

The day Kafka killed his iPhone

Kafka loathed the city of his birth. Why, then, did he never leave it, asks **Shalom Auslander**.

Illustrations **Thomas Fournier**

Me and Kafka go way back. I first met him when I was 16 years old in a dusty, underground second-hand bookstore on West 46th Street in Manhattan. I was the angry, depressed son of a violent, severely dysfunctional family. Beyond the front door of our turbulent home, things only became worse. Monsey, the ultra-Orthodox community in which I lived, was stifling and oppressive. New York City – liberating, electric, alive – lay like a distant secular Jerusalem 90 miles to the south, and I had long hoped it would be my escape, my new homeland, somewhere I could go and be myself. But on this, one of my very first excursions into the city alone, I found it as stifling and oppressive in its own way as Monsey was in hers. Seeking escape and solitude, I ducked into the bookstore.

“Can I help you?” the bookseller asked.

“What’s funny?” I replied.

I left soon after with a brown, tattered, two-dollar copy of *The Metamorphosis* and *Other Stories*, by some guy named Kafka from some place named Prague. He didn’t look particularly funny, but this was in the days before Prozac, and I was fresh out of marijuana, so I figured it was worth a shot.

In the titular story, a man tragically transforms into a bug – and his family rejects him. In another, a man starves himself to entertain a crowd of onlookers – and they prefer the panther in the cage next door. In another, a talented singing mouse is slowly ostracised from her community because of her talent – and when she disappears, nobody cares.

Kafka was funny, but he was funny in a way I had never before encountered. His stories were jokes, but Kafka wasn’t joking. He seemed to be looking out at the world – at his family, his community, his society – with the same mixture of bemusement and exasperation as I was.

“Maybe I can do that, too,” my adolescent mind decided. “Maybe I can laugh at the darkness.”

I have been reading and rereading Kafka ever since. I have read his stories, his novels, his letters and his diaries. I have read books about his books, and books about the books about his books. With each stage of my life, the weird guy I met in that dusty old bookstore has taught me something new. In my teens, he taught me how to turn pain into laughter. In my 20s and 30s, as I was beginning to write my own stories, Kafka – with his guilt-ridden bugs and his strange penal colonies and his man who is followed around by bouncing balls that won’t give him a moment’s peace



PRAGUE

– inspired me to give myself the same permission Kafka gave himself, to be free, to say what I needed to say, to trust that my odd particulars contained the universal.

I am now 50, ten years older than Kafka was when he died of tuberculosis, and of all his stories, novels, fragments, letters, notes, there is one line that speaks to me today more than any other, one line that I hold on to dearly, one line I want to tattoo in reverse on my forehead so that I’ll remind myself of it every morning when I wake and look in the mirror, and again when I go to sleep at night.

But first, let’s talk about Prague.

There is much debate among academics who debate such things as to the significance Prague has in Kafka’s work and psyche. Some, such as his first Czech translator Pavel Eisner, go so far as to say his work would have been impossible

without it, “that in Prague alone this work... could have been conceived.” Others agree that the spirit of Prague infused his work, but that the larger influence was his Jewishness. Others say his Jewishness may have been a factor, but as much as his being a German.

What’s more interesting to me, frankly, is why Kafka never left Prague, the city he loathed, the place he called in his diaries “that damned city.”

“Prague doesn’t let go,” he wrote. “The old crone has claws.”

Not only didn’t he leave, he rarely even left Prague’s inner city – the ghetto of the ghetto. As renowned Kafka scholar Klaus Wagenbach describes in his *Kafka: Pictures of a Life*, “His childhood home, grammar school, Gymnasium, various business addresses of his father, his university, the family apartments, his office – all were within a radius of a hundred yards. ‘This little circle,’ a friend of Kafka’s recalls him saying as he drew a small circle with his hand, “encompassed my entire life.”

“F Kafka would like to add you to his network on LinkedIn”





But Kafka had money.
He had a degree.
He had the means to leave.
And he obviously had the motivation.
So why did he stay?
I think I know.
But first, let's talk about Los Angeles.



A few weeks ago, I was sitting at a coffee shop on Wilshire Boulevard, and my phone was buzzing. It was Joe Biden. He wanted money. "Democracy is at stake," he said. A moment later, my laptop dinged. I had a new email. It was Bernie Sanders. He wanted my vote. "The future of America is at stake," he said. The people at the table beside me were reading the day's news stories from their phones, loudly, proud of their awareness, of their engagement with the world around them. Unemployment is up, one said. Covid is mutating, said another. Sea levels were rising. Cops were murdering people. Trump had slept with a goat. The goat was pressing charges. Fox News suggested the goat was a slut. CNN reported the goat was now missing.

I had been writing about my sense of shame and self-loathing, but having heard the news, I just wanted to write about politics and sea levels and police brutality. How could I not? Wasn't that what was really important?

I moved to Los Angeles two years ago because I'm a schmuck. My wife and I previously lived in a small rural town in the woods of upstate New York, but our children, entering their teens, needed the stimulation and opportunities of a city. The people at the table beside me left, and I called my shrink.

"How's it going out there?" he asked.

I told him that I was drowning. That I was drowning in news, in events, in media, in Tweets, drowning in internet memes and Zooms and billboards telling me what to watch, what to see, what to fear, what to do. That we were all drowning, all of us, mankind, drowning in LA and NYC and London and Paris and Barcelona and Tel Aviv and Tehran.

"I'm sure someone will lend you a surfboard," he said.

I thought of the unnamed rodent protagonist in Kafka's *The Burrow*, desperately trying to get underground, to secure his solitude, and I wondered what

Franz would have made of all this. Would he have been on Twitter? Facebook?

F Kafka would like to add you to his network on LinkedIn.

"Hey guys, Franz Bugman here, if you liked my video, don't forget to hit the like button and subscribe to my channel."

I wonder if he would have waited for the tuberculosis to kill him, or if he would have just gone to the top of the Writer's Guild building and jumped to his death.

And so I went home that day, and I decided to see, once again, what Kafka could tell me. To see what this strange man from Prague can possibly have to say of any

relevance to this day and age, to this world of 24-hour news channels and iPhones and global warming and Trump. I pulled out his Diaries, and this, some hours later, is what I found:

"August 2, 1914:
Germany has declared war on Russia. Swimming in the afternoon."

It was a summer Sunday, like any summer Sunday, except that Saturday was the first official day of World War I, the bloodiest war in mankind's bloody history. Fifteen million people were about to die; another 23 million were about to be injured.

And Kafka went swimming.

That's the line I mentioned earlier, the one I want to tattoo on my forehead. That's the line that is saving me, guiding me now through this deluge of bullshit, this tsunami of distraction.

War had broken out... and Kafka shut off his iPhone. He didn't check his emails. He didn't return texts.

He went to the beach. To walk, to think, to be with his thoughts.



How I envy that remove. I aspire to it. We all should.

It wasn't the first time Kafka had expressed his need for solitude.

"I have an infinite yearning for independence and freedom in all things," he wrote in an earlier letter. "Rather put on blinkers and go my own way to the limit than have the familiar pack mill around me and distract my gaze."

And that, to bring things back to the beginning, is why I think Kafka never left Prague. Because Pragues, he knew, are everywhere. LA is a Prague, NYC is a Prague, London is a Prague. Earth is a Prague. And there's only one real way out of Prague, out of all Pragues, and that's by traveling within.

"The tremendous world I have inside my head," he wrote of the place he longed to live. "But how to free myself and free it without being torn to pieces. And a thousand times I'd rather be torn to pieces than retain it in me or bury it."

He found the answer.

By swimming in the afternoon.

By killing your iPhone.

By shutting off your wifi and deleting Insta and blocking CNN and FOX and The New York Times.

"The wish for an unthinking, reckless solitude," he called it. "To be face to face only with myself."

I still have that brown, tattered, two-dollar copy of *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*, though it is far more tattered now. There is a photo of him on the back cover. "Franz Kafka," it says below, "was from Prague, which later became the Czech Republic."

I didn't know it then, but they were wrong. Kafka wasn't from Prague. He wasn't from the Czech Republic.

He was from everywhere.

Or, more precisely, nowhere.

The best place of all.

The Burrow, with its neurotic, anxious rodent, was the last story Kafka ever wrote. It shares the same hard-won creative freedom, the same defiant emotional honesty, the same reckless solitude as all his work did, and which he yearned for all his life. Six months after completing it, he died, and was, as Wagenbach put it, "buried in Prague, the place he always wanted to leave."

I wonder if he knew he had. ■

Shalom Auslander is the author of the critically acclaimed novels, *Beware of God*, *Foreskin's Lament*, and *Hope: A Tragedy*. His new novel, *Mother for Dinner*, is published by Picador. Shalom will be speaking about Kafka at a JR online event on Prague on 21 March. See p63.