

TRANSFORMATION

"I didn't find that story very satisfactory," thought Michael. "Surely it could have ended better than that. Why didn't Gregor and the Samsas make more effort at the beginning to *communicate*? What was Kafka trying to say? Was it supposed to be an allegory, or what? Anyway, it's a daft story. How could a human possibly be transformed into a gigantic insect during his sleep? It's just too silly to contemplate."

It was a hot afternoon. Michael had just finished reading Kafka's *Metamorphosis* as he sat in the garden after lunch. The lunch and the heat of the afternoon made him feel very drowsy; so it was not long before he drifted off to sleep in his chair.

His dreams were troubled; giant insects seem to infiltrate them in odd ways. When he woke up his back felt hard and, it seemed to him, armour-plated. The light about him seemed to be strange. He tried to blink, but found he had no eyelids. "Oh no," he thought. "This is not true. I must still be dreaming."

However, this part of the dream, if dream it was, did not go or fade away into something different. He looked around, expecting at least to see the garden and the rear of his house. He saw neither. Indeed, he saw nothing clearly; he appeared to be wrapped in a white membrane through which light penetrated. As he moved he was aware of the membrane beginning to split and he naturally tried to crawl out of it. He got the impression that he was a giant insect emerging from a giant chrysalis or pupa.

Indeed, as he looked round he saw there were a few other empty pupa cases near him on the ground, and there were some giant insect-like creatures crawling around. They were not really insects, he noticed; they did not have the distinctive three segments of insects, and their foreparts were held erect with the first pair of limbs used as arms. But they were certainly arthropods of some sort, and he was now one of them.

"Good grief," he thought, "this is ridiculous. Soon I'll wake up; soon I'll hear Mum calling me."

At that instant he thought he did hear his mother's voice – though 'hear' was not exactly the right word. He was certain there was no actual sound. Could he in fact hear sounds as a bug? But he was aware of words in his head, so to speak, and that these were his mother's words. He assumed it was some sort of telepathy, nor did it strike him as odd at the time that his mother might communicate in this way.

"At last you've pupated," she said (or rather, communicated), half to herself. "We've been quite worried about you. While your brothers and sisters had normal pupations, your pupa shook a lot as though things were not going properly. Your dad and I really thought something was going badly wrong and wondered if you would pupate successfully at all."

"Oh no," he thought. "Mum must've seen what I've been reading and is winding me up. I know: this whole thing is some elaborate wind-up Mum and Dad have thought up when they saw I'd fallen asleep in the garden."

“Oh, Mum,” he said out loud (or rather tried too communicate to his mother). “A joke’s a joke. But stop winding me up and help me get this ridiculous outfit off.”

He was not certain, however, that he had communicated very well as he did not seem to be able actually to speak. The reply confirmed his worst fears.

“Oh dear,” he heard his mother say, noticing for the first time that his mother was one of the giant insect-like creatures he had observed. “Oh dear, you’re talking just like a newly hatched larva. Not a word makes sense. I know it takes a little while to regain the memories you built up as a larva, but newly emerged adults are a little more intelligible than this.”

She turned to another similar creature and Michael understood her to say to it: “I knew there would be something wrong with this one. Indeed, I’m surprised after the restless time it seemed to be having during pupation that it pupated like a normal sort of person. But its mind seems to have gone; it cannot speak at all. It just utters gibberish like some newly hatched larva.”

“Never mind, dear,” said the other one, who Michael took to be his Dad. “It certainly looks all right; I expect it’s just taking him longer than usual for the memories to reassemble after his troubled pupation.”

“This is way past a joke,” he thought. “My memory’s not affected, and I know how to talk!”

But that was the trouble: he could not talk. He had no voice box, nor any tongue or lips – at least nothing resembling any human tongue or lips. He did not seem to be able to transfer his thoughts either. It began to dawn on him that something terrible had happened, that he was not dreaming and that, like poor Gregor Samsa, he could not communicate with his family. But, unlike Gregor, his family were no longer human. He was a giant bug, in a family of giant bugs and he could not communicate with his family! He began to panic. What was he to do?

One or two other bugs came up to communicate with him; but when he tried to reply, he sensed they were surprised. He heard his mother tell them to leave him alone. “Your brother has had a bad pupation,” she said, “you must let him recover slowly. It might be that his brain is damaged and that he will never be able to communicate properly. We must be very kind to him; after all, he is your brother.”

“I’m not a bug, and I’m not a brother to bugs!” he tried to say. But no one understood.

Then he began to reflect. Either this was some terrible dream and he would wake up sometime or else something strange had happened to him and he really was a giant bug in a family of giant bugs. Even if it was a dream, he decided he had best accept the situation and go along with it until he woke up.

He looked around. He seemed, indeed, to be in a garden, but it was very alien. He did not recognize the flora at all. The sun in the sky seemed to him considerably larger than it should be, but it was no warmer than he had been used to.

Where was he? Was he somewhere else in the world? But this looked like nothing he had ever seen in books or in travel programs on the television. Besides, no one had ever reported finding giant bugs on earth that communicated and lived in family groups. So where was he? He had heard vaguely of ideas of parallel universes. Had he somehow or other slipped through into another universe? Or was he somewhere else in the same universe? Perhaps on a planet in another galaxy? How had he arrived wherever he was and, indeed, arrived there in a pupating bug? He could not answer any of these questions nor, indeed, was he ever able to.

As he rested in the late afternoon sun of that place, wherever it was, he tried to discover how to communicate. He became aware that in fact he had a remarkably acute sense of smell – far more discriminating than he had ever known or, indeed, heard anyone ever describe. He became aware that he was, so to speak, ‘hearing through his nose’ (or through whatever organ it was that sensed smell). He realized that his family were communicating with one another with an elaborate and, what seemed to him, complicated system of scents that they emitted. “Yes,” he thought, “humans communicate by agitating the air so as to send sound waves through it. Why not send ‘odour waves’ through the air?”

He was not clear how he had been able to translate these odour patterns into sense in his brain; but he was quite pleased that he could. He realized that in fact these bugs did not speak English, or any other earth language; it was simply because he thought in English that odour patterns got translated, so to speak, into English in his brain.

He realized he could emit quite a variety and many combinations of odours. What he had to do was to learn how to control these and emit combinations that were intelligible. His first attempts showed he had a lot to learn about odour control!

As the sun started to set, the mother bug called her offspring in. He turned and saw a one-storey building behind him. His so-called brothers and sisters were disappearing into it. He decided to follow; he did not want to spend the night in the open in this alien environment. He was surprised, but relieved, to find himself going into a sophisticated home with all sorts of artefacts in it, including what was clearly a television in the main room. He also discovered that the house had a second storey, underneath the ground floor, not above it.

“Oh, well,” he thought, “it might not be so bad after all. At least they seem civilized. I’ll just have to play canny and learn the ropes. Who knows? I might do all right as a bug in a world of bugs, not like poor Gregor left stranded in a world of uncomprehending humans.”

Indeed, he did do well. Although he never understood what had happened to him, he soon came to realize that it was no dream; he also discovered that his new Mum and Dad were not his old ones transformed; he had come into a new family in a different world. Here, he discovered, were towns and cities, with highways connecting them and a civilization at least as advanced as the one he had left.

Although things had been quite tough to begin with, he did learn how to communicate. He soon ceased thinking in English and thought in the 'odour-language' of the bugs; he even learnt how to read and write it.

He did not of course have the larval memories he was supposed to have had, since as far as his memory was concerned his larval stage had happened on earth, but he did manage to acquire much of this memory, so to speak, by listening to his brothers and sisters, and to his new parents. He picked up enough, at least, so that they merely thought he was a little slow in regaining these memories.

After starting with remedial support at college he soon made rapid progress and graduated with distinction. Eventually he became a successful and well-known writer of science fiction, with a happy bug family of his own.

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