Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*
Kafka’s The Metamorphosis

Unwelcome At Home

John P. Anderson
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Volumes 1-10
To Ken Luber, for his help with ideas and writing.

And special thanks to Ms. Colette Simon for her expert help with psychoanalytical terms and her idea that hysterical conversion is in play in this story.

READ THIS

From Chuang Tsi, *The True Book of the South Land of Blossom* quoted by Kafka to Janouch:

The men of antiquity changed outwardly, but inwardly remained unchanged. Today men change inwardly but outwardly remain unchanged. When men change adapting themselves to circumstance yet remain one and the same, that is not really change. One [who remains unchanged on the inside] remains calm in changing and calm in not changing; men remain calm in all their contacts with the outside world and do not let themselves be drawn into the multiplicity of things. Thus men believed in the gardens and halls of the wise men of old. But the gentlemen who gathered together in the different schools of learning fought against each other with assertion and counter-assertion. And today, for the first, time, how do things look? The saint who is called dallies in the world but does not injure the world.
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Section I: Introduction

Unwelcome at Home

In Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* [written in 1912 and first published in 1915], an overbearing father inflicts heavy psychic damage on his vulnerable son. Stimulated by the father’s betrayal of his first-born, blood of his blood, the twilight zone opens momentarily allowing the father’s brutality to transform the son into a giant bug. Three months later the combined protective forces of Easter and Passover finally put the bug creature to rest.

The young adult son, working as a traveling salesman selling cloth wholesale, had for several years been living mostly on the road but recently had changed to living at home full time [nights and weekends]. His purpose in making the change was to get more family TLC. He came back home to love more, since his desire for positive human connections is the bedrock of his identity and on the road he has had no girlfriend life.

The damage goes down when, after about a week at home on a full time basis, father tells the son Gregor he is not welcome and can’t stay at home. So much for family TLC. This treatment despite the fact that Gregor provided the sole support for the rest of his family [father, mother and sister] who do not work. This support includes rent for the apartment in which father denies him a place. So much for appreciation. Given the kind of person he is, Gregor does not threaten to reduce support if he cannot stay at home. Gregor does not leverage his financial position.

Father tries to force Gregor to be a different kind of person than he is, more independent and less needy, no doubt advertised as for his own good. Father wants to make Gregor into what the father wants him to be instead of accepting Gregor for who he is. The father’s real motivation is not Gregor’s best interests but father’s own personal convenience. A
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week of nights and one weekend in the apartment with the stay-at-home and TLC-seeking Gregor has been too much for father. Alpha father was losing to Gregor some of father’s attention from his wife and daughter.

For his efforts father does get a different kind of son, but not the one he expected. Over the course of the following night in the twilight zone, the psychic damage causes a physical change in the son; it turns the highly sensitive son into a giant beetle-like insect. A severe psychic pain causes a severe physical change. And in a story referring to Passover, that is why for the Samsa family that particular night was different from all other nights.

This change in the physical dimension [in Gregor’s body] follows the dynamics of a “hysterical conversion” as recognized in traditional psychoanalysis. In that process the physical change absorbs all psychic pain and scrubs the damage from memory. The source of the damage becomes an unseen reality.

This physical process, gruesome though it is, serves the critical purpose of protecting at all costs the son’s most important and permanent spiritual value, his love of family. This kind of permanent spiritual value is what Kafka called the “Indestructible.” As Kafka said: “Man cannot live without a permanent faith in something indestructible in himself.”

Beetle Gregor does not remember the damage so the inner value survives. He still loves his family and wants to stay at home. But this family could not love their human son for who he was and certainly cannot even stomach much less love a giant beetle for what it is. Being good bourgeois, they of course judge Gregor the beetle on the basis of his outside features not his indestructible inside nature. Even though most unwelcome, He/it does get to stay at home because they are incapable of dealing with a giant beetle and lock him in his room.

To make the connection to hysterical conversion, Kafka gave to the son Gregor many of the symptoms of the first patient [“Anna O”] with a published diagnosis of hysterical conversion [in 1895 by Freud and Breuer]. But Anna did not turn
into a ladybug. The point is that Kafka used a recognized psychoanalytic process that does happen to people in the real world and pushed it with exaggeration into the twilight zone.

Irony feeds the title, a title which indicates some form of change. The irony is that the most important aspect of the story is lack of change. The Metamorphosis, the change, does not change the Indestructible, the inner Gregor. Father changes his son’s outer reality but not his inner. The son still loves his family even after the change.

But the Metamorphosis does destroy the inner repose of the rest of the family. Their primary value is personal convenience for each member [even in intra-family relationships]. The bug’s presence in the apartment is really inconvenient, and for three months they are forced to live with the pain and suffering of constant personal inconvenience. While Gregor lives as an incarcerated beetle at peace in his Indestructible.

The difficulty of interpreting the story is that the source of the earlier psychic pain is only hinted at in the text. This son as a bug can’t remember what his father did to him. Kafka’s text does not remember either, as both the son and the narrator’s story are scrubbed of this memory.

The reader must work backwards from the physical manifestation announced in the first line of the story to the psychic pain administered by father the evening before. You have to walk the cat [or the bug] back along the hint crumbs Kafka did leave behind. Eventually you will come to crumbs of shredded Easter wafer and Passover drybread.

The evil showcased by this story is spiritual fascism, not accepting people for who they are and telling them who to be and what to do [beyond that necessary for civil order]. In 1912 in Austria and Germany, the communists and their counterreaction the Nazis were right around the corner. You can see them coming in father’s giant boots. The booted Nazis were to take all of Kafka’s sisters in camps just because of who they were and banned Franz’s books as depraved just because they could.
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The modern day creative cousin of this story is The Matrix, in which the energy of growing children is taken to support a false reality, a customized twilight zone. Perhaps this is the direction the Thousand Year Reich would have taken.

Fathers and Sons

So Kafka’s story is based on fathers injuring sons, an old story still told in our dna. It still controls considerable energy in our psychic boiler rooms.

In primitive cave life the one alpha male apparently enjoyed exclusive sexual privileges with all cave females, wives and daughters and even granddaughters, and the alpha male would either kill, drive out or castrate his sons, the potential competition for the females and leadership. This in what you might call the naked use of power.

The castrated betas branded with high-pitched voices would stay and do the work for the cave family run by the fascist alpha. The driven-out intact sons were not to return but find their own females and their own caves; they were not welcome back at the alpha’s home cave. It was not a family cave.

In our bug story, the son would be the counterpart of a driven-out beta not having found a female for himself and coming back to daddy’s cave full time seeking emotional help. You can just hear the alpha: YOU CAME BACK FOR WHAT? FOR HELP? YOU KNOW THE PRICE OF ADMISSION, SQUEAK.

In any event whatever you think about this theory of cave society [accepted by no less than Darwin and Freud], Kafka is working with what we know are powerful father and son emotions. This son [Gregor] has been doing all the work, has not found a female and wants to come back home full time. At home in the Samsa [apparently pronounced zamza] family apartment version of the cave, father would not accept the son as he was and trying to change him damages the son. And the damaged son squeaks.
Gregor the bug is passive, dependent and stuck at home, just like a human baby. These characteristics must be the same descriptions father used in criticizing Gregor’s desire to return home to live and declaring him not wanted and unwelcome.

But father got exactly what he made his son out to be. Father’s harsh and uncaring descriptions of his son shaped reality but ultimately did not serve father’s interests. This is Kafka justice, justice for those exercising power over others, justice for personal imperialists and fascists.

Wounded as not wanted, the needy beta son Gregor is turned into a giant insect but retains Gregor’s human emotions and desire to be with family. His mating instinct has been blocked by family upbringing and has rotted into an interest in his sister. This interest continues in the bug.

This retention of human characteristics is the key to unlocking the story.

Questions

These are the questions I think need to be answered to understand this story:

What caused Gregor’s change? Why do we have work this out just with hints?

What changed and what didn’t change in the Metamorphosis from human to bug?

Why did Gregor experience a physical change?

Why was the physical change of Gregor into a bug, and why a bug with a protected hard back and a vulnerable soft belly.

Why does Gregor’s back become softer as the story goes along? Why did he change physically a second time?
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Why is Gregor erotically interested in his sister?

What happens to Gregor’s dead body and why? Why does the butcher’s boy go up the stairs near the end of the story?

Since equilibrium within a closed energy system is to play a part in answering these questions, note for all of this that when the alpha is up the beta is down.

The Indestructible

This story is a web woven around an idea, Kafka’s idea of the Indestructible. The story is tightly woven around this center and holds in suspension for the reader many consumable prizes.

Here is Kafka’s summary of the Indestructible: “Man cannot live without a permanent faith in something indestructible in himself.” [Brod quoting Kafka]. The Indestructible is a matter of spirit, not of bone and muscle. The strength of spirit must be of such a nature that it will get you through all difficulties and you can always count on in bad times. It must be part of your genuine identity. Since it is linked to identity, it will be different for different people.

The Indestructible is Kafka’s Way past the tyranny of all caves, the Way beyond all castration threats and all fascists. Your Indestructible cannot be taken away, even by continuous brutality or a sharp knife.

This idea may remind you of the quote from Chuang Tsi on page 6. Read it. The men who do not change on the inside have their Indestructible. They remain calm. Gregor remains calm even though changed into an insect.

For Kafka personally and for Gregor in this story, the Indestructible is a feeling of positive connections to others. In this particular case, with family. Kafka viewed human closeness as one of the products of the high road, of living a spiritually
principled life. Think of the Christian martyrs. Like them, Gregor makes the ultimate sacrifice for his love.

Kafka makes it clear that independence is necessary for indestructibility. **It has to issue from your own genuine identity in order to be indestructible.**

Kafka often noted that silence was needed in order to maintain the Indestructible: “Genuine and lasting strength consists in bearing things.” [Janouch p. 38]. This is part of being calm. A hard and protective back is often necessary to maintain your side of positive human connections. Perceived as an “easy push over,” you are often mistreated by others. And often your silence is misinterpreted as fear.

**Indestructible and Destructible Spirits**

With a title indicating change, the most important aspect in this story is what does not change, what is Indestructible, and what remains true regardless of the metamorphosis. What cannot be taken from Gregor regardless of the circumstances. The Truth for Gregor. His independent Indestructible. Even after changing him to a bug. Even in a concentration camp room. In his case, outer may change but inner does not and remains calm.

By contrast, we are shown in the case of the rest of the family what can and does change as a result of the metamorphosis, what is destructible. What can be taken from the family. What is destructible and is destroyed, even by their own actions. They are easily pushed into servility, which is their natural state. They have no independent Indestructible.

Nabokov summarized the participants in this story as follows: “Gregor is a human being in an insect’s disguise; his family are insects disguised as people.” By this Nabokov means that the ultimate value for the family [father, mother and sister] is their own personal convenience, even at the expense of Gregor. For Gregor the ultimate value is concern for others, in this case for his family. Gregor is humane by instinct; the family is selfish by instinct.
The family’s selfish nature has allowed them for 5 years to live on Gregor’s earnings. Not working when they could have, they have been taking advantage of him. Father has even hidden from Gregor a nest egg that survived the shutdown 5 years before of the business he owned [that would be fraud in bankruptcy] and in addition amounts Gregor gave them from his earnings which were excess to their needs. These funds could have been used to release Gregor earlier from his servitude job or allow him to change to a more personally rewarding job. The family has vermin-like been sucking the blood of his freedom and realization, forcing him to be a traveling salesman without TLC. They have been a small Matrix unit. They have been dependent on Gregor.

Meanwhile, Gregor retains, even as an insect and even after what they did to him, what Nabokov described as his “sweet and subtle human nature.” A ladybug you might say. A vegetarian ladybug that does not consume blood, is not vermin.

For Gregor, what remains true of him before and after and regardless of the conversion to a bug is his caring and positive attitude towards his family. This is his Indestructible; it remains unchanged even though father makes him unwelcome at home and treats him with emotional brutality. Finally, he is rejected even as a member of the family; he is cast out.

Even with a hard back and six legs and a world of inconvenience, Gregor still cares for father and family and does not blame them. This humane attitude they cannot take from him, even though they treat him inhumanely and incarcerate him in his bedroom.

For Gregor’s family, their principal spiritual value [what they think is important] is their desire for their own personal convenience. But personal convenience is a highly destructible human emotion and weak support for a life. It can easily be taken from you by alphas, camp guards or by chance. In this story it is taken from the family during the life of Gregor as a bug. They have to keep a bug in the apartment as long as it is alive, a big bother. They even have to go back to work
and sell their jewelry. They take in boarders and easily convert to servile servants. Bummer.

The only acts of seeming kindness the family members show to the bug are motivated by a desire to enhance the chances he/it will change back to human form, which would restore his work potential and their convenient life. After Gregor’s self-administered death, the parents return once again to personal convenience-driven behavior, take the day off and plan to match their marriageable daughter out of the house.

For a considerable period of time [for about three months from Christmas to Easter and Passover], the family treats the bug inhumanely but cannot shake Gregor’s humane attitude. The family keeps the bug Gregor locked up his room, and over time the room becomes more like a concentration camp than a son’s room.

Kafka indicates the separation of Gregor and family through the feature of communication. Focused on themselves, the family cannot understand his bug speech. Gregor as a bug squeaks. But focused on family, Gregor can understand their human speech, but they think he can’t.

Gregor’s condition is described in the first line of story in some translations as a “monstrous vermin.” This is, in my view, an apt translation of the issue because as Kafka noted elsewhere, a vermin not only bites but steals your blood, your own essence. This description is used by a narrator influenced by father, not by Gregor assessing himself. Ironically, this description of vermin is apt as applied to his family, but not to Gregor. It does describe the family, particularly father. To describe Gregor as vermin is to project father’s traits on his son.

Gregor is the very opposite of a vermin; he is a giver not a taker. The vermin family has been sucking Gregor’s blood for 5 years and now the night before have bitten him in order to chase him away.

So one way of reading the metamorphosis is as a projection by father on Gregor, a projection of father’s vermin traits on him. A projection that became true. A fascist projection that took his outer but not his inner identity. More on this below.
In the physical realm, Gregor the bug removes himself as a problem for the family by self-sacrifice, by not eating. Having been first changed into a bug, he self-administers his second and final physical metamorphosis into death in the physical realm. He devotes to family even the life in his body. Death leaves only his indestructible spirit, which we can watch through hints in the text safely return from corrupted matter to the uncorrupted spirit realm.

And his spiritual example before the family does not result in any spiritual realization by them. The parents remain selfish to the end as they happily anticipate their daughter leaving home, happy not so much for her but for themselves. Happy to get rid of her and reduce expenses.

You Can’t Go Home Again

Having originally left home to work and live mostly on the road [a good beta], the young adult son in this story has for most of the last 5 years been the sole support for his entire family—father, mother and 17 year old sister Grete [apparently rhymes with beta]. During this 5-year period, Gregor has apparently lived at home only in between long business trips [Nabokov’s interpretation]. Father takes son’s support for granted and assumes it will always continue. In other words, the family and specifically father take advantage of Gregor, of his desire to help the family. Gregor gives and they take.

In the story’s time frame, Gregor has for the past week changed his pattern and lived all the time at home [and taken really early trains to the office]. With this change, the son sought more family TLC, more enduring and positive emotional relationships, more human closeness [at home in the evenings and on weekends].

Gregor seeks human closeness from his family because he has no other source. The road and unrelated females have not proffered this kind of close relationship. So that’s all he wants, just to live at home where all the time he can love and be loved.
In the everyday “normal” world, Gregor would be considered unusually needy and better off living alone so he could develop independence. But in Kafka’s determinedly uncompromising view of human existence, Gregor is seeking the best human life has to offer, emotional closeness and connection with others. He expects to find it in his family if not with girlfriends.

So Gregor wants to be at home. But home is the one place where Gregor is not welcome, not at the family home. On the night before the story begins something bad went down in terms of Samsa family TLC. The platform for enduring and positive emotional relationships for Gregor collapsed. Something broke.

Given hints in the text, the father’s reaction on the night before and after a week of frustration must have been to say to Gregor something like this: “WE DON’T RECOGNIZE YOU ANY MORE. YOU ARE BEING SELFISH BY STAYING AT HOME ALL THE TIME. YOU USED TO BE SUCH A GOOD INDEPENDENT BOY. BOY YOU HAVE CHANGED.”

In attempting to make his son live more independently, the father tries “to make another person out of” him, a person other than the emotionally needy son he was. [Quote from Kafka’s 1910 diary entry about school trying to change him]. In trying to move him out, to make him change, father fails to take into account how that will affect this particular son with his particular needs, fails to appreciate his son’s identity. This for Kafka is the major sin.

Contrast the son’s desire for emotional closeness and togetherness with the father’s selfish attempt to use brutality to achieve separation, by humiliating his son as unwelcome and driving him out of the family apartment. Note that the son did not meet force with force, did not threaten to cut off his full financial support of the family unless he was allowed to stay at home. That he could easily have done and been alpha at home, that is if he were a chip off the old block. But he isn’t. He is
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new wood and a carpenter. You will remember the famous carpenter, Jesus the joiner [Joyce].

The father’s attempt backfires. He tries to change his son to become more independent by making him unwelcome. Exactly contrary to the father’s objectives, the insect son becomes totally dependent on his family and nearly impossible to move out. The change makes more than another person out of him; it makes another species out of him. All he can do post-conversion is crawl around in his bedroom and eat what they feed him, just like a totally dependent baby human. This is Kafka justice: you get what you made your son out to be.

While often expressed by parents as “leaving home will be good for your own personal development,” this is not true for this particular son, and if his parents loved him with understanding love, they would realize that. Hanging out the unwelcome sign often serves the desire of the parents at long last to have what they call “their own lives,” as if they owned them. Here Gregor’s return to stay at home nights and weekends disturbs the family’s stale evening routines, particularly his father’s evening naps in his chair and his alpha position as the exclusive object of the females’ devotion. At the end of the story when Gregor is gone, the first thing father asks for and once again basks in is the exclusive attention of the females, and the parents are planning to move their remaining daughter out to marriage and finish their job of seeking full convenience free of offspring.

Following to its ultimate conclusion the original assessment of Gregor as changed, eventually the family concludes that the creature is so changed it is not Gregor, is not a member of their family, and the family decides to get rid of it. Once again Gregor’s needs are not taken into account. The always considerate Gregor does the job himself, committing suicide by not eating.

The Physical Change: Hysterical Conversion

Notwithstanding the physical change to a bug, Gregor remains caring and considerate, preserves his Indestructible. In
order for the Indestructible to hold, the brutality by his father had to be handled by Gregor in a way that would not result in recrimination on his part against the family. For this purpose Kafka used the hysterical conversion, which he had no doubt read or heard about.

After Colette Simon, a psychoanalyst, suggested this interpretation of the change, I read the same theory in a 2014 piece by Radhika Feron.

This kind of conversion buries in the unconscious the psychic pain and even the memory of the disturbing event. Gregor as the bug doesn’t know what happened to him or why. He does not blame his family.

In psychoanalytic terms, the change is a physical not a psychological transformation [i.e. a change in Gregor’s outer form]. The change “happens” because the human son Gregor cannot, consistent with preserving his Indestructible, handle the psychic pain of rejection by his parents, the pain of being unwelcome at home and being denied TLC. The physical change is a process known as “hysterical conversion,” a conversion by which unbearable psychic pain is changed into a new physical condition.

In this process, inner goes outer. Outer consistency is sacrificed to preserve inner consistency. With the physical conversion, Gregor’s love for family is saved. In some sense, Gregor chooses this version of the damage resulting from his father’s brutality. If father’s attempt to change Gregor had changed his inner nature and not his outer, then he would have been like his parents, an insect in the disguise of a human. He would have been independent of them to the point of not supporting them. Beware of what you wish for.

Kafka ties his bug story to this psychoanalytic concept by use in Gregor’s case of some of the same physical changes reported in the case of “Anna O,” apparently the first written case [Breuer and Freud in 1895] which identified hysterical conversion. Gregor as a bug suffers some of the same changes over time as were reported in her case. More on her below.
In my reading, this suggests that the fundamental meaning of the title *The Metamorphosis* is a hysterical metamorphosis.

The reason we have to make do with hints rather than stronger help in figuring why the conversion happened is because the effect of hysterical conversion is to eliminate the memory of the event. **Kafka’s text as well as Gregor reflects the effect of the process.** Kafka does not say something like “Gregor didn’t remember but his father had brutalized him the night before.” That would rob the story of its mystery and the effect of the hysterical conversion process. And it would give the narrator a role that Kafka was careful to avoid, the omniscient and neutral truth narrator. Like the parents, the narrator is compromised.

Gregor does not remember the pain or being injured and of course the parents do not refer to it since they caused it and would bear guilt. The most we get is the following from Gregor:

> It’s shocking, what can suddenly happen to a person! I was quite alright last night, my parents know about it, perhaps better than me, I had a small symptom of it last night already. They must have noticed it.

Notice the “it” used four times, the “it” of turning from a human into an “it” bug, an impersonal “it”. An “it” you could step on or force out the door. An “it” you would treat based on generalities and not its particular identity. Gregor thinks his parents would know about “it.” Notice how this statement falls well short of saying “they caused it.” His indestructible humanness will not let this understanding of why through into consciousness, since it would generate recrimination towards them and violate his Indestructible.

But we the readers know the parents were somehow involved because they would know about it and know it better than Gregor. Last night is clearly identified as the time of the hit. The small symptom of “it” that appeared last night at the
time of the hit could have been Gregor stiffening his back to his father’s demands that he not live at home. He could just have remained silent. This is suggested by his mother’s description of him the very next morning as “stubborn” and suggesting that he go “somewhere,” that is somewhere else, anywhere. Just not be at home.

The hysterical conversion is combined in the story with another form of reality-distorting vision. The often-present fog suggests the French phrase for subjective mental orientation at odds with reality: the *souvenir-écran* or a screen memory, a false memory designed to cover up psychic pain. In the story, this fog in the streets is hanging on later in the day than is usual for the time of year. And a big bug is in the bedroom, a really big bug.

**Physical Change to a Bug, Psychodynamics and the Second Leaving**

So that is why we have a physical change, in order to preserve Gregor’s Indestructible inner spirit. But why does Gregor’s outer form change to what his father called him, unwanted and dependent? Why that particular change? Why not a dragon?

With all of Gregor’s effort devoted to protecting his inner Indestructible, his outer form apparently became highly vulnerable to control by others. His vulnerable outer form changed to what his father projected Gregor to be.

This balancing act within Gregor’s energy system, devotion of additional energy to protecting inner reducing the energy available to protecting outer, was consistent with the conservation of energy or balance of energy principle believed at Kafka’s time to rule within the human energy system. From Wikipedia:

In 1874, the concept of “psychodynamics” was proposed with the publication of *Lectures on Physiology* by German physiologist Ernst Wilhelm von Brücke who,