

***The Metamorphosis* – By Franz Kafka – An Excerpt**

Note from your teacher: As you read the following excerpt by Franz Kafka – please don't worry if you find it – strange, confusing, or hard to understand. Start by just reading it for the story – “What is literally taking place in the text.” Mark these papers up – underline – write comments (I left you lots of space in the right margin) – write questions – and just think it through. Write down anything you like – but you may want to consider these:

- What is taking place in the story?
- How does it fit in with what we've read so far?
- Is it really happening? (Is there evidence for or against) Does it matter if it is really happening?
- What are the reasons that Gregor is upset?
Why are the people around him upset – is it the same thing?
- Can you possibly relate his experience to anything that you've gone through – long or short term?

As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly stay in place and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes.

What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet within its four familiar walls. Above the table on which a collection of cloth samples was unpacked and spread out—Samsa was a traveling salesman—hung the picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a pretty gilt frame. It showed a lady, with a fur hat on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff into which the whole of her forearm had vanished!

Gregor's eyes turned next to the window, and the overcast sky—one could hear raindrops beating on the window gutter—made him quite melancholy. What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense, he thought, but it could not be done, for he was accustomed to sleep on his right side and in his present condition he could not turn himself over. However violently he forced himself toward his right side he always rolled onto his back again. He tried it at least a hundred times, shutting his eyes to keep from seeing his struggling legs, and only desisted when he began to feel in his side a faint dull ache he had never felt before.

Oh God, he thought, what an exhausting job I've picked out for myself! On the road day in, day out. It's much more irritating work than doing the actual business in the home office, and on top of that there's the trouble of constant traveling, of worrying about train connections, the bad food and irregular meals, casual acquaintances that are always new and never become intimate friends. The devil take it all! He felt a slight itching up on his belly, slowly pushed

himself on his back nearer to the top of the bed so that he could lift his head more easily, identified the itching place which was surrounded by many small white spots the nature of which he could not understand and was about to touch it with a leg, but drew the leg back immediately, for the contact made a cold shiver run through him.

He slid down again into his former position. This getting up early, he thought, can make an idiot out of anyone. A man needs his sleep. Other salesmen live like harem women. For instance, when I come back to the hotel in the morning to write up my orders these others are only sitting down to breakfast. Let me just try that with my boss; I'd be fired on the spot. Anyhow, that might be quite a good thing for me, who can tell? If I didn't have to hold back because of my parents I'd have given notice long ago, I'd have gone to the boss and told him exactly what I think of him. That would knock him right off his desk! It's a peculiar habit of his, too, sitting on top of the desk like that and talking down to employees, especially when they have to come quite near because the boss is hard of hearing. Well, there's still hope; once I've saved enough money to pay back my parents' debts to him—that should take another five or six years—I'll do it without fail. I'll cut my ties completely then. For the moment, though, I'd better get up, since my train leaves at five.

He looked at the alarm clock ticking on the chest of drawers. Heavenly Father! he thought. It was half-past six and the hands were quietly moving on, it was even past the half-hour, it was getting on toward a quarter to seven. Had the alarm clock not gone off? From the bed one could see that it had been properly set for four o'clock; of course it must have gone off. Yes, but was it possible to sleep quietly through that ear-splitting noise? Well, he had not slept quietly, yet apparently all the more soundly for that. But what was he to do now? The next train went at seven o'clock; to catch that he would need to hurry like mad and his samples weren't even packed, and he himself wasn't feeling particularly fresh and energetic. And even if he did catch the train he couldn't avoid a tirade from the boss, since the messenger boy must have been waiting for the five o'clock train and must have long since reported his failure to turn up. This messenger was a creature of the boss's, spineless and stupid. Well, supposing he were to say he was sick? But that would be very awkward and would look suspicious, since during his five years' employment he had not been ill once. The boss himself would be sure to come with the health insurance doctor, would reproach his parents for their son's laziness, and would cut all excuses short by handing the matter over to the insurance doctor, who of course regarded all mankind as perfectly healthy malingerers. And would he be so far wrong in this case? Gregor really felt quite well, apart from a drowsiness that was quite inexcusable after such a long sleep, and he was even unusually hungry.

As all this was running through his mind at top speed without his being able to decide to leave his bed—the alarm clock had just struck a quarter to seven—there was a cautious tap at the door near the head of his bed. "Gregor," said a voice—it was his mother's—"it's a quarter to seven. Didn't you have a train to catch?" That gentle voice! Gregor had a shock as he heard his own voice answering hers, unmistakably his own voice, it was true, but with a persistent horrible twittering squeak behind it like an undertone, which left the words in their clear shape only for the first moment and then rose up reverberating around them to destroy their sense, so that one could not be sure one had heard them rightly. Gregor wanted to answer at

length and explain everything, but in the circumstances he confined himself to saying: "Yes, yes, thank you, Mother, I'm getting up now." The wooden door between them must have kept the change in his voice from being noticeable outside, for his mother contented herself with this statement and shuffled away. Yet this brief exchange of words had made the other members of the family aware that Gregor was, strangely, still at home, and at one of the side doors his father was already knocking, gently, yet with his fist. "Gregor, Gregor," he called, "What's the matter with you?" And after a little while he called again in a deeper voice: "Gregor! Gregor!" At the other side door his sister was saying in a low, plaintive tone: "Gregor? Aren't you well? Do you need anything?" He answered them both at once: "I'm just about ready," and did his best to make his voice sound as normal as possible by enunciating the words very clearly and leaving long pauses between them. So his father went back to his breakfast, but his sister whispered: "Gregor, open the door, I beg you." However, he was not thinking of opening the door, and felt thankful for the prudent habit he had acquired on the road of locking all doors during the night, even at home. His immediate intention was to get up quietly without being disturbed, to put on his clothes and above all eat his breakfast, and only then to consider what else had to be done, since he was well aware his meditations would come to no sensible conclusion if he remained in bed. He remembered that often enough in bed he had felt small aches and pains, probably caused by lying in awkward positions, which had proved purely imaginary once he got up, and he looked forward eagerly to seeing this morning's delusions gradually evaporate. That the change in his voice was nothing but the precursor of a bad cold, a typical ailment of traveling salesmen, he had not the slightest doubt.

To get rid of the quilt was quite easy; he had only to inflate himself a little and it fell off by itself. But the next move was difficult, especially because he was so unusually broad. He would have needed arms and hands to hoist himself up; instead he had only the numerous little legs which never stopped waving in all directions and which he could not control in the least. When he tried to bend one of them the first thing it did was to stretch itself out straight; and if he finally succeeded in making it do what he wanted, all the other legs meanwhile waved the more wildly in the most painful and unpleasant way. "But what's the use of lying idle in bed?" said Gregor to himself.

He thought that he might get out of bed with the lower part of his body first, but this lower part, which he had not yet seen and of which he could form no clear picture, proved too difficult to move; it shifted so slowly; and when finally, almost wild with annoyance, he gathered his forces together and thrust out recklessly, he had miscalculated the direction and bumped heavily against the lower end of the bed, and the stinging pain he felt informed him that precisely this lower part of his body was at the moment probably the most sensitive. So he tried to get the top part of himself out first, and cautiously moved his head toward the edge of the bed. That proved easy enough, and despite its breadth and mass the bulk of his body at last slowly followed the movement of his head. Still, when he finally got his head free over the edge of the bed he felt too scared to go on advancing, for, after all, if he let himself fall in this way it would take a miracle to keep his head from being injured. And under no circumstances could he afford to lose consciousness now, precisely now; he would rather stay in bed.

Metamorphosis: Gregor Samsa's Nightmare

But when after a repetition of the same efforts he lay in his former position again, sighing, and watched his little legs struggling against each other more wildly than ever, if that were possible, and saw no way of bringing any calm and order into this senseless confusion, he told himself again that it was impossible to stay in bed and that the most sensible course was to risk everything for the smallest hope of getting away from it. At the same time, however, he did not forget to remind himself occasionally that cool reflection, the coolest possible, was much better than desperate resolves. At such moments he focused his eyes as sharply as possible on the window, but, unfortunately, the prospect of the morning fog, which enshrouded even the other side of the narrow street, brought him little encouragement and comfort. "Seven o'clock already," he said to himself when the alarm clock chimed again, "seven o'clock already and still such a thick fog." And for a little while he lay quiet, breathing lightly as if perhaps expecting the total silence around him to restore all things to their real and normal condition.

But then he said to himself: "Before it strikes a quarter past seven I absolutely must be quite out of this bed, without fail. Anyhow, by that time someone will have come from the office to ask for me, since it opens before seven." And he began to rock his whole body at once in a regular rhythm, with the idea of swinging it out of the bed. If he tipped himself out in that way he could keep his head from injury by lifting it at a sharp angle as he fell. His back seemed to be hard and was not likely to suffer from a fall on the carpet. His biggest worry was the loud crash he would not be able to help making which would probably cause anxiety, if not terror, behind all the doors. Still, he must take the risk.

When he was already half out of the bed—the new method was more a game than an effort, for he needed only to shift himself across by rocking to and fro—it struck him how simple it would be if he could get help. Two strong people—he thought of his father and the maid—would be amply sufficient; they would only have to thrust their arms under his convex back, lever him out of the bed, bend down with their burden, and then be patient enough to let him turn himself right over onto the floor, where it was to be hoped his little legs would then find their proper function. Well, ignoring the fact that the doors were all locked, should he really call for help? In spite of his predicament he could not suppress a smile at the very idea of it.

He had already gotten to the point where he would lose his balance if he rocked any harder, and very soon he would have to make up his mind once and for all since in five minutes it would be a quarter past seven—when the front doorbell rang. "That's someone from the office," he said to himself, and grew almost rigid, while his little legs only thrashed about all the faster. For a moment everything stayed quiet. "They're not going to open the door," said Gregor to himself, grasping at some kind of irrational hope. But then of course the maid went as usual to the door with her determined stride and opened it. Gregor needed only to hear the first good morning of the visitor to know immediately who it was—the chief clerk himself. What a fate: to be condemned to work for a firm where the slightest negligence at once gave rise to the gravest suspicion! Were all the employees nothing but a bunch of scoundrels, was

there not among them one single loyal devoted man who, had he wasted only an hour or so of the firm's time in the morning, was so tormented by conscience as to be driven out of his mind and actually incapable of leaving his bed? Wouldn't it really have been sufficient to send an office boy to inquire—if indeed any inquiry were necessary—did the chief clerk himself have to come and thus indicate to the entire innocent family that this suspicious circumstance could be investigated by no one less versed in affairs than himself? And more through the agitation caused by these reflections than through any act of will Gregor swung himself out of bed with all his strength. There was a loud thump, but it was not really a crash. His fall was broken to some extent by the carpet, his back, too, was less stiff than he had thought, and so there was merely a dull thud, not so very startling. Only he had not lifted his head carefully enough and had hit it; he turned it and rubbed it on the carpet in pain and irritation.

"Something fell in there," said the chief clerk in the adjacent room to the left. Gregor tried to suppose to himself that something like what had happened to him today might someday happen to the chief clerk; one really could not deny that it was possible. But, as if in brusque reply to this supposition, the chief clerk took a couple of firm steps in the next-door room and his patent leather boots creaked. From the right-hand room his sister was whispering to inform him of the situation: "Gregor, the chief clerk's here." "I know," muttered Gregor to himself; but he didn't dare to make his voice loud enough for his sister to hear it.

"Gregor," said his father now from the room on the left, "the chief clerk has come and wants to know why you didn't catch the early train. We don't know what to say to him. Besides, he wants to talk to you in person. So open the door, please. He will be good enough to excuse the mess in your room." "Good morning, Mr. Samsa," the chief clerk was calling amiably meanwhile. "He's not well," said his mother to the visitor, while his father was still speaking through the door, "he's not well, sir, believe me. What else would make him miss a train! The boy thinks about nothing but his work. It makes me almost cross the way he never goes out in the evening; he's been here all last week and has stayed at home every single evening. He just sits there quietly at the table reading a newspaper or looking through railroad timetables. The only amusement he gets is working with his jigsaw. For instance, he spent two or three evenings cutting out a little picture frame; you would be surprised to see how pretty it is; it's hanging in his room; you'll see it in a minute when Gregor opens the door. I must say I'm glad you've come, sir; we should never have gotten him to unlock the door by ourselves; he's so obstinate; and I'm sure he's unwell, even if he denied it earlier this morning." "I'll be right there," said Gregor slowly and carefully, not moving an inch for fear of losing one word of the conversation. "I can't think of any other explanation, madam," said the chief clerk, "I hope it's nothing serious. Although on the other hand I must say that we men of business—unfortunately or perhaps fortunately—very often simply have to ignore any slight indisposition, since business must be attended to." "Well, can the chief clerk come in now?" asked Gregor's father impatiently, again knocking on the door. "No," said Gregor. In the left-hand room a painful silence followed this refusal; in the right-hand room his sister began to sob.

Why didn't his sister join the others? She had probably just gotten out of bed and hadn't even begun to put on her clothes yet. Well, why was she crying? Because he wouldn't get up

and let the chief clerk in, because he was in danger of losing his job, and because the head of the firm would begin dunning his parents again for the old debts? Surely these were things one didn't need to worry about for the present. Gregor was still at home and not in the least think-ing of deserting the family. At the moment, true, he was lying on the carpet and no one who knew the condition he was in could seriously expect him to admit the chief clerk. But for such a small discourtesy, which could plausibly be explained away somehow later on, Gregor could hardly be fired on the spot. And it seemed to Gregor that it would be much more sensible to leave him in peace for the present than to trouble him with tears and entreaties. Still, of course, their uncertainty bewildered them all and excused their behavior.

"Mr. Samsa," the chief clerk called now in a louder voice, "what's the matter with you? Here you are, barricading yourself in your room, giving only 'yes' and 'no' for answers, causing your parents a lot of unnecessary trouble and neglecting—I mention this only in passing—neglecting your business duties in an incredible fashion. I am speaking here in the name of your parents and of your employer, and I beg you quite seriously to give me an immediate and precise explanation. You amaze me, you amaze me. I thought you were a quiet, dependable person, and now all at once you seem bent on making a disgraceful exhibition of yourself. The boss did hint to me early this morning a possi-ble explanation for your disappearance—with reference to the cash payments that were entrusted to you recently—but I almost pledged my solemn word of honor that this could not be so. But now that I see how incredibly obstinate you are. I no longer have the slightest desire to take your part at all. And your position in the firm is not exactly unassailable. I came with the intention of telling you all this in private, but since you are wasting my time so needlessly I don't see why your parents shouldn't hear it too. For some time now your work has been most unsatisfactory; this is not the best time of the year for business, of course, we admit that, but a time of the year for doing no business at all, that does not exist, Mr. Samsa, must not exist."

"But, sir," cried Gregor, beside himself and in his agita-tion forgetting everything else, "I'm just about to open the door this very minute. A slight illness, an attack of dizziness, has kept me from getting up. I'm still lying in bed. But I feel all right again. I'm getting out of bed right now. Just give me a moment or Two longer! It's not going as well as I thought. But I'm all right, really. How such a thing can suddenly strike one down! Only last night I was quite well, my parents can tell you, or rather I did have a slight presentiment. I must have showed some sign of it. Why didn't I mention it at the office! But we always think we can get over any illness without having to stay at home. Oh sir, do spare my parents! All that you're reproaching me with now has no foundation; no one has ever said a word to me about it. Perhaps you haven't looked at the last orders I sent in. Anyway, I can still catch the eight o'clock train, I'm much the better for my few extra hours' rest. Don't let me detain you here, sir; I'll be attending to business very soon, and do be good enough to tell the boss so and to give him my best regards!" And while all this was tumbling out in a rush and Gregor hardly knew what he was saying, he had reached the chest of drawers quite easily, perhaps because of the practice he had had in bed, and was now trying to get himself upright by means of it. He actually meant to open the door, actually meant to show himself and speak to the chief clerk; he was eager to find out what the others, after all their insistence, would say at the sight of him. If they were horrified then the responsibility was no longer his and he could relax. But if they took it in stride, then he had no reason either to be upset, and could actually get to

the station for the eight o'clock train if he hurried. At first he slipped down a few times from the polished surface of the chest, but finally with one last heave he stood upright; he paid no more attention to the pains in the lower part of his body, no matter how much they smarted. Then he let himself fall against the back of a nearby chair, and clung to its frame with his little legs. With that he regained control over himself and he stopped speaking, for now he could hear that the chief clerk was saying something.

"Did you understand one single word of that?" the chief clerk was asking; "surely he can't be trying to make fools of us?" "Oh, dear God," cried his mother, in tears, "perhaps he's terribly ill and we're tormenting him. Grete! Grete!" she called out then. "Yes, Mother?" called his sister from the other side. They were calling to each other through Gregor's room. "You must go this minute for the doctor. Gregor is ill. Go for the doctor, quick. Did you hear how he was speaking?" "That was the voice of an animal," said the chief clerk in a voice conspicuously soft compared to the shrillness of the mother's. "Anna! Anna!" his father was calling through the hall to the kitchen, clapping his hands, "get a locksmith at once!" And the two girls were already running through the hall with a swish of skirts—how could his sister have gotten dressed so quickly?—and were tearing the front door open. There was no sound of its closing again; they had evidently left it open, as one does in homes where some great misfortune has happened.

But Gregor was now much calmer. The words he uttered could no longer be understood apparently, although they seemed clear enough to him, even clearer than before, perhaps because his ear had grown accustomed to the sound of them. Yet at any rate people now believed that something was wrong with him, and were ready to help. The positive certainty with which these first measures had been taken comforted him. He felt himself drawn once more into the human circle and hoped for great and remarkable results from both the doctor and the locksmith, without really distinguishing precisely between them. To make his voice as clear as possible for the crucial consultations that were soon to take place he cleared his throat a little, as quietly as he could, of course, since this noise too might not sound human for all he was able to judge. In the next room meanwhile there was complete silence. Perhaps his parents were sitting at the table with the chief clerk, whispering, perhaps they were all leaning against the door and listening.

Write down any more comments – questions – ideas you have, below, and make sure to bring this to class.