

Mahler

# Komplett Kafka



Suhrkamp

Over at Rabbi Löw's a light's still burning.

Though not an electric one.



It's 1852.

Rabbi Löw is a clever man, today he's making things out of clay. He fashions a being which soon begins to grumble, cry, and rage, in short: which is alive.



The being has a name, too: Hermann Kafka.



Hermann is always in a bad mood, his language coarse. He has a *penchant for rude phrases*, uttered as loudly as possible; he refers to the rabbi's good cooking as *grub* and *cleans his ears with toothpicks*. The only thing that's important to him is that one *cuts bread straight*.  
Not an easy guy.

The rabbi soon finds it too much to bear and bans his creature from the house.

But Hermann goes his own way. He's tenacious, he has a *great entrepreneurial spirit* and finds a wife who is devoted to him, who toils away in the shop and at home ...  
Julie Kafka, née Löwy.

# HERRMANN KAFKA

## Galanteriewaren



31 years later.

Rabbi Löw lives alone, he even keeps house himself.  
He comes across a sad, dried-out little lump of clay  
beneath the bed.

How long could this have been  
lying here already?



The rabbi is really touched; on top of that, he has a hard time  
throwing things away.

And so the rabbi stops what he's doing and goes back to his alchemical work.

There's not a lot to it, but if you stretch it out enough, it becomes a rather charming little figure.



Ach, Rabbi, if only you hadn't given life to the sad little lump of clay.

How much anxiety, pain, and procrastination the little being would have been spared.

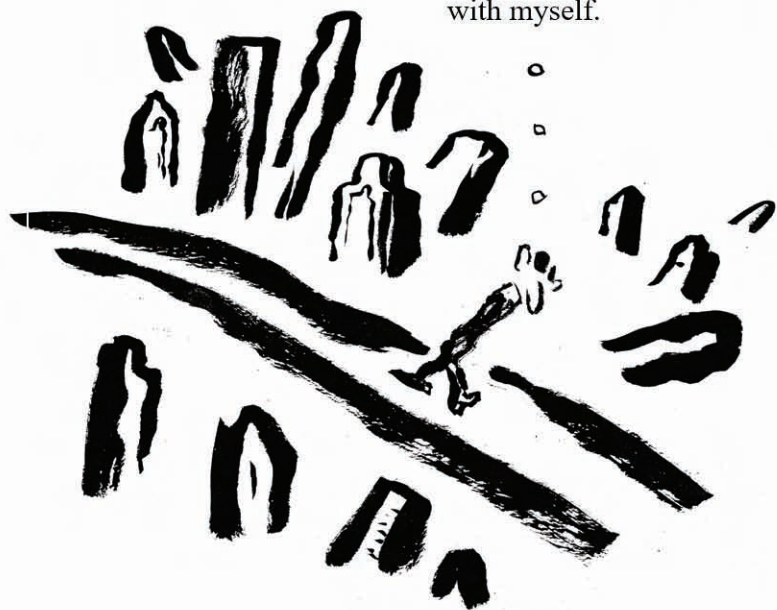


Is there anything to this backstory?

Probably not, Rabbi Löw died in 1609, in Prague.

And Franz Kafka doesn't have much to do with Judaism.

What do I have in common  
with the Jews?  
I hardly have anything in common  
with myself.

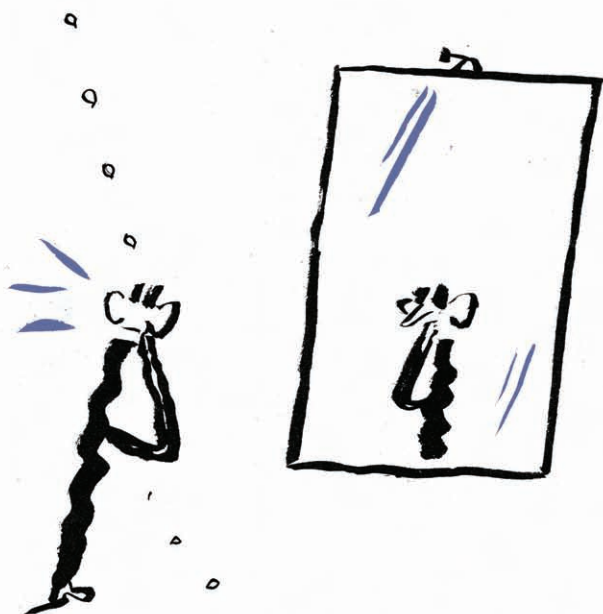


Hermann Kafka only *goes to temple four times a year*,  
and later on Franz will write: *And I yawned and I dozed  
throughout the long hours (only dancing lessons ever  
matched the temple for boredom).*



Ever since he was a boy, Franz has suffered from innumerable anxieties, and is especially afraid of mirrors *because they showed in me an ugliness which in my opinion was inevitable, which moreover could not have been an entirely truthful reflection, for had I actually looked like that, I certainly would have attracted even more attention...*

You can't achieve anything  
with this kind of body.



I shall have to get used to its  
continuous failings.

The coarse father and his sensitive son, that anxious and small bundle of bones, are a curious team.

*I was, after all, already weighed down by your sheer physical presence, Kafka writes years later in his Letter to His Father.*



*I remember, for example, how we often undressed together in the same changing-room. I was skinny, weakly, slight; you were strong, tall, broad. Even in the changing-room I felt pitiful, and what's more, not only in your eyes, but in the eyes of the entire world, for you were for me the standard by which everything was measured.*

His father is not only physically overpowering, but extraordinarily stubborn to boot.

For Hermann, only one opinion counts: his own.

He is always right, everyone else is



*You were capable, for instance, of running down the Czechs, and then the Germans, and then the Jews, and what is more, not only selectively but in every respect, and finally nobody was left except yourself.*

Kafka's *Letter to His Father* will become a fixture of world literature, but the addressee, of all people, never read it. Maybe the letter was simply too long, after all, it contains over one hundred handwritten pages.

PUT IT ON THE  
NIGHTSTAND!



Hermann Kafka is not a reader.

In addition to his scary father, *in the confusion of childhood*  
his mother appears *as the archetype of reason*.

Julie Kafka is full of understanding and affection, but her  
son soon realizes that she's mistaken about him.

She takes me for a healthy  
young man, who suffers  
from a bit of hypochondria.



Another big problem: how to dress.



*I noticed, of course, which was very easy, that I was particularly badly dressed, and I also had an eye for when others were well dressed, but for years my mind could not manage to find the cause of my miserable appearance in my clothes.*



And then there are his three sisters, too.

Kafka describes the oldest, Elli, as a *clumsy, tired, timid, bad-tempered, guilt-ridden, overmeek, malicious, lazy, greedy, miserly child, I could hardly bring myself to look at her, certainly not to speak to her, so much did she remind me of myself ... Her miserliness was especially abhorrent to me, since I had it to an, if possible, even greater extent.*



The youngest, Ottla, comes off best. She is considered Kafka's favourite. For their father, on the other hand, she is *a kind of devil*.

*You yourself have confessed to me that in your opinion she is always intentionally causing you suffering and annoyance, and while you are suffering on her account she is satisfied and pleased.*



*Youth's meaninglessness. Fear of youth, fear of meaninglessness, of the meaningless rise of an inhuman life, this is how Kafka grows up.*

Not to mention his fear of school. And yet, despite it all, he manages to make it through the difficult German Gymnasium.



He only succeeds, however, especially in mathematics, *by crying during examinations.*

His horrible school days are now behind him, but what is to come is no less unpleasant.

*Since I always looked only to my inability as my guide into the future ... considering the future never did me any good, it was only a spinning out of my present grief.*

Kafka suffers from a sense of *gravity*.

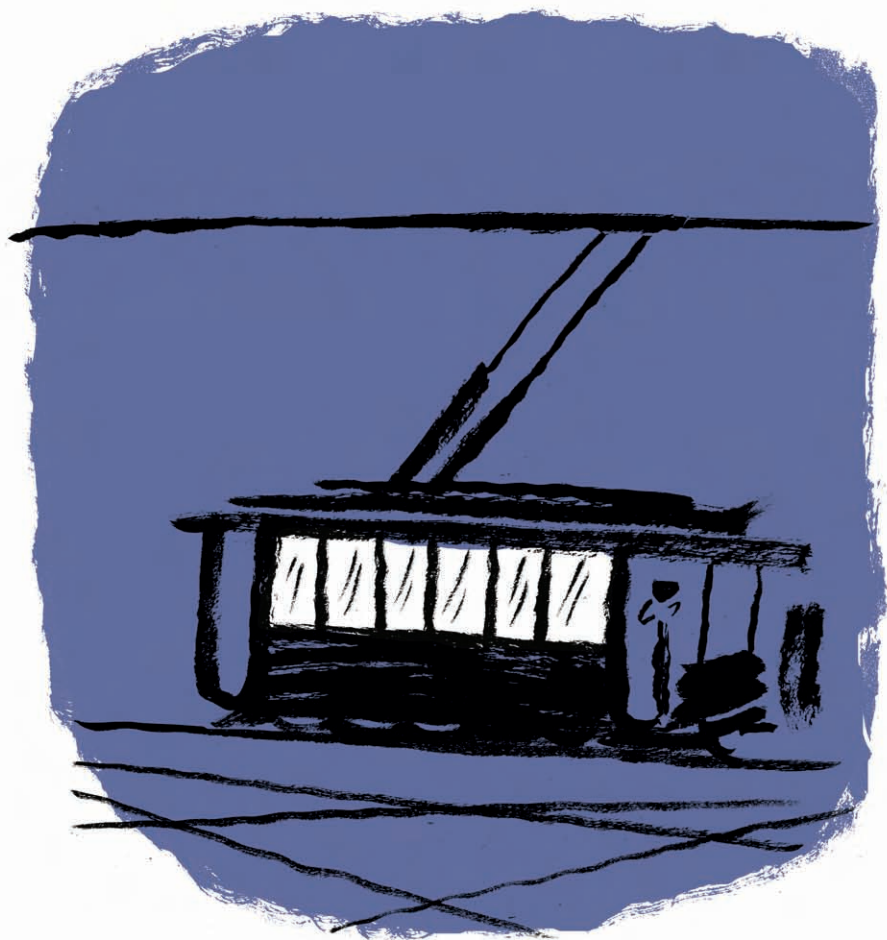
And yet, now and again, there are flashes of hope.

Of course there are possibilities for me,  
but beneath which stone?



He is never light-hearted. No matter where he is,  
there is always a reason to brood.

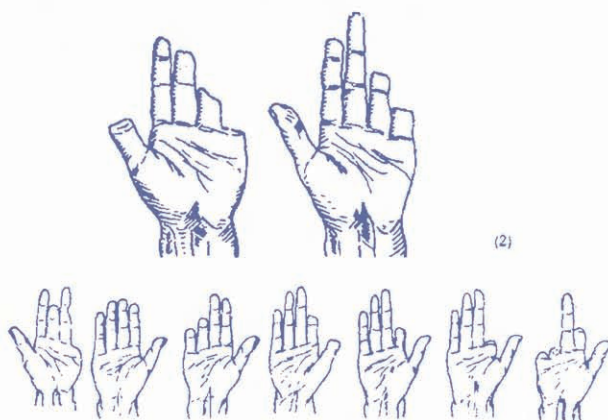
*Everything immediately gives me pause. Every joke in the comic  
paper; what I remember about Flaubert and Grillparzer; the sight  
of the nightshirts on my parents' bed, laid out for the night ...*



*I stand on the end platform of the tram and am completely  
unsure of my footing in this world, in this town, in my family.*

From his mid-twenties on, Kafka, law degree in tow,  
works for various insurance companies.

Among other things, there he devotes himself to *measures*  
*for preventing accidents from wood-planing machines.*



*Am in the office now. I am in the Assicurazioni Generali and have  
some hopes of someday sitting in chairs in faraway countries,  
looking out of the office windows at fields of sugar cane or  
Mohammedan cemeteries; and the whole world of insurance itself  
interests me greatly, but my present work is dreary... Adieu.*

After work he exchanges one desk for another. At home in his room, he plunges into his own texts.

*I'll jump into my story even though it should cut my face to pieces.*

But, hemmed in between his parents' bedroom and the living room, there is no peace to be found.



*I want to write, with a constant trembling on my forehead. I sit in my room in the very headquarters of the uproar of the entire house. I hear all the doors close, because of their noise only the footsteps of those running between them are spared me, I hear even the slamming of the oven door in the kitchen. My father bursts through the doors of my room and passes through in his dragging dressing gown, the ashes are scraped out of the stove in the next room...*

Deep *in the dregs of misery* he doesn't feel any better either.

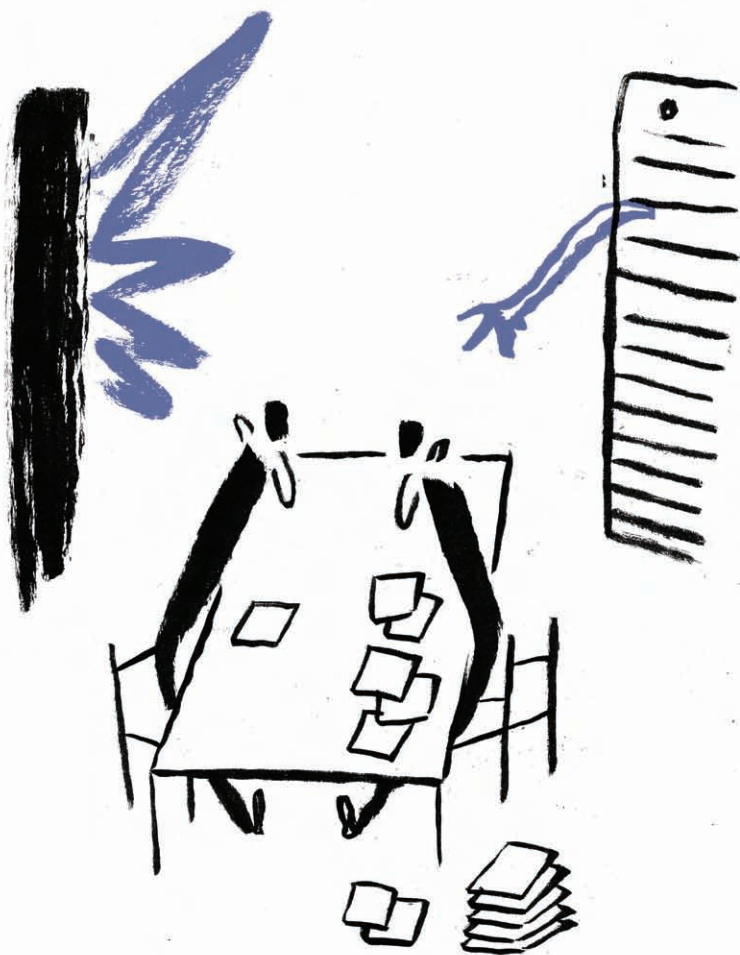
That is how Kafka later describes his office at the  
*Arbeiter-Unfall-Versicherungs-Anstalt* for the  
*Kingdom of Bohemia*.



*I casually know only what lies on top, below I can only suspect terrible things.*



Kafka finds his existence to be a kind of *horrible double-life*,  
*from which there is probably no escape but insanity.*



In a letter he sums things up: *Time is short, my strength is limited, the office is a horror, the apartment is noisy.*



And yet, outwardly, Kafka appears normal.

The author and critic Max Brod writes:

‘At first sight, Kafka was a healthy young man, if strangely quiet, observing, reserved.’



In fact, Kafka was a handsome figure, over 1m 80cm tall, that is, more than 10 cm taller than the average Czech of the time.

Visually speaking, Brod is the opposite.

He is short, with somewhat of a strange posture, curvature of the spine forces him to wear a back straightener, a frame made of metal bars.



Nevertheless (or because?) Brod enjoys far more success with women than Kafka.

Contrary to the usual clichés, the *straightened-out* Brod describes Kafka as a healthy, *natural-healer* type.

‘Intellectually, he was by no means attracted to the interesting-sickly, the bizarre, the grotesque, but towards the greatness of nature, towards what healed, the salutary, the healthily solid, the simple ... and those who see Kafka as something of a desert monk and anchorite are completely wrong.’



Nor should we forget that he practiced *gymnastics* naked in front of an open window for 10 minutes every day.

Kafka's diaries, however, give a different impression:

- *I work with weights I cannot get rid of.*
- *Total block. Endless torments.*
- *Whatever I touch comes apart.*
- *I don't hide from people because I want to live quietly, but because I want to perish quietly.*
- *Day before yesterday criticized over the factory. Then an hour on the sofa considering jumping out the window.*



And yet he has a strong need for pleasure.  
He likes to go to the movies with his friend Brod.



Kafka meticulously records his viewing experiences in his diary:  
*Was at the movies. 'Lolotte'. The good minister. The little bicycle.  
The reconciliation of the parents. Was tremendously entertained.  
Before it, a sad film, 'The Accident on the Dock', after it the gay  
'Alone at Last'.*

His conclusion:  
*I am capable of enjoying human relationships,  
but not experiencing them.*



Together with Brod, Kafka forges commercially motivated plans, too, his dream: a series of bestsellers.

Brod reports:

‘We had the idea of creating a new type of travel guide. It was to be called *CHEAP* ... So, *Cheap through Switzerland*, *Cheap in Paris*, and so on.’



‘Franz was indefatigable and took a childish delight in expanding the principles of this type, which was to make us millionaires and, above all, to rescue us from our dreadful office work, down to the last detail. [...] A special joke of ours concerned a *Cheap* phrase book which was to be based on the principle that it is impossible to learn a foreign language completely. Our idea, then, was that we go ahead and learn the wrong one straight away.’

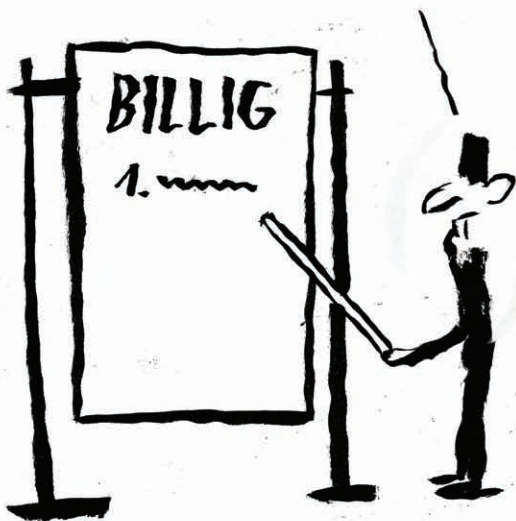
Their friends *have a good laugh* about such ideas.

But the *Cheap* volumes never appear, nothing comes of their *multi-million-dollar* idea. The idea is just *too* good.

Brod: 'I then also seriously corresponded with publishers about our plans for *travel guide-reform*. But negotiations failed because we did not want to divulge the precious secret without a huge advance.'

Now, over 100 years later, the secret can be revealed:

*CHEAP* will save the traveller from having to choose.  
*CHEAP* contains imperative routes, just *ONE* hotel per city,  
just *ONE* mode of transportation, the cheapest.



Kafka is very disappointed about *Cheap*'s failure to happen, even if later on Brod admits: 'Often it was hard to tell whether he meant something seriously or whether he was joking.

'... Franz was particularly fond of straddling the line between seriousness and joking and did so with a high degree of virtuosity.'



And so the *Cheap* series never appears; in return, however, a volume by the name of *Contemplation*. A book of conspicuously small size, as Kafka neatly tidies up the pieces while in the process of arranging them. He considered only a few of his early stories to be ready for print.

Out,  
out,  
out

There's a worm here somewhere  
that can even hollow out history's  
plenitude.



Due to the *improbably small selection* Kafka asks the publishers for the *largest font size possible, within those intentions that you have for the book.*

The request is granted.

‘With their giant letters the ninety-nine pages of the first edition resemble ancient votive tablets,’ Brod observes sheepishly.

Kafka is rather severe when it comes to women, too.

*Agathe is very ugly and so is Hedwig. H. is small and fat, her cheeks are red uninterrupted and boundless, her upper front teeth are large and do not allow the mouth to close and the lower jaw to be small; she is very short-sighted, and not only because of the pretty movement with which she puts down the pinch on her nose - the tip of which is really beautifully composed of small planes; tonight I dreamed of her shortened thick legs, and on these detours I recognize the beauty of a girl and fall in love.*



But then Kafka meets Felice Bauer and everything changes.

Or maybe not.

In his diary he records their first encounter:

*Frl. Felice Bauer. When I came to Brod on August 13, she was sitting at the table and, to me, looked like a maid. Nor was I at all curious about who she was, I simply accepted her presence. A bony, empty face that wore its emptiness openly. Bare neck. Breezily worn blouse. [...] Almost broken nose, blonde, somewhat stiff, charmless hair, strong chin. As I took a seat, I looked at her more closely for the first time, and by the time I was seated, had already formed an unshakable judgment.*



Two years later the following:

*The argumentation in general: I am lost to F.*

Around this time he writes, as if intoxicated, *The Judgment* in just a single night.

Kafka, the serious author, is born. Even he himself is satisfied with the story. In a letter to the publisher Kurt Wolff, Kafka describes this father-son story as *my favourite work*.



The critic of the *Dürerbund* sees things differently. For him *The Judgment* is a 'painstakingly inflated mental-health study'.

Kafka keeps a careful eye on his reviews.  
Soon the word the critics employ most often is:  
*peculiar*.

He finds sympathetic reviews to be nothing but *lavish praise*, considers them to be based on *misunderstanding* and particularly *useless* when written by acquaintances (like his friend Brod). He finds negative reviews, however, to be:

reasonable.



Kafka would have preferred to see the greater part of his oeuvre destroyed.

*Of all that I have written only the following books count:  
The Judgment, The Stoker, The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, A Country Doctor, and the story: A Hunger Artist.*

Everything else will be published posthumously against his will thanks to the actions of Max Brod.

Kafka's works are amongst the most interpreted in literary history. But what do they really mean?

Sometimes Kafka himself isn't all that sure.

Can you discern any kind of sense in the JUDGMENT?  
I can't, and I can't explain a thing in it either!



In one of his countless letters to Felice he continues:

*The 'Judgment' cannot be explained. Perhaps one day I'll show you some entries in my diary about it. The story is full of abstractions, though they are never admitted. The friend is hardly a real person, perhaps he is more whatever the father and Georg have in common. The story may be a journey around father and son, and the friend's changing shape may be a change in perspective in the relationship between father and son. But I am not quite sure of this, either.*