

Samsa in Love

Haruki Murakami

He woke to discover that he had undergone a metamorphosis and become Gregor Samsa.

He lay flat on his back on the bed, looking at the ceiling. It took time for his eyes to adjust to the lack of light. The ceiling seemed to be a common, everyday ceiling of the sort one might find anywhere. Once, it had been painted white, or possibly a pale cream. Years of dust and dirt, however, had given it the color of spoiled milk. It had no ornament, no defining characteristic. No argument, no message. It fulfilled its structural role but aspired to nothing further.

There was a tall window on one side of the room, to his left, but its curtain had been removed and thick boards nailed across the frame. An inch or so of space had been left between the horizontal boards, whether on purpose or not wasn't clear; rays of morning sun shone through, casting a row of bright parallel lines on the floor. Why was the window barricaded in such a rough fashion? Was a major storm or tornado in the offing? Or was it to keep someone from getting in? Or to prevent someone (him, perhaps?) from leaving?

Still on his back, he slowly turned his head and examined the rest of the room. He could see no furniture, apart from the bed on which he lay. No chest of drawers, no desk, no chair. No painting, clock, or mirror on the walls. No lamp or light. Nor could he make out any rug or carpet on the floor. Just bare wood. The walls were covered with wallpaper of a complex design, but it was so old and faded that in the weak light it was next to impossible to make out what the design was.

The room had perhaps once served as a normal bedroom. Yet now all vestiges of human life had been stripped away. The only thing that remained was his solitary bed in the center. And it had no bedding. No sheets, no coverlet, no pillow. Just an ancient mattress.

Samsa had no idea where he was, or what he should do. All he knew was that he was now a human whose name was Gregor Samsa. And how did he know that? Perhaps someone had whispered it in his ear while he lay sleeping? But who had he been before he became Gregor Samsa? *What* had he been?

The moment he began contemplating that question, however, something

like a black column of mosquitoes swirled up in his head. The column grew thicker and denser as it moved to a softer part of his brain, buzzing all the way. Samsa decided to stop thinking. Trying to think anything through at this point was too great a burden.

In any case, he had to learn how to move his body. He couldn't lie there staring up at the ceiling forever. The posture left him much too vulnerable. He had no chance of surviving an attack—by predatory birds, for example. As a first step, he tried to move his fingers. There were ten of them, long things affixed to his two hands. Each was equipped with a number of joints, which made synchronizing their movements very complicated. To make matters worse, his body felt numb, as though it were immersed in a sticky, heavy liquid, so that it was difficult to send strength to his extremities.

Nevertheless, after repeated attempts and failures, by closing his eyes and focusing his mind he was able to bring his fingers more under control. Little by little, he was learning how to make them work together. As his fingers became operational, the numbness that had enveloped his body withdrew. In its place—like a dark and sinister reef revealed by a retreating tide—came an excruciating pain.

It took Samsa some time to realize that the pain was hunger. This ravenous desire for food was new to him, or at least he had no memory of experiencing anything like it. It was as if he had not had a bite to eat for a week. As if the center of his body were now a cavernous void. His bones creaked; his muscles clenched; his organs twitched.

Unable to withstand the pain any longer, Samsa put his elbows on the mattress and, bit by bit, pushed himself up. His spine emitted several low and sickening cracks in the process. My God, Samsa thought, how long have I been lying here? His body protested each move. But he struggled through, marshaling his strength, until, at last, he managed to sit up.

Samsa looked down in dismay at his naked body. How ill-formed it was! Worse than ill-formed. It possessed no means of self-defense. Smooth white skin (covered by only a perfunctory amount of hair) with fragile blue blood vessels visible

through it; a soft, unprotected belly; ludicrous, impossibly shaped genitals; gangly arms and legs (just two of each!); a scrawny, breakable neck; an enormous, misshapen head with a tangle of stiff hair on its crown; two absurd ears, jutting out like a pair of seashells. *Was this thing really him?* Could a body so preposterous, so easy to destroy (no shell for protection, no weapons for attack), survive in the world? Why hadn't he been turned into a fish? Or a sunflower? A fish or a sunflower made sense. More sense, anyway, than this human being, Gregor Samsa.

Steeling himself, he lowered his legs over the edge of the bed until the soles of his feet touched the floor. The unexpected cold of the bare wood made him gasp. After several failed attempts that sent him crashing to the floor, at last he was able to balance on his two feet. He stood there, bruised and sore, one hand clutching the frame of the bed for support. His head was inordinately heavy and hard to hold up. Sweat streamed from his armpits, and his genitals shrank from the stress. He had to take several deep breaths before his constricted muscles began to relax.

Once he was used to standing, he had to learn to walk. Walking on two legs amounted to a kind of torture, each movement an exercise in pain. No matter how he looked at it, advancing his right and left legs one after the other was a bizarre proposition that flouted all natural laws, while the precarious distance from his eyes to the ground made him cringe in fear. He had to learn how to coordinate his hip and knee joints. Each time he took a step forward, his knees shook, and he steadied himself against the wall with both hands.

But he knew that he could not remain in this room forever. If he didn't find food, and quickly, his starving belly would consume his own flesh, and he would cease to exist.

He tottered toward the door, pawing at the wall as he went. The journey seemed to take hours, although he had no way of measuring the time, except by the pain. His movements were awkward, his pace snail-like. He couldn't advance without leaning on something for support. On the street, his best hope would be that people saw him as disabled.

He grasped the doorknob and

pulled. It didn't budge. A push yielded the same result. Next, he turned the knob to the right and pulled. The door opened partway with a slight squeak. He poked his head through the opening and looked out. The hallway was deserted. It was as quiet as the bottom of the ocean. He extended his left leg through the doorway, swung the upper half of his body out, with one hand on the doorframe, and followed with his right leg. He moved slowly down the corridor, hands on the wall.

There were four doors in the hallway, including the one he had just used. All were identical, fashioned of the same dark wood. What, or who, lay beyond them? He longed to open them and find out. Perhaps then he might begin to understand the mysterious circumstances in which he found himself. Or at least discover a clue of some sort. Nevertheless, he passed by each of the doors, making as little noise as possible. The need to fill his belly trumped his curiosity. He had to find something substantial to eat.

And now he knew where to find it.

Just follow the smell, he thought, sniffing. It was the aroma of cooked food, tiny particles that wafted to him through the air. The information gathered by olfactory receptors in his nose was being transmitted to his brain, producing an anticipation so vivid, a craving so violent, that he could feel his innards being slowly twisted, as if by an experienced torturer. Saliva flooded his mouth.

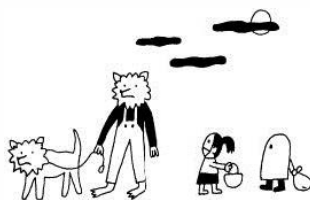
To reach the source of the aroma, however, he would have to go down a steep flight of stairs, seventeen of them. He was having a hard enough time walking on level ground—navigating those steps would be a true nightmare. He grabbed the bannister with both hands and began his descent. His skinny ankles felt ready to collapse under his weight, and he almost went tumbling down the steps.

And what was on Samsa's mind as he made his way down the staircase? Fish and sunflowers, for the most part. Had I been transformed into a fish or a sunflower, he thought, I could have lived out my life in peace, without struggling up and down steps like these.

When Samsa reached the bottom of the seventeen steps, he pulled himself upright, summoned his remaining strength,

and hobbled in the direction of the enticing smell. He crossed the high-ceilinged entrance hall and stepped through the dining room's open doorway. The food was laid out on a large oval table. There were five chairs, but no sign of people. White wisps of steam rose from the serving plates. A glass vase bearing a dozen lilies occupied the center of the table. Four places were set with napkins and cutlery, untouched, by the look of it. It seemed as though people had been sitting down to eat their breakfast a few minutes earlier, when some sudden and unforeseen event sent them all running off. What had happened? Where had they gone? Or where had they been taken? Would they return to eat their breakfast?

But Samsa had no time to ponder such questions. Falling into the nearest chair, he grabbed whatever food he could reach with his bare hands and stuffed it into his mouth, quite ignoring the knives, spoons, forks, and napkins. He tore bread into pieces and downed it without jam or butter, gobbled fat boiled sausages whole, devoured hard-boiled eggs with such speed that he almost forgot to peel them, scooped up handfuls of still warm mashed potatoes, and plucked pickles with his fingers. He chewed it all together, and washed the remnants down with water from a jug. Taste was of no consequence. Bland or delicious, spicy or sour—it was all the same to him. All that mattered was filling that empty cavern inside him. He ate with total concentration, as if racing against time.



He was so fixated on eating that once, as he was licking his fingers, he sank his teeth into them by mistake. Scraps of food flew everywhere, and when a platter fell to the floor and smashed he paid no attention whatsoever.

By the time Samsa had eaten his fill and sat back to catch his breath, almost nothing was left, and the dining table was an awful sight. It looked as if a flock of quarrelsome crows had flown

in through an open window, gorged themselves, and flown away again. The only thing untouched was the vase of lilies; had there been less food, he might have devoured them as well.

He sat, dazed, in his chair for a long while. Hands on the table, he gazed at the lilies through half-closed eyes and took long, slow breaths, while the food he had eaten worked its way through his digestive system, from his esophagus to his intestines. A sense of satiety came over him like a rising tide. He picked up a metal pot and poured coffee into a white ceramic cup. The pungent fragrance recalled something to him. It did not come directly, however; it arrived in stages. It was a strange feeling, as if he were recollecting the present from the future. As if time had somehow been split in two, so that memory and experience revolved within a closed cycle, each following the other. He poured a liberal amount of cream into his coffee, stirred it with his finger, and drank. Although the coffee had cooled, a slight warmth remained. He held it in his mouth before warily allowing it to trickle down his throat. He found that it calmed him to a degree.

All of a sudden, he felt cold. The intensity of his hunger had blotted out his other senses. Now that he was sated, the morning chill on his skin made him tremble. The fire had gone out. None of the heaters seemed to be turned on. On top of that, he was stark naked—even his feet were bare.

He knew that he had to find something to wear. He was too cold like this. Moreover, his lack of clothes was bound to be an issue should someone appear. There might be a knock at the door. Or the people who had been about to sit down to breakfast a short while before might return. Who knew how they would react if they found him in this state?

He understood all this. He did not surmise it, or perceive it in an intellectual way; he knew it, pure and simple. Samsa had no idea where such knowledge came from. Perhaps it was related to those revolving memories he was having.

He stood up from his chair and walked out to the front hall. He was still awkward, but now, at least, he could stand and walk on two legs with-

out clinging to something. There was a wrought-iron umbrella stand in the hall that held several walking sticks. He pulled out a black one made of oak to help him move around; just grasping its sturdy handle relaxed and encouraged him. And now he would have a weapon to fight back with should birds attack. He went to the window and looked out through the crack in the lace curtains.

The house faced onto a street. It was not a very big street. Nor were many people on it. Nevertheless, he noted that every person who passed was fully clothed. The clothes were of various colors and styles. Men and women wore different garments. Shoes of stiff leather covered their feet. A few sported brightly polished boots. He could hear the soles of their footwear clack on the cobblestones. Many of the men and women wore hats. They seemed to think nothing of walking on two legs and keeping their genitals covered. Samsa compared his reflection in the hall's full-length mirror with the people walking outside. The man he saw in the mirror was a shabby, frail-looking creature. His belly was smeared with gravy, and bread crumbs clung to his pubic hair like bits of cotton. He swept the filth away with his hand.

Yes, he thought again, I must find something to cover my body.

He looked out at the street once more, checking for birds. But there were no birds in sight.

The ground floor of the house consisted of the hallway, the dining room, a kitchen, and a living room. As far as he could tell, however, none of those rooms held anything resembling clothes. Which meant that the putting on and taking off of clothing must occur somewhere else. Perhaps in a room on the second floor.

Samsa returned to the staircase and began to climb. He was surprised to discover how much easier it was to go up than to go down. Clutching the railing, he was able to make his way up the seventeen steps at a much faster rate and without undue pain or fear, stopping several times along the way (though never for long) to catch his breath.

One might say that luck was with him, for none of the doors on the second floor were locked. All he had to do was turn the knob and push, and each



door swung open. There were four rooms in total, and, apart from the freezing room with the bare floor in which he had woken, all were comfortably furnished. Each had a bed with clean bedding, a dresser, a writing desk, a lamp affixed to the ceiling or the wall, and a rug or a carpet with an intricate pattern. Books were neatly lined up in their cases, and framed oil paintings of landscapes adorned the walls. Each room had a glass vase filled with bright flowers. None had rough boards nailed across the windows. Their windows had lace curtains, through which sunlight poured like a blessing from above. The beds all showed signs of someone's having slept in them. He could see the imprint of heads on pillows.

Samsa found a dressing gown his size in the closet of the largest room. It looked like something he might be able to manage. He hadn't a clue what to do with the other clothes—how to put them on, how to wear them. They were just too complicated: too many buttons, for one thing, and he was unsure how to tell front from back, or top from

bottom. Which was supposed to go on the outside, and which underneath? The dressing gown, on the other hand, was simple, practical, and quite free of ornament. Its light, soft cloth felt good against his skin, and its color was dark blue. He even turned up a matching pair of slippers.

He pulled the dressing gown over his naked body and, after much trial and error, succeeded in fastening the belt around his waist. He looked at himself in the mirror, clad now in gown and slippers. This was certainly better than walking around naked. It wasn't as warm as it might have been, to be sure, but as long as he remained indoors it would stave off the cold. Best of all, he no longer had to worry that his soft skin would be exposed to vicious birds.

When the doorbell rang, Samsa was dozing in the biggest room (and in the biggest bed) in the house. It was warm under the feather quilts, as cozy as if he were sleeping in an egg. He woke from a dream. He couldn't remember it in detail, but it had been

pleasant and cheerful. The bell echoing through the house, however, yanked him back to cold reality.

He dragged himself from the bed, fastened his gown, put on his dark-blue slippers, grabbed his black walking stick, and, hand on railing, tottered down the stairs. It was far easier than it had been on the first occasion. Still, the danger of falling was ever present. He could not afford to let down his guard. Keeping a close eye on his feet, he picked his way down the stairs one step at a time, as the doorbell continued to ring. Whoever was pushing the buzzer had to be a most impatient and stubborn person.

Walking stick in his left hand, Samsa approached the front door. He twisted the knob to the right and pulled, and the door swung in.

A little woman was standing outside. A very little woman. It was a wonder she was able to reach the buzzer. When he looked more closely, however, he realized that the issue wasn't her size. It was her back, which was bent forward in a perpetual stoop. This made her appear small, though, in fact, her frame was of normal dimensions. She had fastened her hair with a rubber band to prevent it from spilling over her face. The hair was a deep chestnut and very abundant. She was dressed in a battered tweed jacket and a full, loose-fitting skirt that covered her ankles. A striped cotton scarf was wrapped around her neck. She wore no hat. Her shoes were of the tall lace-up variety, and she appeared to be in her early twenties. There was still something of the girl about her. Her eyes were big, her nose small, and her lips twisted a little to one side, like a skinny moon. Her dark eyebrows formed two straight lines across her forehead, giving her a skeptical look.

"Is this the Samsa residence?" the woman said, craning her head up to look at him. Then she twisted her body all over. Much the way the earth twists during a violent earthquake.

He was taken aback at first, but pulled himself together. "Yes," he said. Since he was Gregor Samsa, this was likely the Samsa residence. At any rate,

there could be no harm in saying so.

Yet the woman seemed to find his answer less than satisfying. A slight frown creased her brow. Perhaps she had picked up a note of confusion in his voice.

"So this is *really* the Samsa residence?" she said in a sharp voice. Like an experienced gatekeeper grilling a shabby visitor.

"I am Gregor Samsa," Samsa said, in as relaxed a tone as possible. Of this, at least, he was sure.

"I hope you're right," she said, reaching down for a cloth bag at her feet. It was black, and seemed very heavy. Worn through in places, it had doubtless had a number of owners. "So let's get started."

She strode into the house without waiting for a reply. Samsa closed the door behind her. She stood there, looking him up and down. It seemed that his gown and slippers had aroused her suspicions.

"I appear to have woken you," she said, her voice cold.

"That's perfectly all right," Samsa replied. He could tell by her dark expression that his clothes were a poor fit for the occasion. "I must apologize for my appearance," he went on. "There are reasons. . . ."

The woman ignored this. "So, then?" she said through pursed lips.

"So, then?" Samsa echoed.

"So, then, where is the lock that's causing the problem?" the woman said. "The lock?"

"The lock that's broken," she said. "You asked us to come and repair it."

"Ah," Samsa said. "The broken lock."

Samsa ransacked his mind. No sooner had he managed to focus on one thing, however, than that black column of mosquitoes rose up again.

"I haven't heard anything in particular about a lock," he said. "My guess is it belongs to one of the doors on the second floor."

The woman glowered at him. "Your guess?" she said, peering up at his face. Her voice had grown even icier. An eyebrow arched in disbelief. "One of the doors?" she went on.

Samsa could feel his face flush. His ignorance regarding the lock struck him

as most embarrassing. He cleared his throat to speak, but the words did not come.

"Mr. Samsa, are your parents in? I think it's better if I talk to them."

"They seem to have gone out on an errand," Samsa said.

"An errand?" she said, appalled. "In the midst of these *troubles*?"

"I really have no idea. When I woke up this morning, everyone was gone," Samsa said.

"Good grief," the young woman said. She heaved a long sigh. "We did tell them that someone would come at this time today."

"I'm terribly sorry."

The woman stood there for a moment. Then, slowly, her arched eyebrow descended, and she looked at the black walking stick in Samsa's left hand. "Are your legs bothering you, Gregor Samsa?"

"Yes, a little," he prevaricated.

Once again, the woman writhed suddenly. Samsa had no idea what this action meant or what its purpose was. Yet he was drawn by instinct to the complex sequence of movements.

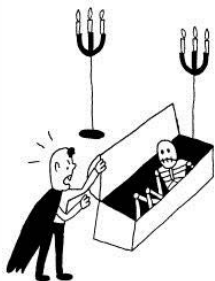
"Well, what's to be done," the woman said in a tone of resignation. "Let's take a look at those doors on the second floor. I came over the bridge and all the way across town through this terrible upheaval to get here. Risked my life, in fact. So it wouldn't make much sense to say, 'Oh, really, no one is here? I'll come back later,' would it?"

This terrible upheaval? Samsa couldn't grasp what she was talking about. What awful change was taking place? But he decided not to ask for details. Better to avoid exposing his ignorance even further.

Back bent, the young woman took the heavy black bag in her right hand and toiled up the stairs, much like a crawling insect. Samsa labored after her, his hand on the railing. Her creeping gait aroused his sympathy—it reminded him of something.

The woman stood at the top of the steps and surveyed the hallway. "So," she said, "one of these four doors *probably* has a broken lock, right?"

Samsa's face reddened. "Yes," he said. "One of these. It could be the one



at the end of the hall on the left, possibly," he said, faltering. This was the door to the bare room in which he had woken that morning.

"It could be," the woman said in a voice as lifeless as an extinguished bonfire. "Possibly." She turned around to examine Samsa's face.

"Somehow or other," Samsa said.

The woman sighed again. "Gregor Samsa," she said dryly. "You are a true joy to talk to. Such a rich vocabulary, and you always get to the point." Then her tone changed. "But no matter. Let's check the door on the left at the end of the hall first."

The woman went to the door. She turned the knob back and forth and pushed, and it opened inward. The room was as it had been before: only a bed with a bare mattress that was less than clean. The floor bare as well. Boards nailed across the window. The woman must have noticed all this, but she showed no sign of surprise. Her demeanor suggested that similar

rooms could be found all over the city.

She squatted down, opened the black bag, pulled out a white flannel cloth, and spread it on the floor. Then she took out a number of tools, which she lined up carefully on the cloth, like a hardened torturer displaying the sinister instruments of his trade before some poor martyr.

Selecting a wire of medium thickness, she inserted it into the lock and, with a practiced hand, manipulated it from a variety of angles. Her eyes were narrowed in concentration, her ears alert for the slightest sound. Next, she chose a thinner wire and repeated the process. Her face grew sombre, and her mouth twisted into a ruthless shape, like a Chinese sword. She took a large flashlight and, with a black look in her eyes, began to examine the lock in detail.

"Do you have the key for this lock?" she asked Samsa.

"I haven't the slightest idea where the key is," he answered honestly.

"Ah, Gregor Samsa, sometimes you make me want to die," she said.

After that, she quite ignored him. She selected a screwdriver from the tools lined up on the cloth and proceeded to remove the lock from the door. Her movements were slow and cautious. She paused from time to time to twist and writhe about as she had before.

While he stood behind her, watching her move in that fashion, Samsa's own body began to respond in a strange way. He was growing hot all over, and his nostrils were flaring. His mouth was so dry that he produced a loud gulp whenever he swallowed. His earlobes itched. And his sexual organ, which had dangled in such a sloppy way until that point, began to stiffen and expand. As it rose, a bulge developed at the front of his gown. He was in the dark, however, as to what that might signify.

Having extracted the lock, the young woman took it to the window to inspect in the sunlight that shone be-



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tween the boards. She poked it with a thin wire and gave it a hard shake to see how it sounded, her face glum and her lips pursed. Finally, she sighed again and turned to face Samsa.

"The insides are shot," the woman said. "It's kaput. This is the one, just like you said."

"That's good," Samsa said.

"No, it's not," the woman said. "There's no way I can repair it here on the spot. It's a special kind of lock. I'll have to take it back and let my father or one of my older brothers work on it. They may be able to fix it. I'm just an apprentice—I can only handle regular locks."

"I see," Samsa said. So this young woman had a father and several brothers. A whole family of locksmiths.

"Actually, one of my brothers was supposed to come today, but because of the commotion going on out there they sent me instead. The city is riddled with checkpoints." She looked back down at the lock in her hands. "But how did the lock get broken like this? It's weird. Someone must have gouged out the insides with a special kind of tool. There's no other way to explain it."

Again she writhed. Her arms rotated as if she were a swimmer practicing a new stroke. He found the action mesmerizing and very exciting.

Samsa made up his mind. "May I ask you a question?" he said.

"A question?" she said, casting him a

dubious glance. "I can't imagine what, but go ahead."

"Why do you twist about like that every so often?"

She looked at Samsa with her lips slightly parted. "Twist about?" She thought for a moment. "You mean like this?" She demonstrated the motion for him.

"Yes, that's it."

"My brassiere doesn't fit," she said dourly. "That's all."

"Brassiere?" Samsa said in a dull voice. It was a word he couldn't call up from his memory.

"A brassiere. You know what that is, don't you?" the woman said. "Or do you find it strange that hunchback women wear brassieres? Do you think it's presumptuous of us?"

"Hunchback?" Samsa said. Yet another word that was sucked into that vast emptiness he carried within. He had no idea what she was talking about. Still, he knew that he should say something.

"No, I don't think so at all," he mumbled.

"Listen up. We hunchbacks have two breasts, just like other women, and we have to use a brassiere to support them. We can't walk around like cows with our udders swinging."

"Of course not." Samsa was lost.

"But brassieres aren't designed for us—they get loose. We're built differently from regular women, right? So we

have to twist around every so often to put them back in place. Hunchbacks have more problems than you can imagine. Is that why you've been staring at me from behind? Is that how you get your kicks?"

"No, not at all. I was just curious why you were doing that."

So, he inferred, a brassiere was an apparatus designed to hold the breasts in place, and a hunchback was a person with this woman's particular build. There was so much in this world that he had to learn.

"Are you sure you're not making fun of me?" the woman asked.

"I'm not making fun of you."

The woman cocked her head and looked up at Samsa. She could tell that he was speaking the truth—there didn't seem to be any malice in him. He was just a little weak in the head, that was all. He was probably a few years older than she was. As well as being lame, he seemed to be intellectually challenged. But he was from a good family, and his manners were impeccable. He was nice-looking, too, though a little scrawny and pasty-faced.

It was then that she noticed the protuberance pushing out the lower part of his gown.

"What the hell is that?" she said stonily. "What's that bulge doing there?"

Samsa looked down at the front of his gown. His organ was really very swollen. He could surmise from her tone that its condition was somehow inappropriate.

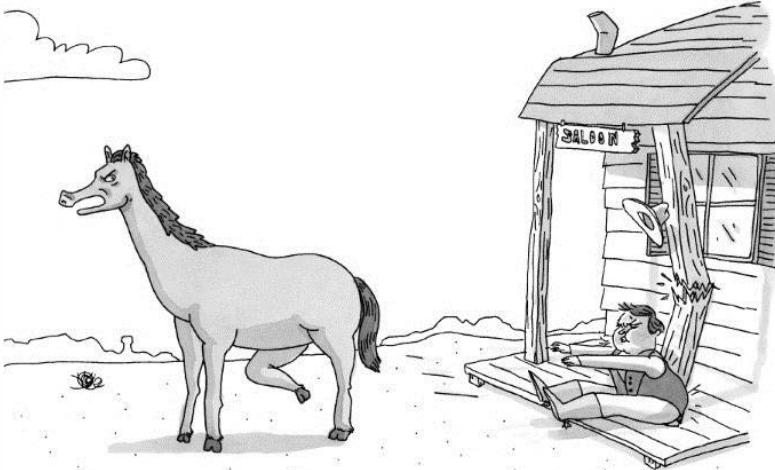
"I get it," she spat out. "You're wondering what it would be like to fuck a hunchback, aren't you?"

"Fuck?" he said. One more word he couldn't place.

"You imagine that, since a hunchback is bent at the waist, you can just take her from the rear with no problem, right?" the woman said. "Believe me, there are lots of perverts like you around, who seem to think that we'll let you do what you want because we're hunchbacks. Well, think again, buster. We're not that easy!"

"I'm very confused," Samsa said. "If I have displeased you in some way, I am truly sorry. I apologize. Please forgive me. I meant no harm. I've been unwell, and there are so many things I don't understand."

"All right, I get the picture." She



Kanin

"Don't look a gift horse in the ass, either."

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sighed. "You're a little *slow*, right? But your wiener is in great shape. Those are the breaks, I guess."

"I'm sorry," Samsa said again.

"Forget it." She relented. "I've got four no-good brothers at home, and since I was a little girl they've shown me everything. They treat it like a big joke. *Mean* buggers, all of them. So I'm not kidding when I say I know the score."

She squatted to put her tools back in the bag, wrapping the broken lock in the flannel and gently placing it alongside.

"I'm taking the lock home with me," she said, standing up. "Tell your parents. We'll either fix it or replace it. If we have to get a new one, though, it may take some time, things being the way they are. Don't forget to tell them, ●.K.? Do you follow me? Will you remember?"

"I'll tell them," Samsa said.

She walked slowly down the staircase, Samsa trailing behind. They made quite a study in contrasts: she looked as if she were crawling on all fours, while he tilted backward in a most unnatural way. Yet their pace was identical. Samsa was trying hard to quell his "bulge," but the thing just wouldn't return to its former state. Watching her movements from behind as she descended the stairs made his heart pound. Hot, fresh blood coursed through his veins. The stubborn bulge persisted.

"As I told you before, one of my brothers was supposed to come today," the woman said when they reached the front door. "But the streets are crawling

with soldiers and tanks. People are being rounded up. That's why the men in my family can't go out. ●nce you get arrested, there's no telling when you'll return. That's why I was sent. All the way across Prague, alone. 'No one will notice a hunchback girl,' they said."

"Tanks?" Samsa murmured.

"Yeah, lots of them. Tanks with cannons and machine guns. Your cannon is impressive," she said, pointing at the bulge beneath his gown, "but these cannons are bigger and harder, and a lot more lethal. Let's hope everyone in your family makes it back safely."

Samsa decided to take the bull by the horns. "Would it be possible to meet again?" he said.

The young woman craned her head at Samsa. "Are you saying you want to see me again?"

"Yes. I want to see you one more time."

"With your thing sticking out like that?"

Samsa looked down again at the bulge. "I don't know how to explain it, but that has nothing to do with my feelings. It must be some kind of heart problem."

"No kidding," she said, impressed.

"A heart problem, you say. That's an interesting way to look at it. Never heard that one before."

"You see, it's out of my control."

"And it has nothing to do with fucking?"

"Fucking isn't on my mind. Really."

"So let me get this straight. When your thing grows big and hard like that,

it's not your mind but your heart that's causing it?"

Samsa nodded in assent.

"Swear to God?" the woman said.

"God," Samsa echoed. Another word he couldn't remember having heard before. He fell silent.

The woman gave a weary shake of her head. She twisted and turned again to adjust her brassiere. "Forget it. It seems God left Prague a few days ago. Let's forget about him."

"So can I see you again?" Samsa asked.

A new look came over the girl's face—her eyes seemed fixed on some distant and misty landscape. "You really want to see me again?"

Samsa nodded.

"What would we do?"

"We could talk together."

"About what?" the woman asked.

"About lots of things."

"Just talk?"

"There is so much I want to ask you," Samsa said.

"About what?"

"About this world. About you. About me. I feel like there are so many things we need to talk about. Tanks, for example. And God. And brassieres. And locks."

Another silence fell over the two of them.

"I don't know," the woman said at last. She shook her head slowly, but the chill in her voice was less noticeable. "You're better brought up than me. And I doubt your parents would be thrilled to see their precious son involved with a hunchback from the wrong side of town. Even if that son is lame and a little slow. ●n top of that, our city is overflowing with foreign tanks and troops. Who knows what lies ahead."

Samsa certainly had no idea what lay ahead. He was in the dark about everything: the future, of course, but the present and the past as well. What was right, and what was wrong? Just learning how to dress was a riddle.

"At any rate, I'll come back this way in a few days," the hunchbacked young woman said. "If we can fix it, I'll bring the lock, and if we can't I'll return it to you anyway. You'll be charged for the service call, of course. If you're here, then we can see each other. Whether



we'll be able to have that long talk or not I don't know. But if I were you I'd keep that bulge hidden from your parents. In the real world, you don't get compliments for exposing that kind of thing."

Samsa nodded. He wasn't at all clear, though, how that kind of thing could be kept out of sight.

"It's strange, isn't it?" the woman said in a pensive voice. "Everything is blowing up around us, but there are still those who care about a broken lock, and others who are dutiful enough to try to fix it. . . . But maybe that's the way it should be. Maybe working on the little things as dutifully and honestly as we can is how we stay sane when the world is falling apart."

The woman looked up at Samsa's face. "I don't mean to pry, but what was going on in that room on the second floor? Why did your parents need such a big lock for a room that held nothing but a bed, and why did it bother them so much when the lock got broken? And what about those boards nailed across the window? Was something locked up in there—is that it?"

Samsa shook his head. If someone or something had been shut up in there, it must have been him. But why had that been necessary? He hadn't a clue.

"I guess there's no point in asking you," the woman said. "Well, I've got to go. They'll worry about me if I'm late. Pray that I make it across town in one piece. That the soldiers will overlook a poor little hunchback girl. That none of them is perverted. We're being fucked over enough as it is."

"I will pray," Samsa said. But he had no idea what "perverted" meant. Or "pray," for that matter.

The woman picked up her black bag and, still bent over, headed for the door.

"Will I see you again?" Samsa asked one last time.

"If you think of someone enough, you're sure to meet them again," she said in parting. This time there was real warmth in her voice.

"Look out for birds," he called after her. She turned and nodded. Then she walked out to the street.

Samsa watched through the crack in the curtains as her hunched form set off across the cobblestones. She moved awkwardly but with surprising speed. He found her every gesture



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charming. She reminded him of a water strider that had left the water to scamper about on dryland. As far as he could tell, walking the way she did made a lot more sense than wobbling around upright on two legs.

She had not been out of sight long when he noticed that his genitals had returned to their soft and shrunken state. That brief and violent bulge had, at some point, vanished. Now his organ dangled between his legs like an innocent fruit, peaceful and defenseless. His balls rested comfortably in their sac. Readjusting the belt of his gown, he sat down at the dining-room table and drank what remained of his cold coffee.

The people who lived here had gone somewhere else. He didn't know who they were, but he imagined that they were his family. Something had happened all of a sudden, and they had left. Perhaps they would never return. What did "the world is falling apart" mean? Gregor Samsa had no idea. Foreign troops, checkpoints, tanks—everything was wrapped in mystery.

The only thing he knew for certain was that he wanted to see that hunchback girl again. To sit face to face and talk to his heart's content. To unravel

the riddles of the world with her. He wanted to watch from every angle the ways she twisted and withered when she adjusted her brassiere. If possible, he wanted to run his hands over her body. To touch her soft skin and feel her warmth with his fingertips. To walk side by side with her up and down the staircases of the world.

Just thinking about her made him warm inside. No longer did he wish to be a fish or a sunflower—or anything else, for that matter. He was glad to be human. For sure, it was a great inconvenience to have to walk on two legs and wear clothes. There were so many things he didn't know. Yet had he been a fish or a sunflower, and not a human being, he might never have experienced this emotion. So he felt.

Samsa sat there for a long time with his eyes closed. Then, making up his mind, he stood, grabbed his black walking stick, and headed for the stairs. He would return to the second floor and figure out the proper way to dress. For now, at least, that would be his mission.

The world was waiting for him to learn. ♦

(Translated from the Japanese, by Ted Goossen.)