

## Kafka Café

*A nondescript café, Kafka Café is the regular haunt of Mr. M. As M settles down to an evening of solitude in the café, the eerie comforts of confiding strangers surround him. Do dreams reflect the reality or distort it?*



Soumya Sen, 2001A8PS263

The Kafka Cafe was located right across the University lawns, but hidden from view by a labyrinth of overgrown shrubs. It was a small shop, serving only a limited variety of sandwich, pastry and coffee. Perhaps it was because of this conspicuous lack of choices that most people, preferred to visit the posh cafes on the other side of the campus. But the lack of customers did not seem to bother Joe, the aged proprietor of this cafe. In fact he appeared to be genuinely contented in his frequent declarations:

*"You know, with these darn arthritic legs I can't be running around and attending too many customers, I really prefer it this way".*

Nevertheless, the cafe's strange air of solitude, which seemed to possess the great power to paralyze even time itself, had earned it a few regular patrons. Among these regular visitors was M., who had found his way to the cafe some fifteen years back after a tiring day at work. That day while sitting next to the glass window, sipping a cup of hot coffee and recollecting memories of bygone times, M. had realized that he was to fall in love with this cozy shelter he had discovered for himself. He had made a few good friends at the cafe, one of them being the proprietor, old Joe, who entertained M. with his rather curious habit

of diligently relaying the news he caught on his portable radio.

M. was sitting at his usual corner in the cafe, leafing through a new architecture catalog, when the little bell on the door jingled and a girl walked in. M. had not seen her at the cafe before, but from her looks she appeared to be a student at the University. Having got herself a cup of coffee, she sat down at the table adjoining M's. M. sensed that the girl was observing the sketches he was making at the margins of his catalog. A little while later she addressed him,

*"Excuse me Sir; I hope I am not intruding. Are you an architect?"*

*"Yes, I am. I was a professor at the University but I am retired now",* replied M., taking a better look at her.

*"Hi, I am Julia,"* she said.

*"Well, I have a question with which you might be able to help me. Do you know if there are any Gothic buildings in this area?"* she asked.

*"Um..I don't think so. No, none in this town as far as I know,"* said M. thoughtfully and then inquired hesitantly,

*"But may I know why you ask?"*

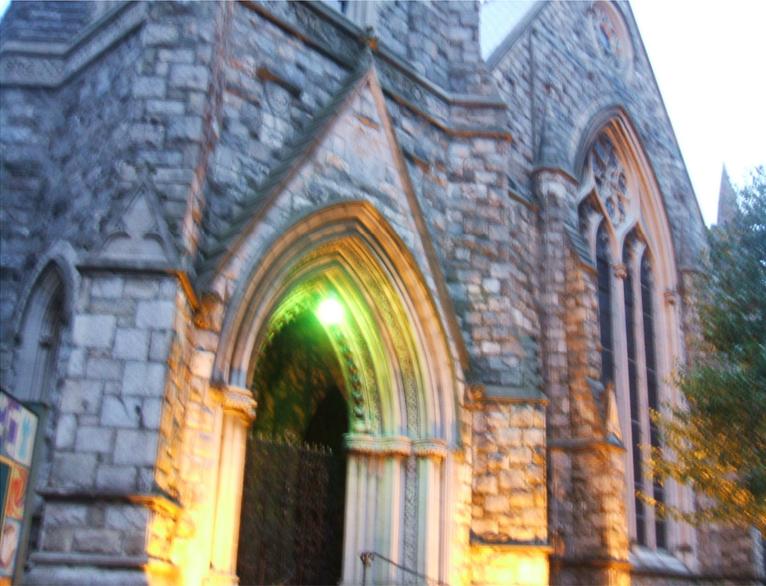


She ran her slender fingers on the outer rim of her cup and with a shy smile,

*"It's a bit silly actually. I had a dream last night in which I saw a Gothic building... But strangely it seemed as if it was somewhere in this neighborhood. Although I don't recollect having seen any such building around here, I kept wondering if such a building might actually exist. Is it possible that even if I had not taken a conscious note of it, the unconscious might have registered it only to later reveal it in my dream?"*

After a brief pause, she added with a coy smile,

*"Maybe I am just reading too much into a dream".* Only then M. noticed that the book she was clutching in her hands when she walked in was Jung's *Man and his symbols*. *'She is probably a psychology*



*major*', thought M.

*"I must say that your dream sounds very interesting me. Can you describe this building for me? Or maybe you can tell me the dream in its entirety if that's fine with you"*, he told her.

*"Sure, it was a rather innocuous dream"*, she said, moving over to M.'s table. *"In the dream, I was walking back home in the evening when an old lady came up to me for directions. Having shown her the way, I started walking again but suddenly realized that I had lost my own sense of direction. While roaming around dazed, I lost my way in the shrubs. When I finally*

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*emerged from it, I found myself in a colorful field of flowerbeds that stretched all the way to the horizon. A narrow track led through it to a large gate of elaborate ironwork. Beyond the gate was this ancient structure which was quite grand in its design. The gate was open and I went in to take a closer look. It had a deep arched doorway, supported over a series of closely arranged decorative columns. Above it were three Gothic windows that rose vertically to great heights; the middle one reaching higher than the others. Further above was a large circular window with extensive tracery, placed centrally between the sloping sides of the roof. On either sides of the facade rose buttresses which crowned with decorative pinnacles.*

*I could only make out the silhouette of this building against the fading twilight sky. I went up to the main door and knocked. Chiseled on the stones above the doorway was the message- "I am the Door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture (John 10:9)." I felt an immense joy of conquest rising in me; it seemed as if I had finally found the way I had been searching for all along. It felt as if the secret to all happiness lay beyond that door....But at this point I must have trailed off into a deeper sleep for I don't remember what happened thereafter."*

Her words almost had a mesmerizing effect on M. and he too had drifted away to the land in her dream. Suddenly a voice startled him.

*"I must apologize for intruding into your conversation but I just could not help it. May I join you?"* It was Pat, a young artist and regular visitor at the cafe whom M. knew well. He was sitting at the table behind M. It was quite apparent that he had overheard their conversation and was not making any effort to disguise his curiosity.

*"I am sorry if I am bothering you but I had a similar dream yesterday which I feel compelled to share with you."* Both M. and Julia had overcome their initial surprise and were willing to hear Pat's story. *"Go ahead, we are all ears,"* said M. with a sudden inquisitiveness.

"Well, I had this dream where I found myself in an old building with tall arched windows like the ones you just described. However I don't intend to imply that we both saw the same building, because all the events in my dream took place indoors. I found myself in the nave of this building which could have been a cathedral, although there weren't any divine motifs to be seen anywhere. The nave was very long, lined with decorated pillars that supported the high vaults above. At the far end were a set of tall windows with stained glass through which light came in. In the place where the altar should have been, there were a few desks and chairs arranged to form a small classroom, and someone was standing there with open arms as if waiting to embrace me. I started to walk towards that illusive figure but the nave's end seemed to recede further and further away. I kept walking till I began to feel fatigue -my legs felt heavy, the air grew thicker and the light dimmed. I knelt down for a while to catch my breath, but when I got up, the figure had vanished. Without that mysterious figure waiting for me at the end of the nave, I suddenly realized that I had been left without a purpose. I felt cheated and humiliated as I wandered around in search for an exit. Finally I noticed an open door. When I approached, the large bronze doors appeared to be Rodin's 'Gates of Hell'. The little figurines pleaded with me not to go past them, but I did anyway. I found myself in an octagonal chamber which was covered from floor to ceiling with huge mirrors that reflected back only grotesque caricatures of me. As I looked closely I saw my deformed images imploring me to turn away. But there was no where to escape; the door had vanished and in its place stood another large mirror. I had to face my images everywhere I looked. I was trapped amidst my own ugly manifestations which were by then demanding that I blind myself. The nightmare was too much to bear, I woke up at that point," said Pat. He seemed a bit flustered as if he had to relive those moments during the narration.

M. had fallen silent. When he came out of his deep contemplation he said, "I guess I ought to tell you something as well. I wasn't going to... because it is very personal. But since you both have shared your story, I think it is only fair if I tell you a dream that I myself had. I can't help wondering whether our dreams have a common thread, so to say. I had this dream where I was searching for a very rare book at the library. The librarian

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was a friend of mine, and so he had made special arrangements for me to visit the restricted section. When he led me there it turned out to be an octagonal chamber, like the one Pat mentioned; however with the difference that instead of mirrors it was covered wall-to-wall with book shelves. The librarian informed me that there was a mandatory policy to keep that room locked all round the clock, and so it meant that I was to be locked in for the duration of my stay. Soon I found myself left alone amidst the towering racks of books. Each bookcase had fifty racks that reached three floors high and was equipped with a catalog of all books it carried. One had to climb up a long ladder to reach the upper shelves. I searched through the first six catalogs and on the seventh I rested. Unfortunately it showed that the book I was looking for was on the topmost rack of the seventh case although I found the arrangement to be inexplicably inconvenient; I had no option but to climb the ladder. The steps of the ancient ladder creaked beneath my weight. I had to struggle to keep my balance. In the end I managed to reach the top, but to my surprise the book wasn't there, in its place I found a diary titled 'The diary of Anne F.' that is all that I remember of the dream."



M. continued, "I know what you guys are thinking. No, it was not the diary of Anne Frank that I found up there. This one belonged to my late wife, Anne F. M., who had chosen to write her name in that way out of her own little fancy. Ever since her death I have wondered if she too felt threatened and tortured in her life, and in that case, was I her torturer? Was this little gesture not a fancy but a way to perhaps let me know how she felt? In my efforts to become successful in my professional life, I had probably neglected her too much. After her death I constantly felt the pangs of guilt and I couldn't carry on normally. Soon I opted for retirement, and now here I am in this cafe where I come everyday to find some solace in this quiet corner."

Ting-Tong. The bell jingled and Mr. & Mrs. R. wobbled in, arm-in-arm. They too visited

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the cafe regularly after their evening walk in the lawns. They were an old, happy couple. But that day they seemed to be having some disagreements. Mr. R. gruffly said, "I don't want to listen to all that anymore. Just forget it."

*"You don't understand, I felt so scared and lonely..."*, sniffed Mrs. R. She clearly wasn't in a mood to drop it. She continued, *"...just imagine being surrounded by those statues, lonely and defenseless. I haven't had such a nightmare in years."*

The word 'nightmare' made M., Pat and Julia turn around instinctively to listen to the old couple. M. knew Mrs. R. quite well, she loved to talk, while Mr. R. was just the opposite; he preferred to brood most of the time, only with the exception of political topics in which he voluntarily joined in to criticize the Government's policies towards veterans and pensioners. Mr. R. was already enjoying his coffee but Mrs. R. clearly wanted to share something more. So M. asked her how she was. That was enough to get her started. *"Oh, thank you for asking. We are doing well, but I have been very upset since yesterday night. I could not catch any sleep last night because of a ghastly nightmare."*

*"I am so sorry to hear that Mrs. R. May I ask what was it about?"* inquired M. with almost a practiced politeness.

*"You won't believe what I saw. I was in this museum or some place like that with high ceilings, gigantic pillars and large marble rooms with thousands of masks hanging on the walls. I had failed to keep in step with R... and had lost my way in that maze of pillars. R... was no where to be seen. I called out his name time and again, and kept stumbling around till I came to a room full of statues of hideous monsters. In the middle of the room stood three towering totem-poles with hawks perched on top of them. Just then the monsters started to come to life one by one; they woke each other up with their howls. The hawks started to circle overhead. I was scared and I cried out for help, but no one appeared. I stood there all alone to face the end. It was horrible!"*

*"It was just a nightmare; I am here with you now, so drop it. You sound crazy going on*

*and on about it,"* grumbled Mr. R. as he finished his coffee.

*"A thunderstorm is on its way here,"* announced the quirky old Joe from his counter. He must have picked it up from the evening news on his radio.

*"We better get going,"* said Mr. R. as he got up, supporting himself on his walking stick. Soon the old couple was gone.

Lightning flashed behind the branches of trees and clouds rumbled threateningly. Everyone inside the café had fallen silent. After a while Julia asked M., *"Don't you think all our dreams are linked together?"*

*"Maybe or maybe not. I don't think they are necessarily connected. They are fragments that reflect our individual desires, worries and fears, but when taken together they also seem to tell a more universal story. It tells us about the way we sometimes search for higher goals and spend most of our life in trying to realize them. But over the years of struggle we lose sight of the other finer things in life which probably should have mattered more. In the end we are often left all alone, scared, repentant but still clinging on to life with a hope that salvation is our destiny. But perhaps our souls are born orphans or abandoned at birth, and no one will ever wait to receive us at the end of our journey. Our isolation is an inescapable reality, but I guess it could be made more bearable if we could love and truly value the things that we already have,"* opined M. *"Well, the rain seems to have eased a bit, so I must take your leave now. It was nice meeting you. Goodnight!"* With these words M. got up.

Outside the cafe, a light drizzle and a chill wind welcomed M. He straightened his coat's collar and started walking towards his home. Before taking a turn at the corner he decided to look back. He saw Pat and Julia coming out of the cafe; they were closely huddled under Pat's umbrella. They both seemed to be enjoying the light rain in the company of each other. M. smiled to himself contentedly and continued on his way. It had indeed been an unusual evening and M. was feeling lighter than ever. He wondered if Anne would return to unite with him in his dream that night. Something deep inside him was telling that she surely would.