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Good Morning, Mr. Kafka

by Mildred Pond

Dorothea tells herself that she sees in the dark -- more precisely, it's like seeing *through* the dark. The change has prompted her to write a letter to Franz Kafka -- in her mind, of course; principally because she feels he would understand. *I mean seeing into, Mr. Kafka, seeing through.* It is not a commonplace trait, but nothing is normal these days, not for her, and besides who establishes what's normal in the first place?

“A lifelong potter, I've always shaped things out of clay with my hands, Mr. Kafka, often spinning the wheel with my eyes closed, my fingers sensing exactly when to stop.” She considers adding that she's also taken to writing sentences that come out in a new rhythm, like poetry. Such as:

I see layers within,
Separate, steadfast.
They do nothing, offering
instead –
Resistance.
Yet I move through each new
petal
Of my soul. “Welcome,” I hear.

No, there's another closed
door.

She's been advised to contemplate a rose, daily, and she does. An odd, far-fetched suggestion, but no wiser alternatives have not been offered. She scribbles,

Today, pale light has already crept above the low apartment buildings across the street, and she hasn't catapulted into the familiar, sweating panic. She gratefully embraces that new sensation -- calm, a hint of joy, no, not joy, but what's left when there's no raucous chatter. “*Dear Rose, it's in the deep quiet that you are,*” she says with conviction, and the quiet slips away.

To describe is to obfuscate,
Make unreal the real.

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Since she shut down her potter's wheel, a pinkish, quieting dust has settled on everything in her studio beyond the kitchen. Her strong, muscular hands tremble now, as if they are not hers, as if words have replaced her need of them. Thoughts arise instead, molded into insights, not shaped, dried and glazed. "Mr. Kafka, my new insights spring forth, clear, hopeful, but quickly swerve into new, terrifying directions."

Her decision to write a letter to a long dead Czech writer came full-blown during one such pre-dawn, panic attack. As if the famous author were an old friend! But why not write to him? She'd read his stories, and always cherished the postcard a friend had sent her years ago of a tiny house on a Prague hill, now an antiques store, but formerly one of Kafka's many homes. Behind the shop, on top of a high hill, was a castle! It seemed appropriate to choose a formal rhythm for her letter, which began:

"Dear Mr. Kafka,

"I address you directly because it doesn't strike me as fitting to write to your alter ego, Gregor Samsa, who woke up one morning to discover that he'd turned into a bug! What a horrifying shock that must have been! Unable to turn over, scratch himself. In my minds' past meanderings about your transformation, I've always pictured a huge, fully-grown, fat cockroach crawling stealthily up the wall in your family's apartment in Prague, although you also described it as definitely a beetle, even some sort of vermin. A vermin would aptly describe your understandable horror.

"Your unusual insights, Mr. Kafka, tell me that there are real similarities between Gregor Samsa's transformation (you called it a metamorphosis), and my own, namely: that *I* have turned into a cancer cell."

In her mind, she crossed out the last four words and said aloud: "One gigantic mess of vicious, rampaging cells, Mr. Kafka!" She commiserated with poor Gregor, going to bed one night in his pajamas, and waking up, not on his human back, but on a hardened shell. Helpless, deliberately ignored, shunned, *unseen* by his entire family. Kind, old Dr. Weber had broken the awful news of her own metamorphosis more gently. He'd had tears in his

eyes, put his arm around her.

Daylight had finally given shape to her small bedroom. Dorothea continued:

“Like Gregor, I panicked, Mr. Kafka, ran amuck in different directions, first to meditate in silence at an ashram in the Catskills, second, I closed my studio, cancelled all my classes. I lasted a day at the ashram, packed my bag and left. More precious time went by, sirens blaring in my head like hysterical clocks. I tried other escapes, walks in Central Park, visited museums. I thought again of your transformation when my friend Yvonne, who still cuts my vanishing hair, told me of a wise man named Emmanuel. The name means, ‘God is With Us,’ in Hebrew.”

Dorothea grimaced toward the ceiling, picked up a pen this time and, hoping to ground herself, wrote on a pad that Emmanuel, already dead a few hundred years, channeled his wise counsel through a woman.

“Mr. Kafka, Yvonne looked at my pitiful straggly hair, my frozen stare, and reassured me that Emmanuel had offered guidance to several other clients. Wide-open, helpful answers that had steered one client, whose husband had walked out on her, into new directions. Like: ‘What can you lose if you have your own heart? And what can you win if you do not?’ The woman had expressed doubt, so Emmanuel added, “See this as a lesson, not a retribution.”

“I’ll be blunt, Mr. Kafka. My metamorphosis threw me over a cliff. The only promise Dr. Weber offered me was a tiny frame of six to eight months. ‘Live ‘em well, dear,’ he said, firmly gripping my hand, fearful that I might faint.

“But I let weeks go by, Mr. Kafka, overcome with fear, fury, paralysis, and finally a steady, lower-keyed panic. Time raced, like horses around a track. I threw out my ear splitting, ticking kitchen clock, but the noise continued, rampaged. I heard it pulsing in my veins. In my situation, you might have gone to hear Emmanuel yourself.

“There I sat, on a cushion, surrounded by a dozen others with their own dilemmas. I listened apprehensively to the guidance, new-sounding phrases, like “Love requires no practice, practice the

decision to love,” Emmanuel told a woman, bitter because she kept failing to repair her relationship with her father.” To a young man, who was looking for faith, he said, “You cannot think God’s reality. You can only experience it.” Elliptical, but somehow soothing, wouldn’t you say, Mr. Kafka?

“Finally, my turn came. I managed to describe my hopeless, cancer cell identity, and waited. The woman channeling Emmanuel, eyes closed, paused on her chair in the center of the room, and finally said:

“Stop everything.
You are not alone.
Walk through the fear.
Be still. In the stillness,
Contemplate a rose.”

Dorothea interrupted her letter, picked up her rose in its slim glass vase, went to the kitchen and brewed a pot of coffee.

She had stood on the sidewalk afterwards, bewildered. *Contemplate a goddam rose?* A freakish cannibalism was rapidly mincing her insides to nothing, all she had left was a tiny remnant, a little speck of what is generally called time, and she was to stare at, breathe in a rose’s aroma? See its beauty? *Watch* it die? Were there no other mental hurdles Emmanuel could have suggested, from wherever he was, out of time’s clutches? She walked for blocks, floating in a fog, dropped into to a coffee shop, ordered a cup of tea.

Her letter to Kafka remained unfinished.

Now, precious weeks later, in her kitchen, she picked up her train of thought: “Fictional or not, Mr. Kafka, I mean your condition, mine -- it’s all a matter of shared interest, or probing those interests, isn’t it? What’s a flower? Who’s the bug? Who’s the cancer cell? Is a rose a thing? Or a thought?”

Of course time creeps forward. But not always. Before she shut down her studio, she occasionally spun her potter’s wheel with such focused concentration that time vanished. Now, in rare moments, she looks into her rose and she can tell when time stops. She’s learned how to see, be in each stage the rose passes through: curled tips, widening center, amazing transformations witnessed

up close – a slow bursting into splendor, then an unhurried curling, shriveling, and finally . . . decay.

* * *

On the sidewalk one afternoon, carrying with her that week's bloom, she'd tripped and fallen, and called out, "Hello? Emmanuel? Why a rose?" Habits form, she thought, good and bad, assume a natural gait of their own. A passerby helped her to stand, and she muttered to the passerby, to herself, "Why not a lily, or an iris, or even a tulip? A cabbage is beautiful too, and how about a cauliflower?"

She researched the rose in an old, dust-covered encyclopedia. *Sub Rosa*, they said in ancient Rome, referring to a wild rose placed above a door when secret matters were being discussed inside. It symbolized the need to keep a secret. The rose had an ancient past.

* * *

"It's just a simple rose, dear," she explains for the tenth time to Janie, her perplexed daughter.

"I can see that, Mom!"

Dorothea hears the fear in Janie's voice. The girl has stoically listened to her mother's descriptions of how the ancient Greeks and Romans loved the rose, which later became a symbol of the Virgin Mary, talisman for St. Valentine's Day; it was a flower that had been around for millions of years. Dorothea cannot grasp its meaning any more than her daughter.

When Janie drops by after work, bearing gifts of Chinese food, French rolls, wine, hand creams, whatever catches her eye, she pointedly does not see her mother's precious rose, the ritual of it, its constant presence. She's already impatient, bristling.

* * *

Dorothea awakens abruptly in the middle of the night, understands that she is only looking at the rose's exterior limits. She has barely glanced past each flower's top layers, mute petals, dead before their time, or in their good time. Minutes, hours, days have slipped by, the roses are all dead, and another

storm of panic thrashes inside her. She's at the beginning, again.

Soon she sees on the carpet at her feet, several, fallen white petals have astonishingly transformed into pictures. Pictures! "*Are you listening, Mr. Kafka?*" Vivid, long ago memories, one, of Janie at the front door, so little, clinging to her daddy's legs, after Dorothea had shoved him out. *Get out, Sid. Now.*

Janie pointedly keeps busy when she comes now, careful to avoid stepping into her mother's mausoleum-like former studio, still troubled over the abrupt ending of the classes held there since before Janie was born. No one steps into the space, least of all the studio's long-time teacher, Dorothea herself.

Yet the studio is oddly expectant, an unquiet stillness hovers over Dorothea's remaining bowls, plates, and vases. She notices the large pitcher Sid bought when they'd met at a street fair in Soho. It had been her favorite because she'd managed to get the glaze just right and he had noticed it right away. Why was the pitcher still there? And why was she noticing only today that it was? Poor Sid, haggard, falling apart, could hardly have remembered to pack the pitcher when Dorothea kicked him out. Janie, turned six that month, wouldn't let go of her daddy's legs when Dorothea shoved him and his army duffel bag into the hall outside. *Get out, Sid. Now.*

* * *

This evening, weeks later, Janie brings her a toasted roll with a slice of Dorothea's favorite cheese. She's smiling, hoping that, just this once, her mother might eat something. . . anything. Dorothea nods, smiles back, says thank you and takes a bite.

The rose, in its slim, glass vase on the kitchen counter, is radiantly beautiful today; Dorothea is unable to take her eyes off of it, wants to say:

Listen, Janie, I'm not sure why I contemplate a rose. It's what it is. . . symbol of virtue, love, something hidden, St. Valentine, sacrifice, death! And Emmanuel -- I don't know why I trust him, but I do -- specifically prescribed a rose.

Instead Dorothea says, "It is soothing to look at, Janie." Well, sometimes it is. Often, it's torture just

to stay put, unable to stop the panic.

When she is not visiting her mother and trying to ignore her mother's strange fixation, Janie is a capable assistant prosecuting attorney. Dorothea always pictures Janie bristling in court, firing up her determination to win her argument, her case, which she often does. Fortunately, she is happily, or rather comfortably married to a laid-back history professor and they have an eleven-year-old son, Bird, who is sharp like his mom and calmly tolerant like his dad and a kinder human being than the three of them combined.

Dorothea is crazy about Bird. He seems to understand about her rose. Charles is the boy's real name. Bird wears no false costume, he's always himself, and he can swing in his mind like a large-winged bird. That's why Dorothea thinks the nickname she's given him suits him so well. Dorothea has told Bird about her letter to Mr. Kafka.

But time keeps strutting forward each day, inside her mind, or it creeps like a cold snake in the bleak, night hours. On this particular morning, she thinks of Gregor Samsa again, and so she talks to Mr. Kafka : "It's the shock of it, isn't it, our being transformed so *suddenly* and radically, you into a bug and me into my cancer cells. Our outer armor, garments, the roles we've played, how we showed ourselves to the world, our *plans*, for God's sake, smashed, altered, obliterated, seemingly overnight."

Dorothea told Bird recently, "I don't know who I am anymore. That's worrisome because I'm not sure who I was *before*." She had to laugh at herself, and so did Bird. He was certain that she was still the same grandmother he saw yesterday and a year ago.

Bird understands perfectly when she suddenly grows peevish, screeches in the kitchen to let loose her fears, her fate, or just for the hell of it. He even seemed to understand when she hurled the rose across the room one afternoon, smashing the glass vase against the wall. Bird paused a moment, decided to walk round like a monster, which made Dorothea collapse on the sofa, laughing.

The boy seems to understand that a mystery is unfolding in Dorothea's rose routine. The flower is often poised between them in its place of honor when they lounge on the floor playing a game of rummy, or

while they build a house of cards, before knocking it over. Sometimes Dorothea will pick up on an ongoing story, which she likes to make up as she goes along, a practice she's had since he was little. Perhaps he thinks that if she continues with the stories she is still his same nanny and not a cancer cell.

One afternoon, Dorothea decided on a hunch to tell Bird about Gregor Samsa. Intrigued, only half sure, he asked her to read the story.

The boy's eyes grew less merry when Dorothea read about poor Gregor's transformation into a gigantic beetle, turned solemn when Gregor's father and siblings showed revulsion over the change, and finally poor Bird was stymied, and sad when an apple Gregor's father threw at him cracked the bug's shell, bringing on the bug's death.

They spent several afternoons, taking turns reading the entire story. Dorothea sensed that Bird had a deeper, quieter, capacity to listen to the story than she did. He was more saddened than horrified. Dorothea felt a wise generosity settle inside him. He was ahead of her.

Far ahead of her, she thought one night, a week later. Everyone was ahead of her, and she began to yell, raging at the absent kitchen clock's relentless, time bomb ticking inside her head. "Be still? Contemplate? Go gently into some gentle, goddamn, rose-filled night? It's not possible, Emmanuel!"

* * *

Now, again, her hand is bleeding! She's rammed her thumb into a thorn after grabbing her rose from its vase, mashed its petals and hurled the flower into the trashcan. "A real numbskull's what you are! Staring at a rose, while the crazy universe, whatever rules the rampage out there, the insane universe, your dumb mind keeps stumbling over . . . nothing." She slips in a daze to the floor.

Her stamina spent, she's quieted down, grateful to be alone. Bird and Janie have gone away for a few days. But she misses her rose, her kind, rocking chair of a rose. She manages to stand, and walk the half block to the corner, avoiding glimpses of her straggly frame in the florist's window. Eddie, the florist, hands her a splendid, serene, white rose, its petals rimmed in

deep pink.

* * *

“You don’t have to *do* that,” Bird said vehemently when he showed up again, referring to her carrying the flower in its vase, from the kitchen to the living room, and back again, depending on what she was doing. “Just close your eyes, and it’s there.”

Bird hid her rose in the hall closet while she was fixing him a snack in the kitchen one afternoon. When Dorothea looked for it, she felt dizzy and keeled over. Of course, she was so weak she might have fainted anyway. Charlie Bird was fanning her with a dishtowel when she regained consciousness, sprinkling cold water on her face. Her rose stood in its vase on the floor next to her.

* * *

But she knows, weeks later, that Bird is right. She closes her eyes and the rose, its mute presence, connects, shines, performs its mysterious magic. But later, she hears it, the new kitchen clock’s silent ticking.

The trickery of time is that its seeming, even flow, or its chopped up mayhem, depends on her mind. Its disjointed parts rarely move in one direction, and her body listens -- separately, warily, untidily, on its own. Okay, so time’s a puzzle. Pieces of time? Recently, after she’d gotten lost inside her latest rose’s wilting petals, she knew there was no time. She was quiet. It had stopped.

* * *

“My mind’s a mirror, Mr. Kafka, and I see a blur of identities: daughter, sister, student, teacher, wife, mother, lover, states of mind, parts within parts, all peculiarly held together by an unseen glue. The mirror cracks, shatters, remains.

“What about you, Mr. Kafka? Brother, son, crawling, insignificant bug? You saw a castle, high on a hill above your little house in Prague. God lived there, didn’t he? Mr. Kafka, are you with me? Which one of us is on trial? And for what crime? Who’s judging? My cancer cell is breathing fire in the wings.”

“Write who you are, in relation to your time, ” the professor had told the students in the required philosophy class during Dorothea’s one, and only, year in college. She had attempted to dig her way out of the shadowy depths of Plato’s mythical cave, into a supposedly real world outside. Out of her depth, she had written, arrogantly clueless, avoiding conclusions, since she knew she was just a speck, a semblance of somebody. She’d dropped out of college, struck out on her own, pursuing a different dream, a deep-seated promise to herself to become a potter.

“I’m a cancer cell now, Mr. Kafka, and I’d thought I was out of the cave, definitely outside. The false shadows of a dream figure on the wall may be gone, but I’m still stumbling in the dim light around me. You do know what I mean, don’t you? It’s still a dream. . . a domineering, ever-present castle in the background of everyone’s mind, a mysterious power breathing down judgment.”

“Don’t be a sap, Dottie, finish what you started,” her college professor had scolded in a note, but she had dropped out anyway, apprenticed under a fine, experienced potter, molding her mind and fingers to move according to rules she learned to follow instinctively. She was a potter, sure, safe, and solid.

* * *

Sometimes Eddie drops off her weekly rose himself, if his shipment arrives early. He buzzes her bell and says, “Special delivery, Dottie, your rose is here.” Lately, she’s been scrutinizing a pink English tea rose. She might lose her way in its mysterious darkness, or forage into new, less frightening, spaces. More than once she’s loitered inside, seen herself ravaged, and she remembers escaping to the Catskill’s, months ago, for a weekend’s meditation. “Attain Peace of Mind,” the ashram’s ad had promised.

She’d sat on a cushion, listening to the kindly, white-turbaned, dark-skinned guru, addressing the large, crammed hall. “Agitation is of the mind,” he said. She’d agreed wholeheartedly. On the wall near her a framed statement read: “To know that you do not know is best.” She’d agreed to that one, too. And fled the next morning. “Give it time,” the guru told her at the door. “I don’t have time,” she’d whispered. He responded with a hearty laugh, as if he knew all

about time. Then he'd stood on his toes, to firmly press a thumb into the center of her forehead, no doubt thrusting a powerful gift of tranquility into her troubled cancer-transformed self. His eyes turned merry, and he said: "No Thought, No Action, No Movement, Total Stillness." he said.

Instead, a rush of images appeared, successive shock waves, clamoring through her mind as soon as she settled into her seat on the crowded New York bound bus. As if the guru's pressing thumb had sprung loose a long-buried sack of ugly, mean-spirited memories: a scattered panorama of her life, stripped of illusions. Was she meant to look at them, see them in a new light? She remembered stealing some licorice from the drug store when she was six, remembered a small child in a pram, her new pink coat splattered with mud, the child's mother spanking her violently, while Dorothea, aged seven, who had carelessly let the pram roll into the mud, stood by watching the spanking, not admitting her role in the accident. A rush of buried memories clamored, decades old events she had not thought of in years, snapshots of live open wounds, a trail of them, sometimes kind, some mean-spirited, each reflected separately in the window as the bus rushed by streams, woods, small villages, rushing cars. Suddenly, an image of Sid, Janie's dad, in the hall outside. *Get out, Sid. Now.*

* * *

"Mr. Kafka," she thinks now, as winter approaches, "Crawling around, feeling like the lowest of insignificant bugs, you must have agonized over it, no? You had to, barely escaping being stepped on. Wondering why you were born? Just to feel helpless, guilty? Where was God in all this? Was there a God?"

To Know That You Do Not Know Is Best. Why is it best? Because you toss everything out that you think you know?

Sid never uttered a word that night she had vengefully kicked him out, thirty years ago. He'd stood in the hall outside, gaunt, perplexed, silent. *Get out, Sid.* Dorothea had known how fragile he was, that he'd be homeless, and she didn't care. Five years of turmoil with him, his habitual gathering up of comrades, ripped apart Vietnam vets, bringing them home, marching with them in the streets. She'd

marched arm-in-arm with them, all fired up. The more Sid marched, the quieter he got, keeping hidden the mess inside, the same mess his comrades heaved out in angry, drug-fed parades, protests, in her own little apartment. Some of his bedraggled friends moved in, slept on the floor, and she'd let them, playing the heroine.

Sid kept his fear, his guilt, locked up, but it regularly burst through his sleep. Shouts of horror shattered the night's quiet, which he never recalled the next day. Her small, three rooms, she realized one morning, resembled a real madhouse. She kicked the mumbling, angry, hung-over bunch of vets out and a few days later ordered Sid out too. He'd stood in a daze staring at the army duffel she'd shoved toward him. Little Janie clutched his legs, sobbing. *Please, Daddy, don't go.* He caressed Janie's head, said nothing. Dorothea knew he would probably sleep that night unde some bridge, and didn't care.

Sid had married and divorced twice, slowly digging, hammering his way toward daylight. He lived in Vermont now, had become a carpenter, a good one, hitting and shaping into manageable feelings the layers of remorse, guilt and rage over his butchering not just at random, countless Vietnamese women and children, but once blasting an entire village, killing everyone in sight. Sid had hammered those hideous memories into a semblance of forgiveness with each wooden plank of a new Vermont floor, wall, roof, or house porch. He now lived with Sylvia, a nurse.

Sid was finally selling his strong, tranquil-filled sculptures of burnished steel. One of them, entitled Peace, stood on the lawn outside his village's Town Hall. Sid was a caring dad.

* * *

"How come you've *never* thought this through?" Dorothea asks herself. She is again in a cold sweat, as unsettled as ever. At people's wakes, funerals, there was always talk of the deceased person's useful, wonderful life, a selfless this, a courageous that, but then came a plethora of feel good platitudes. Did anyone really know, go there, look inside the dark, and ask? Learn? *Mr. Kafka, there's a thought in the back corners of my mind, yours too, I suspect, of an abyss, an axe already falling.*

It takes an act of will to stare into the dark. *No, look beyond, ask the little rose.* Its petals are like pages in a book, a diary of her life, she thinks, fallen idols, pictures in the exhibition that is closing. Questions and answers are embedded together, within the flower's stillness. And quite suddenly, she descends, lucidly, into a dream.

But again, inside the rose, crazy ghosts spring up. There's an ugly blight at the base of her otherwise perfect white rose. It's the equivalent of a clubfoot, she's seeing herself. Her rose is teaching her to look, accept, let go, in the silence.

An endless succession of submerged pictures flash by: of torment, judgments, fear, shame, regrets; of triumphs now too, and winning streaks. *Each brave rose absorbs, takes it all in, shrivels, shrinks, and dies.*

In each naked instant of quiet you provide,
blossoming friend,

I am stripped again,

Made raw, defenseless.

* * *

She didn't phone Sid. Instead, on an impulse, she rang her neighbor's doorbell down the hall, startled the woman by giving her a stunningly lovely rose. "Just to say hello," she explained. Really, it was an apology for disliking the woman. Her neighbor's crime: *loneliness*, and consequent peeping through a crack in her front door.

She phoned Annie next, a student she'd thought clumsy, who frequently dropped her mugs and bowls, pulled them off the shelf when they were barely dry, not ready for the kiln. Dorothea had snapped, "How long are you going to keep doing this, Annie?" The class went dead. Her meanness had shut it down.

"Annie?" Dorothea held the phone away from her ear, expecting a chilly silence. "I think one of your pieces may still be here." There was an unclaimed shapely little bowl, a lovely shade of golden brown, now under a coating of dust. Dorothea would send it to her as a peace offering.

Annie remained silent. Dorothea said, "I really wanted to say how sorry I am, how wrong I was, to yell unkindly at you in class."

More silence, finally a chuckle. "Oh no, Dotty, I had it coming. How *are* you?"

Maybe Annie had heard that Dorothea had become a cancer cell, and wanted to make things easier for her, soften her landing.

"What a coincidence, Dottie. I was planning to call you next week, to invite you to my wedding. Still months away, but I wanted you to know."

Months? "What wonderful news, Annie. . ." her voice trailed. "I'd be happy to come. . ."

She hung up, overcome by waves of helplessness, dread. The shift made her dizzy, and she knocked over the shapely brown bowl. She slid to the floor near her rose, gently touched its supple petals with her fingertips. That evening she cleaned Sid's pitcher. Its glaze was still fine. She would package the pitcher, ask Janie to mail it to the new bride, whose marriage she would not attend.

* * *

Sid had just marched in an anti-war demonstration that Sunday morning in the park, and sauntered afterwards toward the potters' corner section of the street fair. He had hung back, hesitant, under the awning. Dorothea had thought he was handsome, haggard, disheveled, and appreciative of her wares. He'd looked over her bowls, vases, plates, and picked up that particular pitcher with its azure blue finish that she'd managed to get just right.

"This is nice," he said, turning it round, appreciatively. Sid had bought it, sauntered off, returned later, still carrying it, and offered to walk her home after she and the other potters packed up their wares.

They'd hit it off. Surprisingly, she thought, considering how quiet he was, glancing round attentively in her studio later. He'd walled off the war scars, unlike the vets she soon met with him on the streets, who yelled, marched, went berserk on drugs, made speeches. Everyone then -- blacks, women,

vets – assembled, and joined to march for their rights, stop the war. Sid was soft-spoken, thoughtful, and she didn't see or chose not to see, how much he had shuttered off. He was in fact a smiling, walking time bomb who kept giving away the few things he owned to someone more in need.

After a minister they'd met at a peace protest married them, Sid's rage began to slip out, in his sleep, sometimes explosively, more violently, as if he had two separate selves. By day, she taught her pottery classes, Sid took on odd jobs, but he often quit, or was let go, and they marched together, yelled for peace together and soon she proudly carried her unborn baby, marching in the protests, while the quicksand inside swirled. She'd stood aside, allowed her small apartment to become a crammed boarding house for a crazy bunch of confused, sometimes violent drug-fed vets.

* * *

“Mr. Kafka, the blight on my rose is like a scarred face. I see now how it takes its deformity in stride. I am unlearning, Mr. Kafka.”

* * *

“She's serene about it, isn't she?”

“Serene about what, Mom?”

“Her life's strains, challenges, abysses. . .this little blight is nothing.” Dorothea points to this week's rose.

How much Janie has changed. Now she looks around for the rose as soon as she comes. She's stopped bringing tantalizing food, fragrances and fruits. Dorothea has little interest in eating. Both Janie and Bird give each rose its due. *Benevolence, Mr. Kafka, is contagious, wouldn't you agree?*

* * *

“Jesus, Dottie, what's wrong? You woke us up,” Sid says over the phone.

She's dialed Sid's number, noticing how grace-filled her rose is, this new one, its deep red so radiant under the ring of light provided by her bedside lamp. The clock reads three A.M., too late to apologize, but

she's unable to speak, struggling to stop crying.

“What the hell? You okay, Dottie? Janie said you'd gone to the Catskills, I know that was a while ago.”

“I've come back. . .yes. I'm sorry, Sid.”

“What?”

Get out, Sid. Now! The words were vapor.

“What is it, Sweetie? Can't get back to sleep?”

“You're a wonderful dad, Sid. Thanks.”

“She can be a pain in the butt sometimes,” he said, laughing. He wanted to make her laugh, too. “Want us to come down, Dottie?”

No words came. She searched, but none came. She was sobbing.

“I still laugh in my sleep, Dottie,” he said, quietly.

Had she asked him if he did? Her mind shook, rattled, doors were opening and slamming. She was losing her bearings, but bearings no longer counted, she knew that for certain, no boundaries, no shape, only the oneness of her dear, dear rose was real. She had squeezed off each delicate petal of her new rose, squeezed them off one by one and they'd scattered like rice paper on her lap. His beautiful steel boxes were like flowers on the graves of those he had murdered halfway around the world in another time, yet also now. “I'm glad, Sid. So long.”

Live 'em well, dear, the good doctor had told her. *What idiocy. . .what better way. Take a gamble, Dottie, spin the wheel. All you have, after all, is a choice between the red and the black, one or the other, so choose! Or perhaps do nothing, look at a rose, deep inside. . .a rose. . .forgive.*

Gladys, her neighbor, was flabbergasted when Dorothea, gave her the day's fresh new rose.

She meets it one night, has to, it is in the hand she's dealt herself all along. Her lady of the night, from hospice, sleeps on the couch nearby. It comes, when it seems that everyone in the world sleeps,

though that's never true. It is already there before she opens her eyes. She makes herself sit up in her bed. Her nemesis, patron of horror, doom, death, the blight that has devoured her slowly, bit by bit, as if it has legs, wings, is metastasizing now, still waving its tentacles further into the surrounding air, the carpet, the walls. She is in a new place entirely, and she is quietly standing her ground, unblinking. Suddenly, she moves forward, through the bedposts, travels through the rampage, what was, and as it vanishes, there is her steadfast friend instead, no question about it -- her rose!

“Are you seeing, my friend? How its form has altered? It's translucent in its blessed stillness, and it is nothing too. It is gone, a no-thing! But you know this by now, surely, don't you, *dear* Franz? “

Mildred Pond was raised in Paris, where her father, a career diplomat, was stationed. Years later he was posted in Berlin, Germany, where she landed her first job at the *The Stars & Stripes*. She was hired to answer telephones, but her boss in Berlin sent her to cover all manner of stories which, later, when I returned to the United States led to my being hired as a reporter for *The New York Times*. She quit the *Times* after almost a decade to return to college, earning a Masters Degree in Philosophy at Fordham University. She also was a reporter in the press office of the United Nations, covering the General Assembly for the international press. She has had several short stories published in online magazines and a couple in now defunct small lit. mags.

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