

Better Morphosis

Look, I'll put it to you this way, in the hope you'll understand. Literature's okay, but what really grabs me is scuttling, right? Like, I mean, scuttling - here and there, anywhere I feel like.

Which is to say that directions are better than sentences. Any direction better than any sentence. Scuttle scuttle scuttle. Bliss.

Me and all my friends had been having this really great scuttle. Okay? A megascuttle, all round this apartment building in Prague. A moment's inattention and what happens?

- Jesus, I wake up and find myself transformed. Like lying in a BED, transformed into-. Look, I have to tell you. Into this huge pale human thing. Well - shit, into Franz Kafka. KAFKA. (That's his name. They have NAMES.)

Where's everyone gone? Nowhere. I don't know. I don't know, I never had a single thought before. Suddenly I'm Franz Kafka, lying there in that bed and thinking fit to bust. THINKING. Yuk...

All I'm thinking is just awful. I mean, I'm a fan of oily rags and maybe mildew. A bit of damp in a bad corner and I'm happy. Anything. Grease, know what I mean? But not for fuck's sake *thinking*.

Honest, I didn't even know thinking had been invented. But there I was, and thinking - I may as well say it, thinking bad thoughts about my father. How he was so oppressive, how he was so strong and hairy and his voice was so loud and when he washed of a morning he made splashes in the washbasin and blew his nose into the water, both nostrils at once into the soapy water and...

Well, look, Christ, never mind thinking, like the whole concept of FATHER was alien. Come on, down there in the basement, we just spawned, remember. We just were. One moment, nothing. Eggs. Next moment, up and running. Dozens of us, *scuttling*. You know? Scuttling, having real fun, mobile as all get-out. Little legs going like the clappers. So I felt down the bed. TWO LEGS.

Jesus. What a nightmare!

Just TWO LEGS. Where had all the others gone? Pity's sake, what the hell was I supposed to do with two legs? You think you can get a good scuttle going with *two legs*? Forget it!

Two legs. I can't get over it. Between the legs some hair of a sort and this stupid flabby thing. I feel it with my mandibles -

Mandibles! Yow, what have the bastards done to me? I have lost my shagging mandibles. No mandibles. Just these feeble hand things, all pale and pulpy and -

- and I pull at it and it - sort of gets stiff -

- come on, I must be off my tiny thorax -

- it gives out with some mess that I might normally eat but now it sort of blows away and there's a whole muddle of emotion in my ... MIND I cannot cope with. Look, reproduction should not require such an upheaval.

But almost immediately Kafka - me, dammit - begins *thinking* again, and I get out of bed. No kidding. I. Get. Out. Of. BED.

The horror of it! Those two awful long white legs, not neat at all, covered with a layer of flesh... I move them and instead of having a good scuttle across the floor, I stand up on these legs in quite the wrong attitude. And I walk, balancing on these two stilts, high above the floor.

Frightened? Sonny, I was scared out of my wits. Scared shitless, and that's the truth. There's a chest across the room, of the sort I used to scuttle under. Instead, I pick up the clock on it and I see it is half-past six.

You follow me? I'm reading a clock and I'm thinking it's time to be going to work. Me, who never read a clock or went to work in my life. Look, I've spent days in basements and places like that, but for fun. FUN. Work? I'd never heard of work till

that moment, and there I was thinking of myself dressed in trousers and sitting at a desk with a ledger. Sitting. Christ, I ask myself in a panic, how the shagging hell do you STT? But somehow at the same time I am washing myself - I'm *trying to get the filth off myself*.

It's incredible. I though soap was something you ate, yet here I am, calling myself Franz and rubbing this stuff round my neck. Not at all liking filth. Only yesterday, it used to be a way of life.

And there's father-okay, don't say it, I'm only telling you - there's FATHER, banging on the door with a fist and calling, "Franz, Franz, what's the matter with you?"

You think that's odd? Then dig this: I ANSWER.

Yes, I make this noise kind of thing in my throat and I say, "I'm just ready." That's what I say. I have never spoken one word before- fine, many a scuttle here and there, but never a WORD. And there I stand, bold as brass, if shaking a bit, saying, "I'm just ready." Maybe I'm growing stronger.

And the nightmare goes on. I can't repeat it. You'd think I was round the twist if I told you. I mean, like sitting at a breakfast table with a FAMILY. Not thousands, just four of them, each with two of these legs I've been telling you about. You think I looked funny? Up yours.

I shiver to think of that breakfast. Those people... Not a one of them realised I was not human. They looked at me and they pretended I'm someone called Franz Kafka. Maybe they really thought I was Franz Kafka. People who can't scuttle just can't be trusted.

Standing, I sample a bowl of oatmeal.

So after this meal, when I find I'm stuffing foul non-rancid things down my throat - without bad effects - I try a quick scuttle round the room. Can I get up the wall? Can I scuttle across the ceiling?

What, with two legs?

Forget it.

I fall flat on my bonce and break a chair. The other three people all run around screaming - quite fast, admittedly, but you would hardly call it scuttling. Scuttling needs technique. I don't have to tell you.

My idea is to get out of the house. *So I put on a coat*. Don't laugh. I'm telling you, I put on a coat. In this nightmare everyone puts on coats when they go out. Maybe I'll see the funny side of it one day.

On the way to work, we bump into Milena. That's a female of the species.

"Hello, Fritz," she says. "Thanks for your letter. How are you?"

This is meant to be the sexy bit, but don't get excited, chums. Fritz - me - I - he goes over all shy. Can't even look at her properly. Stutters. In his mind thinks of simply incredible things he would do to her, involving getting her on a couch and going into unrealistic positions without clothes, plus jerky movements.

Of course, EGGS are at the bottom of it all. That at least I can understand. But does he get on with the egg-laying? Do they spawn?

Not a bit of it. They just stand there in the street.

I say, "I'm not too good this morning. The question of my health is a difficult one, which I shall have to answer at length in a letter, if you can find the patience to read it. I wouldn't hold it against you if you didn't read it. Whatever you think I look like does not necessarily represent the truth."

This is bizarre. She replies, "I like the flowers. They now stand in my room. They bring the daylight into my room. Perhaps you will come to see them, visit my room."

And I say, "No, you are not listening." And he's thinking of her ovipositor.

I can hear his stomach rumbling, and long to escape among the cobbles underfoot, where lovely horse droppings lie. I could scuttle scuttle scuttle scuttle like fury among them.

"I keep imagining this morning that I have-please, believe me, Milena, because when we're married you will have to put up with a lot of this, but I keep imagining that I have lots of little crisp sepia legs."

"What colour?" she asks, startled.

"Sepia. A sort of light, faded brown, perhaps with a touch of mahogany. Anyway, I

keep thinking I'm a common household pest. Horse shit!"

"What?" Milena backs away in disgust. But this word is mine. I have managed to squeeze out that one phrase, "horse shit". Much better than conversation.

Kafka and Milena take fright and run off in different directions. Looks like egg-laying has taken a beating.

Somehow I get to my workplace. All sorts of men there - I'm terrified, of course-in big boots. I keep thinking I'm going to get stamped on, even when the clots are calling me Franz.

I sit down at this desk with a ledger. It isn't as difficult as I'd thought, because I have found how to... look, I'm not explaining all this for fun... I have found how to *bend in the middle*.

Down I sit, and what do I do?

I shouldn't be doing this. I know I shouldn't be doing this, but still I do it. (Yes, right, figure that one out...)

I start writing *The fucking Trial*.

In a notebook.

In longhand.

Like there was no tomorrow.

Scared of being caught. Don't tell me it doesn't make sense. There's that thing, my HAND, utterly repulsive, and it is moving, making tiny scrawls on the paper. Scrawls I might enjoy on their own, but unfortunately they are not just mere scuttles - oh, no, it seems I'm in some kind of a scuttle-free universe - these scuttles spell something. Spell. SPELL. Don't ask me to explain, just take it that's what they do, see?

"K. was informed by telephone that next Sunday a short inquiry into his case would take place."

That's what Kafka - that's what *I* wrote. It didn't make sense to me. I'm no fool, but that sentence wouldn't make sense to any insect. Telephone? Sunday? Yet he - I - seemed pleased enough, and kept dribbling these words across the page.

What is all this? I asked him. Who the hell are you?

No answer, naturally.

But he did then stop this scrawling, which was a relief. He rested his head in his hands. He closed his eyes. That is, sorry, I mean I rested my head in my hands. I closed my eyes.

Bad feelings came over me.

An inspector approached, walking heavily between the clerks' desks. When he got to Kafka's desk, he spoke.

"Get on with your work."

I looked up. At last I found my voice.

"Please help me," I chirped. "I'm an innocent cockroach. Sir."

Kafka - I - was taken before the supervisor. I repeated my sentence. By now, I could say it more loudly. My two pale flabby little paws were waving, as if in protest.

Eventually, a doctor was called. DOCTOR. It seems these humans are often - unwell - a kind of failure even to non- scuttle. He examined me, and was not surprised to find I had only two legs, though of course I squealed about it.

So here I am in this damp cell now. A considerable relief, let me tell you.

There are cockroaches here, thank god. They scuttle over the floor. Scuttle scuttle scuttle. Great. Sense at last.

I lie on the floor so that they can scuttle over me.

"Don't. Please," says Kafka. Me.

"Sod off," I say.

Scuttle scuttle scuttle.

Happiness.
