

Miro Gavran

Kafka's Friend

Translated from Croatian by Nina H. Kay-Antoljak

1

The cold wind from the Vltava penetrated to their bones. Strolling around the Vyšehrad Castle, they looked down on Prague from the high ground.

The young students looked like precocious boys who, despite their lack of experience in life, almost succeeded in feigning maturity.

They had met last autumn at the German students' Reading Room and had been inseparable ever since. The meagre spring sun reflected from the marble gravestones as they walked by them. The nearness of the graveyard where distinguished persons from times past were buried seemed to add a certain gravity to their conversation.

"Every book that has been written is a reflection of the life lived by its author," said Max.

"Everything that has been written is a concoction. Reality does not submit to words," responded Franz.

It was the year 1903.

2

Max was gifted with a variety of talents.

He loved to play music, to compose, to write stories and newspaper articles, to compete in oratory...

Even he himself was sometimes bewildered by the multitude of his interests. Because of all that, it was as though he found it difficult to decide what it was he wanted to be in the foggy future.

The breadth of his education was unquestionable. His answers frequently filled his professors with admiration.

However, despite that, the young man felt that his friend Franz, who was only a year older, had firmer convictions than he did.

Franz's frail body was the sanctuary of an enquiring spirit and impressive personality, which Max truly admired.

Franz's thoughts were always clear and evocatively stated. He never spoke in second-hand sentences.

He never squandered words.

To the casual observer, Franz was a retiring and insecure young man, ill-prepared for practical life.

To Max, he was a human being who lived in a world of his own to which external reality was only a hindrance.

Literature had brought them together. The passionate young readers secretly dreamt of the day when they, too, would become writers. Writing down their first short stories, they discovered the beauty of creativity.

Words of praise from one's closest friend had fateful significance at that time.

3

They were Jewish. Max was a believer, Franz was a doubter. Max felt chosen for a great spiritual journey, Franz felt abandoned.

Their discussions about God and faith often ended in mutual misunderstanding. That was the reason that they avoided that theme.

Nonetheless, whenever they returned to it after the elapse of some time, they did so like moths that cannot resist the powerful attraction of death-dealing lamps.

Franz's father, Hermann Kafka, was a wholesale trader. His son would hear him telling one customer that he was German, another that he was Czech, and yet another that he was Jewish.

He told whomever he was talking to whatever they wanted to hear. That resulted in his son himself not knowing how to answer the question of what he really was.

4

Max started visiting Franz's house with increasing frequency.

His friend's mother, Julie, and his father, Hermann, let him know that he was welcome soon after they met him.

The young man was from a prosperous family. He was always refined in manner, and easily won people's favour.

Franz had three sisters: Gabrielle, Valerie and Ottili. They were still children, and only the oldest was on the threshold of girlhood. They did not participate in the conversations of their elders. They were expected to be silent at meals.

His father rarely addressed Franz. He had no respect for his son's opinions. To him, Franz was a child who refused to grow up and take responsibility.

He knew that his son despised the study of law that he had only managed to convince him to undertake with considerable difficulty.

In the eyes of the strict merchant, Max was the ideal picture of a responsible and stable young man who could look forward to a fine future. He regretted that his insecure son was not more like Max.

5

In the recess between lectures, several students found themselves together in the Great Hall of the university.

Ernst boasted that he had been in a brothel the night before with the most passionate whore he had ever met.

"If any of you would like to, I can introduce you to her," he suggested to his colleagues.

Franz blushed.

Max dropped his eyes.

They were inexperienced. They were embarrassed to admit it.

6

If Franz had had a brother, their friendship would have been different.

As it was, Max had a twofold role in his life.

He replaced a nonexistent creature for him. An uninformed visitor who found himself in the Kafka home would definitely have thought that Max was a member of the family.

7

When he read Franz's stories for the first time, he was filled with admiration.

Kafka's sentences built up a new world that had never been described until then in the literature that he knew.

He tried in vain to persuade him to publish his stories.

Franz doubted his texts to the same extent that Max believed in them.

"Perhaps I shall think of a sentence tomorrow that will give the story new meaning. It's better not to be in haste with publishing," he said, warily defending himself from Max's efforts to expose his imagination to the judgement of the public.

8

"I used to think that I would drive away my demons by writing. Now I know that my writing has unintentionally revitalised and attracted them," said Franz after the sleepless night in which his story came about.

With a shaking hand, he tried to brush aside a wayward lock of hair from his forehead.

His face was drawn, and he had dark smudges under his eyes.

Max believed what Franz had said.

However, he did not dare to admit that he enjoyed writing and that no demons beset him during those moments of inspiration.

He was convinced that Franz was different from every other human being walking on this earth and that it would be inappropriate to compare himself with him.