

# SONATA IN K

KAREN AN-HWEI LEE

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*This novella is a work of fiction.*



*Kafka-san is not Franz Kafka.*

*K is not K.*

*Don't despair, not even over the fact that you don't despair.*

–Franz Kafka

*We do not see things as they are. We see them as we are.*

–The Talmud

*You can live as if nothing is a miracle,*

*or you can live as if everything is a miracle.*

–Albert Einstein

ONE



Kafka-san and the Little Birds



## KAFKA-SAN IN RETROSPECT

Dear Max—

Delinquencies  
*lebensbeschreibung*  
in a living dream of zephyrs  
    stir a pile of Japanese  
maple leaves  
    on Pico Boulevard,  
a sonata of moonlight,  
of Dora and my sisters,  
especially Ottla –  
how I miss their voices  
and the noise of my ink nib  
scuttling  
    across a page,  
this *zuibitsu*.

Nervous about ushering my new client, Kafka-san, to his hotel, I arrive ninety minutes early at the regional airport—my faux jade-sequined, braided corn-husk handbag stuffed with Japanese melón-*pan* in anticipation of hunger pangs from his overseas flight. In what was sort of a lottery for the first one hundred survey respondents in greater Los Angeles, I was chosen to serve as his local interpreter. All the way from Prague, according to his tattered itinerary, which I read at least a dozen times over the last month, Kafka-san flies to Frankfurt, then Chicago, then this airport named for a cowboy actor who once lived here. Not particularly known for architectural merit, it displays a stark tetrahedral atrium housing a bronze statue of the rangy actor sporting a ten-gallon hat and spurs, rather garish although well-cast in likeness, in my opinion. Phlegmatic in temper during my third decade, unlike my sanguine girlhood

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days when I surreptitiously read translations of Freud or Florovsky in French class, I do not mind waiting, grateful the agent wisely avoided scheduling Kafka's flight into the cosmopolitan airport up the freeway in a chronic, uncivil state of reconstruction.

With his fame, there is a remote chance Kafka-san might be recognized and cause a ruckus. Veritable public fuss, an Angeleno brouhaha. On the other hand, in the dazzling oblivion of the valley, Kafka-san or not, perhaps no one would bat an eye at a laconic man with the frank, trimmed candor of an actuarial scribe—fatally tubercular—who, tragically, could not swallow a drop of mineral water at the end of his life. One may not swiftly assume all the dark humor, with the aftertaste of chilled tonic, would release its vapors at once, shy as a boy holding a bottle of panic in the ladies' parlor. I stop by the flower vendor to purchase a bouquet for him. Dear reader, if you didn't know already, please forgive me for the oversight. Yes, today is Kafka-san's birthday, with confessions: re-reading his selected letters, reviewing his itinerary, I proudly prepared for this visit as though I—a woman of modest means, of frugal northeastern tastes, pilgrim daughter of post-war Japanese immigrants—were a distant angel waiting in the afterlife.

Lilies, I say. Please.



On the contrary, a wave of relief soothed my frayed nerves: Kafka-san does not fly into the airport with a grandiose flourish out of a contrail-streaked California sky more the color of limpets than periwinkles, no entourage of flash-bulbing admirers multiplied *ad*

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*infinitum* in this glitzy mall of mirrors, limestone, and air-conditioned plexi-glass—his featherweight silhouette leans at the top of the escalator, and he recognizes me from a photograph sent by the agency: Kafka-san waves light-heartedly, his wing-tip collar turned up as he coughs a bit. Hatless, which surprises me, the absence of his signature derby, yet it is the spitting image of Kafka-san, nonetheless. *Lilies and cyclamen*, he says, glowing fox-eyed as I press the overflowing bouquet of cut flowers into his arms. His wool overcoat is heavily perfumed with bergamot oil, crystallized ginger—a favorite—and the darkest soil in a forest where a truffle-hunting pig roots around for black gold. With a clairvoyant's gaze, however, Kafka-san deciphers my unfiltered thoughts. *Ach, fräulein. Pigs are no longer used for truffles*, he says. *No more schweine with a keen interest in truffles as food, you understand. Trained dogs are replacing the pigs. Dogs do not eat black gold. Truffles.*

Lilies and cyclamen, I say.

*Maiglöckchen und Alpenveilchen.*

Happy Birthday, sir.

Kafka-san sneezes.

I offer him a tissue.

His slender, milk-colored fingers hold natural light on the concourse, evoking the cirrused troposphere which buoyed his frame only minutes ago.

Allergic to lilies, sir?

No, he laughs.

Despite the lilies, I think of the word, *belladonna*. Nightshade of versatile fruit: vine-ripe heirloom tomatoes, *brinjal* eggplants or aubergines. Yes. Or *enokitake*,

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the long white Japanese mushroom, strands of moonlight leaking a violet essence, moonlight of the bending willow wands, yet wholly solanaceous in the night. With an upturned chin, Kafka-san murmurs, and *what is the day of my birth*, flowing like any other shadow, no more or less significant than my day of passing? This macadam road of fled memories is cobbled haphazardly from all the biographies ever written, plus my letters and other inked ephemera. Scores of hand-cancelled ink postcards, for instance, scanned into a paleographical cloud. Does this make me a hologram of penmanship? An inked chimera of words *sans* rhyme, a hybrid of cumulonimbus and epigraphy? An ersatz rendition of the original man? Or am I mysteriously enflashed, an upcycled domino-box of hand-crafted chocolates? Deftly, with a sleight of hand and a flourish worthy of prestidigitation, Kafka unveils a wrapped box of artisan *wasabi* chocolates from Prague.

As a courtesy, I open the box and offer one.

*Ich danke Ihnen.* Thank you, Miss K.

*Wasabi*, I exclaim, horseradish.

The chocolate bon-bon, flavored by a hint of the original horseradish, not at all the knifing vapors of natural isothiocyanate, spills glorious chartreuse.

Thank you, Mister Kafka.

Auspicious, I say to myself.

In the darkness of my handbag, the melón-*pan* is forgotten.



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### ON KAFKA-SAN'S BIRTHDAY

Dear Max –

Can you believe it? I made it  
to my one hundred twenty-ninth birthday  
without dying. *Nein*, if only I were still alive!

What a miracle, Max.

I don't feel worse than I did yesterday,  
or even *im vorigen Jahr*, last year.  
For a birthday vacation, I teleported  
to Los Angeles. For an adventure, I hailed a cab  
at Irolo near Wilshire and Eighth.

On July third, seventy-one degrees,  
not so infernal after all,  
although the smog—  
*ähnel*t tuberculosis.



We cruise northward in my split-pea-green hybrid  
propelled by a new lithium-ion battery and platinum  
spark plugs, yet more wishfully electric than gas-free. In  
a future world, it could be an ionic levitating vehicle,  
*magnetohydrodynamic*. I would float to the touchless  
car wash, to a glittering nocturnal carnival, anywhere  
I wished to go. In this retrograde era, it guzzles that  
obdurate isomer of octane, petrol, draining the low fos-  
sil fuel reserves of the globe, fractional distillates of rot-  
ting mammoth flesh or antediluvian ferns disintegrated

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long ago. A box of red *hachiya* persimmons sits on the back seat, wrapped in newspaper, heart-achingly ripe, aflame in their crackling skins. *One never witnessed such flaming fruit, not even in the gilt-edged salons of Vienna*, I hear Kafka thinking. Ah, yes, I forgot to carry them into the apartment after my road-trip to the open-air farmer's market, and they softened considerably over a few days. *Nein*. Kafka politely declines the persimmons. *Persimmon*, says Kafka. *Persimone. Persiflage. Parfumerie*. With a belt crossed over his torso, Kafka-san glares out the window with jowled tension—as if he expects a ghoul to rear up and accost us.

Miss K.

Yes?

My father will rear up out of nowhere and hit *das auto*.

A bout of freeway phobia, Mister Kafka.

What should I do?

Close your eyes.

Where are we going?

To a hotel in Los Angeles.

Where are we now?

Orange County.

How long is the freeway?

Miles after this exit.

Where are the oranges?

Good question, Mister Kafka-san. Decades ago, orange groves existed in this county. The orange farmers realized it was more profitable to sell their arable land to real estate developers in the post-war industrial boom, so there are no more oranges.

None at all?

Silence.

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Where does one buy oranges, then?  
One goes to a farmer's market.  
Yet no more farmers exist.  
Oranges are imported.  
Silence.  
Mister Kafka, how are you feeling?  
I see Hermann's face.  
Where?  
My father rears up, a buffalo-shouldered man.  
More likely we'd hit him than he'd hit us.  
You see, my neurosis is acting up.  
Close your eyes.  
Silence.  
Recite the alphabet backwards.  
Z is for *zeitung*, y is for *yachten*, x is for *xylofon*...



## KAFKA-SAN IN K-TOWN

As a gift to myself, I stood outside  
a Koreatown bakery—gazed at buttercream  
cakes and swirled green-tea custard

until my tongue went dry. Then I realized  
I had no credit. Amerika  
is no longer cash.

Max, a huge favor—would you please  
wire a hundred dollars  
into my checking account?  
This way, I can open a line of credit

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and start paying back my life-loan,  
I owe you in eternity—

*Ein herzliches Dankeschön,*  
my heartfelt thanks.



The hotel Amerika, exclaims Kafka-san as we pull into a cul-de-sac.

A pearl-gloved doorman assists Kafka with his carry-on briefcase. *Traveling light*, he explains. *No other luggage*. Kafka looks flushed, if not feverish, so I offer a swig of mineral water from an ice-cooled bottle.

No, thank you. The fever is only tubercular, he explains.

You're no longer afflicted by *tuberkulose*, Mister Kafka.

How so?

The film production company in Los Angeles either cloned you from a bone fragment excavated from your relocated grave in Prague or designed a three-dimensional hologram based on your surviving photographs. Or both. You are no longer a consumptive invalid, so to speak.

Kafka pats his chest and massages his throat. What about my larynx?

You are healed, Mister Kafka.

No more country cures?

No more sanatoriums. Tuberculosis was eradicated from Amerika and Europe. Only four years after you passed away, Scottish scientists discovered antibiotics. It

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started with mold and staphylococcus. One was toxic to the other. Pencillin mold, that is.

Not my lungs, then?

Smog is all, Mister Kafka.



On the ride up the elevator, Kafka-san trembles ever so slightly.

Silence.

How does this claustrophobic room levitate?

You've taken an elevator before, Mister Kafka.

Not one of this velocity.

Cables, I say. Pulleys. A motor in the basement.

*Where love is, no room is too small*, says Kafka.

Silence.

The Talmud.

*Be very careful if you make a woman cry, because God counts her tears.*

*The woman came out of a man's rib.*

*Not from his feet to be walked on.*

*Not from his head to be superior, but from the side to be equal.*

*Under the arm to be protected, and next to the heart to be loved.*



On the nineteenth floor, the lacquered brass elevators slide open. We walk a florid sequence of carpets with tree-of-life motifs, a paisley maze in shades of orange, bird-vase-and-pillar designs and medallion patterns before locating his hotel room. One thousand

nine hundred twenty-four. What do you know, says Kafka-san, wryly. The year I died, *nein?* *Yawohl*, yes. The door swings open. Mounted ceiling lights, with their sleek, angled limbs, throw marionette-shadows along chintz-flowered walls. The hotel porter has kindly carried Kafka's carry-on bag the whole time, a valise held together by a belt. I tip him. Kafka's intent eyes trace the immaculate surfaces of the bathroom, the faux brass-finished faucets, synthetic carrara marble vanity, and floor-to-ceiling mirrors. The coppery, papered room reeks faintly—pleasantly—of satsuma oranges, fresh-cut tobacco, and cassia.

In the lift, why did the numbers skip?

A separate hotel, I reply.

How so?

Two hotels are joined in the middle. We share the lobby. This hotel is 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. The other hotel is floors 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, through 18. Those floors are slightly more expensive than this one, not to mention that their rooms are all suites. Certain hallways are entirely designated as condominiums for long-term residents. Not that the company representatives didn't wish to put you up in the other hotel, of course. Rather, only this hotel had vacancies for the month of July, while the other one was already booked for an international conference on global literatures and marginalized languages. No, either rhetoric and exposition or cultural linguistics, I correct myself, or translation studies in extinct tongues, or all of the above.

Running his index finger along his left brow, Kafka-san looks pensive. As I slide the key-card into Room Nineteen Twenty-Four, he murmurs, what a fascinating bread-job, *brotberuf*, this must be, to work in

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an Amerikan hotel. More fascinating encounters than those of a traveling insurance man in the supernatural theatre of the Oklahoma plains, than a so-called fancy goods shop owner in the fabled ghetto of Manhattan, or a certified public accountant in the aircraft hangars of Los Angeles. Amerikan travel books, *wunderbar*, and stories of my relatives who traveled abroad by steamship. I never actually visited Amerika, for instance, neither the city of New York nor the absurdist theatre of Oklahoma. A confession, *fräulein*.

I know, Mister Kafka.

How droll. The Amerikan producers wish to adapt one of my works into a film, and here I am in Amerika, no longer a consumptive invalid, to advise them in English, a language I do not speak. Not even in German, Czech, or Hebrew, I mean.

Yes, one would say it is Kafkaesque.

*Ach, nein.*



Before departing for the afternoon and leaving my client to his quiet hours, I show Kafka-san how to use the loudspeaker on the telephone, flush the loo, and ring the switchboard for room service. Twill-weave shirt-sleeves rolled up his forearms, Kafka tries the mint tangerine-sandalwood lotion and milled soaps. Amaretto, he says. Almond liqueur-soaked apricot kernels. Despite the late afternoon, Kafka orders a breakfast of oat cakes with praline syrup, a strawberry-blackberry-mint parfait, figs drizzled with caramel and aged balsamic vinegar, croignets and beignets, eggs over-easy, fingerling rosemary potatoes with asparagus, onions,

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and bell peppers, a teaspoonful of mint yogurt, and a glass of milk. He chews every bite intently, especially the seasonal fruit—pineapple, *ananas*, he says—at a dozen times, counting silently in his head. *Fletcherizing*, says Kafka-san, is at least thirty-two times. Regrettably, I am only *Fletcherizing* in shorthand at the moment.

No meat, Mister Kafka?

None yet.

Very wise, Mister Kafka.

One more thing, Miss K.

Of course.

I am freezing.

I study him carefully. Kafka, meticulously dressed with inimitable class, wears a pin-striped blazer and pressed serge trousers. However, it is seventy-six degrees. Do you have chills? Fever?

You said I'm no longer tubercular.

Yes.

How cold is it outside?

Seventy-two degrees.

Why am I so cold?

I adjust the thermostat and ring the hotel operator to request an electric heating blanket. As if telepathic, the housekeeping staff knocks at the door instantly. Wall sockets are located on the pedestals of the motion-sensitive lamps. I plug in the blanket and demonstrate how to change the settings on the dial. Amused by the convenience of an electric blanket, Kafka wraps it around his shoulders, poncho-style. *What an invention. To wear the portable coziness of a lamp, of a fireside hearth, on the body while reading a book. This is what I always dreamed of when I was in Berlin, studying at the university on those frigid winter nights.*

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Good evening, Mister Kafka.

Miss K, for your kindness. *Freundlichkeit*.

Kafka-san places the lilies and cyclamen in a bottle of mineral water, and the floral arrangement looks nothing less than *wunderschön* in the dimming afternoon of gray pigeon's wings and ghosts of cathode rays fleeing a siloed vacuum of lost Angelenos, a mortar hive of urban dwellers hibernating in caves of ultramarine body-shaping lycra, of nocturnal light-emitting diodes in Watts, of vivid citrus-hued infatuation on Sunset Boulevard, of jettisoned streaming plasma and toxic bath salts on Wilshire, of nonplussed electroluminescence and rifled cash in bullet-riddled Hollywood.



### KAFKA-SAN BUYS AN ORANGE

Dear Max –

At a farmer's market on Third and Fairfax,  
I tried to buy an orange  
using the money you wired.

Fragments of blood oranges,  
honey tangerines, navel oranges, the cara cara  
and valencias, glossy tangelos, clementines, or satsumas  
tough-skinned, eaten out of hand, sliced in wedges –

even a hot-house bitter orange tree  
for one's room in winter.

Max, I felt a migraine coming on  
as I floundered through the market, crazed  
by thousands of oranges, oranges, oranges.

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At last I settled on a flagon of *orangensaft*

from Coatzacoalcos, Mexico –

the vendor said it was liquid gold,

*el oro liquido.*



At ten o'clock in the morning, Kafka-san is ready for his first appointment with a producer and director on Wilshire, the two men who hope to adapt one his works into a screenplay. I drive by the hotel to take him to breakfast at a café in Koreatown, the Café Kafka. As a translator and interpreter, I am a curious about the nature of the screenplay, yet refrain from pestering him with irrelevant questions. Indeed, I would love to ask, *What is the inciting incident? Where does it take place? Is it a love story of sorts? Who is the protagonist, and what is the focus of his desire? How many suspension bridges must the thwarted lovers cross before finding one another, figuratively speaking?* Of course, this is frivolous conjecture, as Kafka-san is not known for writing silly romances.

Kafka answers the door flawlessly starched and suited as though he'd never slept in his traveling clothes, not even lightly rumpled, the noblesse of a violet-black calla lily in a marsh. However, he is unshaven: a four o'clock shadow. On the crown of his head, silky tufts stand up, faintly reeking of tangerine-sandalwood and amaretto. Stayed wide awake last night, he says, a solitary vigil, *einsam*.

Your insomnia?

Mice ran up and down inside the walls.

How many, do you think?

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Countless.

Those aren't mice, Mister Kafka.

Rats, then? The hotel should get a cat.

No, those are pipes.

Organ pipes?

Air pockets clicking, drumming.

Silence.

Mister Kafka?

In the night.

You heard mice, then.

The only way is to get a cat. Traps only mangle the mice not clever enough to sneak out with the bait, and then you fail to reduce the overall number of pests. Put the fear of God in them. A cat is designed to do just that in each of its nine lives.

Mister Kafka, I'll dial the hotel operator.



At the Café Kafka, we explore a triptych of choices on the breakfast menu: buttermilk waffles with red-bean *azuki* ice cream, non-genetically-modified raspberries, and organic carob sauce. Sticky buns with roasted pecans, cinnamon, and dehydrated cherries in honor of what used to be Cherry Street. Fennel-seed braised tofu scramble. Tomatillo salsa with roasted baby corn over a teriyaki quinoa pancake. Delicious, but would you prefer lunch, Kafka-san? Seafood risotto, instead? Risotto with oysters, mussels, sliced octopus, calamari rings, seaweed *nori*, and broiled mackerel served in a clay hot-pot over a hypnotic blue gas flame? Or flaky langostino tails—neither lobster nor a prawn—with a portobello garlic butter sauce?