Letters to Friends, Family and Editors

Franz Kafka

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Letters to Friends,
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Publisher's Note


Of the letters in the present volume, the majority are addressed to Max Brod, Kafka's lifelong friend, companion, and helper. The friendship with Oskar Pollak, Kafka's schoolmate, was short-lived. Of a permanent nature was the friendship with the philosopher Felix Weltsch, the blind writer Oskar Baum, and, from 1921 on, Robert Klopstock, a medical student, later a physician, whom he met at the sanatorium in Mathary.

Among the addressees were important women, among them Hedwig W. (1907–9) and Minze Eisner (1919–23). Kafka corresponded vigorously with Kurt Wolff, one of the directors of Rowohlt Verlag and later owner of the publishing house that bore his name.

Fortunately some new material could be secured and included in the English edition: e.g., the full text of the letter to the sister of Julie Wohryzek (November 24, 1919); it replaces the fragment tentatively addressed in Briefe “To the parents of J.W. (?)”. Further additions are seven letters to Martin Buber, of which four (dated May 25, 1914, and June 28, July 20, and August 3, 1917) are published here for the first time, with the kind assistance of the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem, who own the originals; a letter concerning the printing history of The Metamorphosis (probably addressed to Robert Musil); a letter to Felix Weltsch; a letter to his parents written in the last days of his life and preserved by Max Brod in his Kafka biography; fifteen short letters or postcards sent to Brod from 1905 to 1909, also from the biography; a letter to René Schickele; and one to Otto Stoessl.

Briefe included four letters to Kafka's favored sister Ottla which are retained in the present volume (with corrected dates). Additional letters to Ottla are now available in Briefe an Ottla und die Familie, edited by Hartmut Binder and Klaus Wagenbach, Frankfurt a.M., 1974.
LETTERS TO FRIENDS, FAMILY AND EDITORS

As in the original German edition, this version concludes with a selection from the slips of paper on which Kafka, advised in the last few weeks of his life to speak as little as possible, noted his observations and wishes.

The editorial work was a joint effort by Beverly Colman, Nahum N. Glatzer, Christopher J. Kuppig, and Wolfgang Sauerlander. The translators wish to thank Mr. Sauerlander for his invaluable help in clarifying obscurities, deciphering private references, and interpreting the eccentricities of Kafka’s language and character; he has also made extensive additions to Max Brod’s original notes and has succeeded in dating many letters that were dated incorrectly in the German edition.

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1900

To Selma Kohn¹

[Entry in an album]

How many words in this book.

They are meant for remembrance. As though words could carry memories.

For words are clumsy mountaineers and clumsy miners. Not for them to bring down treasures from the mountains’ peaks, or up from the mountains’ bowels.

But there is a living mindfulness that has passed gently, like a-stroking hand, over everything memorable. And when the flame shoots up out of these ashes, hot and glowing, strong and mighty, and you stare into it as though spellbound by its magic, then—

But no one can write himself into this kind of pure mindfulness with unskillful hand and crude pen; one can write only in such white, undemanding pages as these. I did so on September 4, 1900.

Franz Kafka

1902

To Oskar Pollak¹

[Prague, February 4, 1902]

While we were walking together Saturday, I realized what it is we need. But I have not written you about it until today because such things have to lie awhile and stretch. When we talk together, the words are hard; we tread over them as if they were rough pavement. The most delicate things acquire awkward feet and we can’t help it. We’re almost in each other’s way; I bump into you and you—I don’t dare and you—. When we come to things that are not exactly cobblestones or the Kunstwalt,² we suddenly see that we are in masquerade, acting with angular gestures (especially me, I admit), and then we suddenly become sad and bored. Does anyone make you as bored as I do? You often become quite sick. Then I feel sympathy and cannot do anything and say anything, and jerky, silly words come up, the sort of remarks you’d get from anyone, only better said; then I fall silent and you fall silent and you
become bored, and I become bored and it’s all like a stupid hangover and there’s no use lifting a hand. But neither wants to say this to the other, out of shame or fear or— You see, we’re afraid of each other, or I am—.

Of course I understand it. It’s boring, to stand for years in front of an ugly wall and it just won’t crumble away. Of course, but the wall is afraid for itself, for the garden (if there is one), and you get out of sorts, yawn, have headaches, don’t know where to turn.

You must surely have noticed, whenever we see each other again after a longish time we’re disappointed, irritated, until we get used to the irritation. Then we have to put up a front of words, so that our yawns won’t be noticed.

..............................................................

The fear creeps over me that you won’t understand this whole letter—what’s its aim? Without flourishes and veils and warts: When we talk together we’re hampered by things we want to say and cannot say just like that, so we bring them out in such a way that we misunderstand, even ignore, even laugh at each other. (I say: The honey is sweet, but I talk so low or so stupidly or inadequately, and you say: Nice weather today. The conversation has already taken a wrong turn.) Since we are always trying and always without success, we become tired, dissatisfied, stiff-jawed. If we tried to do it in writing, we would be more at ease than when we talk—we could then discuss the cobblestones and the Kunstwahr, without shame, for the better part would be in safety. That is the point this letter is trying to make. Is that prompted by jealousy?

I had no way of knowing that you would read the last page also; that’s why I have scribbled this odd bit, although it doesn’t belong to the letter.

We have been talking together for three years; so in many things we no longer distinguish between mine and thine. Often I would not be able to say what comes from me and what from you, and perhaps it’s the same for you too.

Now I am extremely glad that you are keeping company with that girl. For your sake; she means nothing to me. But you often talk with her, not only for the sake of talking. You walk around with her somewhere here or there, or in Roztok, and I sit at my desk at home. You talk with her, and in the middle of a sentence somebody jumps up and makes a bow. That is me with my untrimmed words and angular faces. That lasts only a moment, and then you go on talking. I sit at my desk at home and yawn. I’ve been through it already. Wouldn’t that separate us? Is that so strange? Are we enemies? I am very fond of you.
To Oskar Pollak

[Liboche; postmarked on arrival: August 12, 1902]
If someone flies through the world on seven-league boots from the Bohemian to the Thuringian forests, it’s quite a feat to catch him or even so much as touch the tip of his coat. No cause for offense. So it’s now too late for Ilmenau. But in Weimar—can there be some hidden intention here?—a letter will be waiting for you, stuffed full of strange things which will have become stronger and finer from having waited so long in the aforesaid town. Let us hope so.

Yours, Franz

To Oskar Pollak

[Prague; postmarked on arrival: August 24, 1902]
I sat at my fine desk. You don’t know it. How could you? You see, it’s a respectably minded desk which is meant to educate. Where the writer’s knees usually are, it has two horrible wooden spikes. And now pay attention. If you sit down quietly, cautiously at it, and write something respectable, all’s well. But if you become excited, look out—if your body quivers ever so little, you inescapably feel the spikes in your knees, and how that hurts. I could show you the black-and-blue marks. And what that means to say is simply: “Don’t write anything exciting and don’t let your body quiver while you write.”

So I was sitting at my fine desk and writing my second letter to you. You know, a letter is like a bellwether; it at once draws twenty baaing letters after it.

Whooosh, the door flew open. Who came in without knocking? Some ruffian? Ah, a beloved guest. Your postcard. It is odd about this first card that I have received here. I’ve read it countless times, until I know your whole ABC; and only after I’d read more out of it than was actually in it was it time to stop and tear up my letter. Rish-rosh, it went, and was dead.

But I read one thing in your card that stood out and was not at all nice to read: You are traveling around with that wicked accursed bug of criticism biting you, which is something one should never do.

But what you write about the Goethe National Museum seems to me totally twisted and wrong. You went there filled with conceits and schoolboy ideas, and began right off by griping about the name. Now I think the name “museum” is good, but “national” seems to me even better, not at all tasteless or sacrilegious or anything of the sort, as you write, but the subtlest, most marvelously subtle irony. For what you write about the study, your holy of
holies, is again nothing more than a conceit and a schoolboy idea with just a
dash of German lit.—may it roast in hell.⁶

Damn it all, there was nothing to it, keeping his study in order and then
setting it up as a “museum” for the “nation.” Any carpenter and
wallpaperer—supposing he were the right sort who knew enough to
appreciate Goethe’s bootjack—could do it, and that’s all there was to praise.

But do you know what really is the holiest thing we could have of
Goethe’s as a memento—the footprints of his solitary walks through the
country—they would be it. And here comes a joke, a marvelous one, that
makes God in His heaven weep bitterly and sends hell into hellish convulsions
of laughter. It’s this: We can never have another person’s holy of holies, only
our own—that’s a joke, a marvelous one. Once before I gave you a chance to
nibble at tiny bits and pieces of it—in the Chotek gardens.⁷ You neither wept
nor laughed. That’s how it is—you’re neither God in heaven nor the wicked
devil.

Only the wicked criticaster (talking down Thuringia) inhabits you, and
he is a subordinate devil whom, however, you should shake off. And so, for
the good of your soul, I shall tell you the strange tale of how once upon a
time [. . .], may God bless him, was overcome by Franz Kafka.

He was always running after me wherever I went, wherever I was. If I lay
on the vineyard wall, looking out over the countryside and maybe seeing or
hearing something lovely far off beyond the mountains, you can be sure that
suddenly someone rose up behind the wall, with considerable noise, solemnly
bleated, and gravely stated his view that the beautiful landscape decidedly
stood in need of a treatise. Elaborately, he explicated his plan for a
comprehensive monograph or a charming sketch and drove home his point.
My only argument against it was myself, and that was little enough.

[. . .] You cannot imagine how all this torments me now. Everything I’ve
written you is nothing but gallows whimsy and country air, and what I’m
writing you now is glaring daylight that hurts the eyes. My uncle from
Madrid (railroad manager)⁸ was here; I came to Prague because of him.
Shortly before his arrival I had the weird, unfortunately very weird notion of
begging him, no, not begging, asking, whether he mightn’t know some way
to help me out of this mess, whether he couldn’t guide me to someplace
where at last I could start afresh and do something. All right, I began
cautiously. No need to tell you the whole story in detail. He began to talk
unctuously, although ordinarily he’s a truly kind person; he comforted me,
nicey-nicey. Let it pass. I dropped into silence at once, without really wanting
to, and in the two days that I have been in Prague on his account I didn’t say
another word about it, although I have been with him all the time. He leaves
this evening. I am going to Liboch for another week, then to Triesch for a week, then back to Prague, and then to Munich, to attend the university, yes, the university. Why are you making faces? Yes, I mean to go to the university. Why am I writing all this to you. Perhaps I knew it was a hopeless thing; what do people have their own feet for. Why have I written to you about it? So that you will know how I feel about the life outside that goes stumbling over the cobblestones like the poor mail coach that limps from Liboch to Dauba. You simply have to have pity on and patience with your Franz.

Since I haven’t written to anybody else I wouldn’t like it if you were to talk to anybody about my endless letters. You won’t. If you want to answer, which would be very nice, you can write to the old address for another week, c/o Windischbauer, Liboch. Later Zeltnergasse 3, Prague.

To Oskar Pollak

[Liboch; autumn 1902]
It’s a strange time I’ve been spending here, as you must have noticed, and I needed a strange time like this, a time in which I lie for hours on a vineyard wall and stare into the rain clouds which don’t want to leave here, or into the wide fields, which grow even wider when you have a rainbow in your eyes, or where I sit in the garden and tell the children (especially a blonde little six-year-old, whom all the women call adorable) fairy tales or build sand castles or play hide-and-seek or whittle tables that—as God is my witness—never turn out well. A strange time, isn’t it?

Or where I go through the fields which now lie brown and mournful with abandoned plows but which all the same glisten silvery when in spite of everything the late-afternoon sun comes out and casts my long shadow (yes, my long shadow, maybe by means of it I’ll still reach the kingdom of heaven) on the furrows. Have you noticed how late-summer shadows dance on dark, turned-up earth, how they dance physically? Have you noticed how the earth rises toward the grazing cow, how trustfully it rises? Have you noticed how rich, heavy soil crumbles under too delicate fingers, how solemnly it crumbles?

To Oskar Pollak

[Prague; postmark: December 20, 1902]
Prague doesn’t let go. Either of us. This old crone has claws. One has to yield, or else. We would have to set fire to it on two sides, at the Vyšehrad and at
the Hradčany; then it would be possible for us to get away. Perhaps you’ll give it some consideration up to Carnival time.

You’ve read a great deal, but you don’t know the tale of Shamefaced Lanky and Impure in Heart. Because it’s new and is hard to tell.

Shamefaced Lanky had crept off to hide his face in an old village, among low houses and narrow lanes. The lanes were so small that whenever two people walked together they had to rub against each other friendly-neighboringly, and the rooms were so low that when Shamefaced Lanky stood up from his stool his big angular head went right through the ceiling, and without his particularly wanting to he had to look down on the thatched roofs.

Impure in Heart lived in a big city that got drunk night after night and was frantic night after night. For you see that is the joy of cities. And Impure in Heart was just like the city. For you see this is the joy of the impure.

One day before Christmas Lanky sat stooped at the window. There was no room for his legs inside so he’d stuck them out of the window for comfort; there they dangled pleasantly. With his clumsy, skinny, spidery fingers he was knitting woolen socks for the peasants. He had almost spitted his gray eyes on the knitting needles, for it was already dark.

Someone knocked daintily at the plank door. That was Impure in Heart. Lanky gaped. The guest smiled. And at once Lanky began feeling ashamed. He was ashamed of his height and his woolen socks and his room.—But in spite of that he did not blush, but remained as lemon-yellow as he has been. And with difficulty and shame he set his bony legs into motion and shamefully extended his hand to the guest. It reached across the whole room. Then he stammered some friendly mutterings into his woolen socks.

Impure in Heart sat down on a flour sack and smiled. Lanky also smiled, and his eyes crawled bashfully along his guest’s glistening waistcoat buttons. Impure in Heart turned his eyelids toward the ceiling, and the words emerged from his mouth. Those words were fine gentlemen with patent-leather shoes and English cravats and glistening buttons; and if you furtively asked them, “Do you know what blood of blood is?” one would answer with a leer, “Yes, I have English cravats.” And as soon as those little gentlemen were out of the mouth, they stood up on tiptoe and were tall; they then skipped over to Lanky, climbed up on him, tweaking and biting, and worked their way into his ears.

Lanky began acting restive; his nose sniffed the air of the room. God, how stuffy, stale, and unaired the air was!

The stranger did not stop. He told stories about himself, about waistcoat buttons, about the city, about his feelings—a merry mix. And as he talked he
incidently kept stabbing his pointed cane into Lanky’s belly. Lanky trembled and grinned. Then Impure in Heart stopped; he was content and smiled. Lanky grinned and politely led his guest to the plank door. There they shook hands.

Lanky was alone again. He wept. He wiped his big tears away with his socks. His heart ached and he could not tell anyone. But sick questions crawled up his legs to his soul.

Why did he come to me? Because I am lanky? No, because I . . . ?
Am I weeping out of pity for me or for him?
Do I like him after all or do I hate him?
Has my god or my devil sent him?
The question marks throttled Shamefaced Lanky.

Once again he set to work on the socks. He almost pierced his eyes with the knitting needles. For it was even darker.

So think it over until Carnival.

Yours, Franz

1903

To Oskar Pollak
September 6 [1903?]

It might have been more sensible for me to have waited with this letter until I saw you and knew what the two months have made of you, for these summer months move me—I think—a good way along. And then too this summer I haven’t received so much as a postcard from you, and in the last half year I haven’t spoken a word with you that was worth the trouble. So it may well be that I am sending the letter to a stranger who will be annoyed by the importunity, or to a dead man who cannot read it, or to a clever person who will laugh at it. But I must write the letter; for that reason I’m not waiting until it becomes clear that I ought not write it.

For I want something from you, and I don’t want it out of friendship or intimacy, as might be imagined; no, purely out of selfishness, plain selfishness.

Perhaps you noticed that I entered on this summer with high hopes; perhaps you were even dimly aware of what I wanted out of this summer. I’ll say it: to bring out at one stroke what I believe I have in me (I don’t always believe it). You could be aware of it only dimly, and I ought to have kissed your hands for having gone along with me, for it would have been most uncomfortable to be walking beside someone whose mouth was nastily pursed. But it was not nastily pursed.
Well the summer has forced my lips to part somewhat—I’ve become healthier (today I’m not feeling so well), become stronger, been with people a good deal, can talk with women—I have to say all this here—but the summer has brought me none of the miracles.

Now, however, there’s something that’s tearing my lips wide apart, or is it a gentler feeling, no, tearing is right—and someone who is standing behind the tree says softly to me: “You won’t do anything without others.” But I am now writing solemnly and with choice sentence structure: “Solitariness is repulsive; honestly lay your eggs out in the open and the sun will hatch them; better to bite into life than bite your tongue; honor the mole and its ilk but don’t make it into one of your saints.” Then someone who is no longer behind the tree says to me: “Is that the truth after all and one of summer’s miracles?”

(Listen, just listen to a clever opening to a cunning letter. Why is it clever? A poor man who had not previously begged writes a begging letter with an elaborate opening in which he piteously describes the toilsome road that led to the insight that not to beg is a vice.)

Tell me, do you understand the feeling one must have when one’s task is to pull a yellow mail coach full of sleeping people through an interminable night? One is sad, one has a few tears in the corners of one’s eyes, hobbles slowly from one white milestone to the next, has a crooked back and has to keep looking down the highway, although there is nothing on it but night. Damn it all, how one would like to wake up those wretches in the coach, if only one had a post horn.

Now, now you can listen to me, if you’re not tired.

I’ll put together a bundle for you; it will contain everything I have written up to now, original or derivative. Nothing will be missing except the childhood things (as you see, this misery’s been on my back from early on), then the stuff I no longer have, then the stuff I regard as worthless in this context, then the plans, since they are whole countries to him who has them and sand to everyone else, and finally the things I cannot show even to you, for we shudder to stand naked and be fingered by others, even if we have begged on our knees for that very thing. Anyhow, this whole past year I have written almost nothing. Whatever remains, and I don’t know how much it is, I’ll give to you if you write or say yes to me in answer to this request of mine.

You see that is something special, and although I am very clumsy about expressing such things (very ignorant), perhaps you already know. What I want to hear from you is not whether one might happily wait a bit or whether to go ahead and burn it all up with a light heart. In fact I don’t even want to know what your attitude toward me is, for I’d have to force that out
of you too; what I want is something easier and harder, I want you to read the pages, even if indifferently and reluctantly. For there are also indifferent and reluctant passages among them. Because—this is why I want it—what is dearest and hardest of mine is merely cool, in spite of the sun, and I know that another pair of eyes will make everything warmer and livelier when they look at it. I say only warmer and livelier, for that is divinely certain, since it is written: “Glorious is autonomous feeling, but responsive feeling brings strength to others.”

Well, why all the fuss, eh— I am taking a piece (for I can do more than this and I shall—yes), a piece of my heart, packing it neatly in a few sheets of inscribed paper, and sending it on to you.

To Oskar Pollak

Dear Oskar,

Perhaps I am glad you have left,¹ as glad as people would have to be if someone climbed to the moon to look at them from there, for this sense of being observed from such height and distance would give people some small assurance that their movements and words and wishes are not altogether comical and foolish, as long as astronomers in their observatories hear no laughter from the moon.

[...]

[...] We are as forlorn as children lost in the woods. When you stand in front of me and look at me, what do you know of the griefs that are in me and what do I know of yours. And if I were to cast myself down before you and weep and tell you, what more would you know about me than you know about hell when someone tells you it is hot and dreadful. For that reason alone we human beings ought to stand before one another as reverently, as reflectively, as lovingly, as we would before the entrance to hell.

[...] If, like you, one dies for a while, one has the benefit of suddenly seeing clearly in either a pleasant or ugly light all the relationships that inevitably look so hazy when one is inside them. But the survivor also has that strange experience.

I have really spoken with you alone, among all the young people, and when I did talk to others it was only incidental or for your sake or through you or in reference to you. For me, you were, along with much else, also something like a window through which I could see the streets. I could not do that by myself, for tall though I am I do not yet reach to the windowsill.

Now that’s going to change, of course. I now talk to others also, more
awkwardly but more independently, and I see to my considerable surprise what your standing here was. Hence in this city which is foreign to you there are some quite intelligent people to whom you were someone to be revered. That's the truth. And I am vain enough to be pleased by that.

I don't know why that was so, whether because you were reticent, or seemed so, or receptive, or suggested potentialities, or really radiated power. At any rate, some think you left them, although after all you only left the girl.

Your letter is half sad and half glad. You really didn't go to the boy, but to the fields and the forest. But you are seeing these fields and forests, whereas we barely see their spring and their summer, and know no more about their autumn and their winter than about God in ourselves.

Today is Sunday, when the clerks always come down Wenzelsplatz across the Graben, and clamor for Sunday quiet. I think their red carnations and their stupid and Jewish faces and their clamor is something highly significant; it is almost as if a child wanted to get to heaven and bawled and barked because no one was bothering to hand him the footstool. But the child doesn't want to get to heaven at all. The others, however, who walk on the Graben smiling because they do not know how to use even their Sunday—I'd slap their faces if I had the courage and didn't smile myself. But you in your castle may laugh, for there heaven is close to the earth, as you write.

I am reading Fechner, Eckhart. Some books seem like a key to unfamiliar rooms in one's own castle.

The things I wanted to read to you and that I will send to you are fragments from a book, The Child and the City, which I myself have only in fragments. If I am to send them to you, I must copy them, and that takes time. So I'll be sending you only a few pages with every letter (if I don't see the thing making visible progress, I'll soon lose interest). Then you may read them in context; the first fragment is coming in the next letter.

By the way, no writing's been done for some time. It's this way with me: God doesn't want me to write, but I—I must. So there's an everlasting up and down; after all, God is the stronger, and there's more anguish in it than you can imagine. So many powers within me are tied to a stake, which might possibly grow into a green tree. Released, they could be useful to me and the country. But nobody ever shook a millstone from around his neck by complaining, especially when he was fond of it.

Here are some verses. Read them when you are in the proper mood.
This present day is cool and hard.
The clouds congeal.
The winds are ropes tugging.
People congeal.
Footsteps sound metallic
On brazen pavements,
And our eyes behold
Wide white lakes.

Standing in the Christmassy square
Of an ancient little town,
The crèche's colored windows stare
Out upon the snowy ground.
Walking in the moonlight goes
A man in silence in the snow,
And the wind his shadow blows
Tall along the crèche's wall.

People who dark bridges cross,
passing saints
with feeble candles.
Clouds that parade across gray skies,
passing churches
with darkening towers.
One who leans on the squared stone railing,
looking into the evening waters,
hands resting upon ancient stone.

Yours, Franz

To Oskar Pollak

[1903]

Dear Oskar,

[...] Cool morning postscript to a painful evening madness. I see nothing unnatural in your not having helped the woman; perhaps uncorrupted people wouldn't have done so either. But it is unnatural that you brood on it and what is more enjoy this brooding and this inner conflict, enjoy your self-laceration. You skewer yourself on every brief emotion for a long time, so
that in the end you live for only an hour, since you have to mull for a hundred years about that hour. Granted, perhaps I don’t live at all in that case. Once I had the impudence to write somewhere that I was living swiftly, offering this for proof: “I look into a girl’s eyes, and it was a long love story with thunder and kisses and lightning;” whereupon I was vain enough to write: “I am living swiftly.” Like a child with picture books behind a curtained window. Sometimes the child catches a glimpse of the street through a crack, and at once turns back to its precious picture books.—In making comparisons I am merciful toward myself.

To Oskar Pollak

[Prague; postmark: December 21, 1903]

No, I want to have written to you before you come yourself. Letter-writing is like being looped together by a rope; when we stop, the rope is broken, even if it was no more than a thread, so I want to tie the ends together quickly and provisionally.

You see, this was the image that seized hold of me last night. People keep themselves at a tolerable height above an infernal abyss toward which they gravitate only by putting out all their strength and lovingly helping one another. They are tied together by ropes, and it’s bad enough when the ropes around an individual loosen and he drops somewhat lower than the others into empty space; ghastly when the ropes break and he falls. That’s why we should cling to the others. I suspect that girls keep us from falling because they are so light, and therefore we must love the girls and they should love us.

Enough, enough—with good reason I am afraid of starting a letter to you, because it always stretches out and never comes to a good end. That’s why I stopped writing to you from Munich, although I had so much to write. Besides, I can’t write at all when I am in foreign parts. All words are wildly dispersed and I can no longer corral them into sentences, and then everything new is pressing in on me so hard that I cannot fend it off and cannot ignore it.

Well, now you are coming in person. I don’t want to waste the whole Sunday afternoon sitting at the desk—I’ve been sitting here since two o’clock and now it’s five—when I’ll so soon be able to talk with you. I’m so glad. You will bring cold air that will do all our stuffed heads good. I’m so happy. See you soon.

Yours, Franz