

THE JUDGMENT

Written by Franz Kafka

Translation by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College

Narrated by Michael Scott

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It was a Sunday morning at the most beautiful time in spring. George Benderman, a young merchant, was sitting in his private room on the first floor of one of the low, poorly constructed houses extending in a long row along the river, almost indistinguishable from each other except for their height and color. He had just finished a letter to a friend from his youth who was now abroad, had sealed in a playful and desultory manner, and then was looking, elbows propped on the writing table, out of the window at the river, the bridge, and the hills on the other shore with their delicate greenery.

He was thinking about how this friend, dissatisfied with his progress at home, had actually run off to Russia some years before. Now he ran a business in St. Petersburg, which had gotten off to a very good start but which for a long time now had appeared to be faltering, as his friend complained on his increasingly rare visits. So he was wearing himself out working to no purpose in a foreign land. The exotic full beard only poorly concealed the face George had known so well since his childhood years, and the yellowish color of his skin seemed to indicate a developing sickness. As he explained it, he had no real connection to the colony of his countrymen in the place and also hardly any social interaction with local families and so was resigning himself to being a permanent bachelor.

What should one write to such a man, who had obviously gone off course, a man one could feel sorry for but could not help. Should one perhaps advise him to come back home again, shift his life back here, take up again all the old friendly relationships—there was certainly nothing to prevent that—and in addition rely on the help of friends? But that amounted to the same thing as saying to him—and the more gently one said it, the more wounding it would also be—that his previous attempts had been unsuccessful, that he should finally give them up, that he must come back and allow everyone to gape at him as an eternal returned prodigal, that only his friends understood anything, and that he would be an overage child, who should simply obey his successful friends who had stayed home. And then was it certain that all the misery one would have to put him through had a point? Perhaps it would not even succeed in bringing him back home at all—he said himself that he no longer understood conditions in his homeland—so then he would remain in his foreign country in spite of everything, embittered by the advice and a little more estranged from his friends. But if he really followed the advice and became depressed here—not intentionally, of course, but because of his circumstances—could not cope with life, with his friends or without them, felt ashamed, and had, in fact, no homeland and no friends any more, was it not much better for him to remain abroad, just as he was? Given these facts, could one think that he would really advance himself here?

For these reasons, if one still wanted to maintain some sort of relationship by correspondence, one could not provide any real news, the way one would without any inhibitions to the most casual acquaintance. It was already more than three years since his friend had been home, and he explained this with the very inadequate excuse of the uncertainty of the political conditions in Russia, which would not allow even the briefest absence of a small businessman, while it permitted hundreds of thousand of Russians to travel around peacefully in the world.

But in the course of these three years much had changed for George. Since his mother's death, which had taken place about two years earlier, George had lived with his old father in a household they shared. His friend had naturally learned about it and had expressed his sympathy in a letter with such a dry tone that the reason could only have been that the sadness of such an event is completely inconceivable in a foreign country. But since that time George had tackled both his business dealings and everything else with greater determination. Perhaps while his mother was still alive, his father's unwillingness to accept any point of view in the business except his had prevented George from developing a real project of his own; perhaps his father, since his mother's death, had grown slacker, although he still worked all the time in the business; perhaps fortunate circumstances had played a much more important role—something which was, in fact, highly likely—but in any case in these two years the business had developed very unexpectedly. They had had to double the staff, the cash turnover had increased fivefold, and there was no doubt that further progress lay ahead.

His friend, however, had no idea of these changes. Earlier, perhaps for the last time in that letter of condolence, he had wanted to persuade George to emigrate to Russia and had expanded upon the prospects which existed in St. Petersburg for George's particular line of business. The figures were minute compared to the scale which George's business had now acquired. But George had had no desire to write to his friend about his commercial success, and if he were to do it now belatedly, it would have looked really odd.

So George limited himself to writing to his friend only about insignificant details, the kind which pile up at random in one's memory when one is thinking things over on a peaceful Sunday. The only thing he wanted was to leave undisturbed the picture which his friend must have created of his home town during the long interval and which he would have learned to live with. And so it happened that George had announced three times to his friend in fairly widely spaced letters the engagement of an unimportant man to an equally unimportant young woman, until, quite contrary to George's intentions, the friend really began to get interested in this curious event.

But George preferred to write to him about such things rather than to confess that he himself had become engaged a month ago to a Miss Frieda Brandefeld, a young woman from a prosperous family. He often spoke to his fiancée about this friend and about the unusual relationship he had with him in their correspondence. "Then there's no chance he'll be coming to our wedding," she said, "and yet I have the right to meet all your friends." "I don't want to upset him," George replied. "Don't misunderstand me. He would probably come, at least I think so, but he would feel compelled and hurt and would perhaps envy me—he'd certainly feel unhappy and incapable of ever coping with his unhappiness and would travel back alone. Alone—do you know what that means?" "Yes, but can't he find out about our wedding in some other way?" "That's true, but I can't prevent that. However, given his lifestyle it's unlikely." "If you have friends like that, George, you shouldn't have gotten engaged at all." "Well, we're both to blame for that, but now I wouldn't want things to be any different." And then when she, breathing rapidly under his kisses, kept insisting "Still, it truly does upset me," he really thought it would be harmless to write everything to his friend. "That's what I am and that's just how he'll have to accept me," he said to himself. "I can't carve out of myself another man who might perhaps be more suitable for a friendship with him than I am."

And, in fact, he did inform his friend about the engagement which had taken place in the long letter which he had written that Sunday morning, in the following words "The best piece of news I have saved until the end. I have become engaged to a Miss Frieda Brandenfeld, a young woman from a well-to-do family, who first settled here long after your departure and thus whom you could hardly know. There will still be an opportunity to tell you more detailed information about my fiancée. Today it's enough for you to know that I am truly fortunate and that, as far as our mutual relationship is concerned, the only thing that has changed is that in me you will now have, instead of a completely ordinary friend, a happy friend. Moreover, in my fiancée, who sends her warm greetings and will soon write to you herself, you acquire a sincere female friend, something which is not entirely without significance for a bachelor. I know that there are many things hindering you from coming back to visit us, but wouldn't my wedding be exactly the right opportunity to throw aside these obstacles for once? But whatever the case, do what seems good to you, without concerning yourself about anything"

George sat for a long time at his writing table with his letter in his hand, his face turned towards the window. He barely acknowledged with an absent-minded smile someone he knew who greeted him from the lane as he walked past.

Finally he put the letter in his pocket and went out of his room, angling across a small passageway into his father's room, which he had not been in for months. There was really no need to do that, since he was always dealing with his father at work and they took their noon meal at the same time in a restaurant. In the evenings, of course, they each did as they wished, but for the most part, unless George was with friends, as was most frequently the case, or was now visiting his fiancée, they still sat for a little while, each with his own newspaper, in the living room they shared.

George was surprised how dark his father's room was, even on this sunny morning. So that was the kind of shadow cast by the high wall which rose on the other side of the narrow courtyard. His father was sitting by the window in a corner decorated with various reminders of his late lamented mother and was reading a newspaper, which he held in front of his eyes to one side, attempting in this way to compensate for some weakness in his eyes. On the table stood the remains of his breakfast, not much of which appeared to have been eaten.

"Ah, George," said his father, coming up at once to meet him. His heavy night shirt opened up as he moved and the ends of it flapped around him. "My father is still a giant," said George to himself.

Then he spoke up: "It's unbearably dark in here."

"Yes, it certainly is dark," his father answered.

"And you've shut the window as well?"

"I prefer it that way."

"Well, it is quite warm outside," said George, as if continuing what he'd said earlier, and sat down.

His father cleared off the breakfast dishes and put them on a cupboard.

"I really only wanted to tell you," continued George, who was following the movements of the old man quite absent mindedly, "that I've now sent a report of my engagement to St. Petersburg." He pulled the letter a little way out of his pocket and let it drop back again.

"Why to St. Petersburg?" his father asked.

"To my friend," said George, trying to look his father in the eye. "In business he's completely different," he thought. "How sturdily he sits here with his arms across his chest."

"Ah yes, to your friend," said his father, with emphasis.

"Well, father, you know at first I wanted to keep quiet to him about my engagement. Out of consideration, for no other reason. You yourself know he's a difficult person. I said to myself he could well learn about my engagement from some other quarter, even if his solitary way of life makes that hardly likely—I can't prevent that—but he should never learn about it from me."

"And now you're thinking about it differently?" the father asked. He set the large newspaper on the windowsill and on top the newspaper his glasses, which he covered with his hand.

"Yes, now I've been reconsidering it. If he's a good friend of mine, I said to myself, then a happy engagement for me is also something fortunate for him. And so I no longer hesitated to announce it to him. But before I send the letter, I wanted to tell you about it."

"George," said his father, pulling his toothless mouth wide open, "listen to me! You've come to me about this matter, to discuss it with me. No doubt that's a credit to you. But it's nothing, worse than nothing if you don't now tell me the complete truth. I don't want to stir up things which are not appropriate here. Since the death of our dear mother certain nasty things have been going on. Perhaps the time to talk about them has come and perhaps sooner than we think. In the business, a good deal escapes me. Perhaps it's not hidden from me—at the moment I'm not claiming it's done behind my back—I am no longer strong enough, my memory is deteriorating, I can't keep an eye on so many things any more.

First of all, that's nature taking its course, and secondly the death of our dear mother was a much bigger blow to me than to you. But since we're on the subject of this letter, I beg you, George, don't deceive me. It's a trivial thing, not worth mentioning. So don't deceive me. Do you really have this friend in St. Petersburg?"

George stood up in embarrassment. "Let's forget about my friend. A thousand friends wouldn't replace my father for me. Do you know what I think? You're not taking enough care of yourself. But old age demands its due. You are indispensable to me in the business—you're very well aware of that—but if the business is going to threaten your health, I'll close it tomorrow for good. That won't happen. We must set up a different life style for you. But something completely different. You sit here in the dark, and in the living room you'd have good light. You nibble at your breakfast instead of maintaining your strength properly. You sit by the closed window, and the air would do you so much good. No, my father! I'll bring in the doctor, and we'll follow his instructions. We'll change your room. You'll move into the front room. I'll come in here. For you there won't be any change. Everything will be moved over with you. But there's time for all that. Now I'll set you in bed for a little while. You need complete rest. Come, I'll help you get undressed. You'll see. I can do it. Or do you want to go into the front room right away. Then you can lie down in my bed for now. That would make a lot of sense."

George stood close beside his father, who had let his head with its tousled white hair sink onto his chest.

"George," said his father faintly, without moving.

George knelt down immediately alongside his father. He saw the enormous pupils in his father's tired face staring right at him from the corners of his eyes.

"You don't have a friend in St. Petersburg. You have always been a jokester and even with me you've not controlled yourself. So how could you have a friend there! I simply can't believe that."

"Think about it for a moment, father," said George. He raised his father from the arm chair and took off his nightgown as he just stood there very weakly. "It will soon be almost three years since my friend visited us. I still remember that you did not particularly like him. At least twice I kept him away from you, although he was sitting right in my room. It's true I could understand your aversion to him quite well. My friend does have his peculiarities. But then you later had a really good conversation with him yourself. At the time I was so proud of the fact that you listened to him, nodded your head, and asked questions. If you think about it, you must remember. That's when he told us some incredible stories about the Russian Revolution. For example, on a business trip in Kiev during a riot he saw a priest on a balcony who cut a wide bloody cross into the palm of his hand, raised his hand and appealed to the mob. You've even repeated this story yourself now and then."

Meanwhile, George had succeeded in setting his father down again and carefully taking off the cotton trousers which he wore over his linen underwear, as well as his socks. Looking at the undergarments, which were not particularly clean, he reproached himself for having neglected his father. It certainly should have been his responsibility to look after his father's changes in underwear. He had not yet talked explicitly with his fiancée about how they wished to make arrangements for his father's future, for they had tacitly assumed that his father would remain living alone in the old apartment. But now he quickly came to the firm decision to take his father with him into his future household.

When one looked more closely, it almost seemed that the care which he was ready to provide for his father there could come too late. He carried his father to bed in his arms. He experienced a dreadful feeling when he noticed, as he took a couple of paces to the bed, that his father was playing with the watch chain on his chest. He could not put him in the bed right away, so firm was his father's grip on this watch chain.

But as soon as he was in bed, all seemed well. He covered himself up and then even pulled the bedspread unusually high up over his shoulders. He look up at George in a not unfriendly manner.

"You do still remember him, don't you?" said George, nodding his head in encouragement.

"Am I well covered up now?" asked the father, as if he could not check whether his feet were sufficiently tucked in.

"So you feel good in bed now," said George and arranged the bedding better around him.

"Am I well covered up?" the father asked once more and seemed particularly keen to hear the answer.

"Just rest for now. You're well covered up."

"No!" cried his father, cutting short George's answer to the question. He threw back the covers with such force that in an instant they had completely flown off, and stood upright on the bed. He steadied himself with only one hand lightly touching the ceiling. "You wanted to cover me up—I know that, my little offspring—but I am not yet under the covers. And even if this is the last strength I have, it's enough for you, too much for you. Yes, I do know your friend. He'd be a son after my own heart. That's why you've been betraying him for years. Why else?"

Do you think I've not wept for him? That's the reason you lock yourself in your office—no one should disturb you, the boss is busy—that's the only way you can write your two-faced little letters to Russia. But fortunately no one has to teach a father to see through his son. Just now when you thought you'd brought him down, so far down that your buttocks could sit on him and he wouldn't move, at that point my son the gentleman has decided to get married!"

George looked up at the frightening specter of his father. The friend in St. Petersburg, whom the father suddenly knew so well, seized his imagination as never before. He saw him lost in the broad expanse of Russia. He saw him at the door of an empty, plundered business. Among the wreckage of his shelves, the shattered goods, the collapsed gas brackets, he was still standing, but only just. Why did he have to go so far away!

"But look at me," cried his father, and George ran, almost distracted, to the bed to take everything in, but he faltered half way. "Because she hoisted up her skirts," the father began in an affected tone, "because she hoisted up her skirts like this, the repulsive goose," and in order to imitate the action, he raised his shirt so high one could see the scar from his war years on his thigh, "because she hoisted her dress up like this and this, you chatted her up, and that's how you could satisfy yourself with her without being disturbed—you've disgraced our mother's memory, betrayed your friend, and stuck your father in bed, so he can't move. But he can move, can't he?" And he stood completely unsupported and kicked his legs. He was radiant with insight.

George stood in a corner, as far away as possible from his father. A long time before he had firmly decided to observe everything closely, so he would not be surprised somehow by any devious attack, from behind or from above. Now he recalled again this long-forgotten decision and forgot it, like someone pulling a short thread through the eye of a needle.

"But now your friend hasn't been betrayed at all," cried the father—his forefinger, waving back and forth, emphasized the point. "I've been his on-the-spot representative here."

"You comedian!" George could not resist calling out. He recognized immediately how damaging that was and bit down on his tongue, only too late—his eyes froze—until he doubled up with pain.

"Yes, naturally I've been playing a comedy! Comedy! A fine word! What other consolation remained for an old widowed father? Tell me—and while you're answering be my still living son—what else was left to me in my back room, persecuted by a disloyal staff, old right down into to my bones? And my son goes merrily through the world, finishing off business deals which I had set up, falling over himself with delight, and walking away from your father with the tight-lipped face of an honorable gentleman! Do you think I didn't love you, me, the one from whom you came?"

"Now he'll bend forward," thought George. "What if he falls and breaks apart!" These words hissed through his head.

His father leaned forward but did not fall over. When George did not come closer, as he had expected, he straightened himself up again.

"Stay where you are. I don't need you! You think you still have the strength to come here and are holding yourself back only because that's what you want. But what if you're wrong!"

I am still much stronger than you. Perhaps all on my own I would have to have had to back off, but your mother gave me so much of her strength that I've established a splendid relationship with your friend and I have your customers here in my pocket!"

"He even has pockets in his shirt!" said George to himself and thought with this comment he could make his father look ridiculous to the whole world. He thought this for only a moment, because he constantly forgot everything.

"Just link arms with your fiancée and cross my path! I'll sweep her right from your side—you have no idea how!"

George made a grimace, as if he didn't believe that. The father merely nodded towards George's corner, emphasizing the truth of what he'd said.

"How you amused me today when you came and asked whether you should write to your friend about the engagement. For he knows everything, you stupid boy, he already knows everything! I've been writing to him, because you forgot to take my writing things away from me. That's why he hasn't come for years. He knows everything a hundred times better than you do yourself. He crumples up your letters unread in his left hand, while in his right hand he holds my letters up to read."

In his enthusiasm he swung his arm over his head. "He knows everything a thousand times better," he shouted.

"Ten thousand times," said George, in order to make his father appear foolish, but in his mouth the phrase had already acquired a deathly tone.

"For years now I've been watching out for you to come with this question! Do you think I'm concerned about anything else? Do you think I read the newspapers? There!" and he threw a newspaper page which had somehow been carried into the bed right at George—an old newspaper, the name of which was completely unknown to George.

"How long you've waited before reaching maturity! Your mother had to die. She could not experience the joyous day. Your friend is deteriorating in his Russia—three years ago he was already yellow enough to be thrown away, and, as for me, well, you see how things are with me. You've got eyes for that!"

"So you've been lying in wait for me," cried George.

In a pitying tone, his father said as an afterthought, "Presumably you wanted to say that earlier. But now it's totally irrelevant."

And in a louder voice: "So now you know what there was in the world outside of yourself. Up to this point you've known only about yourself! Essentially you've been an innocent child, but even more essentially you've been a devilish human being! And therefore understand this: I sentence you now to death by drowning! "

George felt himself hounded from the room. The crash with which his father fell onto the bed behind him he still carried in his ears as he left. On the staircase, where he raced down the steps as if it were an inclined plane, he surprised his cleaning woman, who was intending to tidy the apartment after the night before.

"Jesus!" she cried and hid her face in her apron. But he was already past her. He leapt out the front door, driven across the roadway to the water. He was already clutching the railings the way a starving man grasps his food.

He swung himself over, like the outstanding gymnast he had been in his youth, to his parents' pride. He was still holding on, his grip weakening, when between the railings he caught sight of a motor coach which would easily drown out the noise of his fall. He called out quietly, "Dear parents, I have always loved you nonetheless" and let himself drop.

At that moment an almost unending stream of traffic was going over the bridge.