KAFKA AND THE TRAVELLING DOLL

Jordi Sierra i Fabra

Easy-to-read adaptation by Claudia Sabater Baudet
FIRST DREAM: THE LOST DOLL
One summer morning,
Franz Kafka was going for a stroll at Steglitz Park, as usual.
It was a place full of life: there were couples, elder people,
soldiers, policemen, sellers, well dressed children...
Franz loved watching people and enjoyed the silence.
The air, the trees, the heat of the sun...
Everything was lovely, just like a gift.

Suddenly, he heard a loud crying that stopped him.
It was a little girl near him, standing alone.
No one was looking at her.
Franz didn’t know what to do. Kids were a mystery to him.
The little girl looked very young and she was nicely dressed:
a lace collared blouse, a ruffled skirt, a jacket and boots.
She had dark long hair, braided on each side.
She was beautiful, just like every little girl.

What can I do? Franz thought. Is she lost?
Should I go with her to find a policeman that could help her?
Will she be afraid of me?
I can’t go and leave her here all alone, in the middle of the park.
The girl kept crying helplessly. Franz had never seen anyone crying like this before. Giving up, he took his hat off, tried to smile and said:

‘Hello.’

She looked at him unafraid, full of innocence. Tears were running down her cheeks to her chin. She was sobbing.

‘What’s wrong? Are you lost?’ Franz asked.

‘Not me.’

*What a strange answer,* he thought.

‘Where do you live?’ he asked.

The little girl pointed to the houses behind the trees.

It was obvious she wasn’t lost.

‘Who’s lost then?’ Franz asked.

‘My doll.’

10
The girl, remembering her doll, started to weep again. Franz wanted her to stop:

‘Your doll?’ Franz repeated.

‘Yes.’

He didn’t know what to do yet. He didn’t know how to speak to a little girl. Especially such a sad girl who had just lost her doll.

‘Where did you see it for the last time?’

‘In that bench.’

‘And what were you doing?’

‘I was playing there.’

‘Were you there for a long time?’

‘I don’t know.’

He looked a policeman, asking that many questions. He wanted to leave, but he couldn’t.
That girl and her sobbing eyes withheld him. Then, suddenly, Franz found the solution. He was a writer. And his writer imagination was starting to work.

‘Wait, wait! I’m such a fool! What’s your doll’s name?’ he asked the little girl.

‘Bridget.’

‘Of course, Bridget! It’s her! Forgive me, I get really distracted sometimes! I have so much work, you see!’

The girl opened her eyes.

‘Your doll hasn’t gone missing,’ Franz Kafka said cheerfully. ‘She’s gone travelling!’

The girl looked at Franz surprised. He couldn’t believe what he had just told her, but she was still a kid, and her world was still full of trust, peace and love.

‘Travelling? Where to?’

‘Yes! Travelling! Come, let’s sit over here,’ answered Franz, thinking quickly.
He knew what he was saying had to sound convincing. A little girl’s innocence was not enough.

They sat in a bench close by, under the shade of the trees. Franz needed to rest. He was only 40, but he was just like an old man. He was very sick: he had tuberculosis\(^1\) and he was not able to work anymore.

‘And your name is...?’ he asked the little girl, acting dumb.

‘Elsi.’

‘Elsi, of course! It was obviously your doll because the letter is for you!’

‘What letter?’ the girl asked, surprised.

‘The one the doll wrote for you, to explain why she left. However, since I was in a rush, I left it at home. I’ll bring it tomorrow so you can read it, is that right for you?’

That was a turning point. The little girl could either think he was crazy or actually believe what he was telling her.

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\(^1\) Infectious and contagious disease that affects especially the lungs. Nowadays it’s treatable, however, in the past it could be mortal.
'Why has Bridget gone travelling without me?'
Elsi asked disappointed.

Franz was expecting this question.
He was proud of himself
because he could anticipate the girl’s reaction,
even just for a split second.

‘How long have you owned that doll?’

‘My whole life. She has always been my doll.’

‘That’s why, Elsi.
Bridget is old enough to leave the nest.
All of us will leave our homes eventually,
and we will travel, see the world...’

‘She didn’t tell me,’ the girl answered,
about to burst in tears again.

‘Maybe she forgot, or maybe you didn’t understand her.
And that’s why she wrote a letter.’

‘Then why do you have my letter?’ Elsi wanted to know.

Franz had been very convincing.
He had explained an absurd idea, but very honestly.
He had his answer ready and said it without hesitation.
‘Because I’m the postman of the dolls!’

‘Don’t postmen deliver letters to the houses?’ asked Elsi.

‘Common postmen do, but doll postmen don’t. Letters from dolls need to be delivered personally to the receivers, otherwise parents could read the letters before them. Besides, girls who receive these letters can’t read properly yet. And then I read them out loud. It’s an extremely important job.’

Elsi dried her last tears.

‘Why don’t you go and get my letter?’

‘I’m afraid it’s too late. My working hours are over. Tomorrow, when you come to the park, I’ll bring it to you. Trust me.’

Elsi got up from the bench and stood in front of him. She looked like she didn’t know what to do. Finally, she approached Franz and kissed him on the cheek. A kiss as soft as a butterfly’s wings.
'See you tomorrow, then,’ and the girl said goodbye.

‘Alright,’ said Franz, excited.

Elsi started to walk away, slowly,
until she vanished among the people.

Then, Franz realized:

‘Oh my god!’ he said loudly, covering his mouth with his hands.
‘I’m in real trouble!’

He was never afraid of anything or anyone,
but now he was afraid of a girl,
a little woman who was able to cry with such sadness
and to look at him with such intensity.
He was also afraid of the way all this could affect the girl:
if the next day he didn’t show up with the promised letter,
Elsi would grow thinking her doll had left her.
A little girl’s hope depended on him.
A sacred hope.

Franz Kafka felt the tingling sensation on his hands,
the nervous tension that urged him to make up
the most extraordinary stories.
He was a writer, but he had never written a letter
coming from a doll.
He got up from the bench feeling very anxious.
What would Bridget the doll be like?
Where would she be gone to? How could he explain that to Elsi?
He arrived home feverish.
His forehead was boiling hot.
He was thinking about the mystery he had just created:
the travelling doll.