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## Outliving Kafka

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*Franz Kafka, 1923. Photographer unknown.*

*Outliving Kafka*

I watch Franz Kafka as he writes alone in his room just before dawn breaks in Prague, I watch him hesitate, I watch him write down—tentatively, then with haste and anticipation, like a last dying breath—the final sentence of the novel he has yet to complete, the novel he may never complete.

Almost immediately, almost as if what happens is the consequence of the line he has just chosen as the ending of his unfinished book, Franz Kafka hears a knock at the door, we both hear it.

It is the morning of July 3, 1914, and today Franz Kafka is thirty-one years old. It is not the only anniversary this Friday brings. Exactly one year ago he announced his engagement to Felice Bauer, a marriage he has now decided to call off, a decision he will have to defend in Berlin two weeks from today, if he has the courage, that is, to confront his former bride and her parents and sister, explain the sudden rupture in front of that family tribunal.

He does not attend right away to that knock, wonders if it is not an illusion. He is exhausted by the long night of writing in the apartment at Bilekgasse 10 that his sister has loaned him, even more exhausted by all the work that lies ahead if he wishes to conclude his novel, so many episodes that still have to be filled in. And he has no strength. It may be his birthday, but he is expected at the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute two hours from now and then at the asbestos factory later in the afternoon—and, of course, there is the imminent war, the archduke murdered barely a week ago, the troops of Austria-Hungary marching toward Russia and Serbia, all the friends who will soon die. For a moment, maimed hands and crippled legs flash through Franz Kafka's mind, fingers missing, an eye gouged out by a machine, men on crutches slipping on the cobblestones of his city. He has spent many years trying to prevent these accidents from afflicting workers insured by his company, and now, now he knows all too well that he will be unable to prevent even one injury of the many that, like a flood, cannot be stopped.

All he can do, all he wants to do, is keep writing, more so now that he has painstakingly spelled out the ending to his novel.

Given these precise circumstances, he should, of course, have expected that knock, and probably the second one, which, a few seconds later, more peremptory and demanding, also startles him. Perhaps what he

finds strangest is that no noise had preceded that interruption—and Franz Kafka, like a mole, is acutely attuned to every scrape of noise in that house, every sigh and whistle and shout of his neighbors, each grinding turn of wheels in the side street below, the drunken song, “Oh child, lost in the forest,” that wafts up from the tavern in front of his window. But the knock had not been announced by footsteps on the stairs or a cough or a key in a lock—nothing at all, just the rap this early in the morning and then its louder echo, the emphatic repetition of the sound that indicates that this is no hallucination, that an answer is required.

I watch him fling on his dressing gown and fumble at the cords to tie it tight, stopping to close the window that has been open all night, helping himself to a draft of cool, fresh air, giving himself time to make sense of this disturbance, the faint suggestion that someone—a member of his family, perhaps, his mother or one of his sisters—had come up with the idea of sending him a birthday present. As he moves toward the door, he dismisses the explanation as absurd. After all, he has not even had his breakfast, everyone knows how he nurses these dawn hours of privacy, the best for writing—and now he must really hurry, as a voice comes to him from the other side of the door, a voice he does not recognize, a man’s growl:

“Herr Kafka. We know you are there.”

“That’s right,” says another voice, just as unrecognizable but softer, almost plaintive. “There’s no other place he could be.”

“Oh, he’s here. He’s here, writing away as if his life depended on it.”

“Not only his, not only his.”

I watch Franz Kafka open the door.

He has never seen either of the two men in front of him, not once, not ever, and yet there is something distressingly familiar about them. One is tall and unshaven and bizarrely cheerful, smiling idiotically as if he had just told himself a joke. The other is smaller, his face scrubbed razor-clean, well dressed, thin as a rail, thinner than Kafka himself. The man’s left hand moves nervously, hooked to a pocket in his trousers, flapping like the fractured wing of a bird. Both of them are wearing ties, but the taller man has his askew, as if he had borrowed it for this occasion and did not know how to use it. The frayed tie hangs from his neck obscenely, allowing anyone to view the stubble under his chin and a large red pimple that juts out like a horrible coquettish nipple.

They are clearly a pair of ruffians.

I know Franz Kafka as well as anyone can know him and nevertheless I am uncertain as to his reaction. Will he slam the door shut in

their boorish faces? Will he run to the window and cry out for help? Or will Franz Kafka reach a hand out and adjust the tie of the tallest, rosy-cheeked thug, lift it up to its proper place, hide the stubble and the dreadful pimple, make the man a bit worthier of being admitted into his presence?

Instead, he asks, truly perplexed: "What is the meaning of this?"

The thin man turns to his mate and laughs. "He wants to know the meaning of this."

"But maybe he doesn't. Maybe he really doesn't know. Maybe he hasn't figured it out yet."

It is intolerable. He is the object of their mockery, they are speaking about him and no one else, and yet it is as if he were absent, somehow dead, a corpse with a punctured, silent heart.

"Enough!" Franz Kafka says. "I have no time! Get that into your thick heads! I have no time!" They say nothing. He looks from one to the other, expecting a reply. He tries again: "Who let you in? And why in hell are you here?"

"Cease and desist," says the larger, more cheerful fellow. "We've come to give you fair warning."

"Cease and desist what?"

"He said you'd know."

"He? Know what?"

"The lawyer. You want more information, you should accompany us, he said. He's waiting for you at the Café Savoy, said you'd want to talk to him. He even has breakfast waiting for you, that's the sort of person he is, our boss."

"The Café Savoy isn't open yet. It never opens till ten in the morning."

As soon as Franz Kafka utters these words, he realizes how ridiculous it is that he should be arguing with these two strangers about his favorite café, it's humiliating to even engage in conversation with scum like these on any subject instead of casting them out indignantly.

"Well, they opened early today. He asked them to and they consented, they were quite deferential. He's waiting for you there."

"Or maybe you're saying that he's not there?"

"You wouldn't be saying that we're lying, would you?"

They both move forward, menacingly, and yet with a certain diffidence, playing the role of someone who threatens more than embodies a true danger. And it is this weakness of theirs, the way they try to shift into the room without having determined beforehand which of the two should enter first, how they bow at each other waiting with feigned courtesy for one of them to take the first step, it is this farcical

shuffle of a masquerade that makes Franz Kafka smile. Of course, of course. He suddenly realizes the meaning—yes, the meaning!—of all this. Should he command them to leave and inform his friend Max Brod that his prank has failed, that this attempt to scare him with a situation awkwardly lifted from Franz's fiction has failed, that Max should be ashamed of himself for such a graceless joke?

No, better to play the game, go with them and meet Max at the Savoy, where he must be chuckling to himself. You've been too depressed lately, Franz, what with this break with Felice and your upcoming trip to Berlin, you need some cheering up—something more than gardening and swimming and reading to entertain you, laugh it up at the Yiddische Theatre—Franz Kafka can hear Max's voice in his ear. He's hired these two clowns, given them a script to follow—and they're not doing too good a job, they haven't even been provided with hats for their performance—to prove that Max has understood Franz's latest project, wishes to stage the first chapter of the novel that Kafka read to him some days ago, the novel he has just concluded with that bitter, enigmatic, shameful sentence, the novel that has so many still unfinished chapters on which he should be working instead of being distracted by these birthday antics. Very well, he will follow this pair of buffoons, take his breakfast with Max at the café as if it were a Sunday rather than a Friday at this ungodly hour.

But it is not Max who is sitting at a table at the Savoy. It is not Werfel or Rilke or Weiss.

I watch Franz Kafka peer into the café after nodding hello to his habitual waiter. Behind him, the two men are so close that he can feel the pant of their mouths, their tongues hanging out, the smell of garlic on one breath, a sort of oversweet perfume emanating from the other one, the one who is thinner than even he is. For an instant, he remembers how he had to expel them from the room while he dressed, the genuinely surprised looks they exchanged when he told them not to try to steal his underwear, *you know what happens to people like you who do something like that, eh?*, he remembers that they shook their heads as if he were mad and then retired to wait outside and then accompanied him on the short walk, following like dogs, that's the thought that probably slipped into him, Franz Kafka must have evoked the image of dogs when he heard their padding footsteps behind him, he must have enjoyed the sense of superiority that his regular exercise gave him, Franz Kafka loves to walk and swim, the two scoundrels scurrying to catch up are obviously in bad physical shape.

Inside the gloom of the Savoy—the light of day is barely filtering in—there is only one man at a solitary table, smoking a cigar and stirring a large cup of chocolate, steaming hot. The man looks like a lawyer, at least Max has been able to hire the right actor or get some real lawyer to play the part. He is old and venerable and stirs the chocolate with authority, as if making sure it will be the right temperature when he brings it to his lips. A man used to getting his way. But not in any way arbitrary, Franz Kafka decides—not unlike his own superior, Dr. Eugen Pfohl, at the Worker's Accident Insurance Institute of the Kingdom of Bohemia.

The man looks at him from across the café, makes a gesture that could be a welcome or something less amiable, it is hard for Kafka to tell, if I were next to him I would not know either.

“So. Herr Kafka. At last.”

“I don't believe we have met, sir. But Max Brod has chosen well.”

The lawyer—if indeed he is a lawyer—raises the cup to his lips, sips judiciously, finds the liquid still too hot, sets the cup down with dainty fingers on the saucer.

“I have never had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Brod, but I have heard only good things about him. Please sit down, Herr Kafka.”

Franz Kafka does so. He turns toward the waiter to order his own meal, but the waiter is nowhere to be found. Only the two men are at the wide doors of the café, hovering like second-rate actors awaiting the moment to be called onto the stage again.

“He is getting your breakfast,” the lawyer who may or may not be a lawyer says. “I told him what to bring.”

“And you know what to order for me, sir?”

“There is not much I do not know about you, Herr Kafka. That's my job.”

“I didn't hear your name when you introduced yourself.”

“That is because I did not introduce myself.”

Kafka smiles. What a silly birthday gift! But Max is getting his money's worth. Franz does feel cheered up, he is somewhat amused. Soon, however, he will need to be at the office. Time, perhaps, to stop this nonsense.

“And now, of course, you will say I am under arrest. And you will refuse to tell me what I am accused of, you will allude to a court and a vast organization and who knows how many doors that need to be opened, ushers and officials I will spend the next year trying to bribe and decipher. Go ahead, please. I can't wait.”

The man blows on the dark surface of the chocolate, takes a spoon, uses it to carry a few drops to his mouth, nods in satisfaction, drinks a larger gulp. He is in no hurry.

“Not at all, not at all. You are not under arrest and I am here, in fact, to inform you of the exact charges against you, and the whole sense of today’s meeting is to avoid going to court, having anyone know of this little problem. Well, not that little, to tell you the truth, only little if you are willing to cooperate and reach a settlement. But I have been instructed to make sure your reputation does not suffer, nor would we want your colleagues to be made aware of what you have done. Because the first charge against you is, of course, slander. You must cease and desist the slurs and insults and indeed lies you have been telling about my client.”

I watch Franz Kafka meticulously. This is the moment I have been waiting for. One of the moments, at least. A pivotal moment, at least.

He says nothing, but I can tell that he suddenly is not so sure of himself. What the lawyer—he is now convinced by his own legal expertise as a doctor of jurisprudence that he is indeed in front of a real lawyer—has just said resonates within him, the accusation does not fall on fallow ground, it twitches at him, at his conscience. Otherwise, why does he seem to grow pale, refuse to acknowledge the breakfast that the waiter now places on the table, look behind him to see what the two thugs are doing, realize that they have now sat themselves down at a nearby table, hungrily eying the food, all that fruit in front of their prey? And they have hats on now! Where have the hats come from, when did they procure them?

His unease makes him, nonetheless, brazen and direct.

“If you tell me the name of your client, I will gladly dismiss all these suspicions. I am the one who is being slandered, someone has been telling lies about me.” Though he stutters at these words, they remind him of words of his own, words he would rather not recall, he drowns in the water of his mind.

The lawyer sighs, takes a bite out of a Viennese croissant. He chews mournfully, washes it down with some more chocolate, presses a napkin delicately to his lips before proceeding.

“If it were only slander, Herr Kafka, this would be an easy case, my client would not have had to recur to the law for redress. But the results of the words you have launched against my client have had much more serious consequences. You are also accused of harassment, intimidation, destruction of my client’s means of livelihood, denial of adequate counsel and representation, up till now, that is”—the lawyer lifted his

eyebrows, which were bushy and groomed, before going on—"and, finally, conspiracy to cause bodily harm and, I am sad to pronounce this word, *murder*. In spite of which my client seeks an amicable settlement."

Franz Kafka's voice trembles.

"Tell him that I would welcome seeing him repeat all this, face to face in a court of law, that—"

"Why do you suppose that the offended party is a man? Why not a woman, Herr Kafka? Don't you know of any lady who has reason to feel you have not acted properly toward her?"

"So it is a woman?" Kafka pronounces these words with something akin to relief. His thoughts had been slouching toward another sort of solution, he has admitted that this is not Max's doing, not a joke at all, he has begun . . . but the idea is stopped by the lawyer's response.

"It is a man, of course it is a man. As you know full well, perfectly well, who is asking for redress. He told me you would feign innocence, declare yourself ignorant of each and every one of these deeds, demand that I offer you my client's name. A man, yes, of flesh and blood, just like yourself. But let us not mention blood, Herr Kafka, let us try to avoid the shedding of any such bodily fluid. Let us rather focus on the fact that, just as he had submitted, you would avoid any and all responsibility."

Now Franz Kafka stands up—I am not surprised, I did not think he would immediately accept the shape of the challenge that is forming in his head—he stands up from the table with such abruptness that the lawyer's hot chocolate spills over, foaming dark and brown and dense, into the saucer and over it, soiling the tablecloth, the famous white bordered tablecloth of the Savoy.

They both watch, as I do, the thick stain that spreads on the whiteness as if gushing from a wound.

"Now look at what you've done," says the lawyer. "I'll have to ask—and pay—for another one."

"Here," Franz Kafka cries out, and throws some coins onto the table. They clink against each other, fall in a pile, aghast.

"What's this? Money? Thrown at me? Very well, well, well. I'll recommend to my client that we add attempted bribery to the charges."

"Add what you wish."

Kafka leaves him there without another word, and certainly not one to the two clowns who now advance toward the table. Not, apparently, to receive further orders. Because when Kafka looks back—he cannot help himself—he sees that they are not about to follow him but have descended on the breakfast like spiders, their fingers like needles, like

the arms of spiders. The lawyer looks on benevolently for a few seconds before shooing them off like flies. He looks up, sees Kafka is still there, paralyzed at the café's threshold.

"One more thing," the lawyer calls after him. "You are directed to forgo mentioning a word of this to anyone else, and particularly not to remark upon these proceedings in your diary. Any transgression of this instruction will be met by immediate and swift consequences."

Has he understood? Has Franz Kafka understood what is being demanded of him?

I am not sure. As soon as he leaves the Savoy, he shuts off his mind from me, I cannot access his thoughts, as if the confrontation that has just transpired has built a wall between us, isolated him. For a brief lapse, I saw into him, watched him slink toward the realization of who was making these accusations and what was required to stop this lawsuit, he heard a voice inside murmuring, perhaps shouting from inside his headache: *it was as if another person were within me, sticking his head and throat out of my mouth and screaming for something to drink*. Now, as he walks toward the insurance company to start what is certain to be an interminably long day, he seems to have suffocated that idea. Or perhaps he has twisted a knife into that idea and turned it twice to make sure it does not resurrect. Maybe he has convinced himself already that this incident on his thirty-first birthday was a dream, a nightmare born of his apprehensions at the upcoming Berlin showdown on July 9.

For the rest of that morning, during the afternoon and the evening, all through the next sleepless night and difficult Saturday, I keep an eye on him. Nothing. Not a word on paper, not a word in his diary, nothing. Then, on Sunday, July 5, these words: *To have to bear and to be the cause of such suffering!*

Yes, he must bear it and yes, he is the cause.

For the next few weeks, for the month that follows, I do not let him out of my sight. He goes to Berlin, is humiliated by Felice and her family and one of her friends, but that is not my affair. I simply watch and wait. So far, he does not return to the novel, does not even read the ending again, try to amend or change it, merely lies listlessly on his bed, carrying on a conversation with himself, or perhaps with nobody at all.

Maybe it's time for a reminder?

On August 2, the day that Germany declares war on Russia, Kafka goes swimming in the afternoon.

He dives into the water, and just after the plunge he sees another swimmer, to one side and slightly behind him—he does not recall anyone about to enter the pool along with him. There is something

ominous about that figure in the murky green, his strokes shadowing Kafka's, though a split second later, as if that man is determined to repeat those movements, taunting him, daring him to engage, to come closer and see him face to face. Whoever it is, he needs a good lesson! Franz Kafka decides to stay under water for as long as he is able—longer, he is sure, than this ape who is mimicking him. The shadowy swimmer will be forced to surface before Kafka, will have to acknowledge who is the master.

But Kafka's lungs are not as healthy as he presumes. He does not know yet—or does he?—that he is already afflicted with tuberculosis, is about to find out that his body will not always obey the commands of his mind.

He has to come to the surface before the other swimmer does. He waits, above the waters, waiting for his unknown rival and imitator—or maybe it was all a coincidence, why does he always believe that everything that happens to him is a sign of something else, something meaningful or transcendent?—to come up for air, but the minutes pass and nobody remotely like that faraway phantom of a man shows up. Kafka quickly dips his head into the pool, looks around in a circle, sees no one. *The man who disappeared*, he must be thinking to himself, thinking of the title of that other novel he will never finish. Or perhaps of a new novel he wants to begin, about a man abandoned at a railway station, a man with a cough like his, a man assaulted by the fear of animals gnawing at him.

The new novel does not go well, grinds to a halt.

Three weeks after his swim in the afternoon, he begins to work again on *The Trial*. Without warning, I can burrow back into his thoughts, I can measure what lasting effect, if any, the visit of the two clowns and the sit-down with the lawyer has had upon him. Perhaps he cannot change the ending of that final chapter until he has completed the other chapters, those still unwritten, invent new characters who might lead him to a different outcome. Or am I the one laboring under a delusion?

No, there is hope.

Over the next few months, he progresses with the novel in the midst of increasing desolation, empty and cold; he has two good weeks of work in early October and then writes a letter to Max, what to do in case of suicide, a letter full of instructions but nothing yet about what the lawyer has implied, nothing to indicate that he effectively intends to cease and desist.

And so it goes, days of utter despair, days of inching progress, claws wrestling with a wall. One day he writes beautifully and then stops,

another night he manages a page of what he calls the mother chapter, mostly his work goes forward at a miserable crawl. Every time he starts something it seems ugly, ungainly, like a suckling infant who shows no sign of ever ceasing to be ridiculous and pathetic and yet may grow into something more fully formed. By the end of the year, it is obvious that nothing has been accomplished.

Has he completely forgotten, now that it is 1915, what happened to him on his birthday, has he slit the throat of the idea vaguely formulated, a throat that bleeds white blood (he does not like, as I do not, the color red)?

Has he completely forgotten to cease and desist?

Not so.

He tries his hand at different endings, he writes two at least, I peer over his shoulder, urge him on from as near as I dare come, watch him put the other endings away, separate them from the manuscript, stuff them in a useless drawer he rarely explores.

Those pages stay there for months, are not taken out to be worked on, seem to have been forgotten.

He moves to new lodgings—even more noise, even less able to advance sleeplessly on his writing—is drained by the meals at his family home, the afternoons at the factory, squeezed by the meticulous reports he files at the insurance company, the letters he writes and does not write to Felice and her sister and others, so many others, until he comes to a complete standstill. Is this good? Is this bad? I do not know, and contemplate another warning to him, though fearful of revealing myself, walking into his life like the two thugs did, like the lawyer did at the Savoy, fearful that if it comes to this, it will be the last, desperate step. If that fails, then there is no hope, no hope at least for us.

I decide to be patient. Isn't that what everyone always counsels, what Kafka himself constantly suggests is the only solution when the world swivels out of control? Has he not said that because of impatience we lost Paradise, because of impatience we cannot find our way back?

I set myself, nevertheless, a date, I must. He cannot reach the age of thirty-two, he cannot be allowed to celebrate that new birthday without having made a decision, confronted his responsibility.

But I do not have to wait for July 3, 1915.

Before that, he goes to pieces, at the end of May he acknowledges in his diary that he is going to pieces, soon his heart, his one heart, will tell him that he cannot bear so much discontent and the incessant tugging of so much desire.

His unhappiness is so akin to mine that I believe, I trust, I pray, he is able to open himself to another visit.

Warning him, issuing a threat, giving him a taste of his own medicine, persecuting the accuser, none of that seems to work.

Time for another strategy.

Another knock at his door. A different knock because it is a different door, a different year, and a different sort of guest.

Yes, I said guest.

What does he see when he responds to the knock? Does he recognize me on that June 3, 1915?

I speak the words, the password only he and I know on this earth, at least for now, for now: *“Like a dog!” he said; it seemed as though the shame was to outlive him.*

Franz Kafka nods.

He knew this day would come, that I would come, maybe he has known all along who has been watching him, who has been waiting, like him, for this night. He steps aside, gestures toward the room. In the faint light, his ears seem even more protruding, his eyes blacker than ever, as gaunt as he has ever been or ever will be, even on his deathbed.

He sits down, shuddering.

I loom over him, larger than I have been in a long, long time. I say to him: “With failing sight K. saw how the men drew near his face, leaning cheek-to-cheek to observe the verdict.”

“So, Jozef,” he says.

“At last,” I say.

“But you mean no harm,” he says.

“I mean no harm,” I say.

I sit down in front of him, in front of the man who has created me.

“Even if you know I cannot do what you need me to do.”

Why not? I want to ask him why not? Why not just change the last words, not have it be like a dog, not like a dog, just so the shame does not outlive me? Is that too much to ask? Better if it is a dream, as he has written it in one of the endings he has consigned to the corpse of a drawer, better still if, as in the other ending also cast into the graveyard of what he will never use, or better still if a glorious light streams toward me instead of away, better still if there is forgiveness, not to demand absolution, forgiveness would be enough—but why like a dog, why must the shame outlive him, outlive Jozef K., outlive me forever? Forever. A word he did not add, that I add myself.

“You will die, Franz,” I say. “You will die once and once only. But every time someone reads your novel, reaches those last words, I will

die again, again and again like a dog, again and again the shame, again and again outlived by the shame.”

I know his answer. What has been written cannot be unspun. He cannot imagine another ending. He cannot help me.

I told him I had come with no harm in mind. Maybe that was a mistake.

“You know what I could do to you?” I say. “Men have died of fright. They are dying right now, of bullets and bombs and also of fright, not so far from here.”

He shakes his head, suddenly sure. He lives only for the truth that he has discovered. He will not relent.

I begin to sob.

Thus far I have tried not to let one tear fall from my eyes. Not even at his ending and my execution do I cry. He has given me at least that: clear eyes to see who might help, who might keep me company, he has given me the dignity, he has refused to force me to kill myself, he has allowed me to force them, the law and the court and the deaf ears of eternity and history, to commit the crime.

He reaches out to me. Those two thin hands of his draw me to his chest and I hear the pounding of the heart that will within a few years cease to beat like mine has ceased thanks to him and his vision. I feel that his heart is large enough for me and for him and for all the others who are to come and will be executed, his own family, so many of his neighbors, he and I see the future and if we keep looking at that future his heart will explode like a constellation in an endless sky.

“There, there,” Franz Kafka says, patting me on the shoulders and then on my back, as if comforting a baby, and the cradle-like movement, the gentle back and forth, tells me that he has a plan, something to propose, the settlement my lawyer suggested he would finally arrive at, the possibility to cease and desist demanded of him by the two thugs I sent with my confusing and yet straightforward message.

Brute force did not manage to move him, the lawyer’s admonitions were unable to convince him, my swimming so close to remind him that he was being stalked, none of that worked.

Only this.

He cannot resist the compassion welling within him, the arms with which he embraces me, that I never want him to untangle from my body, I wish to die this way and not like a dog, wish for the love to outlive me and not the shame, even if I am guilty, even if I do not deserve the love or the embrace or the sorrow he is sharing with me.

He whispers in my ear: "Jozef, dear friend Jozef. I cannot change anything I have already written, I cannot do that. It would be like undoing the whole world. But this I can do, this I can promise, Jozef. I will, from this moment onward, cease and desist from writing the rest of the novel. I will make sure that ending is never read by anyone again, I will not myself ever read it again, go back to it. I will leave instructions to Max to burn the manuscript, burn that chapter and every other chapter of that novel. The novel is not that good anyway, does not justify its own survival. It will become ashes, as I will, as you shall when it burns."

I try to kiss his hand, but he moves it away. He smiles with his sad, haunted eyes. He does not want me to be subservient. He wants me to remember him as an equal, as partners. Can I do that?

If he keeps his word, yes, I can.

And he does, he keeps his promise.

Not one more word of *The Trial* is ever scribbled. The last chapter is never read, never revised, ever again. He writes two letters to Max, with instructions far more explicit than anything he has previously commanded: there can be no doubt about it, all his unpublished, unfinished work is to be burnt after his death.

I am there when Franz Kafka dies.

I am there in Kierling on June 3, 1924, at Dr. Hoffmann's sanatorium as he dies of starvation, our hunger artist. The throat that made me, the throat that promised me sweet annihilation, that throat was too devastated to let food pass through, not even words could come from inside him.

But he did not die alone.

I was there, I held the hand that had comforted me, I thanked him for having given me birth but not the death of a dog.

To die like he died.

Was that too much to ask?

I waited, confidently, I watched his body being returned to Prague from Vienna, I watched the burial, I watched Max go to his friend's room.

With Kafka's final will and testament in his hand.

Max Brod walks up the stairs.

He gathers all the manuscripts together.

I repeat this: Max Brod gathers all the manuscripts together in a pile.

Places them in the fireplace.

Sighs as deeply as I have ever seen a man sigh and then strikes a match.

In the sudden flare, I see Max Brod hesitate. It is very much like the moment, almost ten years ago, on Franz's birthday, when my maker also hesitated before writing the words that were to doom me and force me to intrude into his life, first to threaten him and then to beg for mercy, I see Max Brod hesitate.

And then, he blows the flame out.

He picks up the pages, he begins to read.

And I know that I will die like a dog one more time, and then again, and yet again, I know that the shame will outlive me, will outlive my Franz who lies in a grave in a Prague cemetery, I watch as Max Brod reads into the night as I await my ending, the way I will live and die for all of eternity.