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FRANZ KAFKA
Letters to Felice

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which is quietly developing into a much bigger story. How could I give it to you to read, even if it were finished? It is rather illegible, and even if that weren’t an obstacle—up to now I certainly haven’t spoiled you with beautiful writing—I don’t want to send you anything to read. I want to read it to you. Yes, that would be lovely, to read this story to you, while I would have to hold your hand, for the story is a little frightening. It is called _Metamorphosis_, and it would thoroughly scare you, you might not want to hear a word of it, for alas! I scare you enough every day with my letters. Dearest, on this better writing paper let us start a better life. While writing that last sentence, I caught myself looking heavenward, as though you were up there. If only you weren’t, which indeed you are, but down here with me in the depths. And don’t deceive yourself, they are great depths, the more calmly we write to each other from now on—may God grant us that at last—the more clearly you will see it.

If only you will stay with me, in spite of it! Well, perhaps serenity and strength are destined to be where restlessness and weakness need them.

I am too depressed at the moment, and perhaps I shouldn’t be writing at all. But my story’s hero has also had a very bad time today, and yet it is only the last lap of his misfortune, which is now becoming permanent. So how can I be particularly cheerful! But if this letter serves as an example to you never to tear up a single scrap you have written to me, then it is, after all, a worthwhile and important letter. But you mustn’t think I am always so sad. I’m not. With one exception, I have no reason to complain too much; and everything, with the exception of this one hopelessly black spot, could still turn out well, be pleasant and, with your help, wonderful. On Sunday, if I have the time and ability, I want to pour it all out to you, and with your hands in your lap you can watch the great flood. But now, dearest, I’m off to bed. May you be given a pleasant Sunday, and I some of your thoughts.

Franz

November 24, 1912

[ Begun during the night of November 23 to 24]

Dearest, once again I am putting aside this exceptionally repulsive story in order to refresh myself by thinking of you. By now it is more than half finished, and on the whole I am not too dissatisfied; but it is infinitely repulsive, and these things, you see, spring from the same heart in which you dwell and which you tolerate as a dwelling place. But don’t be unhappy about it, for who knows, the more I write and the more I liberate myself, the cleaner and the worthier of you I may become, but no doubt there is a great deal more to be got rid of, and the nights can never be long enough for this business which, incidentally, is highly voluptuous.
Now, before I go to sleep (it is actually 3 A.M., usually I only work till 1; you must have misunderstood one of my last letters, I meant 3 in the afternoon; I stayed on in the office and wrote from there), because it is your wish and because it is so simple, I will whisper in your ear how much I love you. I love you so much, Felice, that if I can keep you I should want to live forever, but only, it must be remembered, as a healthy person and your equal. Well, that’s how it is, and you should know it, and indeed it is almost beyond kissing, the awareness of which leaves me with almost nothing to do but stroke your hand. And this is why I would rather call you Felice than dearest, and rather Du than darling. But since I want to relate as many things as I can to you, I also like calling you dearest, and am happy to be able to call you anything.

Sunday [November 24, 1912], after lunch

Two letters! Two letters! No Sunday could live up to such a start! But now, dearest, since you have not only forgiven me but also see my point, we should, shouldn’t we, Felice, whatever happens, remain calm and love each other without further trouble. I wish I were strong enough to make you lively and gay again with my letters, as, alas, I was weak enough to make you tired and tearful. I almost think I could. But if I succeed, it will be due entirely to the fortifying knowledge of having you as a friend, and being able to rely on someone like you.

But dearest, please, please don’t ever again write at night; I read these letters that cost you your sleep with a mixture of joy and sorrow. Don’t do it again; sleep peacefully, as you deserve; I couldn’t work properly if I knew you were still awake—above all on my account. But knowing you are asleep, I work with greater courage, for then I imagine that you have completely surrendered to my care, helpless in your healthy sleep, and in need of help, and that I am working for you and for your good. With these thoughts, how could my work fail to progress! So sleep, sleep, think how much more work you do in the daytime than I. Go to sleep tomorrow without fail, write no more letters in bed; if my wish is powerful enough, you won’t even do it today. Then, before going to bed, you may throw your supply of aspirin tablets out of the window. Well, no more late writing, leave writing at night to me, give me this faint chance to be proud of my nightwork, it is the only pride I feel vis-à-vis you; without it I should be too submissive, and surely you would not like that either. But wait a moment, to prove that nightwork everywhere, even in China, is left to men, I’ll go to the bookshelf (it’s in the next room) to get a book and copy out for you a short Chinese poem. Well, here it is (what a noise my father is making with his nephew!): It is by the poet Yuan Tzu-tsai (1716–97), on whom I find the comment: “Very talented and precocious, had a brilliant career in the civil service. He was uncommonly versatile both as man and
artist." To understand the poem one should know that well-to-do Chinese
sprinkle their sleeping quarters with fragrant essences before going to sleep.
The poem may be very slightly improper, but its lack of propriety is amply
compensated for by its beauty. Here it is at last:

IN THE DEAD OF NIGHT
In the cold night, while poring over my book,
I forgot the hour of bedtime.
The scent of my gold-embroidered bedcover
Has already evaporated,
The fire in the hearth burns no more.
My beautiful mistress, who hitherto has controlled
Her wrath with difficulty, snatches away the lamp,
And asks: Do you know how late it is?64

Well? This is a poem one has to savor to the full. It reminds me, incidentally, of
three things, but I won't try to examine the associations.

First of all, I am delighted that you are a vegetarian at heart. I don't like
strict vegetarians at all that much, because I too am almost a vegetarian, and see
nothing particularly likable about it, just something natural, and those who are
good vegetarians in their hearts, but, for reasons of health, from indifference, or
simply because they underrate food as such, eat meat or whatever happens to
be on the table, casually, with their left hand, so to speak, these are the ones I
like. It's a pity that my love for you advanced so fast, that there is no room left
to love you more for what you eat. And you share my craze for sleeping with
the window open? Open the whole year around? Even in winter? Wide open?
That would be going one better than me, for in the winter I open it only a
little, one tiny crack. True, I look out onto a large empty lot, beyond which
flows the Moldau.65 And on rising ground immediately beyond the river are
public gardens. So we get a lot of air and wind and cold, and though you may
still leave your window wide open in the Immanuel-Kirchstrasse, it's by no
means certain that you would do so in a room situated like mine. Besides, I beat
you in this: my room has no heating whatever, yet here is where I do my
writing. I've just noticed (I am sitting by the window) that the inside window is
wide open, the outside one barely closed, while the balustrade on the bridge
down below is covered, not in snow, but white frost. Now you try and compete
with that!

The poem by your little ladies is splendid.66 I am of course returning it, but
I have made a copy. But to punish your Fräulein Brühl for wishing you a
husband with a "von" to his name, or rather wishing you for him, I would like
her to have the following birthday present: as from tonight, night after night,
after office hours, for one whole year until her next birthday, two mad managers will come up to her and, one on either side of her, will dictate letters unceasingly and simultaneously until midnight. And only because she writes such pretty verse would I be prepared, should you intercede on her behalf, to reduce her sentence to six months. But because you like her, and because she amuses herself so prettily. I shall send her a picture postcard from Kratzau (that’s up in the mountains behind Reichenberg) where unfortunately I have to go tomorrow, and on it, in an unknown hand and without a signature, I will get someone to write: “Congratulations. But ah! Who from?”

I’ve been meaning to ask you for a long time, and always it slips my mind, how it is that you take, let alone read, so many and such diverse publications which you mentioned in your second letter as being among your daily mail? You mentioned so many, and still add “etc.” If that is so—i.e., if I understood right, then we could start an additional exchange between us. I can’t lay my hands on too many things that you have held in your hands, and I can’t send you too many things that concern me. For a long time now I have planned, and only my indolence has prevented me repeatedly from carrying it through, to cut out and collect from various papers news items that astonished me for some reason, that affected me, that seemed important to me personally for a long time to come; at a glance, they were usually quite insignificant, for instance just recently “The beatification of 22 Christian Negro youths in Uganda”—(which I have just come across and am enclosing). I find something of the kind in the papers nearly every other day. News which seems to be meant only for me, but I haven’t got the patience to start the collection for myself, let alone keep it up. But I should do it with pleasure for you, and you, if it would amuse you, could do it for me. I am sure everyone feels there are certain news items not meant for every reader, but aimed only at certain readers here and there, in which the outsider could detect no reason for special interest, and such bits of news that specially affect you I should value more than any collection of mine, which I would send you without much regret. But don’t misunderstand me: I mean only small clippings from daily papers, chiefly about actual happenings; clippings from magazines should be rare exceptions; don’t think I want you to cut your beautiful periodicals to pieces for me. Besides, I read only the Prager Tagblatt, and that only very fleetingly, and of magazines only the Neue Rundschau, and also Palästina, which they have stopped sending me, though I am still a subscriber. (They probably think they did more for me with that one copy the night we met than they do for other subscribers in the course of a whole year—and they are right.) To start the collection with a fitting contribution, I am enclosing the report of a nasty trial.

Now that I mentioned my trip to Kratzau, I can’t get the tiresome thought out of my head. My little story would certainly have been finished tomorrow,
but now I have to leave at 6 tomorrow evening; I get to Reichenberg at 10, and go on to Kratzau at 7 the next morning to appear in court. I have the firm intention of making such a complete fool of myself in this rather complicated and risky case that no one will ever send me off on that kind of job again. Anyway, I am hoping to be back in Prague by 4 o’clock on Tuesday afternoon, and will go straight to the office, just in case (but I won’t be at all anxious, not in the least bit anxious) there is a letter from you, and then, content if there is one, composed if there isn’t, I shall go home and straight to bed. If this plan is to succeed, I shall have to finish my business in court at Kratzau in less than 3 hours; so I am seriously thinking of gradually fainting away toward the end of the 3rd hour and being hurriedly carried off to the station. In lieu of my signature, the court proceedings will say: "The representative of the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute (not Company, dearest!) fainted, and had to be removed.” Just think how doubly revived I shall be on the train, and how I shall race to Prague!

Oh dear, there is still so much to say, and so many questions to ask, but it is so late, and I can’t go on. As usual on Sunday, I went this morning to see Baum (do you know Oskar Baum?) and read to them (Max was there too, with his fiancée) the first part of my little story. Later a girl arrived, who in some way reminded me slightly of you (it doesn’t take much for me to be reminded of you). I was spellbound, and after my eyes had exhausted the slight resemblance I wanted to go to the window, look out, see no one, and be wholly yours.

I am on very good terms with my mother. We are even developing a satisfactory relationship; our common blood is beginning to make sense, she seems to love you. She has even written you a letter, but I wouldn’t let her mail it, it was too meek; it was the kind of letter I should have demanded on that bad evening, and that wouldn’t have been right. Soon, I think, she will write you a calm, friendly letter.

So I am not to have a picture of you? And no one took a photograph of “Humor”? Strange people, to miss such an opportunity. Are there no group photos of employees? Views of the offices? The factory? The Immanuel-Kirchstrasse? No factory brochure? The address of your Prague branch? What does your job entail? I am interested in every little detail of your office (in contrast to mine). What attractive slogans you use! You are in the record office? What exactly is that? How can you dictate to two girls simultaneously? If you send me something attractive from your office, I will send you my Institute’s annual reports with some extremely interesting articles by me.

And now I embrace you in farewell.

Franz
November 24, 1912

With extreme cunning—and to distinguish myself by my cunning in the eyes of the beloved—I am sending each page of this Sunday letter (there are five) in a separate envelope on the assumption that the post office, though it seems to plague us, won’t lose them all (even though it’s Sunday, and they can’t be registered). On the other hand, this method increases the risk of one page or another getting lost; well, I’m doing my best and will not invite danger by mentioning further fears.

On Wednesday, dearest, you probably won’t get a letter, more likely a picture postcard, but preferably to your apartment, so as not to attract your little lady’s attention.

Please write and tell me exactly how well you are. These headaches! These tears! This nervousness! Dearest, I beg of you, sleep properly, go for walks, and if when reading my letter you sense something unpleasant approaching, something I should have left unsaid, tear it up at once, don’t hesitate! But remain calm, calm. One letter is of no consequence, I’ll write ten for the one, and should you tear up 10, I will replace them with 100.

Yours, Franz

Wouldn’t it be better for you to spend the summer in a sanatorium? Before long I will send you a very tempting description.

Did you ever bother to find out whether the Jews are playing in Berlin?33 I think they must be. Unfortunately I haven’t answered Löwy’s letter yet; what I told you in my first letter, namely, that I am an erratic letter writer, still holds good today.

The yearbook [Arkadia] won’t be out before February. My own little book [Meditation] will appear either next month or in January. Needless to say, you will get them both as soon as they are published. I deliberately didn’t write anything in the Haubert [Education sentimentale]; it is a book that should not have other people’s writing in it. Besides, I am not at all sure that I am capable of saying anything to you that could be seen by the world at large.

Yours
Sunday night, November 25, 1912

Well today, dearest, I shall have to put aside my story, I have worked on it today nowhere near as much as yesterday, and on account of that maddening trip to Kratzau I will have to let it wait for a day or two. This grieves me, but I hope the story won’t suffer too much, though I shall need another 3–4 evenings to finish it. By “won’t suffer too much,” I mean that my story, alas, has already been harmed enough through my method of working. This kind of story should be written with no more than one interruption, in two 10-hour sessions; then it would have its natural spontaneous flow, as it had in my head last Sunday. But I haven’t got twice 10 hours at my disposal. So one has to try to do the best one can, since the very best has been denied to one. What a pity I can’t read it to you—a great pity. Every Sunday morning, for instance. Not in the afternoon, I wouldn’t have time, I would be writing to you. Today I actually wrote until 6:15 P.M., then went to bed, though I should have mailed the letters first, but was afraid I should get to bed too late, and would then be unable to sleep, for as soon as they get together next door and start playing cards (perhaps the only thing in which I couldn’t force myself to participate, even for my father’s sake, except on the rarest occasions), there is no more peace for me. But tonight I needn’t have worried; I had not realized that my parents and my youngest sister were spending the evening with my married sister, while the middle one went to the country with her fiancé to see her future in-laws. Nevertheless I slept badly, obviously a punishment for not having mailed the letters first, but was afraid I should get to bed too late, and would then be unable to sleep, for as soon as they get together next door and start playing cards (perhaps the only thing in which I couldn’t force myself to participate, even for my father’s sake, except on the rarest occasions), there is no more peace for me. But tonight I needn’t have worried; I had not realized that my parents and my youngest sister were spending the evening with my married sister, while the middle one went to the country with her fiancé to see her future in-laws. Nevertheless I slept badly, obviously a punishment for not having mailed the letters; since I was alone in the apartment, except for the maid—she is 17 but quiet as a mouse—no one woke me; there I was, dozing, and since my room is as cold as the grave, I couldn’t even make the effort to reach for my watch. When I finally did, I saw to my horror that it was 9:30. For heaven’s sake, will it be too late to mail the letters? Frantic exercises for 2 minutes—described, perhaps, once before—with windows wide open, getting dressed, and off to the station. Outside the house—in our somewhat deserted neighborhood doors are now locked at 9—I just managed to avoid my family, who were on their way home; I quickly took a side turning, and fled to the station. I’ve got a new pair of shoes, and stomp something terrible along the empty streets. I hope at least that the letters arrive in good time. I return immediately and have my supper as usual, my youngest sister keeps me company, cracks nuts, eats more herself than she gives to me, and we usually enjoy ourselves very much. That’s supper, but then there are times when even my favorite sister is not enough, and when I am not enough for her.

Franz
LETTERS TO FELICE 1912

Dearest, how upset one gets when there is something to worry about. There were days when I waited calmly for your letters, picked them up calmly, read them once, put them in my pocket, read them again, put them away again, but all in perfect calm. There are other days, and today is one of them, when I tremble with intolerable excitement waiting for your letter, when I pick it up like some living thing and cannot bear to let it go.

Dearest, have you noticed how astonishingly of one mind we are in our letters? If there is a question in one, the following morning brings the answer. The other day, for instance, when you wanted me to say I love you, I had felt compelled to put the answer in the letter that crossed yours that night somewhere between here and Berlin; but perhaps it was obvious anyway from the opening words of my very first letter, or even from the first casual look I gave you that evening. There have been so many examples of our mutual understanding that I have lost count. But the best came today.

As I told you yesterday, I am going away this evening, alone, at night, into the mountains, and though you couldn’t have known, you send me this charming little companion. What a delightful little girl! The narrow shoulders! So fragile and easy to hold! She is so modest, but calm. No one had worried her in those days, made her cry, and her heart beats the way it should. Looked at for any length of time, you know, the picture could easily bring tears to one’s eyes. You want me to return it some time? All right, I will. But meanwhile, hidden in my confounded inside pocket, it will take a brief, uncomfortable trip in trains and through various hotel rooms, though the girl professes, so far without explanation, to feel uneasy in hotel rooms. Yes, one can see the little watch chain, the brooch is pretty, the hair waved and almost too carefully arranged. But in spite of all that, you are easily recognizable; there was a moment I remember above all others, when you sat at the table with an expression not unlike the one in the picture. You were holding one of the Thalia photographs; you looked at me, who made some stupid remark, and let your eyes wander around the table in a quarter-circle, until they came to rest on Otto Brod, who then gave the correct explanation of the photograph. The changing view of your face, as you slowly turned your head, left an indelible impression on me. And now the little girl for whom, needless to say, I am an utter stranger, arrives and confirms the truth of this delightful memory.

I have thought of another example of our oneness of mind. Yesterday I asked you for printed matter, today you promise to send it. But these palpitations, dearest! How can it be true that I am part of your heart if it palpitates while I want it to be calm?

Yours, Franz
From January 21 to 22, 1913

My poor dearest, since that Chinese poem has acquired such great meaning for us, there is one thing I have to ask you. Didn’t you notice that it was specifically about the scholar’s mistress, and not his wife, although the scholar is undoubtedly an elderly man, and the combination of scholarship and age would seem to contradict the presence of a mistress. But the poet, ruthlessly striving only for the final situation, ignores this improbability. Was it because he preferred the improbability to an impossibility? And if not, was it perhaps because he feared that a like confrontation of the scholar with his wife might rob the poem of all its gaiety, and create in the reader nothing but sympathy for the woman’s misery? The mistress in the poem is not too badly off; this time the lamp really does go out, it was not too much trouble, and there is still plenty of fun left in her. But how would it be had it been his wife, and that night not just any night but a sample of all nights, and then of course not only of nights but of their whole life together, a life that would be a battle for the lamp. Could any reader smile at that? The mistress in the poem is in the wrong because she gains a victory at the time, and wants no more than a single victory; but because she is beautiful and wants but a single victory, and no scholar could ever be convincing in a single attempt, even the severest of readers will forgive her. A wife, on the other hand, would always be in the right; she would claim not a victory but her existence, which the man poring over his books cannot give her, even though he is perhaps only pretending to be looking at the books, while for days and nights on end he thinks of nothing but his wife whom he loves above all else, but loves with his inherent inadequacy. Here the mistress undoubtedly has a sharper eye than the wife, for she is not completely immersed in the situation; she keeps her head above it. But the wife, poor unhappy creature that she is, fights blindly on; she cannot see what stares her in the face; and what is really a wall she secretly believes to be but a stretched rope, under which one will somehow be able to crawl through. At least that’s how it is in my parents’ marriage, though the causes involved are very different from those in the Chinese poem.

However, not every Chinese poem in my collection is as favorable to the scholar as this one, and he is called “scholar” only in those poems that are kind about him; elsewhere he is called “bookworm.” Then he is compared to the “fearless traveler,” the war hero who wins victories over dangerous mountain tribes. It is a wife who awaits his return, no doubt anxiously, but overjoyed at the sight of him; they look into each other’s eyes like a devoted couple who love each other and have the right to love each other; there are no sidelong glances like those of the mistress when, from the goodness and the bidding of her heart, she is watching the scholar. Moreover, there are children who wait and skip
around the returning father, while the “bookworm’s” home is empty; there are no children there.

Dearest, what a dreadful poem that is, I hadn’t realized it. Perhaps, since it can be opened up, it can also be crushed under foot and left behind; human life has many levels; the eye sees but one possibility, but in the heart all possibilities are present. What do you think, dearest?

Franz

[LETTERHEAD: Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute]

January 22, 1913

Again two letters, dearest; aren’t you afraid? For don’t you realize that after a spell of two letters a day we invariably have a total collapse? Provided, of course, we haven’t collapsed already, in which case we can only be thankful that no one is watching, for how very ashamed we would have to be! By the way, what happened to your lunch yesterday? I looked for it in vain between the lines. Could you have skipped it? But that would be dreadful! Yes, do send me the new list of references! Of course. I throw myself upon everything done by you. Nebble doesn’t like the list? One of these days we shall really have to give him a spanking. Listen, this evening (it’s too late now) I’ll tell you about a new business idea that should stir up your office. Farewell, dearest, a certain person is hurrying off to lunch, and demands that you do the same.

Franz

From January 22 to 23, 1913

Very late, dearest, and yet I shall go to bed without deserving it. Well, I won’t sleep anyway, only dream. As I did yesterday, for example, when in my dream I ran toward a bridge or some balustrading, seized two telephone receivers that happened to be lying on the parapet, put them to my ears, and kept asking for nothing but news from “Pontus”; but nothing whatever came out of the telephone except a sad, mighty, wordless song and the roar of the sea. Although well aware that it was impossible for human voices to penetrate these sounds, I didn’t give in, and didn’t go away.

For the past three days I have written very little of my novel, and that little I wrote with such skill as might perhaps be adequate for chopping wood, not even for chopping wood, at best for playing cards. Well, just lately (this is not a self-reproach, rather a self-consolation) I have dragged myself out of writing by my feet, and must now bore my way back in, with my head.

Dearest, you are crying? Do you know what that means? It means you despair of me. Do you really? No, dearest, don’t do that. You must know from experience that with me it goes around a recurring spot I stumble and scream. I can you read my writing? A somewhat up again, as erect as I can be. Don’t cry that you had been crying, even if you: Red Indian his enemy, perhaps ever mercy! Perhaps, dearest, you secretly might control my moods so far as you know, dearest, that I didn’t do just that this may be?

Shall I go to bed now, or first tell you now; every day they are not carried progress I am making here, too. The oc music, and now it appears that 2 have that there should be one in every large made the suggestion about the hotels, and, and secondly out of date. Still, it today’s suggestions were carried out can gradually approaching the present. However, instead of abandoning him businessman, make renewed atten some hotels actually buy Parlographable to put a Parlograph at the dispos forcing others to provide them. For Well, my new ideas:

- Organize a typing bureau where Parlographs is transcribed on a typewriter slightly below cost price. Perhaps cheaper by contacting a typewritten really offer favorable terms for the tent a Parlograph (issue order installation only after the insertion of installed wherever automat, motor on mailboxes, each Parlograph turned into typescript, will be Lindström Inc.’s small motorized Parlographs and inserting new one in the Reich Post Office Dep of the major post offices.

These machines, moreover, will be the time and inclination to w