The Trial

Franz Kafka



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Chapter One

Arrest--Conversation with Mrs. Grubach--Then Miss Bürstner

Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested. Every day at eight in the morning he was brought his breakfast by Mrs. Grubach's cook--Mrs. Grubach was his landlady--but today she didn't come. That had never happened before. K. waited a little while, looked from his pillow at the old woman who lived opposite and who was watching him with an inquisitiveness quite unusual for her, and finally, both hungry and disconcerted, rang the bell. There was immediately a knock at the door and a man entered. He had never seen the man in this house before. He was slim but firmly built, his clothes were black and close-fitting, with many folds and pockets, buckles and buttons and a belt, all of which gave the impression of being very practical but without making it very clear what they were actually for. "Who are you?" asked K., sitting half upright in his bed. The man, however, ignored the question as if his arrival simply had to be accepted, and merely replied, "You rang?" "Anna should have brought me my breakfast," said K. He tried to work out who the man actually was, first in silence, just through observation and by thinking about it, but the man didn't stay still to be looked at for very long.

Instead he went over to the door, opened it slightly, and said to someone who was clearly standing immediately behind it, "He wants Anna to bring him his breakfast." There was a little laughter in the neighbouring room, it was not clear from the sound of it whether there were several people laughing. The strange man could not have learned anything from it that he hadn't known already, but now he said to K., as if making his report "It is not possible." "It would be the first time that's happened," said K., as he jumped out of bed and quickly pulled on his trousers. "I want to see who that is in the next room, and why it is that Mrs. Grubach has let me be disturbed in this way." It immediately occurred to him that he needn't have said this out loud, and that he must to some extent have acknowledged their authority by doing so, but that didn't seem important to him at the time. That, at least, is how the stranger took it, as he said, "Don't you think you'd better stay where you are?" "I want neither to stay here nor to be spoken to by you until you've introduced yourself." "I meant it for your own good," said the stranger and opened the door, this time without being asked. The next room, which K. entered more slowly than he had intended, looked at first glance exactly the same as it had the previous evening. It was Mrs. Grubach's living room, over-filled with furniture, tablecloths, porcelain and photographs. Perhaps there was a little more space in there than usual today, but if so it was not immediately obvious, especially as the main difference was the presence of a man sitting by the open window with a book from which he now looked up. "You should have stayed in your room! Didn't Franz tell you?" "And what is it you want, then?" said K., looking back and forth between this new acquaintance and the one named Franz, who had remained in the doorway. Through the open

window he noticed the old woman again, who had come close to the window opposite so that she could continue to see everything. She was showing an inquisitiveness that really made it seem like she was going senile. "I want to see Mrs. Grubach ...," said K., making a movement as if tearing himself away from the two men--even though they were standing well away from him--and wanted to go. "No," said the man at the window, who threw his book down on a coffee table and stood up. "You can't go away when you're under arrest." "That's how it seems," said K. "And why am I under arrest?" he then asked. "That's something we're not allowed to tell you. Go into your room and wait there. Proceedings are underway and you'll learn about everything all in good time. It's not really part of my job to be friendly towards you like this, but I hope no-one, apart from Franz, will hear about it, and he's been more friendly towards you than he should have been, under the rules, himself. If you carry on having as much good luck as you have been with your arresting officers then you can reckon on things going well with you." K. wanted to sit down, but then he saw that, apart from the chair by the window, there was nowhere anywhere in the room where he could sit. "You'll get the chance to see for yourself how true all this is," said Franz and both men then walked up to K. They were significantly bigger than him, especially the second man, who frequently slapped him on the shoulder. The two of them felt K.'s nightshirt, and said he would now have to wear one that was of much lower quality, but that they would keep the nightshirt along with his other underclothes and return them to him if his case turned out well. "It's better for you if you give us the things than if you leave them in the storeroom," they said. "Things have a tendency to go missing in the storeroom, and after a certain

amount of time they sell things off, whether the case involved has come to an end or not. And cases like this can last a long time, especially the ones that have been coming up lately. They'd give you the money they got for them, but it wouldn't be very much as it's not what they're offered for them when they sell them that counts, it's how much they get slipped on the side, and things like that lose their value anyway when they get passed on from hand to hand, year after year." K. paid hardly any attention to what they were saying, he did not place much value on what he may have still possessed or on who decided what happened to them. It was much more important to him to get a clear understanding of his position, but he could not think clearly while these people were here, the second policeman's belly--and they could only be policemen--looked friendly enough, sticking out towards him, but when K. looked up and saw his dry, bony face it did not seem to fit with the body. His strong nose twisted to one side as if ignoring K. and sharing an understanding with the other policeman. What sort of people were these? What were they talking about? What office did they belong to? K. was living in a free country, after all, everywhere was at peace, all laws were decent and were upheld, who was it who dared accost him in his own home. He was always inclined to take life as lightly as he could, to cross bridges when he came to them, pay no heed for the future, even when everything seemed under threat. But here that did not seem the right thing to do. He could have taken it all as a joke, a big joke set up by his colleagues at the bank for some unknown reason, or also perhaps because today was his thirtieth birthday, it was all possible of course, maybe all he had to do was laugh in the policemen's face in some way and they would laugh with him, maybe they were tradesmen from the

corner of the street, they looked like they might be--but he was nonetheless determined, ever since he first caught sight of the one called Franz, not to lose any slight advantage he might have had over these people. There was a very slight risk that people would later say he couldn't understand a joke, but--although he wasn't normally in the habit of learning from experience--he might also have had a few unimportant occasions in mind when, unlike his more cautious friends, he had acted with no thought at all for what might follow and had been made to suffer for it. He didn't want that to happen again, not this time at least; if they were play-acting he would act along with them.

He still had time. "Allow me," he said, and hurried between the two policemen through into his room. "He seems sensible enough," he heard them say behind him. Once in his room, he quickly pulled open the drawer of his writing desk, everything in it was very tidy but in his agitation he was unable to find the identification documents he was looking for straight away. He finally found his bicycle permit and was about to go back to the policemen with it when it seemed to him too petty, so he carried on searching until he found his birth certificate. Just as he got back in the adjoining room the door on the other side opened and Mrs. Grubach was about to enter. He only saw her for an instant, for as soon as she recognised K. she was clearly embarrassed, asked for forgiveness and disappeared, closing the door behind her very carefully. "Do come in," K. could have said just then. But now he stood in the middle of the room with his papers in his hand and still looking at the door which did not open again. He stayed like that until he was startled out of it by the shout of the policeman who sat at the little table at the open window and, as K. now saw, was

eating his breakfast. "Why didn't she come in?" he asked. "She's not allowed to," said the big policeman. "You're under arrest, aren't you?" "But how can I be under arrest? And how come it's like this?" "Now you're starting again," said the policeman, dipping a piece of buttered bread in the honeypot. "We don't answer questions like that." "You will have to answer them," said K. "Here are my identification papers, now show me yours and I certainly want to see the arrest warrant." "Oh, my God!" said the policeman. "In a position like yours, and you think you can start giving orders, do you. It won't do you any good to get us on the wrong side, even if you think it will--we're probably more on your side that anyone else you know!" "That's true, you know, you'd better believe it," said Franz, holding a cup of coffee in his hand which he did not lift to his mouth but looked at K. in a way that was probably meant to be full of meaning but could not actually be understood. K. found himself, without intending it, in a mute dialogue with Franz, but then slapped his hand down on his papers and said, "Here are my identity documents." "And what do you want us to do about it?" replied the big policeman, loudly. "The way you're carrying on, it's worse than a child. What is it you want? Do you want to get this great, bloody trial of yours over with quickly by talking about ID and arrest warrants with us? We're just coppers, that's all we are. Junior officers like us hardly know one end of an ID card from another, all we've got to do with you is keep an eye on you for ten hours a day and get paid for it. That's all we are. Mind you, what we can do is make sure that the high officials we work for find out just what sort of person it is they're going to arrest, and why he should be arrested, before they issue the warrant. There's no mistake there. Our authorities as far as I know, and I only know the lowest grades, don't

go out looking for guilt among the public; it's the guilt that draws them out, like it says in the law, and they have to send us police officers out. That's the law. Where d'you think there'd be any mistake there?" "I don't know this law," said K. "So much the worse for you, then," said the policeman. "It's probably exists only in your heads," said K., he wanted, in some way, to insinuate his way into the thoughts of the policemen, to re-shape those thoughts to his benefit or to make himself at home there. But the policeman just said dismissively, "You'll find out when it affects you." Franz joined in, and said, "Look at this, Willem, he admits he doesn't know the law and at the same time insists he's innocent." "You're quite right, but we can't get him to understand a thing," said the other. K. stopped talking with them; do I, he thought to himself, do I really have to carry on getting tangled up with the chattering of base functionaries like this?--and they admit themselves that they are of the lowest position. They're talking about things of which they don't have the slightest understanding, anyway. It's only because of their stupidity that they're able to be so sure of themselves. I just need few words with someone of the same social standing as myself and everything will be incomparably clearer, much clearer than a long conversation with these two can make it. He walked up and down the free space in the room a couple of times, across the street he could see the old woman who, now, had pulled an old man, much older than herself, up to the window and had her arms around him. K. had to put an end to this display, "Take me to your superior," he said. "As soon as he wants to see you. Not before," said the policeman, the one called Willem. "And now my advice to you," he added, "is to go into your room, stay calm, and wait and see what's to be done with you. If you take our

advice, you won't tire yourself out thinking about things to no purpose, you need to pull yourself together as there's a lot that's going to required of you. You've not behaved towards us the way we deserve after being so good to you, you forget that we, whatever we are, we're still free men and you're not, and that's quite an advantage. But in spite of all that we're still willing, if you've got the money, to go and get you some breakfast from the café over the road."

Without giving any answer to this offer, K. stood still for some time. Perhaps, if he opened the door of the next room or even the front door, the two of them would not dare to stand in his way, perhaps that would be the simplest way to settle the whole thing, by bringing it to a head. But maybe they would grab him, and if he were thrown down on the ground he would lose all the advantage he, in a certain respect, had over them. So he decided on the more certain solution, the way things would go in the natural course of events, and went back in his room without another word either from him or from the policemen.

He threw himself down on his bed, and from the dressing table he took the nice apple that he had put there the previous evening for his breakfast. Now it was all the breakfast he had and anyway, as he confirmed as soon as he took his first, big bite of it, it was far better than a breakfast he could have had through the good will of the policemen from the dirty café. He felt well and confident, he had failed to go into work at the bank this morning but that could easily be excused because of the relatively high position he held there. Should he really send in his explanation? He wondered about it. If nobody believed him, and in this case that would be understandable, he could bring Mrs. Grubach in as a witness, or even the old pair from across the street, who probably even now were on their way

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