

"The Hunter Gracchus"



By : Franz Kafka (1883-1924)

"To die would mean nothing else than to surrender a nothing to the nothing, but that would be impossible to conceive, for how could a person, even only as a nothing, consciously surrender himself to the nothing, and not merely to an empty nothing but rather to a roaring nothing whose nothingness consists only in its incomprehensibility."

Franz Kafka - December 4, 1913

Two boys were sitting on the wall by the jetty playing dice. A man was reading a newspaper on the steps of a monument in the shadow of a hero wielding a sabre. A young girl was filling her tub with water at a fountain. A fruit seller was lying close to his produce and looking out to sea. Through the empty openings of the door and window of a bar two men could be seen drinking wine in the back. The landlord was sitting at a table in the front dozing. A small boat glided lightly into the small harbour, as if it were being carried over the water. A man in a blue jacket climbed out onto land and pulled the ropes through the rings. Behind the man from the boat, two other men in dark coats with silver buttons carried a bier, on which, under a large silk scarf with a floral pattern and fringe, a man was obviously lying.

No one bothered with the newcomers on the jetty, even when they set the bier down to wait for their helmsman, who was still working with the ropes. No one came up to them, no one asked them any questions, no one took a closer look at them.

The helmsman was further held up a little by a woman with disheveled hair, who now appeared on deck with a child at her breast. Then he came on, pointing to a yellowish two-story house which rose close by, directly on the left near the water. The bearers took up their load and carried it through the low door furnished with slender columns. A small boy opened a window, noticed immediately how the group was disappearing into the house, and quickly shut the window again. The door

closed. It had been fashioned with care out of black oak wood. A flock of doves, which up to this point had been flying around the bell tower, came down in front of the house. The doves gathered before the door, as if their food was stored inside the house. One flew right up to the first floor and pecked at the window pane. They were brightly coloured, well cared for, lively animals. With a large sweep of her hand the woman on the boat threw some seeds towards them. They ate them up and then flew over to the woman.

A man in a top hat with a mourning ribbon came down one of the small, narrow, steeply descending lanes which led to the harbour. He looked around him attentively. Everything upset him. He winced at the sight of some garbage in a corner. There were fruit peels on the steps of the monument. As he went by, he pushed them off with his cane. He knocked on the door of the house, while at the same time taking off his top hat with his black-gloved right hand. It was opened immediately, and about fifty small boys, lined up in two rows in a long corridor, bowed to him.

The helmsman came down the stairs, met the gentleman, and led him upstairs. On the first floor he accompanied him around the slight, delicately built balcony surrounding the courtyard, and, as the boys crowded behind them at a respectful distance, both men stepped into a large cool room at the back. From it one could not see a facing house, only a bare gray-black rock wall. Those who had carried the bier were busy setting up and lighting some long candles at its head. But these provided no light. They only made the previously still shadows jump and flicker across the walls. The shawl was pulled back off the bier. On it lay a man with wildly unkempt hair and beard and a brown skin—he looked rather like a hunter. He lay there motionless, apparently without breathing, his eyes closed, although his surroundings were the only the only thing indicating that it could be a corpse.

The gentleman stepped over to the bier, laid a hand on the forehead of the man lying there, then knelt down and prayed. The helmsman gave a sign to the bearers to leave the room. They went out, drove away the boys who had gathered outside, and shut the door. The gentleman, however, was apparently still not satisfied with this stillness. He looked at the helmsman. The latter understood and went through a side door into the next room. The man on the bier immediately opened his eyes, turned his face with a painful smile towards the gentleman, and said, "Who are you?" Without any surprise, the gentleman got up from his kneeling position and answered, "The burgomaster of Riva."

The man on the bier nodded, pointed to a chair by stretching his arm out feebly, and then, after the burgomaster had accepted his invitation, said, "Yes, I knew that, Burgomaster, but when I first glance around I've always forgotten it all—everything is going in circles around me, and it's better for me to ask, even when I know everything. You also presumably know that I am the hunter Gracchus."

"Of course," said the burgomaster. "I received the news today, during the night. We had been sleeping for some time. Then around midnight my wife called, 'Salvatore'—that's my name—'look at the dove in the window!' It was really a dove, but as large as a rooster. It flew up to my ear and said, 'Tomorrow the dead hunter Gracchus is coming. Welcome him in the name of the city.'"

The hunter nodded and pushed the tip of his tongue between his lips. "Yes, the doves fly here before me. But do you believe, Burgomaster, that I am to remain in Riva?"

“That I cannot yet say,” answered the burgomaster. “Are you dead?”

“Yes,” said the hunter, “as you see. Many years ago—it must have been a great many years ago—I fell from a rock in the Black Forest—that’s in Germany—as I was tracking a chamois. Since then I’ve been dead.”

“But you’re also alive,” said the burgomaster.

“To a certain extent,” said the hunter, “to a certain extent I am also alive. My death ship lost its way—a wrong turn of the helm, a moment when the helmsman was not paying attention, a distraction from my wonderful homeland—I don’t know what it was. I only know that I remain on the earth and that since that time my ship has journeyed over earthly waters. So I—who only wanted to live in my own mountains—travel on after my death through all the countries of the earth.”

“And have you no share in the world beyond?” asked the burgomaster wrinkling his brow.

The hunter answered, “I am always on the immense staircase leading up to it. I roam around on this infinitely wide flight of steps, sometimes up, sometimes down, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left, always in motion. From being a hunter I’ve become a butterfly. Don’t laugh.”

“I’m not laughing,” answered the burgomaster.

“That’s very considerate of you,” said the hunter. “I am always moving. But when I go through the greatest upward motion and the door is shining right above me, I wake up on my old ship, still drearily stranded in some earthly stretch of water. The basic mistake of my earlier death grins at me in my cabin. Julia, the wife of the helmsman, knocks and brings to me on the bier the morning drink of the country whose coast we are sailing by at the time. I lie on a wooden plank bed, wearing—I’m no delight to look at—a filthy shroud, my hair and beard, black and gray, are inextricably intertwined, my legs covered by a large silk women’s scarf, with a floral pattern and long fringes. At my head stands a church candle which illuminates me. On the wall opposite me is a small picture, evidently of a bushman aiming his spear at me and concealing himself as much as possible behind a splendidly painted shield. On board ship one comes across many stupid pictures, but this is one of the stupidest. Beyond that my wooden cage is completely empty. Through a hole in the side wall the warm air of the southern nights comes in, and I hear the water lapping against the old boat.

I have been lying here since the time when I—the still living hunter Gracchus—was pursuing a chamois to its home in the Black Forest and fell. Everything took place as it should. I followed, fell down, bled to death in a ravine, was dead, and this boat was supposed to carry me to the other side. I still remember how happily I stretched myself out here on the planking for the first time. The mountains have never heard me singing the way these four still shadowy walls did then.

I had been happy to be alive and was happy to be dead. Before I came on board, I gladly threw away my rag-tag collection of guns and bags, even the hunting rifle which I had always carried so proudly, and slipped into the shroud like a young girl into her wedding dress. There I lay down and waited. Then the accident happened.”

“A nasty fate,” said the burgomaster, raising his hand in a gesture of depreciation, “and you are not to blame for it in any way?”

“No,” said the hunter. “I was a hunter. Is there any blame in that? I was raised to be a hunter in the Black Forest, where at that time there were still wolves. I lay in wait, shot, hit the target, removed the skin—is there any blame in that? My work was blessed. ‘The great hunter of the Black Forest’—that’s what they called me. Is that something bad?”

“It not up to me to decide that,” said the burgomaster, “but it seems to me as well that there’s no blame there. But then who is to blame?”

“The boatman,” said the hunter. “No one will read what I write here, no one will come to help me. If people were assigned the task of helping me, all the doors of all the houses would remain closed, all the windows would be shut, they would all lie in bed, with sheets thrown over their heads, the entire earth would be a hostel for the night. And that makes good sense, for no one knows of me, and if he did, he would have no idea of where I was staying, and if he knew that, he would still not know how to keep me there, and so he would not know how to help me. The thought of wanting to help me is a sickness and has to be cured with bed rest.

“I know that, and so I do not cry out to summon help, even if at moments when I have no self-control, for example right now, I do think about that very seriously. But to get rid of such ideas I need only look around and recall where I am and where—and this I can assert with full confidence—I have lived for centuries.

“That’s extraordinary,” said the burgomaster, “extraordinary. And now are you intending to remain with us in Riva?”

“I have no intentions,” said the hunter with a smile and, to make up for his mocking tone, laid a hand on the burgomaster’s knee. “I am here. I don’t know any more than that. There’s nothing more I can do. My boat is without a helm—it journeys with the wind which blows in the deepest regions of death.”