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manager jumped up and asked what had happened, and since he received no answer, he climbed up on the seat, stroked the artist, and pressed his face against his own, so that his face grew wet with the trapeze artist's tears. It was only after a great many questions and flattering words that the trapeze artist said, sobbing: "Only this one bar in my hands—how can I live that way?" Now it was somewhat easier for the manager to console the trapeze artist; he promised that at the very next station he would send a telegram about the second trapeze to the next town on their tour; reproached himself for having permitted the trapeze artist to perform on only one trapeze for so long; and thanked him and praised him warmly for finally calling attention to the mistake. In this way the manager succeeded in slowly reassuring the trapeze artist, and he could again return to his corner. But he himself was not reassured; it was with severe concern that he secretly watched the trapeze artist over the edge of his book. Once such thoughts had begun to obsess him, could they ever come to an end? Would they not continue to become more and more intense? Weren't they a threat to his livelihood, life-threatening? And the manager believed that, during the seemingly calm sleep in which the trapeze artist's weeping had ended, he could make out the first wrinkles beginning to etch themselves into the artist's smooth, childlike forehead.

A Starvation Artist

In the past few decades the interest in starvation artists has greatly declined. Whereas earlier it was very profitable to stage independent productions of such grand performances, today that is completely impossible. Times were different then. In those days the whole city was preoccupied with the starvation artist; from one day of starving to the next, interest mounted; everyone wanted to see the starvation artist at least once a day; later on, some subscription-ticket holders sat all day long before the little barred cage; but viewings took place even at night, when the effect was heightened by torchlight; on clear days the cage was carried out into the open, and then it was the children, especially, for whom the starvation artist was exhibited; while for the grownups it was often only a joke, in which they joined because it was all the rage, the children looked on in open-mouthed wonder, for safety's sake holding each other's hands, as, pale in a black leotard, with strongly protruding ribs, even disdainful of a chair, he sat on spread straw, now nodding politely, now answering questions with a strained smile, stretching his arm through the bars in order to let them feel how thin he was; then again, he shrank completely into himself once more, con-

cerned with no one, not even with the striking of the clock, so important to him, which was the sole piece of furniture in the cage; instead he merely stared straight ahead with eyes half-shut, now and then taking sips from a tiny glass of water to moisten his lips.

Aside from the spectators, who made up the ever changing crowd, there were also permanent watchmen, chosen by the public—oddly enough, usually butchers—whose job it was, always three at a time, to watch the starvation artist day and night so that he did not, perhaps in some secret way, manage to take nourishment. But that supervision was a mere formality, introduced to satisfy the masses, for initiates knew well enough that during starving times the starvation artist had never, under any circumstances, even under compulsion, taken in even the slightest morsel: the honor of his art forbade such an action. Of course not every watchman could understand this concept: sometimes watchmen on the night shift were very lax in the performance of their duties, deliberately sitting in a remote corner and immersing themselves in card games, with the obvious intention of permitting the starvation artist to take a little refreshment, which they supposed he could produce from some secret store. Nothing tormented the starvation artist more than such watchmen; they made him melancholy; they made his starving terribly difficult; sometimes during the hours of the watch, overcoming his weakness, he sang for as long as he could so as to show these people how unjust their suspicions were. But that ploy helped little; they were merely amazed at his dexterity in managing to eat even while singing. He much preferred those watchmen who sat close to the bars and, not content with the dim lighting of the hall at night, shone on him the electric flashlights with which the manager had provided them. The glaring light did not disturb him in the least: he could not sleep anyway; and he could always doze briefly under any sort of illumination and at any time, even in the noisy, overcrowded hall. He was very glad to spend the night with such watchmen without sleeping a wink; he was prepared to joke with them, to tell them stories from his journeyman years, and in turn to listen to their stories, anything just so as to keep them awake, to be able to show them again and again that he had nothing edible in the cage and that he starved in a way that not one of them could. But he was happiest when morning came and an opulent breakfast, for which he had paid, was brought to them, on which they threw themselves with the appetite of healthy men who had spent a strenuous, sleepless night. True, there were people who wanted to interpret this breakfast as a piece of undue influence on the watchmen, but that was going too far; and when they were asked whether they might be ready to take over the night watch without breakfast for the good of the cause alone,

they slipped away, though they continued to harbor suspicions. This, of course, was just one of the suspicions that were inevitably connected with starving. Since no one was able to spend all the days and nights beside the starvation artist uninterruptedly playing watchman, no one could know, on the strength of his own perceptions, whether the fast had truly been performed uninterruptedly, faultlessly; only the starvation artist himself could be certain, and so only he could also be the perfectly assured spectator of his fast. However, there was yet another reason why he was never satisfied; perhaps it was not entirely from fasting that he was so emaciated that many people, to their regret, had to stay away from the performances because they could not stand the sight of him; no, he was so emaciated only from dissatisfaction with himself. For he alone, and no other initiate, knew how easy it was to starve. It was the easiest thing in the world. He did not keep this fact a secret, but no one believed him; at best he was considered modest, but for the most part he was regarded as a publicity hound or even a charlatan, for whom starving was indeed easy because he knew how to make it easy for himself and who had the nerve to halfway admit it. He had to put up with all of this, and in the course of the years he did grow used to it, but inwardly his dissatisfaction continued to gnaw at him, and never, after any period of starving—you had to grant him this distinction—had he ever left the cage of his own free will. The manager had set forty days as the maximum starving time; he never permitted the starving to go on longer, not even in the great metropolitan centers, and indeed, for a very good reason. Experience had proven that for about forty days, through gradually intensified publicity, you could go on stimulating a city's interest, but beyond that time there was no audience, a significant decline in attendance could be registered; of course there were slight differences between cities and countries in this regard; as a rule, however, forty days was the maximum. On the fortieth day, then, the door of the cage, garlanded with flowers, was opened, an enthusiastic audience filled the amphitheater, a military band played, two doctors entered the cage to take the necessary measurements of the starvation artist, the results were announced to the hall through a megaphone, and finally two young ladies appeared, overjoyed to have won the lottery, and intending to lead the starvation artist out of his cage down a few steps, where a carefully chosen invalid's meal had been laid out on a little table. And it was at this moment that the starvation artist always began to resist. Though he would willingly rest his bony arms on the outstretched hands of the ladies who, bending down, offered him their help, he refused to stand. Why should he stop right now, after forty days? He could have held out for a long time, for an unlimited time; why

stop right now, when he was in his starving prime—indeed, not yet even in his prime? Why did they want to rob him of the glory of continuing to starve, the glory not only of becoming the greatest starvation artist of all time, which he probably was already, but in addition, of topping his own efforts to an inconceivable point, for he felt no limits to his ability to starve. Why did this crowd, which pretended to admire him so much, have so little patience with him; if he could hold out and continue to starve, why wouldn't they hold out? Furthermore, he was tired. He was sitting comfortably in the straw, and now he was supposed to stand tall and proceed to his meal, the very thought of which was enough to make him feel queasy and nauseous, though he strenuously suppressed all signs of this condition solely out of consideration for the ladies. And he looked up into the eyes of the ladies who seemed so friendly but in reality were so cruel, and he shook his head, which was too heavy for his weakened neck. But what happened next was what always happened. The manager came and silently—the music made talking impossible—raised his arms above the starvation artist as if inviting the heavens to look down at its handiwork, here on the straw, this pitiable martyr, which the starvation artist admittedly was, but in a quite different sense; grasped the starvation artist around his thin waist, intending through exaggerated caution to produce a convincing impression of how fragile a creature he was dealing with here; and handed him over—not without surreptitiously shaking him a little, so that the starvation artist's legs and torso wobbled back and forth uncontrollably—to the ladies, who meanwhile had turned deathly pale. Now the starvation artist was ready to endure anything; his head rested on his chest, as if it had come rolling in from somewhere and, for some inexplicable reason, stuck there; his body was hollow; his legs, from an instinct of self-preservation, pressed themselves tightly against each other at the knees, while his feet scabbled at the ground as if it were not the real one, they were still looking for the real one, and the entire burden of his body—admittedly very light—rested on one of the ladies, who, imploringly, with fluttering breath—this was not how she had imagined her position of honor—at first stretched her neck as far as it would go, at least to protect her face from any contact with the starvation artist; but then, when this proved impossible and her more fortunate companion did not come to her rescue but contented herself with tremulously carrying before her the hand of the starvation artist, that little bundle of bones, she broke into tears amid the delighted laughter of the hall and had to be replaced by a servant who had been ready and waiting long in advance. Then came the meal, a small amount of which the manager poured down the starvation artist's throat in his swoonlike half-sleep, amid some

comic banter, designed to distract attention from the artist's condition; a toast to the public, which had allegedly been whispered to the manager by the starvation artist, was then proposed; the orchestra backed the entire proceedings with a great flourish, the crowd broke up, and no one had any reason to be dissatisfied with what he had seen—no one, that is, except the starvation artist, he alone, always.

And so he lived with regular short rest periods for many years, in apparent glory, honored by the world, but for all that usually in a melancholy mood, which grew increasingly so because no one was able to take it seriously. And how could he be consoled? What more could he want? And if at times some well-meaning person came along who felt sorry for him and tried to tell him that his sadness probably came from his fasting, it could happen, especially during an advanced stage of the fast, that the starvation artist might respond with an outbreak of rage and, to everyone's horror, begin to rattle the bars of his cage like an animal. But the manager had a punishment for such fits that he rather enjoyed applying. Before the assembled audience he would apologize for the starvation artist, admitting that only the irritability provoked by starving, something not easy for well-fed persons to understand, could excuse his behavior; in this connection he then came to speak of the starvation artist's claim that he could go on starving much longer, a belief that could be explained in exactly the same way; praised the lofty striving, the good will, the immense self-denial that was obviously present in this claim; then sought to refute the claim simply enough by showing photographs, which were simultaneously put on sale, for in the pictures the starvation artist could be seen on a fortieth day of starving, in bed, enfeebled to the point of extinction. This twisting of the truth, which, although it was already well known to the starvation artist, always freshly unnerved him, was too much for him. The effect of the premature ending of his fast was being represented here as its cause! To struggle against this stupidity, against this universe of stupidity, was impossible. Up to this point he had always been ready at the bars of his cage to listen eagerly and in good faith to the manager, but as soon as the photographs appeared, he always let go of the bars, sank, sighing, back into the straw, and the audience, reassured, could once again approach and view him.

When, a few years later, witnesses to such scenes recalled them, they were often unable to understand their own reactions. For in the meantime the previously mentioned shift had occurred; it had happened almost overnight; there might have been deeper reasons, but who had any interest in discovering them? In any case, one day the pampered starvation artist found himself abandoned by the

crowds of pleasure seekers, who preferred to go streaming off to other shows. Once more the manager raced with him through half of Europe to see if the old interest might still be found here or there; all in vain; as if by a secret understanding, what was practically an aversion to public displays of starving had developed everywhere. Of course, in reality it could not have happened so suddenly, and now, after the event, people began to recall a number of early warnings, which at that time, in the ecstasy of success, had not been adequately noted and not adequately suppressed, but now it was too late to do anything about them. Certainly the time for starving, as for all things, would come again, but that was no consolation to the living. What, now, should the starvation artist do? The man whom thousands had once wildly acclaimed could not exhibit himself in booths at small village fairs, and as for taking up another vocation, the starvation artist was not only too old but above all much too fanatically devoted to starving. So he dismissed the manager, the companion of a career without compare, and accepted an engagement with a great circus; and to spare his feelings, he did not even glance at the terms of the contract.

A great circus with its innumerable performers and animals and contraptions, forever balancing and supplementing one another, can find work for anybody at any time—even a starvation artist—if, of course, his demands are correspondingly modest, and in this particular case, it was not only the starvation artist himself who was hired but his old, time-honored name as well; indeed, it could not even be said that, given the peculiar nature of this artistry, which does not diminish with the artist's increasing age, in this instance an artist who had put in his time and was no longer at the height of his powers was seeking refuge in a quiet circus job; on the contrary, the starvation artist gave assurances—entirely credible ones—that he could starve just as well as before; indeed, he maintained that if he could have his way, and this he was promised without further ado, he would really and for the first time give the world a true reason to be astonished, although his claim, considering the mood of the times, which the starvation artist in his zeal was quick to forget, merely produced a smile among the experts.

Deep down, however, even the starvation artist did not lose sight of reality and accepted it as perfectly natural that he, with his cage, should not be placed as, let us say, a showstopper in the center ring but installed outside at a quite easily accessible spot, close to the animal sheds. Huge, brightly colored posters framed the cage, proclaiming what could be seen there. When, during the intermissions, the audience rushed to the menagerie to see the animals, it was almost unavoidable that they would pass by the starvation artist and stop for a moment: they might have continued to stay at his

cage if other spectators, crowding in from behind in the narrow passage and not understanding why they were being held up on the way to the animals they longed to see, had not made extended quiet contemplation impossible. This was also the reason why the prospect of these visiting hours, for which the starvation artist naturally yearned, since they were the meaning of his life, also made him shudder. In the beginning he could hardly wait for the intermissions; thrilled, he had watched the crowd come surging in, until all too soon he became convinced—even the most stubborn, almost deliberate self-deception could not stand up to experience—that every time and without exception it was made up, at least to judge by the people's intention, solely of visitors to the animal sheds. And it was this view from afar that remained the most attractive. For when the crowd had reached him, he was immediately surrounded by the shouts and curses of raging, continually re-forming groups, those—the starvation artist soon found them the more insufferable—who wanted to take their time looking at him, not with any appreciation but merely on a whim and from spite, and the second group, who began by clamoring for the animal sheds. Once this great mob had gone past, the stragglers arrived, and these people, whom nothing prevented from lingering as long as they liked, hurried past with long strides, almost without a sideward glance, to get to the animals on time. And it was a none too frequent godsend when a family man arrived with his children, pointed his finger at the starvation artist, explained in detail what it was all about, and told of years gone by, when he had been present at similar but incomparably more splendid performances; and then the children who, because school and life had insufficiently prepared them, admittedly stood uncomprehending—what was starving to them?—but the radiance of their searching eyes betrayed something of new, more merciful times to come. Perhaps then the starvation artist sometimes told himself that everything would be a little better if only he were not located so close to the animal sheds. The choice was thus made too easy for the visitors, not to mention that the stench of the stalls, the restlessness of the animals at night, the carrying past of raw chunks of meat for the carnivores, and the roaring at feeding time caused him intense suffering and continual depression. But he did not dare to complain to the management; after all, it was the animals he had to thank for the crowd of visitors, among whom there might be found an occasional spectator intended for him; and who knew where they would tuck him away if he tried to make them aware of his existence and therefore also of the fact that, strictly speaking, he was nothing more than an obstacle on the way to the animal sheds.

A small obstacle, to be sure, an ever shrinking obstacle. People

grew used to the sheer oddity of wanting to draw attention to a starvation artist nowadays, and their adaptation spelled his doom. He could starve as best he could, and he did so, but nothing could save him any longer; people passed him by. Try to explain the art of starving to someone! Those who have no feel for it can never be made to understand. The handsome posters became dirty and illegible, they were torn down, no thought was given to replacing them; the little board indicating the number of days he had spent starving, which at the beginning had been carefully retabulated every day, remained unchanged for a long time, for after the first few weeks, the staff had grown sick of performing even this small chore; and so, while the starvation artist went on starving the way he had once dreamed of doing, and he succeeded effortlessly in exactly the way he had prophesied at that time, no one counted the days, no one, not even the starvation artist himself knew how great his achievement really was, and his heart grew heavy. And when once in a while an idle passerby stopped to make a joke about the outdated number and spoke of cheating, this was the stupidest lie that indifference and innate cruelty could devise, for it was not the starvation artist who was cheating, he performed his work honorably, it was the world that cheated him of his reward.

But many more days went by, and that phase came to an end as well. One day a supervisor noticed the cage, and he asked the attendants why this cage full of rotting straw was left standing here when it could be put to good use; no one knew the answer until someone, prompted by the board with the number, remembered the starvation artist. They poked around in the straw with sticks and found the starvation artist underneath. "You're still starving?" asked the supervisor. "When will you stop at last?" "Forgive me, all of you," the starvation artist whispered; only the supervisor, who held his ear against the bars of the cage, heard him. "Of course," said the supervisor and tapped his forehead with his finger to indicate to the staff the starvation artist's condition, "we forgive you." "I always wanted you to admire my starving," the starvation artist said. "We do admire it," said the supervisor, obligingly. "But you should not admire it," said the starvation artist. "Well, then we don't admire it," said the supervisor. "Why shouldn't we admire it?" "Because I have to starve, I can't help it,"¹ said the starvation artist. "Well, how about that!" said the supervisor. "So why can't you help it?" "Because I," said the starvation artist, lifting his tiny head a lit-

1. *Weil ich hungern muss, says the starving-artist, ich kann nicht anders.* When the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther was challenged and asked to desist from his then heretical actions, he replied, using these very words, *ich kann nicht anders*, literally, "I cannot [do] otherwise."

tle, his lips pursed as if for a kiss, and speaking right into the ear of the supervisor, so that nothing would go unheard, "because I could not find the food I liked.² If I had found it, believe me, I would not have caused a sensation, and I would have stuffed myself just like you and all the others." Those were his last words, but his shattered gaze retained the firm, if no longer proud, conviction that he was still starving.³

"Let's go, clean up this mess!" said the supervisor, and they buried the starvation artist together with the straw. But into the cage they put a young panther.⁴ Even the dumbest minds felt relief at seeing this wild animal bounding around in a cage that had for so long been barren. The animal lacked for nothing. The food he liked was brought to him without long reflection by his keepers; he did not even seem to miss his freedom; this noble body, equipped just short of bursting with everything it needed, seemed to carry its freedom around with it; it seemed to lodge somewhere in the jaws; and the joy of life sprang from its maw in such a blaze of fire that it was not easy for the spectators to withstand it. But they controlled themselves, crowded around the cage, and would not be budged from the spot.

Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse People

Our singer is named Josefine. Anyone who has not heard her does not know the power of song. There is no one who is not carried away by her singing, a fact deserving of all the more appreciation since, by and large, people of our kind are not music lovers. For us the best music is peace and quiet; our life is hard; even when we try to shake off our daily cares, we can no longer rise to matters as remote from our ordinary life as music. But we do not complain too much—even that is beyond our reach; we consider our greatest virtue to be a certain practical shrewdness, which, of course, we need most urgently; and we use the smirk of our shrewdness to comfort ourselves about everything, even when we might feel the yearning—though that does not arise—for the hap-

2. Cf. the concluding lines of "The Knock at the Courtyard Gate": "Could I still sense any air other than that of a prison? That is the great question—or rather, it would be the question if I had any prospect of being released."

3. Cf. the dying look of the officer in *In the Penal Colony*: "It [the face] was as it had been in life; no sign of the promised deliverance could be discovered; what all the others had found in the machine the officer did not find; his lips were firmly pressed together, his eyes were open, had an expression of life, their look was full of calm and conviction, the forehead was pierced by the point of the great metal thorn."

4. See the Norton Critical Edition of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, in which Gregor Samsa, the hero, is also discarded like trash, his room/cage cleaned, and a new, flourishing source of life (his sister Grete) put on center stage.

piness that can flow from music. Josefine is the one exception; she loves music and knows how to convey it; she is the only one; with her passing, music—who knows for how long?—will vanish from our lives.

I have often considered what this music is really all about. After all, we are totally unmusical; how is it that we understand Josefine's singing or, since Josefine denies this, that we at least think we understand it? The simplest answer would be that the beauty of her song is so great that even the dumbest minds cannot resist it, but this answer is not satisfactory. If it were really so, her singing would always produce an immediate feeling of something extraordinary, the feeling that something rang from this throat which we had never heard before and which we are not even capable of hearing, something that only this one individual, Josefine, and no one else enables us to hear. Precisely this, in my opinion, is not the case; I do not feel it nor have I noticed anything like it in others. In our private circle we openly admit to each other that Josefine's song as such does not represent anything extraordinary.

Is it really song? Despite our lack of musicality, we have traditions of song; in the early days of our people there was song; legends tell of it, and songs have even been preserved though, of course, no one can sing them anymore. So we do have an inkling of what song is, but Josefine's artistry really does not correspond to it. Is it even song, then? Isn't it perhaps just squeaking?¹ And squeaking, of course, is something all of us are familiar with; it is the characteristic artistic skill of our people or, rather, not a skill at all but a typical manifestation of life. All of us squeak, but of course no one dreams of passing it off as art; we squeak without paying attention, without even noticing, and in fact, there are many of us who don't even realize that squeaking is one of our traits. Hence, if it were true that Josefine does not sing but merely squeaks, and even perhaps, as it seems at least to me, barely exceeds the bounds of ordinary squeaking—indeed, perhaps her strength does not even completely suffice for this usual squeaking, whereas an ordinary laborer can produce it effortlessly all day long at his work—if all that were true, then Josefine's alleged artistry would be disproved, but precisely then we would truly have to solve the puzzle of its huge effect.

But it actually isn't mere squeaking that she produces. If you station yourself a good distance from her and listen or, better still, submit yourself to the following test: let Josefine sing among others and assign yourself the task of recognizing her voice, then you will

1. The German word translated throughout this story as "squeaking" is *pfeifen*, which, for human beings, means "whistling."