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FRANZ KAFKA

*A Hunger Artist
and Other Stories*

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

the wider world would be concerned with the affair after all—where, as I shall keep repeating, it has no jurisdiction—I shall not, I admit, emerge from the proceedings undamaged, but it will surely be taken into consideration that I am not unknown in the wider world, have lived fully in its light for years, trusting and trustworthy, and that consequently this unhappy little woman, who arrived late in my life, and whom, by the way, perhaps anyone but myself would long ago have recognized as a clinging vine and would have trampled beneath his boot silently and out of the world's hearing, that this woman could at worst only add an ugly little flourish to the diploma with which the world at large had long ago declared me to be its estimable member. That is how things stand at present, a situation hardly liable to upset me.

With the passage of time I have become rather less calm, though, but that has nothing at all to do with the real significance of the whole affair; it simply can't be borne to go on vexing someone all the time, even when you know perfectly well that the vexation is groundless; you become upset; you begin, partly just physically, to be watching out for decisions, even though rationally you don't much believe they will happen. But it is also partly just a sign of age; youth makes everything look appealing; unlovely individual features are lost in the ceaseless fountain of youthful energy; if someone had a rather wary eye as a boy, no one thinks badly of him for it, it is simply not noticed, not even by the boy himself, but what is left when he is older are remnants; each one is necessary, not one is renewed, each one is under observation, and the wary eye of an ageing man is just that, quite clearly a wary eye, and not hard to detect. But even in this context it is still not really a change for the worse in the actual situation.

So from whatever angle I look at it, it becomes clearer every time—and I shall stick to this—that if I keep my hand covering this little affair over even quite lightly, I shall be able to go on with my life as before for a very long time, calmly, undisturbed by the world, despite all that little woman's raging.

A Hunger Artist

IN recent decades, interest in hunger artists has greatly diminished. Where it once paid to organize major performances of the kind, under

the personal direction of the performer himself, nowadays it is completely impossible. They were different times. In those days the hunger artist engaged the attention of the entire town; from hunger-day to hunger-day interest increased; everyone wanted to see the hunger artist at least once each day; during the later days there were subscription-holders who would sit all day long before the bars of the little cage; at night too tours were arranged to view him—lit by torches, to heighten the effect; on fine days the cage was brought into the open, and then it was especially for the children that the hunger artist was put on show; while he was often just an amusement for the adults, who only attended because it was the fashion, the children would gaze in astonishment, open-mouthed, holding each other's hands for safety, at how he would sit, pale, in his black singlet, with sharply jutting ribs, on a floor of scattered straw, scorning even a chair, and at how, with a single courteous nod, he would make an effort to answer questions, and stretch out an arm through the bars for his audience to feel how thin he was, but then would sink into himself, paying attention to no one, not even to the clock, the only furniture in the cage, as it struck the hour so important to him, but would merely gaze ahead with eyes almost closed, and sip now and again from a tiny glass of water, to moisten his lips.

Apart from the changing spectators, there were also permanent watchmen elected by the public—curiously, they were usually butchers—always three at a time, who had the job of observing the hunger artist night and day, to see that even so he did not in one way or another take some secret nourishment. But it was simply a formality, introduced to appease the masses, for the initiated knew perfectly well that during the period of fasting the hunger artist would never, not under any circumstances, even if coerced, have eaten even the tiniest morsel; the honour of his art forbade it. Of course, not every watchman could understand that; sometimes there were groups of night-watchers who carried out their duties very sloppily, deliberately sitting huddled together in a corner far from him, absorbed in a card-game, with the obvious intention of granting the hunger artist the opportunity of a little refreshment, which, so they thought, he was able to produce from some secret supplies. Nothing was more of a torment to the hunger artist than these watchers; they made him melancholy; they made his hungering terribly difficult; sometimes he would conquer his frailty and sing during their watch, just so as to

hold out long enough to show these people how unjustly they suspected him. But it didn't help very much; they only marvelled at his skill at eating and singing at the same time. He much preferred the watchmen who sat close to the bars, who were not satisfied with the dim lighting in the hall at night, but shone a light on him with the electric pocket-torches the impresario put at their disposal. The harsh light didn't disturb him in the least, sleep was impossible for him in any case, and he was always able to doze a little in any kind of lighting and at any hour, even in the noisy, overcrowded hall. With these watchmen he was gladly prepared to pass the night entirely without sleep; he was ready to joke with them, tell them stories about his travels, and listen to their tales in turn—and all just to keep them awake, to be able to show them all the time that there was nothing to eat in his cage, and that he hungered in a way none of them possibly could. But he was happiest of all when morning came and they were served—at his expense—with a sumptuous breakfast which they hurled themselves upon with the appetite of healthy men after a hard night on the watch. There were even people who suspected this breakfast of improperly influencing the watchmen, but that was going too far, and when they were asked if they would take on the night watch themselves just for the sake of proving their point, and without the breakfast, they withdrew—but they still kept their suspicions.

This particular suspicion was simply one among the many that were in any case inextricably part and parcel of the hungering. Nobody of course was in a position to spend all their days and nights continuously with the hunger artist, so nobody could know from seeing for himself whether his hungering had been really continuous and without fault; only the hunger artist himself could know that, so only he could be at the same time the fully satisfied spectator of his own hungering. But then again there was another reason why he was never satisfied; perhaps it was not hungering at all that had made him grow to be so very emaciated that many, to their regret, had to stay away from the performances because they could not bear to look at him, but he had only become so emaciated out of his own dissatisfaction with himself. For he alone knew what no other initiate knew: how easy hungering was. It was the easiest thing in the world. He didn't hide it, either, but nobody believed him, at best they thought him modest, but mostly they thought he was after publicity or was even a swindler who found hungering easy anyway because he knew how to make it

easy for himself, and then even had the nerve to half-confess it. He had to take all that; in the course of the years he had even got used to it, but inwardly this state of dissatisfaction gnawed at him, and he had never, not after any period of hungering—they had to testify to that—ever left the cage voluntarily. The uttermost length of time for hungering had been set by the impresario at forty days; he never allowed hungering to go beyond that, not even in the great cities, and with good reason. For forty days or so he knew from experience that by gradually intensifying the advertising he could whip up the interest of a town higher and higher; but then the public would take no more; bookings, it was clear to see, became substantially thinner; in this respect of course there were slight differences between the towns and the provinces, but as a rule forty days was the uttermost time. Then, on the fortieth day, the door of the cage, all garlanded with flowers, would be opened; an ecstatic crowd of spectators filled the amphitheatre; a military band would play; two physicians would enter the cage to carry out the necessary measurements on the hunger artist; the results would be announced to the hall by megaphone, and finally two young ladies would arrive, delighted that they were the very ones selected by lot, and they would attempt to lead the hunger artist out of the cage down a few steps, where on a little table a carefully chosen light meal was waiting for him. And at this moment the hunger artist always resisted. True, he still placed his skeletal arms freely into the hands the young ladies stretched out to help him as they bent towards him, but he would not stand up. Why stop just now, after forty days? He would have held out for a long time, a time without limit, even yet; why stop just now, when he was still at the height of hungering, indeed, not yet at the height? Why did they want to rob him of the fame of hungering still further, of becoming not only the greatest hunger artist of all times, which, indeed, he probably was already, but also to outperform himself far beyond all comprehension, for he felt there were no bounds to his capacity for hungering. Why did this mob, who claimed to admire him so much, have so little patience with him; if he could endure hungering still further, why wouldn't they endure it? He was weary too; he was sitting comfortably in the straw, and now he was supposed to stand up tall and straight and go and eat, the mere thought of which made him feel sick, though out of regard for the ladies he refrained with some effort from demonstrating it. And he looked up into the eyes of these ladies,

apparently so kind, in reality so cruel, and shook his too-heavy head on its frail neck. But then there happened what always happened. The impresario arrived, lifted his arms silently—the music made speaking impossible—above the hunger artist as if he were inviting heaven to behold its work here for once, on the straw, this pitiful martyr, which the hunger artist was anyway, but in a quite different sense. He clasped the hunger artist round his shrunken waist with exaggerated care to make them believe what a fragile thing it was he had to do with here; and he handed the hunger artist over—not without secretly giving him a little shake so that he swayed to and fro, his legs and upper body out of control—to the young ladies, who had meanwhile turned deathly pale. The hunger artist now put up with everything; his head drooped on his chest, it was as though it had rolled away and inexplicably remained where it was; his body was hollowed out; his legs, in some instinct of self-preservation, were tightly pressed together, but they still scraped along the ground as if it were not the real ground and they were just searching after the real ground, while the entire weight of his body, though very light, lay on one of the ladies. The lady, seeking for help and with panting breath—this was not how she had imagined her office of honour—first craned her neck as far as possible to keep at least her face from touching the hunger artist, and then—as this did not work and her more fortunate companion did not come to her aid, but tremulously contented herself with holding the hunger artist's hand, this little bundle of bones, at a distance—she burst into tears, to the delighted laughter of the hall, and had to be relieved by a servant long stationed in readiness to do so. Then came the meal, which the impresario slipped down the hunger artist's throat, just a little, as he half-fainted, half-slept, while he himself chattered merrily to draw attention from the hunger artist's condition; then a toast was raised to the public, which the impresario claimed had been whispered in his ear by the hunger artist; the orchestra reinforced it all with a great flourish; the audience broke up, and nobody had any right to be dissatisfied with what had happened, nobody, only the hunger artist, always and only the hunger artist.

For many years, with short breaks for rest, he lived like this, in apparent glory, honoured by the world, but for all that mostly in a dark temper of mind, which became all the darker because no one had the discernment to take it seriously. How were they supposed to console him anyway? What more could he wish for? And if some

good-natured person turned up who was sorry for him and tried to explain to him that his sadness probably came from the hungering, it could happen, especially at an advanced stage of the hungering-period, that the hunger artist would reply with an outburst of rage and to everyone's horror begin to shake at the bars of his cage like an animal. But for situations of this kind the impresario had a punishment he was fond of using. He would make excuses for the hunger artist before the assembled public, admitting that only the irritability provoked by the hungering, not readily comprehensible to the well-fed, could excuse the hunger artist's behaviour; and then in this connection he would go on to speak of the hunger artist's assertion, which also needed some explanation, that he could go on hungering for much longer than he did—he would praise the noble aspiration, the good-will, the great self-denial that were assuredly also contained in this assertion, but then he would proceed to contradict the assertion simply enough by displaying photographs, which were sold at the same time, for in the pictures the public saw the hunger artist in the fortieth day of hungering, lying in bed, enfeebled and almost fading away. This distortion of the truth, certainly nothing new to the hunger artist but every time grating on his nerves afresh, was too much for him. The consequence of ending his hungering prematurely was being represented here as its cause! To struggle against this stupidity, this world of stupidity, was impossible! Again and again he had gone on listening avidly and in good faith to the impresario as he clung to the bars, but every time the photographs appeared he would let go of the bars, sink sighing back into the straw, and the public, much appeased, was able to approach once more and view him.

If the witnesses to such scenes thought back on them a few years later, they often couldn't understand their own attitude. For meanwhile the drastic change already referred to had set in. It happened almost suddenly; there may have been deeper reasons for it, but who cared to discover them; in any case, one day the pampered hunger artist found himself deserted by the pleasure-seeking masses, who preferred to go in their droves to gaze at other spectacles. Once again the impresario chased through half Europe with him to see if the old interest might not be rediscovered here or there; all in vain; as if by some secret understanding, an outright revulsion against hungering for show had developed everywhere. Of course, in reality it could not have arrived like that all of a sudden, and now in retrospect they

recalled a number of portents which they had in the headiness of success not heeded well enough at the time, nor dealt with well enough, but it was too late to do anything to counteract it now. True, one day the time for hungering would certainly return again, but for the living that was no consolation. What was the hunger artist supposed to do now? The performer who had been surrounded by the cheering of thousands could not make a display of himself in the booths of village fairs, and the hunger artist was not only too old to take up another calling, but was above all too fanatically devoted to hungering. So he dismissed the impresario, companion of a career without compare, and accepted an engagement with a big circus; to spare his delicate sensibility, he did not cast a single glance at the conditions in his contract.

A big circus, with its countless human beings and animals and apparatus, can find a use for anyone at any time, including a hunger artist with his, of course appropriately modest, demands, and besides, in this particular case it wasn't just the hunger artist himself who was being engaged, but also his name, famous from old times. Indeed, given the peculiar nature of his art, which did not diminish with increasing age, one could not even say that an old trouper past his prime was taking refuge in a quiet circus job; on the contrary, the hunger artist declared, entirely credibly, that his hungering was just as good as it used to be, indeed, he even declared that if they would let him have his way—and this they promised him without more ado—he would actually, now for the first time, give the world cause for justified astonishment, an assertion, however, which, given the temper of the times, brought only a smile from the professionals.

Deep down, though, even the hunger artist did not lose his sense of the real state of affairs, and he took it for granted that they did not exactly set him up as the star number with his cage in the middle of the ring, but outside, in a position—one otherwise perfectly accessible—near the stables. Big coloured signs framed the cage, announcing what was to be seen there. During the intervals in the shows, when the public surged to the stables to view the animals, it was almost impossible for them to avoid passing by the hunger artist and pausing there for a moment; they might have stayed longer with him if the crowds coming after them, not understanding this pause on the way to the eagerly awaited stables, had not made longer, peaceful contemplation impossible. This was also the reason why, when these visiting

times came round, which naturally as his life's purpose he longed for, the hunger artist would tremble nevertheless. In the early days he could hardly wait for the intervals; he had looked with delight towards the masses as they thronged forward, until only too soon—even the most stubborn, almost conscious self-deception could not withstand what he experienced so often—he became convinced that they were, most of them intentionally, over and over again, without exception, nothing more than visitors to the stables. And this view of them from a distance still remained the best one. For when they came right up to his cage, the shouts and curses of the constantly shifting factions instantly stormed around him, the ones—the hunger artist soon found these more embarrassing than the rest—who wanted to look at him at their ease, not out of sympathy, but on a whim and just to be stubborn, and the second group, who most of all just wanted to get to the animals. Once the main crowd was over, then came the stragglers, but although these were no longer being prevented from stopping for as long as they liked, they went hurrying past, taking long strides, almost without a side glance, so as to reach the animals in good time. And it was a none-too-frequent happy chance when the father of a family came along with his children, and would point with his finger at the hunger artist, explaining in detail what it was all about, telling of earlier years when he had attended similar, but incomparably more impressive, performances, and then the children, lacking the satisfactory grounding from school or from life, would still, it is true, remain uncomprehending—what did hungering mean to them?—but in spite of that would still reveal in the brightness of their inquiring eyes something of new, more merciful times to come. Perhaps, the hunger artist would sometimes tell himself then, everything would get slightly better if his position were not quite so near the stables. That made the choice too easy for people, to say nothing of how much the smell from the stables, the restlessness of the animals at night, the raw meat carried past him for the beasts of prey, the howling at feeding-time, offended and constantly depressed him. But to make representations to the management was too much for him to dare; in any case he was beholden to the beasts for the mass of visitors, among whom there might be someone meant for him; and who knew where they might hide him if he were to remind them of his existence, which would also remind them that he was, strictly speaking, only an obstacle on the way to the stables.

A small obstacle, it is true, an obstacle which was becoming smaller and smaller. People became used to how strange it was in the present day to expect attention to be paid to a hunger artist, and with this familiarity the verdict on him was pronounced. Well might he hunger as much as he would and could—and he did—but nothing could save him further; they passed him by. Just try to explain to someone the art of hungering! Anyone who doesn't feel it, can't be brought to understand it.* The beautiful signs became dirty and illegible. People tore them down, no one thought to replace them; the little board registering the number of hunger-days completed, which in the beginning had been renewed daily with care, had long remained unchanged, for after the first weeks the attendants had had enough of even this small chore; and so, it is true, the hunger artist went on hungering as he had once dreamed of doing, and he succeeded effortlessly, just as he had foretold at the time, but no one counted the days, no one, not even the hunger artist himself, knew the scale of his achievement so far, and his heart grew heavy. And if once in a while some idle stroller stopped and made fun of the old figures and spoke of fraud, it was in this sense the most stupid lie it was possible for indifference and inborn malice to invent, for it was not the hunger artist who cheated—he laboured honestly—but the world cheated him of his reward.

But many more days passed, and that too came to an end. One day a supervisor happened to notice the cage, and asked the servants why this perfectly good cage with its rotten straw, which they could put to good use, had been left empty; no one knew, until someone, helped by the board and its figures, remembered the hunger artist. They poked at the straw with poles and found the hunger artist. 'What, you're still hungering?' asked the supervisor. 'When are you going to stop?' 'Forgive me everyone,' whispered the hunger artist; only the supervisor, who had his ear to the cage, could understand his words. 'Of course,' said the supervisor, pointing his finger at his forehead, as a sign to the attendants of the hunger artist's state of mind, 'we forgive you.' 'I always wanted you to admire my hungering,' said the hunger artist. 'And we do admire it,' said the supervisor, obligingly. 'But you shouldn't admire it,' said the hunger artist. 'Well, then we won't admire it,' said the supervisor. 'Why shouldn't we admire it?' 'Because I have to hunger; I cannot do otherwise,' said the hunger artist. 'Well, now,' said the supervisor, 'why can't you do otherwise?' 'Because,'

said the hunger artist, lifting his frail head slightly and speaking with lips puckered as if for kissing, right into the supervisor's ear so that not a word was lost, 'because I could not find the food that was to my taste. If I had found it, believe me, I would not have caused a stir, and would have eaten my fill, like you and everybody else.' These were his last words, but his exhausted eyes still held the firm, though no longer proud, conviction that he was still continuing to hunger.

'Now clear up, let's have some order!' said the supervisor, and they buried the hunger artist along with the straw. But into the cage they put a young panther. It was a recovery that even the bluntest of senses could feel, to see this wild beast leaping around in the cage that had been desolate for so long. It lacked for nothing. The keepers did not have to reflect for long about bringing it the sustenance that was to its taste; it didn't even seem to miss its freedom; this noble body, equipped nearly to bursting with all the necessities, seemed to carry its freedom around with it too; it seemed to have it hidden somewhere in its teeth; and its joy of life came with such fiery breath from its jaws that it wasn't easy for the spectators to resist it. But they held out, surged around the cage, and wouldn't stir from the spot.

Josefine, the Singer or The Mouse-People

OUR singer is called Josefine. If you haven't heard her, you do not know the power of song. There is no one who is not carried away by her singing—something that counts so much the more, as on the whole our kind has no love of music. To us the sweetest music is the stillness of peace. Our life is hard; even when we have tried to cast off all our daily cares for once, we can no longer rise to things that are as remote from the rest of our life as music is. But we do not greatly complain about it, we don't even get that far; a certain practical guile, which, it's true, we have a pressing need for as well, is in our view our greatest asset, and the smile of this cunning is our usual comforting way of getting through everything, even if we were for once—not that it happens—to feel that yearning for happiness which, it may be, flows from music. But Josefine is the exception; she loves music, and she knows how to share it too; she is the only one; with her departure music will—who knows for how long?—disappear from our life.

I've often thought about what there really is to this music. After all,