

Franc Kafka and the letter stories

Post boxes are magical things. One minute they're empty... and the next – hup! They're full of letters! Letters from the bank –booooooring! Brightly-coloured letters that tell you how much fun it would be to go on holiday, or go the gym, or eat a pizza –in exchange for money, obviously. Or best of all, hand-written letters, like the one Gregory received.

The letter was from his mother, and this is what it said:

Gregory, we're a long way away from each other. You're at home, and I'm travelling in far-off places. I'll be back soon, but don't worry, while I'm away, I'll still be able to tell you stories. Just like I always do, every night. But it will be different, because they'll be about...

FRANZ KAFKA AND THE LETTER STORIES

Gregory, I'm in a beautiful city. It's called Berlin and it has parks that take your breath away. Today, I was in Steglitz park, and I remembered a story that happened many, many years ago under the very same trees. A writer with a name that was round and spiky-sounding at the same time, Franz Kafka, was walking through the park one day, when he saw a little beetle flying along, tumbling crazily through the air, and he followed it. Or perhaps it was the beetle that led him to a bench where a little girl was weeping inconsolably and sobbing:

“My dolly! I don't know where it can be! I've lost it!”

The writer was touched by the girl's tears and he wondered how he could help her.

“I know,” he said to himself, “I'm a writer, aren't I? Then I'll think up a story!” And so he did. He cleared his throat and said to the girl:

“Don't worry. If your doll's gone travelling in far-off places, I'm sure she'll write to you. And as it happens, I'm a postman for the dolls post office! You wait and see! I'll bring you a letter from her tomorrow.”

Gregory's mother's letter ended with a promise: *I'll write to you soon with the end of the story.*

His mother kept her word, and the next day, sitting in the post box, there was an envelope with his name on it: Gregory. He couldn't wait to find out what the writer with the funny name had done next. Maybe he'd had second thoughts. Maybe he'd felt lazy,

and forgotten about the girl. He ripped the envelope open impatiently and started to read:

Hello Gregory! It's very cold in Berlin today, and I'm sheltering in a café to write to you. Franz Kafka, on the other hand, used to write at home. Sitting at his writing desk, he tried over and over again to write a letter for the girl in the park. A letter that would look as if it had been written by a doll. What's a doll's writing like? And what would she say? Oh! Writing that letter was not an easy job.

At last he finished it, and when the time came, he took it to the park.

While the girl was reading, Franz felt very nervous. What if she didn't like it? The girl thought it was funny, and laughed.

“My doll has gone travelling! She went away to see the world! She says that when you go abroad, everything is very strange, and strange things keep happening to her, with strange people. She wanted to visit a castle, but she couldn't get in. Nobody could tell her where the entrance was, or what time it opened. Nothing. It was very mysterious! She had to leave without seeing anything. Poor little thing!”

Gregory's mother wrote more letters, and when he came back from school, he ran as fast as he could to make sure he was first to open the post box. And every day he'd find the next bit of the story waiting for him.

Dearest Gregory, writing these letters is a lot of fun. I'm not surprised Franz Kafka caught the bug. He said he was writing the letters to cheer up the little girl who'd lost her doll, but I think that really, he did it because he enjoyed it so much. In the letters he described all the doll's many adventures, and her strange and puzzling encounters. Like the time when she met a policeman, who gave her a fine, but wouldn't tell her why. The doll asked again and again - “A fine? But why? Why?” Until finally the policeman said that giving people fines was his job.

The little girl was happy. She knew her doll loved her, because even though she was far away, she told her about the things she had seen and the wonderful places she had travelled to.

Franz Kafka turned the doll into real traveller. He described how she crossed the ocean to visit America. And how, not satisfied with that, she travelled on to the Far East and to China. He made the doll explain to her friend that the Chinese had built a wall that went on forever.

Gregory dearest, my travels are almost over, just like this story, which is coming to an end. Tomorrow afternoon I'm going to catch a plane home. When I get back, we can sit down together and read the last part of the story of the travelling doll and the writer. If you want to, of course. Lots of love, and see you tomorrow, Mum.

The next morning, Gregory heard the sound of his mother's shoes on the stairs, and ran out to meet her. In her suitcase, she had the letter that he was so eager to read. (06:46) His mum was exhausted after rushing about all day, and she flopped down onto the sofa, with Gregory at her side. She told him about Berlin, and the plane, and what had happened on the journey, until, at last, they opened the envelope and they read the end of the story out loud.

“Franz Kafka knew that he couldn’t carry on pretending to be the doll for the rest of his life, writing more and more letters. He enjoyed it, he liked writing them, but there were novels bubbling up in his head, and he couldn’t wait to write them. So he dreamed up a final farewell. The doll explained that she’d fallen in love with a boy doll, whose name was Gregory. He was an expert on beetles. They had got married and set up house together. Sometimes they argued, but most of the time they were as happy as can be, studying beetles, and drawing them. She wouldn’t be writing any more letters, but she might come on a visit one day. The girl read the letter looking a little bit sad, but she understood. She thanked the man who had delivered the letters, and she went on her way.”

Gregory loved his mum’s story, and he loved getting letters, so when summer came around, and he went away on Scout camp, he picked up paper and pencil, and wrote a letter that said:

“Dear Mum. I can write story letters too! Here’s one! Once upon a time there was a beetle, and one day it woke to find that... oh no! It had turned into a boy! Wow! I hope you liked it because tomorrow I’m going to write you another. Love, Gregory.”

Script: Anna Manso