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*Metamorphosis and Other
Stories*

Translated and with an Afterword by Michael Hofmann



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Contemplation

Children on the Road

I heard the carts going past the garden fence, and sometimes I could see them too, through the shifting gaps between the leaves. How the wooden spokes and axles creaked in that hot summer! Labourers came home laughing from the fields – laughing scandalously.

I was sitting on our little swing, just having a rest among the trees in my parents' garden.

The activity in front of the fence was never-ending. Children ran past, and were gone; carts loaded with grain, with men and women on the sheaves, and all round the flower-beds were getting darker; towards evening, I saw a gentleman strolling along with a cane, and a couple of girls walking arm in arm the other way stepped aside into the grass as they greeted him.

Then birds flew up like corks out of a bottle, I followed them with my eyes, saw them climb in a single breath until I no longer thought they were rising, but that I was falling, and, clinging on to the ropes in my dizziness, I began involuntarily to swing a little. Before long, I was swinging harder, the breeze had grown chillier, and quivering stars had replaced the birds.

I was given my supper by candlelight. Often I slumped on the tabletop with both elbows, and took tired bites out of my bread and butter. The crocheted curtains billowed out in the warm wind, and sometimes someone passing by outside would grip them with both hands, to get a better view of me, or to talk to me. Usually the candle would soon go out, and the midges that had gathered would continue to trace their patterns for a while in the dark candle smoke. If someone asked me a question from the window, I would

look at him as though surveying distant mountains or empty space, and he didn't seem to be very interested in my reply either.

But as soon as someone vaulted in through the window and announced that the others were waiting outside, I would sigh and get up.

'What are you sighing for? What's the matter? Is it some irreparable calamity? Will we never recover? Is everything really lost?'

Nothing was lost. We ran outside. 'Thank God, there you all are at last!' – 'Nonsense, you're just always late!' – 'What do you mean, me?' – 'You. Stay at home if you don't want to come out.' – 'No mercy!' – 'What do you mean, no mercy? What are you talking about?'

We put our heads down and butted through the evening. There was no day or night. Now we ground our waistcoat buttons together like teeth, now we ran along in a herd, breathing fire, like wild beasts in the tropics. Like high-stepping cuirassiers in old wars, we urged one another down the short lane, and careered on up the road. Some of us dropped into the ditch, but no sooner had they disappeared against the dark hedges than they stood up on the field path like strangers, looking down at us.

'Get down from there!' – 'Why don't you come up!' – 'Just to have you throw us down? Not likely, we've got more sense than that.' – 'You mean to say you're too scared to. Go on, try!' – Oh yes, you're going to throw us down! You and whose army?'

We attacked, and were pushed back, and lay down in the grassy ditch, falling freely. Everything felt just right, the grass was neither warm nor chilly, only we could feel ourselves getting tired.

If we turned on to our right sides, and tucked our hands under our ears, we felt like going to sleep. Of course, we really wanted to get up once more with jutting chins, if only to fall into a deeper ditch. Then, with our arms extended in front of us and our legs skew-whiff, we wanted to hurl ourselves into the wind, and so almost certainly fall into an even deeper ditch. And there was no end to that.

We barely gave it any thought, how we meant to stretch out properly, our knees especially, in the last ditch of all, and so we lay

on our backs like invalids, feeling woebegone. We flinched when a boy came flying over us from the bank on to the road, with dark soles, arms pressed against his sides.

The moon was already quite high, and a post-coach drove by in its light. A light breeze got up; we could feel it even in our ditch, and nearby, the woods began to rustle. We no longer felt so set on being alone.

'Where are you?' – 'Come here!' – 'All of you!' – 'What are you hiding for, stop being so silly!' – 'Didn't you see the post-coach has gone by already?' – 'It can't have! Is it really already gone?' – 'Of course, it went by while you were asleep.' – 'I was asleep? I was no such thing!' – 'Of course you were.' – 'Come on!'

We ran closer together now, some of us linked hands, we had to keep our heads as high as we could, because we were going downhill now. One of us shouted an Indian war cry, we felt a gallop in our legs as never before, as we leapt we felt the wind catch us by the hips. Nothing could have stopped us; we were running so hard that even when we overtook one another, we could keep our arms folded and look calmly about us.

We stopped on the bridge over the stream. Those of us who had run on too far turned back. The water ran busily in and out among stones and roots; it didn't feel like late evening at all. There was no reason why one of us shouldn't have hopped up on to the bridge rail.

Away in the distance, a train appeared behind the trees, all its compartments were lit, the windows were sure to be open. One of us started singing a ballad, but we all wanted to sing. We sang far quicker than the speed of the train, we swung our arms because our voices weren't enough, our voices got into a tangle where we felt happy. If you mix your voice with others' voices, you feel as though you're caught on a hook.

So, with the woods behind us, we serenaded the distant travelers. In the village, the grown-ups were still awake, the mothers making up everyone's beds for the night.

It was high time. I kissed whoever stood next to me, shook hands with three more fellows, and started to run home; no one

called me back. At the first crossroads, where no one could see me, I turned, and followed a path back into the woods. I was heading for the great city in the south, of which they said in our village:

'The people who live there! I tell you, they never sleep!'

'Why don't they sleep?'

'Because they never get tired.'

'Why don't they get tired?'

'Because they're fools.'

'Don't fools get tired?'

'How could fools get tired!'

Unmasking a Confidence Trickster

Finally, at ten at night, and in the company of a man I had vaguely known some time ago, who had unexpectedly buttonholed me and dragged me round the streets for a good two hours, I reached the large house where I had been asked to a party.

'There!' I said, and clapped my hands to indicate the absolute necessity of the parting of the ways. I had already made several less energetic efforts, and was feeling quite tired.

'Are you going up right away?' he asked. I thought I heard the teeth knocking together in his mouth.

'Yes.'

I had an invitation, I had told him as much right away. I had been invited, furthermore, to come up, where I would have liked to have been for some time already, not standing around outside the gate gazing past the ears of my interlocutor. And now to lapse into silence with him too, as if we had decided on a long stay in just this spot. A silence to which the houses round about and the darkness that extended as far as the stars, all made their contribution. And the footfalls of unseen pedestrians, whose errands one did not like to guess at, the wind that kept pressing against the opposite side of the street, a gramophone that was singing against the sealed windows of one of the rooms somewhere – they all came to prominence in this silence, as though it belonged and had always belonged to them.

And my companion submitted to this on his own behalf, and – after a smile – on mine too, stretched his right arm up along the wall, and, closing his eyes, leaned his face against it.

But I didn't quite get to the bottom of the smile, because shame

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suddenly compelled me to turn away. It was only from that smile that I had understood that here was nothing more or less than a confidence trickster. And there was I, having lived in this town for months, and thinking I knew these confidence tricksters through and through, the way that at night they emerge from side streets, with their hands unctuously extended like mine host, the way they loiter round the advertising billboards we are studying, as if playing hide-and-seek, and peep out with at least one eye from behind the curve of the pillar, the way they suddenly materialize in front of us on the edge of the pavement at busy crossings when we are feeling frightened. I understood them so well, they had been the first people I'd met in the city, in little pubs, and I owe them my first glimpse of an obduracy that I have become so incapable of thinking away that I have begun to feel it in myself. The way they continued to confront one, even long after one had escaped them, when there was no more confidence to trick! The way they refused to sit down, refused to fall over, but continued to look at one with an expression that, albeit from a distance, still looked convincing! And their methods were always the same too: they stood in front of us, making themselves as large as they possibly could; tried to divert us from where we were headed; offered us instead a habitation in their own bosom, and, when in the end a feeling welled up in us, they took it as an embrace into which they threw themselves, always face first.

These old ruses I now detected for the first time after so long in the man's company. I rubbed my fingers together, to make it appear the disgrace had never happened.

My man, though, was still leaning as before against the wall, still thinking he was a confidence trickster, and his contentment with his role mantled the one cheek of his that I could see.

'Rumbled!' I said, and tapped him lightly on the shoulder. Then I hurried up the steps, and the unreasonably devoted faces of the servants in the entrance hall were as welcome to me as some delightful surprise. I looked along the line of them, while my coat was taken off, and the dust rubbed from my boots. Then, taking a deep breath and drawing myself up to my full height, I entered the hall.

The Sudden Walk

When it seems we have finally decided to stay home of an evening, have slipped into our smoking jackets, are sitting at a lit table after supper, and have taken out some piece of work or game at the conclusion of which we customarily go to bed, when the weather outside is inclement, which makes it perfectly understandable that we are staying at home, when we have been sitting quietly at our table for so long that our going out would provoke general astonishment, when the stairwell is dark and the front gate is bolted, and when, in spite of all, in a sudden access of restlessness, we get up, change into a jacket, and straightaway look ready to go out, explain that we are compelled to go out, and after a brief round of good-byes actually do so, leaving behind a greater or lesser amount of irritation depending on the noise we make closing the front door behind us, when we find ourselves down on the street, with limbs that respond to the unexpected freedom they have come into with a particular suppleness, when by this one decision we feel all the decisiveness in us mobilized, when we recognize with uncommon clarity that we have more energy than we need to accomplish and to withstand the most abrupt changes, and when in this mood we walk down the longest streets – then for the duration of that evening we have escaped our family once and for all, so it drifts into vaporousness, whereas we ourselves, as indisputable and sharp and black as a silhouette, smacking the backs of our thighs, come into our true nature.

And all this may even be accentuated if, at this late hour, we go to seek out some friend, to see how he is doing.

Resolutions

To rouse oneself from a state of misery should be an easy matter, even with borrowed energy. I tear myself away from my chair, run round the table, bring some movement to my head and neck, some fire to my eyes, tense the muscles around them. Work to counter every instinct, greet A. rapturously if he should come now, decently tolerate B.'s presence in my room, and in the case of C. imbibe in long draughts everything he says, in spite of the attendant pain and difficulty.

But even if I can manage all that, with each mistake – and mistakes are unavoidable – the whole thing, however hard or easy, will eventually falter, and I will be back where I started.

For which reason, the best advice remains to take what comes, to behave like some sluggish mass, and even if one should feel oneself being blown away, not to be tempted into one superfluous step, to gaze at the other with wary animal eye, to feel no remorse, in a word, to crush out with one's hands whatever ghostly particle of life remains, that is, to intensify the final peace of the grave and not to allow anything else.

A characteristic motion accompanying such a condition is to smoothe one's eyebrows with one's little finger.

The Excursion into the Mountains

'I don't know,' I cried in a toneless voice, 'I really don't know. If nobody comes, then nobody comes. I've done nobody any harm, nobody ever did me any harm, yet nobody wants to come to my aid. Nobody upon nobody. But that's not it either. Only nobody comes to help me – nobody upon nobody would be fine. I would quite like – and why wouldn't I? – to go on an excursion with a crowd of nobodies. Into the mountains, of course, where else? The way those nobodies would crowd together, all their crossed and linked arms, their many feet, separated by minute steps! Naturally, they're all in tailcoats. We're walking along without a care in the world, the wind is pushing through the gaps between us and our various limbs. Our throats feel free in the mountains! It's a miracle we haven't burst into song!'