

A sister's untold journey brought to life like never before!

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GRETE'S METAMORPHOSIS

A Retelling of Franz Kafka's Timeless Tale

RAM KHATRI

Illustrated by Sandipan Santra

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The Door Between Us



In our house, silence is the loudest thing of all. It presses down on us like a crushing weight, suffocating every moment. I am Grete Samsa, seventeen years old, and my family's silence is as thick and unyielding as a fog that won't lift. We speak. We move. Yet, we are mere marionettes, our strings pulled by unseen hands, our lives unfolding in perfect, suffocating harmony. A fragile thread tethers my father, mother, and brother Gregor, and that thread is Gregor himself.



Gregor, my older brother, is twenty-four. He is our reluctant savior, a traveling salesman whose weary feet have borne the weight of our family for years. Since Father's business collapsed, leaving us buried in debt and struggling to make ends meet, Gregor has been the only source of hope we cling to. He leaves before dawn, the sound of his shoes on the wooden floor like a steady drumbeat, marking the beginning of yet another day spent trudging through the grind. His briefcase holds more than just sample goods; it is the lifeline of our survival, the hope that one day we might find ourselves whole again. And when he returns, he is a little more worn and quieter each evening. His silence speaks louder than words could, echoing with sacrifices too heavy to articulate.

Then there's my father, who once commanded respect with his words, now reduced to a slouched figure. He spends his days flipping through newspapers, searching for a past that has slipped beyond his grasp. His eyes are hollow, his gaze distant, as if waiting for something—perhaps for the world to right itself or Gregor to keep fixing it for him. His past, a shadow of his former self, haunts the present. My mother, too, is a ghost of herself, fluttering through the house like a tired bird, her frail fingers, once nimble with the threads of creation, now fumbled with the simplest tasks, each movement a testament to the weight she carried. And me? I'm a girl caught between childhood and adulthood, watching a world I once thought full of possibilities slip through my fingers like water.

But everything changed that morning. The morning, Gregor didn't open his door. His absence was like a gaping hole in the fabric of our lives, a void that threatened to swallow us whole.

It was an ordinary winter day where frost clings to the windowpanes like stubborn memories, and the air inside feels colder than it should. The light outside was pale, struggling against the weight of the heavy curtains that shielded us from the world. I

was stitching ribbons into hats, trying to focus on the delicate task. Each pull of the needle felt like a small victory, a brief escape from the worries that piled up in my mind. But then, as if on cue, Mother's voice shattered the fragile quiet, disrupting our daily routine and adding to the tension in the house.

“Gregor! You'll miss your train!” Her words were sharp, trembling. She knocked softly at first, then louder, the sound growing more insistent. There was a desperation in her voice, a crack in the perfect façade we all wore that I had never heard before.



I heard her slippers shuffle from the hallway, each step heavier than the last. I had grown used to this sound, which usually signified nothing more than her habitual movements. But today, it felt different. Each step seemed to reverberate through the house, vibrating through the walls as if it were holding its breath.

I paused, my fingers stalling on the ribbon. A cold shiver slid down my spine. Something was wrong.

“What’s he doing in there?” Mother’s voice was brittle now, each word a thin thread pulled taut. Her voice, usually soft and controlled, now cracked at the edges. Each knock echoed through the house, like the sound of breaking glass.

Sitting in his armchair and rustling the newspaper as always, Father lowered it just enough to peer over the top. His eyes were dark with impatience, a storm brewing beneath the surface.

“That boy knows what’s at stake. He wouldn’t dare mess this up.” His words were a sharp reminder of the precarious balance we were all teetering on.

What’s at stake? The words lingered, heavy and accusing. Gregor was not just our breadwinner; he was our lifeline. Without him, we were nothing. The thought of losing him—whether to illness, failure, or something else entirely—was unthinkable. But the silence in the room seemed to whisper otherwise. The fear of losing Gregor was a constant, looming presence, making the family feel vulnerable and exposed.

“Grete, go talk to him,” Mother urged, her voice small and fragile, a plea for help in a situation she couldn’t control. She looked at me with desperate eyes, her silent plea hanging between us. “He’ll listen to you.” Her hope was a fragile thread, barely holding against the weight of the impending crisis. The desperation in her voice was palpable, a reflection of the family’s dire need for Gregor’s cooperation.



Would he? The thought felt more like a question than an answer. Gregor and I had once been close, sharing secrets and dreams of a future that felt real. But now, there was nothing but distance between us, a chasm filled with silence and unspoken resentments.

I stood, hesitated for a moment, and then made my way to his door. Each step echoed in the hallway, each one heavier than the last. My hand hovered over the doorknob, its calm surface sending a ripple of unease through me. I knocked softly. “Gregor?” I called, my voice barely more than a whisper. There was no response—just the faintest sound, like the brush of fabric against the floor.

“Maybe he’s just overslept,” I offered, though I knew they weren’t true even as the words left my mouth. Gregor never overslept.

Father, his patience worn thin, rose with a growl. Each step toward the door was deliberate, his heavy footsteps echoing like distant thunder, a storm on the brink of breaking. He pounded on the door, the force of his fist causing the wood to groan in protest. “Open up, Gregor!” he bellowed. “You hear me?” His voice was not just angry but desperate, a father’s plea for his son to be safe.

The house seemed to shudder with the force of his anger. Mother's hands clenched around the banister, her knuckles white. "What if he's ill?" she whispered, her words breaking the tension, a question we all feared to ask.

Father's scowl deepened. "Ill? He can't afford to be ill. None of us can." His words were sharp, each aimed at the heart of our family's fragile existence. But beneath the anger, there was fear—a fear for his son's health, a fear for the family's future, and a fear of his helplessness in the face of this crisis.

I pressed my ear against the door, straining to hear anything—anything that would tell me that Gregor was still the brother I once knew. "Gregor," I called, my voice quivering. "Please, say something. Let us know you're all right."



And then, a faint groan. Barely audible but unmistakable. Relief washed over me, quickly replaced by a new kind of unease. Gregor was alive, but something was terribly wrong.

The hours dragged on, each feeling like a slow, torturous crawl. Mother fluttered nervously from room to room, her worry consuming every movement. Father paced—his frustration was a constant storm that was impossible to stop. And I—well, I stood in the hallway, caught between my childhood and whatever was coming next, unable to focus on anything but that closed door.

By evening, the tension had reached its boiling point. Father's anger spilled over. "He thinks he can just ignore us?" His voice was harsh, his words cutting through the silence like knives. "After everything we've done for him?"

Mother's hands twisted the fabric of her apron. "He's not ignoring us," she whispered. "He's carried us for years. Maybe he's just... tired."

Father's fist slammed onto the table, making the dishes rattle in protest. "Tired? We're all tired. But we don't lock ourselves away, do we?"

His words were cruel but contained a bitter truth we couldn't ignore. Gregor had given so much—his time, energy, and life—so we might survive. And now, it seemed, he had nothing left to give.

That night, I stood outside his door again, my forehead pressed against the cool wood. Memories of happier times—when Gregor and I would laugh and talk when he would play with me—felt like distant fragments. Where had that brother gone? And why did I think so complicit in his disappearance?

Sleep came fitfully, interrupted by strange dreams—whispers I couldn't understand, shadows shifting in the corners of my mind. I dreamt of Gregor, but he was always just out of reach, his face obscured by darkness. When I awoke, the house was still, the silence almost suffocating. Gregor's door remained shut, an impenetrable barrier between us.

But as I stood there, I noticed something that made my heart skip: a faint, almost imperceptible crack in the door, as though it had been pushed open and quickly closed again.

I reached out instinctively, my hand hovering above the doorknob, but then—a sound—a low, muffled groan from inside. My blood ran cold.

Something was terribly wrong. And I knew, deep down, that whatever awaited behind that door would change everything.

Thank you!



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