

FRANZ KAFKA

Metamorphosis
and Other Stories

Translated with an Introduction
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take a smaller, cheaper, but also better situated and more practical apartment than their present one, which Gregor had found for them. While they were talking in these terms, almost at one and the same time Mr and Mrs Samsa noticed their increasingly lively daughter, the way that of late, in spite of the trouble that had made her cheeks pale, she had bloomed into an attractive and well-built girl. Falling silent, and communicating almost unconsciously through glances, they thought it was about time to find a suitable husband for her. And it felt like a confirmation of their new dreams and their fond intentions when, as they reached their destination, their daughter was the first to get up, and stretched her nubile young body.

In the Penal Colony

'It is a strange piece of equipment,' said the officer to the travelling researcher, and with a certain air of admiration he surveyed the equipment with which he must certainly be familiar. The traveller seemed to have taken up the commandant's invitation merely out of politeness, when he asked him if he would like to be present at the execution of a soldier, who had been condemned for insubordination and insulting an officer. Interest in the execution seemed not to be that great in the penal colony either. The only other persons present in the deep, sandy little valley, ringed by bare slopes, apart from the officer and the traveller, were the condemned man himself, a stupid-looking, dishevelled, slack-mouthed fellow, and a soldier who was holding the heavy chain to which smaller chains had been made fast that secured the condemned man by the wrists and ankles and neck, and that were connected one to another by further chains. The condemned man looked so doggishly submissive, it really seemed as if one might allow him to roam the slopes freely, and only needed to whistle when it was time for the execution, and he would come.

The traveller had little use for the machine, and with an almost ostentatious indifference paraded back and forth behind the condemned man, while the officer saw to the last preparations, now crawling underneath the machine (whose foundations were sunk deep in the ground), now climbing a ladder to

inspect some of its upper parts. These jobs seemed as though they might have been left to a mechanic, but the officer performed them with great enthusiasm, whether he was a particular devotee of the machine, or whether for some other reasons, these tasks couldn't be entrusted to any other person. 'Everything's ready now!' he finally called, and climbed down from the ladder. He was quite shattered, was breathing hard through his open mouth, and had stuffed a couple of ladies' cambric handkerchiefs down the collar of his uniform. 'Those uniforms are much too heavy for the tropics,' said the traveller, instead of asking, as the officer might have expected, about the machine. 'True,' said the officer, and washed his greasy, oily hands in a bucket of water standing by for the purpose, 'but to us they signify home, and we don't want to lose touch with home. — As for the machine,' he went on to add, drying his hands on a rag, and simultaneously pointing to the machine, 'up to this point, I've had to take a hand myself, but from here on in the machine works automatically.' The traveller nodded and followed the officer, who, to insure himself against any possible eventualities, then conceded: 'Of course, there are occasional malfunctions; I hope we shan't experience any today, but we have to allow for the possibility. After all, the machine has to operate for twelve hours non-stop. At least, if there are any malfunctions, they are usually very minor, and can be taken care of immediately.'

'Don't you want to sit down?' he asked at last, reached into a tangle of bamboo chairs, pulled one out, and offered it to the traveller, who felt unable to refuse. He found himself sitting at the edge of a pit, into which he cast a glance. It wasn't a very deep pit. On one side, the earth had been formed into a kind of rampart, on the other side was the machine. 'I don't know,' the officer said, 'whether the commandant has explained the machine to you yet.' The traveller made a gesture with his

hands that might be taken either way; the officer asked for nothing more, because now he was able to explain the machine himself. 'This machine,' he began, and reached for a strut on which he supported himself, 'this machine was the brainchild of our previous commandant. I was involved in the project from the very first trials, and worked on every stage to its completion. Credit for the invention, however, is his alone. Did you hear of our previous commandant? No? Well, I don't think I'm going too far if I say that the organization of the entire penal colony is his work. At the time of his death, we, his friends, already knew that the organization was so seamlessly efficient that his successor, even if he had a thousand new plans in his head, would be unable to change anything of the old design. And our prediction has been borne out, too; the new commandant has had to acknowledge its truth. It's really too bad that you never got to meet the previous commandant! — However,' the officer brought himself up short, 'here I am gabbling away, and his machine is in front of us. It consists, as you will see, of three parts. Over time, each one has acquired a sort of popular nickname. Thus, the lowest part is called the bed, the top part is the engraver, and the suspended part here in the middle is the harrow.' 'The harrow?' asked the traveller. He hadn't been paying complete attention; the sun was too strong in the unshaded valley; it was hard to concentrate one's attention. The officer now seemed the more admirable to him, in his tight-fitting parade uniform, weighed down with epaulettes, hung with braid, enlarging so enthusiastically on his theme, and even, while he spoke, pulling out a wrench and tightening the odd bolt. The soldier seemed to be in a similar condition to the traveller. He had wrapped the condemned man's chain round both his wrists, was propping himself up on his rifle with one hand, had let his head loll back, and was taking no interest in anything around him. The traveller wasn't

surprised, as the officer was speaking in French, and French was a language neither the soldier nor the condemned man could possibly have understood. This made it all the more surprising that the condemned man was trying hard to follow the officer's explanations. With a kind of sleepy persistence he looked wherever the officer pointed, and when the latter was interrupted by a question from the traveller, he, as much as the officer, turned to look at him.

'Yes, the harrow,' said the officer, 'an appropriate name for it, don't you think? The needles are set as in a harrow, and the whole thing is used like a harrow, albeit on one spot, and in a far more sophisticated manner. You will see, soon enough. The condemned man is laid on the bed. — Allow me to explain the machine first, and then demonstrate its use to you. That way, you'll be better able to follow it. Also, one of the cogs in the engraver is rather worn; it makes a loud grinding sound when the machine is turned on, and it's very hard to hear yourself think then; unfortunately, spare parts are very hard to get hold of. — Well, as I say, this here is the bed. The entire surface is covered with a layer of cotton-wool; its purpose you will learn in due time. The condemned man, naked, of course, is made to lie face down on the cotton-wool; these are the straps to secure his hands, his feet, and his neck. Here at the head end of the bed, where, as I say, the man is lying face down to begin with, is a little felt stump, which can be easily adjusted so that it goes directly into the man's mouth. It serves the purpose of stifling his screams and preventing him from biting off his tongue. The man has no option but to take the felt into his mouth, otherwise the neck-retainer would break his neck.' 'That's cotton-wool, you say?' asked the traveller, leaning forward. 'Yes, of course,' said the officer with a smile, 'feel for yourself.' And he took the traveller's hand, and moved it over the bed. 'It's cotton-wool with a special preparation, which is why it might appear different

to you; I'll discuss the point of that when I come to it.' The traveller found himself warming to the machine a little; raising his hand to shield his eyes from the sun, he looked up at its top part. It was a large structure. The bed and the engraver were of equal size, and looked like two dark troughs. The engraver was roughly six feet over the bed; the two were linked at the corners by four brass rods, that were effulgent in the sun. Between the two troughs, the harrow hung on a steel band.

The officer had barely noticed the traveller's previous indifference, but he now responded to his quickening interest; he therefore broke off his exposition to give him time to look at the machine uninterrupted. The condemned man did likewise; as he was unable to shield his eyes, he squinted up.

'So, you've got the man lying there,' said the traveller, and he leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs.

'That's right,' said the officer, and pushed his cap back a little, and wiped his face, 'now, listen carefully! Both the bed and the engraver are independently battery-operated; the bed needs power for itself, the engraver for its harrow. As soon as the man has been tied down, the bed is set in motion. It vibrates both sideways and up and down, in tiny, very rapid movements. You will have seen similar apparatus in hospitals; only, with our bed, all its movements are very carefully calibrated; they need to correspond absolutely precisely to the movements of the harrow. And it's the harrow that is entrusted with the actual carrying out of the sentence.'

'And what is the sentence?' asked the traveller. 'Oh, don't you know?' the officer blurted out, and bit his lip: 'I'm sorry, perhaps I'm getting a little ahead of myself in my explanations; please forgive me. The commandant always used to give the explanations in person; the new commandant has excused himself from this honourable duty; but the fact that he has failed to communicate the form of the sentence to such a distinguished

visitor' – the traveller made the attempt to ward off the distinction with both hands, but the officer insisted on the expression – 'to such a distinguished visitor as yourself, well, that sort of development' – he was about to launch into an oath, but mastered himself, and merely said: 'I wasn't told, it's not my fault: Although in point of fact, I'm best placed to explain the varieties of judgement, because I carry the sketches of the previous commandant' – he patted his breast pocket, – 'right here.'

'Sketches made by the commandant himself?' asked the traveller: 'Was there no limit to the man's talents? He was soldier, judge, engineer, chemist and artist, all in one?'

'Yes indeed,' said the officer, nodding with eyes fixed in thought. Then he looked critically at his hands; they didn't strike him as sufficiently clean to handle the sketches; so he went over to the bucket, and gave them another wash. Then he pulled out a small leather folder, and said: 'Our sentence doesn't sound particularly severe. The condemned man has to have the law he has transgressed inscribed by the harrow on his body. This man here, for instance' – the officer gestured at the condemned man – 'will be inscribed with: Respect your commanding officer!'

The traveller glanced at the man; when the officer pointed at him, he had lowered his head and tensed his hearing to the utmost, in the hope of picking up some scrap of information. But the movements of his blubbery pressed lips showed that quite evidently he had not managed to glean anything. The traveller had various questions at the tip of his tongue, but, seeing the man, he merely asked: 'Does he know his sentence?' 'No,' said the officer, and wanted to proceed with his explanations, but the traveller interrupted him: 'He doesn't know his own sentence?' 'No,' said the officer again, halted for a moment, as though to get from the traveller some sort of justification for

such a question, and then went on: 'It would be useless to tell him. It will be put to him physically.' The traveller felt he had nothing further to ask, but he sensed the condemned man's eyes on him; did he approve of the process, he appeared to be asking. And therefore the traveller, having just sat back, now leaned forward again and asked: 'But he knows he has received sentence, surely?' 'No,' said the officer, and smiled at the traveller, as though in expectation of further striking revelations from him. 'No,' mused the traveller, and stroked his forehead; 'so the man doesn't know what view was taken of the case for his defence?' 'He had no opportunity to defend himself,' said the officer, and looked away, as though talking to himself, and unwilling to embarrass the traveller by telling him such self-evident truths. 'He must have had an opportunity to defend himself,' said the traveller, and got up from his seat.

The officer appreciated he was in danger of being delayed for some considerable time in his mission to explain the machine; he therefore went over to the traveller, took him by the arm, pointed to the condemned man, who now, seeing himself the object of so much interest, was standing at attention – and the soldier too gave a tug on the chain – and said: 'It's like this. I have been appointed judge in the penal colony. In spite of my youth. Because I assisted the former commandant in all punishment-related issues, and also I have the best understanding of the machine. My basis for deciding is this: guilt is always beyond doubt. Other courts are unable to follow this principle, because there are many people serving on them, or they have other, higher courts above them. This is not the case here, or at least it wasn't under the previous commandant. The new one, admittedly, has already shown some interest in meddling with my court, but thus far I have been successful in staving him off, and I will continue to be successful in that regard. – You wanted to hear an explanation of the case; it's just as

straightforward as the rest of them. This morning a captain brought a charge that this man, who is his batman, and sleeps outside his door, failed in the performance of his duty. He is required to get up every hour, and salute outside the captain's door. Not a particularly arduous duty, and a very necessary one, because it keeps the man fresh for guard duty and for service to his master. Last night, the captain wanted to see whether his servant was discharging his duty properly. At the stroke of two, he opened his door, and found the man sprawled out asleep. He fetched his riding crop, and struck him a blow across the face. Instead of getting up and begging for forgiveness, the man grabbed his master by the legs; shook him, and cried: "Drop that whip, or I'll gobble you up." — That's the long and short of it. An hour ago, the captain came to me, I took down his report and wrote out the judgement. Then I had the man clapped in irons. It was all very simple. If I had called on the man first, and questioned him, it would have produced nothing but confusion. He would have lied to me; if I'd managed to catch him lying, he would have told different lies, and so on. But now I've got him, and I'm not going to let him go. — Is that enough of an explanation? But time is pressing, and I haven't finished with the explanation of the machine.' He made the traveller sit down again, stepped up to the machine and began: 'As you see, the harrow follows the human form; here is the harrow for the upper body, here are harrows for the legs. All there is for the head is this one little spike. Do you understand?' He leaned forward and smiled encouragingly at the traveller, prepared to give the most detailed explanations.

The traveller looked at the harrow with wrinkled brow. The information about the methods of the court had left him unsatisfied. And then again, he had to remind himself, this was a penal colony, certain rules obtained, and military discipline evidently had to be kept tight. In addition, he put a little hope

in the character of the new commandant, who clearly, albeit slowly, intended to reform the whole process, whatever the views of this particular narrow-minded officer. Reaching this point in his thinking, the traveller asked: 'Will the commandant attend the execution?' 'I'm not sure,' said the officer, caught off balance by the direct question, and his encouraging smile was distorted: 'That's one more reason why we have to hurry. I will even, I'm sorry to say, have to curtail my explanations somewhat. But then I could supply further information tomorrow, once the machine has been cleaned — the fact that it gets so dirty is really its only drawback. So, just the bare essentials from here on. — When the man is lying on the bed, and the bed has begun to tremble, the harrow is lowered on to his body. It automatically adjusts itself so that it barely grazes his body with the tips of its needles; the distance once established, the steel rope tautens into a pole. And then the performance begins. Of course someone without the necessary background would notice no difference in the punishments. The harrow does more or less the same job. Trembling, it sticks its points into the body lying on the bed, which is itself trembling. To make it possible for anyone to view the way the sentence is carried out, the harrow is made of glass. Fitting the needles to it gave us considerable technical headaches, as you might imagine, but after many attempts the difficulties have been surmounted. We shirked no effort. And now anyone can see through the glass the way the inscription is made on the body. Would you like to step nearer, and see the needles for yourself?'

The traveller slowly got to his feet, walked over, and leaned down over the harrow. 'You see,' the officer continued, 'needles in many positions, but always in pairs. Each long one has a short one next to it. It's the long one that writes, and the short one squirts water to wash off the blood, so that the writing