
And I don't dare go about in my underthings anymore.
What with you gawking at me.
And now, my one chance to get out of here.
You're pressing your luck, Buster.

GREGOR gets down and lunges at her.

GRETE

That's it. I can't stand it anymore. I'm finding us a tenant and moving you out.

GREGOR

Move yourself out, Grete.

Go to the Conservatorium, like you've always wanted, and study violin.

The only place I'm going to is the gym.

Running through the park every two months to escape overweight exterminators isn't my idea of a good workout.

GRETE goes into GREGOR's room, and begins throwing things into trash bags.

GREGOR

Well, that was sweet.

The doorbell rings.

GREGOR

And short. I think I'd better hide.

GREGOR hides under a stack of dirty laundry in the corner. GRETE goes to the outside door, and welcomes in a young woman, a potential RENTER for Gregor's room. She is leading an invisible dog leash in front of her.

RENTER

You have a room for rent?

GREGOR

[*aside*] Keep that beast away from me.

GRETE

This way....

A decent size bedroom.

Breakfast, and a modest dinner....

[*beat*] It was my brother's room.

But he doesn't use it anymore....

[*beat*] And, oh, we do laundry, too.

RENTER

What if your brother wishes to come back?

GRETE

If wishes were horses, cockroaches would ride.

RENTER

What?

GRETE

An old family saying. Worth forgetting, actually.

RENTER

But, as I was asking, what if your brother wants to come back to his room?

GRETE

It may seem strange to you; but I don't feel about him like a brother anymore.

GREGOR

[*aside*] Am I truly that easy to forget?

RENTER

What was that?

The "dog" begins sniffing in the direction of the stack of laundry.

GRETE

Our neighbor's parrot.

RENTER

You don't have bugs in here, do you?

GRETE

Heavens no.

The "dog" barks, and a shadow flickers across the stage.

RENTER

What's *that*?

Up there, then?

That giant "thing" crawling on your ceiling?

The RENTER exits, pulling the excited dog behind her, slamming the door. GRETE looks up at GREGOR on the ceiling.

GRETE

Now you've fucked it good for us.

GREGOR

That was one nasty animal.

GRETE

I'm getting you out of here.

GREGOR

I'm going to squash you on the floor.

GRETE

Prepare yourself, dung beetle.

You're going to be out of here sooner than you think.

GREGOR

What do you think you're doing?

GRETE picks up her cellphone.

GRETE

Things can't go on like this. You're not anything like my brother anymore.
And I'm no sister, to some ugly ghoul of a cockroach.

GREGOR

If you could see me through my eyes, I wouldn't look ghoulish at all.

**As the lights flicker, GREGOR flops
down on the sofa.**

GRETE

[speaking into the cellphone] Yes ... yes ... come right away. *Right now.*

GREGOR

A trial. I demand a fair trial, with a jury of my peers.

GRETE

Get to the door, if you want a trial.

GREGOR

The only thing out there are exterminators. You can't fool me.
I'm claiming my right of silence. You won't hear me again ... until ...

GRETE

Until when, Frankenstein?

GREGOR

Until the end of global warming.
Which, by the way, I've determined is the root cause of this condition.

GRETE goes into the dark corner and brings out her violin, which she begins playing.

GRETE

Go.

GREGOR

You know I can't stand your screechings and scrapings, Grete. Stop it.

GREGOR scuttles to the door. GRETE quickly opens it; and the masked EXTERMINATORS wrestle a giant plastic bag over him, and drag him off.

GREGOR

[calling back] I will always love you, Grete.
And please tell Mom and Dad, I love them, too. Always.

GRETE sits down on the sofa, stretches her arms and legs out, and with a smile, begins again playing her violin.

SCENE 8: A COUNTRY DOCTOR

TIME AND PLACE

Same time. Same stage, except now **stage right** is a courtyard outside a moderate size country house (all lit up). In the courtyard is a light carriage, with large wheels but no horse. Alongside the carriage lie two harnesses, and near it is a stone pedestal (say 16" high, and 3' square). Behind the house (**upstage**) is a patch of darkness. **Stage left:** The Stoker's cabin is converted into the inside of a small country cabin – front door **facing stage right**, simple furnishings which include an enlarged photograph of Franz Kafka, and a small bed – staged upright against the wall, in which the PATIENT "lies" (actually stands, "under" covers drawn around him). A window **facing upstage** next to Kafka's photograph.

CHARACTERS

The DOCTOR, late 30's to mid 40's, sporting a full beard.

ROSA, his young, female housekeeper, early 20's.

HADES, immortal, this time in the form of a shabbily dressed groom.

The PATIENT, in his late teens to early 20's, dying.

The Patient's SISTER, in her 20's. Something of a practicing witch.

At the rise the DOCTOR, wrapped in furs, and carrying a medical bag filled with instruments, enters the courtyard (from the house). Snow is falling; and irritated by the circumstances, he is stomping around, kicking at the snow.

DOCTOR

[*calling out*] Rosa?... Rosa?... Can you hear me?...

How am I supposed to travel ten miles, through the city, in *this*, with no horse?

ROSA enters, running, swinging a lantern.

ROSA

[*breathless*] They all know ... your horse is dead ... drowned ... last night ... I told them.... But none has a horse to lend you ... now ... in this weather.... They say, sorry.... That's what they say.

DOCTOR

Drowned?

ROSA

Shortest lie ... between two points ... for a breathless servant girl.

DOCTOR

So?... Am I supposed to stand here, uselessly? Like a post covered in snow?
Waiting till he dies?

The DOCTOR paces around in a circle, kicking irritably at the fallen snow. ROSA falls in step behind, mimicking him. Out of the darkness appears HADES, carrying high an Olympic-size torch. He extinguishes it in the snow, and approaches the DOCTOR and ROSA.

HADES

I have horses here, Guvna, white as the brightest white.
Fast as Arabian Hell.
Irresistible to winter light.
Who can streak across hill and dell, like dragons' breath.

HADES leads two massive, invisible horses, as he approaches the DOCTOR.

The DOCTOR stops, and turns to ROSA.

DOCTOR

What's that smell? Or that sound, if not approaching horses?
Yet I can't see a thing this shabby groom is leading.

HADES

Soft Slipper; soft Pegasus; yea; yea. Shall I hitch them for you, Guvna?

DOCTOR

Who are you? Where did you come from?

HADES

Ho, Sister. Ho, Brother.
They are eager tonight.
You can see it in their breath, and in their shining eyes.
They'll run for you, Professor, like the wind.

DOCTOR

I can't see them at all.

HADES

Ah, then you are not an honest man.

DOCTOR

None has accused me otherwise.

HADES

Who is it, Sir, gives an honest man his vision?

DOCTOR

[*shrugs*] God?

HADES

Courage, I tell you. And necessity.

But surely you can hear them, Guvna? And smell them, too.

DOCTOR

Granted that.

HADES

And you have no horse of your own. Is that not true?

DOCTOR

That I do not.

HADES

None that's alive.

Here. Then take these two, for the hour. They will speed you to your destination.

DOCTOR

Help him, Rosa, with the horses.

ROSA

I can't see them.

HADES

No matter. Just hand me the harnesses.

ROSA puts the lantern down and takes the harnesses to HADES. The moment she comes up to him, he grabs her and presses his mouth against hers. She screams, and runs to the DOCTOR.

DOCTOR

[furiously] You wolfish brute. You should be horsewhipped.

**The DOCTOR looks at Rosa's lip, while
HADES hitches the horses. It is bleeding.**

DOCTOR

Her lip. It's bleeding.

HADES

Get in, Guvna. All is ready.

The DOCTOR climbs into the carriage.

DOCTOR

I'll take the reins, thank you. I know the way.

HADES

But, of course, Guvna. You don't suppose I'm going with you? And leave Rosa?

ROSA

No!

**ROSA runs into the house, locks the
door and starts turning off the lights.**

DOCTOR

You ... get in ... whoever you are. I'm not about to abandon my servant girl to you.

**HADES laughs and slaps one of the
"horses" on the hindquarters.**

HADES

Hike!!

**Sudden darkness. The sound of wind,
hoof beats, and wild neighs. When light
returns, the carriage stands outside the
cabin, stage left, with the DOCTOR in it.
HADES picks up the lantern, approaches
the Doctor's house, smashes in one of
the windows with it, and climbs through.
The snowing stops. Moonlight shines all
around.**

After a brief pause the DOCTOR climbs down from the carriage with his medical bag, approaches the cabin, and knocks. The PATIENT, shirtless, gets out of his bed, goes over, and opens the door.

PATIENT

Doctor, quick. Before she gets back. Let me tell you something.

DOCTOR

Which is?

A roaring sound of rushing wind is heard from the Doctor's house, stage right.

PATIENT

Did you hear that?

DOCTOR

It's only the wind.

The PATIENT puts his arms around the Doctor's neck.

PATIENT

I need to tell you something.

If you can't cure me, don't.

Don't keep me in this condition. Please. I beg of you.

Let me go, if I must.

My sister wants me around, regardless.

But even the most merciful must perish. And I've made my peace.

DOCTOR

I need to examine you, first....

The DOCTOR, pushing the PATIENT back into the house, and into the bed (kicking the door closed in the process), performs a cursory examination of him.

DOCTOR

No fever. No chills.

But Shadrach as my Judge, it's an oven in here.

The DOCTOR removes his fur coat, unbuttons his shirt, raises the window, and opens his bag for his stethoscope. With his own ear to the young man's chest, and with the stethoscope, he listens intently. The PATIENT shivers at the touch of the DOCTOR's snowy beard and the cold stethoscope. Meanwhile, the SISTER enters, pours a glass of vodka, and brings it to the DOCTOR.

DOCTOR

Is *this* what you've planned to die for? *This*? You're perfectly healthy, lad.

Goes to the window and shouts out of it:

For the delusions of this hypochondriac I've sacrificed my Rosa's virginity.

Turns to face the PATIENT.

I could kill you myself. I'm leaving.

PATIENT

No!

SISTER

What's that, at the window?

A horse's neigh.

SISTER

It sounds like a horse, breathing in.

DOCTOR

I can find nothing for concern with your brother's condition. The horses are urging me to fly back home; and I'm leaving.

The DOCTOR takes a sip of the vodka; and as he does so, the SISTER searches his bag, pulling out some photographs, which she looks through, quizzically.

SISTER

Stay, a bit. Finish your drink. And tell me about these interesting pictures.

The DOCTOR drinks more of the vodka.

DOCTOR

What am I doing here?
My horse is dead. No one in the country will lend me one of theirs.
A stranger is destroying the peace of my home.
There are two creatures from Hell, whinnying over my head.
And I'm feeling bewitched, dazed, and adrift.

The SISTER hands the DOCTOR a bloody handkerchief.

SISTER

What do you call this? Rust? Gløgg?

DOCTOR

Where did that come from?

The SISTER points to her brother's side, near the hip.

The DOCTOR goes over to examine further.

DOCTOR

What?! A wound the size of my palm? opening up in his side.

Takes a pair of tweezers out of his bag, and probes the wound.

Worms, thick as my little finger, in it?
Dear God! This is bad. There's no hope for you, son.

PATIENT

I won't live after all?

DOCTOR

You need more than a country doctor.

PATIENT

What? What do I need?

DOCTOR

You need a miracle.
And I seriously doubt there are any, in this neck of the woods tonight.

HADES calls out, from inside the Doctor's house.

HADES

Remove him from his doctor's sleeves, to mend your brother's bloody side.
And long before your charms he leaves, his Rosa will become my bride.

The SISTER begins taking off the Doctor's clothes. He does not resist.

SISTER

Shhh. Shhh.

Kissing the Doctor's bare skin.

Your Rosa's now the Devil's bride.

DOCTOR

[*to himself*] What strange seduction is this?
Is she a witch? Or just a whore?

The SISTER takes the DOCTOR by the hand to lead him into the bed, (standing) alongside her brother. Then she exits.

PATIENT

Do you know what?
What I'd like to do to you?...
Scratch your eyes out; that's what.
You're far less help to me than my sister.
And you're taking up half of what little space I have left in life.

The DOCTOR gets out of bed, throws his coat over his body, grabs his clothes and bag (shoving the scattered pictures back inside), runs outside, and climbs into the carriage.

DOCTOR

Hike!!

But the carriage does not move.

DOCTOR

O, my dear, sweet, young girl.

In a few moments, from the door of the Doctor's house, stage right, ROSA emerges (without a coat) into the frosty mist.

ROSA

Delicious frost. I can taste it everywhere.

Steps onto the pedestal; and with arms outstretched to the sky:

Fair Borealis, mother of ice, snow, and woman's chastity, hear my call.
To you alone can I confess the weakness of a maiden's flesh.
My beloved undressed me with a strange and sudden wind.
A force that covered my nakedness with wings of feathered mystery.
He held me helpless, breast upon his burning breast.
And I, so willingly, surrendered to the boldness of his manliness.
Deep as cresting waves, the shudder of his loins anointed my loosened thighs.
Until, staggered and faint, I felt his might and majesty lift us to the sky.
Up, past snow-peaked clouds and fallen angels' sighs.
How could these terrified, vague fingers of mine be expected to resist?
But, Lo, he does not know, that when he clasped me so ...
I beheld the knowledge of a god.
I saw the goddess that *you* are, observing where I was and what was done.
I heard the voices of the dead. And viewed the borderlands of my Fate.
I saw the end of Eve's eternal banishment.
What joy I felt!
What young girl's heart could be, but not delighted, caressed by such a man?

HADES emerges through the same door of the Doctor's house, wraps a coat around Rosa's shoulders, and then lifts her into the air.

HADES

Rise up, my fair one, and I shall love you like the rose of Sharon.
Like the lilies of the valley.

ROSA

And if we travel, as you promised, to places farther than the sun,
I will believe in you, and never flee from you.

HADES puts her down, and cups his hands around his mouth, to call out:

HADES

*What Ho, Sister; what Ho, Brother.
All in good time. All in good time, my pets.*

HADES kisses ROSA (who returns his kiss passionately). They turn to go back into the house; but just before they exit, HADES spins around, facing the audience, pointing in an exaggerated manner to his eye:

HADES

I had a sty in mine eye, woven by the Fates to torture me,
that bound my mind in pain, and drove me from my kingdom.
But behold! the sty is gone....
A brother is cured....
The housemaid of a naked country doctor is loved....
The hatred of the world is diffused.
Even the pigeons are cured.

They exit, into the house, arm in arm.

SCENE 9: BENDEMANN'S MOTHER

TIME AND PLACE

Same time. Same stage, except now, **stage left**, a long table is brought on stage, and some of the chairs (of the bus stop) are arranged around it. **Center stage** stands a beautiful WOMAN (Bendemann's mother), on a small platform, motionless, in a picture frame. She is wearing black boots, a skirt and blouse, gray shawl, blue ribbons, and a tiara.

BENDEMANN enters, carrying a box and a laptop, both of which he puts down on the table. Then, still standing, he opens the box, removes miniatures from it, and begins constructing a village on top of the table.

BENDEMANN

Looking over at the WOMAN.

What do you think, Mother?

The WOMAN steps out of the frame, unties two blue ribbons, removes her shawl and hands them to BENDEMANN. He takes them from her; and with an attention to detail suggesting a man who wants to defer larger problems for the moment, he situates the shawl like hills, and places the ribbons along the table like a river. She hands him her tiara.

BENDEMANN

Ahhh, yes. The Castle, of course.

BENDEMANN takes the tiara and places it on a hill. Then he opens the laptop, and, still standing, commences dictating an email. The WOMAN is free to move about the stage, and occasionally to come near BENDEMANN, touching him, as a mother might touch a disappointing son.

BENDEMANN

[*dictating*] Pain, as you know, is the middle name of our blue ribbon of a river.

Holds up a ribbon for an instant, and puts it back into place.

From its waters we lift up our eyes unto the hills ...

Picks up the tiara, and then puts it back in place.

The WOMAN tousles his hair; and her laughter accentuates her ethereal being.

BENDEMANN

Delete! Delete all of it! I'll start all over again.

Start: It's Sunday here, this morning,
and a more beautiful time in spring there has never been.

I picture you, in my mind's eye, wearing yourself out,
disguising loneliness behind your exotic beard.

Please tell me I'm wrong. I pray to our maker that I'm wrong.

That everything has changed since we last saw each other. Three years now?

I wish you'd come back to the friends you left.

But I'm not telling you what to do; only what I personally wish for.

I would never presume, my friend, to judge your success.

Or the comforts of your life as an ex-pat in St. Petersburg.

The WOMAN playfully knocks over some of the miniatures; and BENDEMANN rights them. Then he resumes dictation.

BENDEMANN

I miss you.... No. No. No. Delete that!

Since Mother's passing, Dad and I have taken a flat together,
in a string of indistinguishable row houses lining the river.

We work famously, side by side, in his business.

He's still the indispensable one, of course, even at his age.

Since I wrote you last, our staff has doubled. Our profits have tripled.

No complaints. Other than missing your company.... No. No. Delete that!

[*beat*] I have heard that Franz Kafka has got engaged, to Fräulein Felice Bauer.

You may remember her. Lovely, if that's of any earthly interest to you.

I have got engaged, too, to Fräulein Frieda Brandenfeld.

She compels me to write this, since I'm sure you could care less.

And I told her I didn't think it important to write this to you.

The WOMAN puts her face in Bendemann's and stares. Then she goes back to the table and, less playfully this time, knocks over some more of the miniatures – BENDEMANN beginning to right them again.

BENDEMANN

It was out of consideration for yours and my ...

[ponders] *camaraderie*.... But she insists.

“Why upset him?” I asked her.

“It may make him feel obliged to attend our wedding. He might even envy me.”

“I have the right to meet your friends, haven't I?” She pressed.

“Of course, of course,” I conceded.

I could hardly argue with that. Not if I intend to go through with this.

WOMAN

Do you?

BENDEMANN

“Surely he will learn of it from some other quarter,” she persisted arguing.

WOMAN

Women can be like that.

BENDEMANN

“It's true,” I admitted to her. But given your solitary lifestyle, maybe not.

“If you have friends like that, George, you shouldn't have gotten engaged at all.”

I kissed her, to quiet her down, even though she'd touched a wound in me.

WOMAN

Amen.

BENDEMANN

Completes the righting of the miniatures.

I don't understand women.

Are they really distracted from their convictions, by a few minutes of physical attention?... No. Delete that last part.

WOMAN

What is it you don't understand?

That Fräulein Frieda might have good reason to doubt your sincere affections?

I certainly do.

BENDEMANN

It's almost as if I can hear your voice, my friend. In my head.
And what you're asking, from so far away, is, What is she like?
Well, she comes from a well-to-do family, that moved here within the year.
So it is unlikely you've heard of her before. Suffice it to say, I feel truly fortunate.
As to us, I still love and cherish our friendship. And I always will.
The only change is, that you now have a *happy* friend,
as well as a new-found, female friend.
Which, considering your bachelorship, is something not entirely to be sneered at.
I know there must be a hundred things in your way, coming here for our wedding.
And I completely relieve you of the obligation, entirely.

BENDEMANN walks over, sits, and reads from the laptop. The WOMAN sits beside him, and reads as well.

BENDEMANN

With sincere and deep affection, your friend, George Bendemann.

BENDEMANN closes the laptop, opens it again, gets up, and walks upstage, to stare out.

WOMAN

[*stands*] You're not sending it, are you?... What's the problem, dear?

BENDEMANN

The truth?

WOMAN

Oh, no. Why that? Just make up a story, like you used to, when you were a boy.

BENDEMANN

What?

WOMAN

Listen to me! I've come here because you're unhappy.
And you have a problem you can't discuss with anyone else.
What's the point in fucking around like this?
You know you can't keep acting the poor, misunderstood baby anymore.
Talk to me.

BENDEMANN

The problem is *you*, Mother.

WOMAN

Bullshit!

Puts her hands around her mouth, as if shouting at a great distance.

Bullshit. And this is a bullshit wake-up call, your majesty.

BENDEMANN

Okay. Okay. Stop shouting. It's Father.... Really, it's him.
He's not doing so well, now that you're gone. He's actually failing, I think.

WOMAN

Bullshit reigns supreme. You think I can't tell?
Why aren't you sending the email?... Simple question.... Start there.

BENDEMANN

[*covering his face*] Fuck this! Fuck the email. Fuck my friend in St. Petersburg.

WOMAN

Who else do you dare use that kind of language with?... Your men friends?...
Your Father? I don't think so. No way he'd let you get away with it.
Your bosom friend, in St. Petersburg?

BENDEMANN

A thousand friends couldn't replace my Father.

WOMAN

[*starting to leave*] That's enough for me.

BENDEMANN

Steps in front of her, to stop her from leaving.

Father sits in the dark, in his room, all day.
And only nibbles at his food.
Can't you see? He's wasting away.

WOMAN

Bring a doctor in. Or change rooms with him. You have a sunny one.

BENDEMANN

[*slight pause, looking down*] I'll consider it.

WOMAN

Look at me. *Look.At.Me.*

He looks.

WOMAN

You don't really have a friend in St. Petersburg, do you?

BENDEMANN

Think about it. You met him. Three years ago. But you didn't like him much.

WOMAN

If he came here, three years ago, you kept him away from me, I assure you.

BENDEMANN

You forget. You and he were sitting, right in the same room. And had a good conversation together. I was so proud, how you listened to him.

WOMAN

You were *proud of me*? For what?

BENDEMANN

Because I know how you think.

WOMAN

How *do* I think?

BENDEMANN

Like you always do, about my friends.

WOMAN

Your *friends*? your majesty?

BENDEMANN

Stop calling me that.

WOMAN

Is he a priest?

BENDEMANN

No. But he told a story about a priest, in the Russian Revolution, who stood on a balcony, and cut a cross on his forehead.

WOMAN

I don't remember.

BENDEMANN

You don't *want* to remember.

WOMAN

What I remember is, that Fräulein Brandenfeld plans on leaving your father here. By himself, alone. And die here alone. On his own. After you get married.

BENDEMANN

What can I do about it?
Take Father into our new house?
Without Frieda's permission?

WOMAN

If you care anything for him, at all, your majesty.

BENDEMANN swings at her. Not even close.

BENDEMANN

I seriously wish you were a radio. So I could turn you off.

The WOMAN uses a chair to climb up on the table, and stands there.

WOMAN

You just talked with your Father, didn't you? Before you came in here.

BENDEMANN

You lie. You lie. You lie.

WOMAN

He's healthy enough to wipe the floor with you. Like he always was. Bare assed. And he knows what your fiancée is about, doesn't he? How she expects you to betray him, and all your friends. How she wants to push them, all down, in the mud, after you get married.

BENDEMANN

[*slight pause*] You don't want me to marry Frieda, do you?... Do you?

WOMAN

You sniveling coward. It's you who doesn't want to get married. Grow up.

BENDEMANN

Looks in fright up at the WOMAN.

I see you. You think I don't? Standing there in Russia. What they've done to you. At the door of a failed business. In the wreckage of shelves and scattered goods. Why? Why? Why have you stayed away so long? What did I do to you?

WOMAN

Lifting up her skirt.

She spread her legs for you, didn't she? Like her kind always does...
You're a disgrace to my memory.

Kicks out a leg at him.

BENDEMANN

Puts a hand over his eyes.

For God's sake, Mother ... //

WOMAN

Your Mother's dead ... //

BENDEMANN

Put down your skirt. It's disgusting.
I could never stand your doing that.
Exposing yourself to a boy.

Moves to a corner of the room.

You've made me remember something. But thankfully,
like a seamstress pulling too short a thread through the eye of a needle,
I've forgotten it.

WOMAN

Leaning forward.

Here ... catch me.

**BENDEMANN does not move; and she
straightens up again.**

WOMAN

Stay where you are, then. I don't need you. No one does.

BENDEMANN

Our business does.

WOMAN

I just told you. Your Father can wipe the floor with you.
Like your fiancée is doing.

BENDEMANN

[*beat*] It's true. I did keep my friend away from you.

WOMAN

But not from your father.
He knows everything, doesn't he?
And he's already emailed your friend in St. Petersburg.

BENDEMANN

He's emailed him what?

WOMAN

The truth.

BENDEMANN

What does he know about the truth?

WOMAN

He knows what you are.
And what you two have done.

BENDEMANN

Shut up! Shut up!

WOMAN

Stomps the heel of her boot on the table three times.

You're not sending the email, because you don't want your friend to know about your wedding.... And why? Because you're afraid he'll come back and ... //

BENDEMANN

Shut the fuck up!

WOMAN

[*slight pause*] You are hereby sentenced, under law, to death.

BENDEMANN

Approaches her.

What?... You think I'll rush out there, or something, on the bridge, and jump?
You think you have the power to make me do that? You and who else?
When the sound of my fall would be drowned out,
by the endless traffic on the bridge?...
Get out of here. You're not even real to me.

WOMAN

It's *time* for you to drown.

BENDEMANN

Drown?

WOMAN

Drown in the truth.

The WOMAN knocks the miniature city apart, picks up her blue ribbons, fastens them, then the shawl and tiara, and returns to stand in the picture frame. BENDEMANN puts the miniature city pieces back in the box, and then sits down at the laptop, surfing. In a few moments he carries the laptop and shoves in into the face of the WOMAN.

BENDEMANN

Look.

Look at these pictures.

Maybe *you* should do a little drowning yourself.

BENDEMANN returns the laptop to the table; lifts one of the chairs up, onto the table; and both BENDEMANN and the WOMAN exit. Great books are brought in and placed around the table. A large, rectangular box wrapped in white (the "birthday present") is brought in and placed on the platform in the picture frame.

SCENE 10: BUS STOP REPRISE

The eight actors of Scene 1 (ONE through EIGHT) enter and seat themselves around the table. The laptop, box of miniatures, picture frame and platform from Scene 9 remain. One of them carries in an enlarged photograph of Franz Kafka and places it on the chair which was lifted onto the table at the end of Scene 9. As they sit around the table the actors acknowledge one another by true name.

Then –

ONE

Do we know what *Kafkaesque* is now?

SIX

Are you asking me?

FOUR

“A first sign of the beginning of understanding is the wish to die.”

SIX

Was that Kafka?

FOUR

Yes.

EIGHT

Finding a passage in one of the books, and reading.

“*Kafkaesque* is in the dark corners of the law, when it finally occurs to everyone that effort achieves nothing at all, and only the cases predestined from the start to succeed came to a good end, which they would have reached anyway, while every one of the others is doomed to fail despite all you do, and all the illusory little victories on which you plumed yourself.”

TWO

What does *that* mean?

SEVEN

There are two things Kafka: Truth and lies.
Truth being indivisible cannot recognize itself. Thus, lies normally win out.
Like the girl on the third floor.
And the door, closing on Justice. And the country doctor.

FOUR

And Bendemann.

FIVE

Finding a passage in another book, and reading.

Kafkaesque is law that makes no sense. So confused, twisted, disorienting and illogical that there is no way for people caught up in it to ever escape its insanity.

THREE

A labyrinth.

People mindlessly following rules that make no sense.

FOUR

In his novel, *The Castle*, Kafka tells a story of a young girl, named Amalia, who happened to be seen, by chance, at a town festival, by one of the so-called “gentlemen” of the Castle. A man named Sortini, who was smitten by her looks. Long story short, gentlemen of the Castle would never admit genuine feelings for common folk. They were all too far beneath them. So being attracted by the sight of her angered him. And he sent her a letter, in the most vile language, commanding her to present herself at a certain inn in town, where sordid sexual acts could be performed upon her body to utterly shame her, thereby ridding him of any desire for her. The moment Amalia read the letter, she screamed, tore it up, and threw the fragments into the face of the messenger. When Sortini found out, he took it upon himself to ruin her, and her family. She was publicly disgraced for being chaste. Her father lost his job and could never get another one. And her family was driven into abject poverty.

TWO

People like that should be ... //

THREE

Nazis, you mean.

ONE

Kafka was a Jew.

But he died nine years before Jews were forced to wear Stars of David.

**One by one the actors reveal their
personal Stars of David, in a rainbow of
different colors.**

FIVE

To me, Kafka was about hopelessness.

EIGHT

I'm not sure "hopelessness" gets it.
Consider Kafka's parable about the Emperor, on his deathbed,
who summoned his most trusted servant,
and whispered a most private message in his ear,
to be delivered only to the least significant person in the land.

SIX

I don't know that one. What happened?

EIGHT

The messenger set out on his journey, across land and sea,
past millions of people, intent on the importance of finding that one person.
But the task proved insurmountable.
And after many years, his strength gave out and he died

SIX

Never breathing a word of the secret message, I presume.

EIGHT

Right. But the least significant person in the land doesn't know that.
And he sits by the window of his humble abode, every evening,
waiting for the message to arrive.

SEVEN

Another Kafka fantasy.

THREE

What's the point?

TWO

Finding a passage in another book, and reading.

Defamiliarization.

THREE

What's that?

TWO

Reading further.

“*Defamiliarization* is taking something familiar, and making it absurdist.”

FIVE

Magritte.

ONE

Beckett. *Waiting for Godot*.

SIX

Doesn't it make sense to talk about the *man*, too?

SEVEN

Yes. Like where he was born? And where he died?

EIGHT

He stayed most of his forty years in and around the Quarter where he was born. In Prague.

FIVE

And he died, essentially, from starvation.

THREE

Starvation? Like the *Hunger Artist*?

FIVE

Tuberculosis, technically. After seven years it closed up his throat, and he died in 1924, of not being able to swallow.

FOUR

He wanted everything he wrote destroyed.
Told his closest friend, Max Brod, to burn it all.
As his last request.

FIVE

But Brod couldn't bring himself to do it.

EIGHT

Brod was a hunchback, and a womanizer.

FIVE

I'd say he was a savior.

FOUR

Kafka was fluent in Czech, but wrote in German, forever questioning his choice.

Opening a book and reading.

“I ask myself, what right do I have to trespass on the German language, and use it for my writing? What hero do we have, to stand up to German authority? The only Jews possessed of courage I ever knew, both shot themselves.”

Snaps the book shut.

THREE

He couldn't stand loud things. Like that. Or like his father.
The man was a huge, self-centered, overbearing tyrant to Kafka.

SIX

Did he have any girlfriends? Kafka?

ONE

More whores than girlfriends.

SEVEN

Kafka was painfully shy when it came to nakedness.
Like the dog, in his lecture.

EIGHT

Sex, to Kafka, was obscene and repulsive.
A torturing desire that gnawed at him in his dreams.
He got engaged at 29, to Felice Bauer, and wrote her:

Opening a book and reading from a marked place.

“In place of the prospect of marrying a decent, cheerful man,
and having healthy, beautiful children, you gain a sick, weak, unsociable,
and gloomy self, whose one virtue is that he loves you.
I fear I can never possess you. At best, constrained to being a faithful dog,
I might offer you affection by kissing your casually offered hand.”

SEVEN

They quarreled, didn't they?.

EIGHT

Snapping the book shut.

Their engagement ended, first, in 1914, and then, for good, in 1917.

TWO

Snapping another book shut.

In 1917 Kafka first began to suffer from tuberculosis.
When his TB was confirmed he knew he would never be well again.

ONE

Kafka had three younger sisters, who took care of him in his sickness.
Particularly the youngest, Ottla, I understand....
[beat] I should add that, basically, all Kafka really cared about
were his characters. They were his reason for being.

FIVE

[reading] “If they try to escape me, I am compelled to hunt them down.
I sit here, in my room, hearing doors slamming. Things in the kitchen slamming.
My father slamming about, shouting how his hat has not been brushed.
I can barely stand living with this family.
What greater torment for a writer can be imagined?
I have so little time alone to write. Never enough; and I can hardly bear it.
Ten hours a day would be perfect. I struggle for a pittance of that.”

Snaps the book shut.

ONE

I can understand that feeling myself.

FOUR

He finally got rooms of his own. And when he died, they found, in his rooms,
the covers of ten large quarto notebooks, all stripped of their contents.
He must have destroyed 90% of everything he wrote.

THREE

Reading from a book.

“When the tolerable became unbearable,
I ran rings around my narrow room, half naked.
And breathlessly before my mirror, I screamed aloud.
Only to hear the echo of my scream, and no other response,
except from the cart horses down on the pavement below,
which rose into the air like war horses, driven wild on raw flesh.”
Yes. “I find the true feeling of myself only when I am unbearably unhappy.”

Snaps the book shut.

SIX

Jews were commonly beaten on the streets of Prague in Kafka's time.
One Jewish schoolboy was blinded.

TWO

Countless Jewish businesses, ransacked. Archives and sacred books, destroyed.

SEVEN

Reading from a book.

“Father always proclaimed how much happier I should be,
not having to go through what sufferings he went through.
It so profoundly fatigued me to hear that.
What can I do about others' sufferings? when I can barely carry my winter coat?”

Snaps the book shut.

SIX

His three sisters, all of them were murdered in Nazi concentration camps.
And their husbands. And their children. And most of his other relatives.
Exterminated in the Holocaust....

ONE

Is a hundred years enough time?

TWO

For what?

ONE

To ask why.

TWO

Why Hitler?... Why Nazism?... Why insanity?

ONE

No. Why a civilized nation will stand by and just watch.

**One by one they leave – some carrying
books with them; one, the Kafka photo.
The wrapped box rises into the air, and
out of sight.**

END