

Dearest Father

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Franz Kafka

Translated by

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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	7
Dearest Father	15
Extracts from Kafka's Diaries	87
Extracts from Kafka's Letters	101
<i>Note on the Texts</i>	108
<i>Notes</i>	108

Dearest Father

Schelesen

Dearest Father,

You asked me recently why I claim to be afraid of you. I did not know, as usual, how to answer, partly for the very reason that I am afraid of you, partly because an explanation of my fear would require more details than I could even begin to make coherent in speech. And if I now try to answer in writing it will still be nowhere near complete, because even in writing my fear and its consequences raise a barrier between us and because the magnitude of material far exceeds my memory and my understanding.

To you the matter always seemed very simple, at least in as far as you spoke about it in front of me and, indiscriminately, in front of many others. To you it seemed like this: you had worked hard your whole life, sacrificed everything for your children, particularly me, as a result I lived “like a lord”, had complete freedom to study whatever I wanted, knew where my next meal was coming from and therefore had no reason to worry about anything; for this you asked no gratitude, you know how children show their gratitude, but at least some kind

of cooperation, a sign of sympathy; instead I would always hide away from you in my room, buried in books, with crazy friends and eccentric ideas; we never spoke openly, I never came up to you in the synagogue, I never visited you in Franzensbad,* nor otherwise had any sense of family, I never took an interest in the business or your other concerns, I saddled you with the factory and then left you in the lurch, I encouraged Ottla's* obstinacy and while I have never to this day lifted a finger to help you (I never even buy you the occasional theatre ticket), I do all I can for perfect strangers. If you summarize your judgment of me, it is clear that you do not actually reproach me with anything really indecent or malicious (with the exception, perhaps, of my latest marriage plans), but rather with coldness, alienation, ingratitude. And, what is more, you reproach me as if it were my fault, as if I might have been able to arrange everything differently with one simple change of direction, while you are not in the slightest to blame, except perhaps for having been too good to me.

This, your usual analysis, I agree with only in so far as I also believe you to be entirely blameless for our estrangement. But I too am equally and utterly blameless. If I could bring you to acknowledge this, then – although a new life would not be possible, for that we are both much too old – there could yet be a sort of peace, not an end to your unrelenting reproaches, but at least a mitigation of them.

Strangely enough, you seem to have some idea of what I mean. This might have been why you recently said to me, “I have always been fond of you; if, on the outside, I have not treated you as fathers usually treat their children, it is just because I cannot pretend as others can.” Now, Father, I have on the whole never doubted your goodness towards me, but this statement I consider wrong. You cannot pretend, that is true, but purely for this reason to claim that other fathers pretend was either sheer indisputable bigotry, or – and this, in my view, is more plausible – a veiled way of saying that something is wrong between us, and that you are partly responsible for it, albeit through no fault of your own. If this is what you really meant, then we are agreed.

I am not saying, of course, that I have become what I am purely under your influence. That would be a very great exaggeration (although I do have a tendency to exaggerate). It is very possible that, had I grown up entirely free of your influence, I still could not have become a person after your own heart. I would probably still have become a weak, anxious, hesitant, restless person, neither Robert Kafka nor Karl Hermann,* yet still very different from what I am today, and we would have been able to get on very well. I would have been happy to have you as a friend, a boss, an uncle, a grandfather, even indeed (though rather more hesitantly) as a father-in-law. It is only as a father that you

were too strong for me, particularly since my brothers died young and my sisters did not come along until much later, so I had to endure the initial conflicts all alone, for which I was far too weak.

Compare the two of us: me, to put it very briefly, a Löwy* with a certain Kafka core that is simply not driven by the Kafka will to live, prosper and conquer, but by a Löwy-like force that moves more secretly, more timidly, in a different direction, and which often breaks down completely. You, by contrast, a true Kafka in strength, health, appetite, loudness of voice, eloquence, self-satisfaction, worldly superiority, stamina, presence of mind, understanding of human nature, a certain generosity, of course with all the faults and weaknesses that go with these advantages, into which you are driven by your natural disposition and sometimes your hot temper. Perhaps you are not wholly a Kafka in your general worldly outlook, in as far as I can compare you with Uncles Philipp, Ludwig and Heinrich.* That is odd, and here the picture is no clearer. However, they were all cheerier, fresher, more casual, more relaxed, less strict than you. (In this respect, incidentally, I have inherited much from you and have taken far too great a care of that inheritance, admittedly without having the necessary counter-qualities that you do.) Yet on the other hand, you too have gone through various phases in this respect, you were perhaps cheerier before your children

(I especially) disappointed and depressed you at home (you were quite different when visitors came), and you have perhaps become cheerier again, now that your grandchildren and your son-in-law show you some of the warmth that your own children, except perhaps Valli,* never could.

In any case, we were so different, and in our differences such a danger to each other that, had anyone wanted to predict how I, the slowly developing child, and you, the fully-grown man, would behave towards one another, they could have presumed that you would simply trample me underfoot until nothing of me remained. Well, that did not happen, what happens in life cannot be predicted, but maybe something even worse happened. In saying this, I ask you not to forget that I in no way find you guilty. Your effect on me was the effect you could not help having, but you should stop considering it some particular perversity on my part that I succumbed to that effect.

I was an anxious child, and yet I am sure I was also disobedient, as children are, I am sure that Mother spoilt me too, but I cannot believe that I was particularly difficult to handle, I cannot believe that you, by directing a friendly word my way, by quietly taking my hand or by giving me a kind look, could not have got everything you wanted from me. And you are fundamentally a kind and tender person (what follows does not contradict that, after all it refers

only to how I saw you as a child) but not every child has the tenacity and fearlessness to search until he finds the kindness within. You, Father, are only capable of treating a child with the same means by which you were moulded, with vigour, noise and fits of rage, and in my case you found these means especially appropriate because you wanted to bring me up to be a strong, courageous boy.

Of course, I cannot accurately recall and describe your way of bringing me up in the very early years, but I can form some idea of it, drawing on my more recent experience and on your treatment of Felix. In doing this I am increasingly aware that you were younger then, therefore fresher, wilder, more natural and carefree than you are today, and that in addition you were largely occupied with the business, meaning you barely had time to see me once a day, so the impression you made on me would have been all the greater, and virtually impossible for me to become accustomed to.

There is only one episode from those early years that I remember directly, perhaps you remember it too. I was whining persistently for water one night, certainly not because I was thirsty, but in all probability partly to be annoying, partly to amuse myself. After a number of fierce threats had failed, you lifted me out of my bed, carried me out onto the *pavlatche** and left me awhile all alone, standing outside the locked door in my nightshirt. I do not mean to say that this

was wrong of you, perhaps at that time there really was no other way of having a peaceful night, but I mention it as a characteristic example of the way you brought me up and the effect it had on me. This incident almost certainly made me obedient for a time, but it damaged me on the inside. I was by nature unable to reconcile the simple act (as it seemed to me) of casually asking for water with the utter horror of being carried outside. Years later it still tormented me that this giant man, my father, the ultimate authority, could enter my room at any time and, almost unprovoked, carry me from my bed out onto the pavlatche, and that I meant so little to him.

That was merely the beginning of things, but this feeling of powerlessness which still regularly overcomes me (in other respects admittedly a noble and productive feeling) stems in many ways from how you treated me. What I needed was a little encouragement, a little friendliness, a little help to keep my future open, instead you obstructed it, admittedly with the good intention of persuading me to go down a different path. But I was not fit for the path you chose. You encouraged me, for example, whenever I saluted or marched well, but I was no budding soldier, or you encouraged me when I could bring myself to eat heartily, especially when I drank beer, or when I managed to sing songs that I did not understand, or to parrot your own favourite clichés back to you, but none

of it had a place in my future. And even today, it is typical of you only to encourage me in something when it engages your interest, when your own self-esteem is at stake, threatened either by me (for example with my marriage plans) or by others through me (for example when Pepa* insults me). Then you give me encouragement, remind me of what I am worth, what sort of woman I could marry, and condemn Pepa out of hand. But apart from the fact that I am, even at my present age, already virtually impervious to encouragement, I have to ask myself what good it could do me anyway, as it is only ever offered when I am not its primary object.

At that time, and throughout all that time, what I really needed was encouragement. I was already weighed down by your sheer bodily presence. I remember, for example, how we often undressed together in the same cubicle. I skinny, frail, fragile, you strong, tall, thickset. Even in the cubicle I felt a puny wretch, and not only in front of you but in front of the whole world, because for me you were the measure of all things. But when we stepped out before all the people, I with my hand in yours, a little skeleton, unsteady and barefoot on the planks, afraid of the water, unable to copy your swimming strokes which you kept on demonstrating with the best of intentions but actually to my profound shame, then I would lose myself in despair and at such moments all my past failures would come back to haunt me. I felt happiest when you

sometimes undressed first and I could stay in the cubicle alone and delay the shame of my public appearance until you finally came looking for me and forced me to leave the cubicle. I was thankful to you for seeming not to sense my despair, besides, I was proud of my father's body. Incidentally, this difference between us remains much the same to this day.

Your intellectual domination had a similar effect on me. You had reached such heights, solely by your own efforts, that you had unbounded confidence in your own opinions. That was nowhere near so dazzling for me as a child, as it was for me later as a maturing young man. In your armchair you ruled the world. Your opinion was right, any other was mad, eccentric, *meshugge*,* not normal. In fact, your self-confidence was so great that you did not even have to be at all consistent, and could still never be wrong. It was even possible for you to have no opinion whatsoever on a matter, and in such cases all potential opinions on that matter had to be wrong without exception. You might rail against the Czechs, for example, then the Germans, then the Jews, and not only selectively but in all respects, and by the end of it you would be the only one left standing. You took on, for me, that enigmatic quality of all tyrants whose right to rule is founded on their identity rather than on reason. At least, it seemed that way to me.

Now, where I was concerned, you were in fact astonishingly often right, not only in conversation (and this would not have

been surprising, for we hardly ever conversed), but also in reality. Although even that was not especially difficult to understand. I suffered, after all, in my every thought under intense pressure from you, even (and in fact especially) where my thoughts were completely different from yours. All these thoughts that seemed independent of you buckled from the outset under the burden of your derogatory judgments; for me to endure this and still to achieve the complete and lasting development of any thought was virtually impossible. I am not talking here of any lofty thoughts, rather of every little childhood undertaking. I had only to be happy about something or other, be inspired by it, come home and mention it and your response was an ironic sigh, a shake of the head, a finger rapping the table: "Is that what all the fuss is about?" or "I wish I had your worries!" or "What a waste of time!" or "That's nothing!" or "That won't put food on the table!" Naturally one could not expect you to be enthusiastic about every childish triviality, since you had your own worries. Even that was not the point. The point was rather that, thanks to your antagonistic nature, you disappointed the child with such determination and principle, and your antagonism constantly intensified as it accumulated material, until it became a permanent habit, even when your opinion was for once the same as mine, and these childhood disappointments were by the end not just everyday disappointments; but, since

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