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The Suspect Arm

The room was pitch-dark, seemingly nonexistent, as he opened his eyes. Not even a trace of the dawn had yet made its way through the louvres. ‘That’s weird, for I got up so early,’ he thought. The entire right side of his body had gone numb, especially his arm, which appeared paralysed. ‘See, that’s what I get when I lie on my right side.’ He was always afraid of sleeping on the side of his heart, in case something happened and he never woke up again. And he liked thinking, in a somewhat smug way it must be said, about his desire to experience his own death. ‘There’s nothing more humiliating than to die while asleep,’ he had once written in a diary that he kept. ‘Kept’, in a manner of speaking, for the diary was a battered, 100-page exercise book which he remembered three or four times a year, and then he’d take the opportunity to put down on paper some of the thoughts that occasionally crossed his mind.

The numbness had in some measure diminished. But what really sickened him lay in his mouth, which had the taste of a decayed piece of peel. ‘It’s best I read a little, that’s the only way I’ll fall asleep. Because if I’m late in the morning how will I handle the department head blowing his top.’ He switched the lamp on, and as he was now lying on his left-hand side, he leaned over with his right hand to grab a book from the bedside table. It seemed somewhat strange to him that he was struggling to make these movements. It was as though his arm was no longer obeying him. Eventually, after a few attempts, he took hold of the book, but as he went to lift it, it slipped from him and fell on the floor with a loud thud. He then looked at his arm. Had he not lost his voice from the shock, he would surely have screamed so loud that he would have woken up all the neighbours. His arm was scrawny, much shorter than his other arm, and furry all over. As for his fingers, they too had grown thin and were hideously bent like hooks at the end. He immediately thought: the arm of an ape! He tried to smile. ‘I must still be asleep. I must be dreaming. My dreams are always like that, nightmares, luckily I forget all about them in the morning.’ He switched off the lamp and closed his eyes. ‘You idiot. How can a human arm be transformed into the arm of

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an ape? You're obviously asleep, or else you're hallucinating.' It was this latter alternative that he preferred. 'Clearly it must be something like that, a mere hallucination which will disappear in time. Remember? It's happened to you once or twice before. At one point, for an entire evening, you thought you were the head of the bank. You got up and looked in the mirror – you looked exactly like him. But when you sat down and rationally analysed the causes, you made the following discovery: you were envious of his position, of the esteem in which everyone held him, of his mien of respectability, whereas you were an insignificant accountant of the third rank. That's what brought about the substitution. You got up in the morning perfectly well, you went to work and no one ever found out anything. Another time you thought that a dead woman was lying next to you in bed – even though you had gone to bed early all on your own. You investigated and again came upon the solution: all the women you had slept with – most of them prostitutes – had never given you what you had hoped to receive from them. You lay down on the bed in which you made love and got up from it with the same intolerable feeling of emptiness. That's why you then saw the dead woman beside you.

'That's all well and good, but what about today, how is it possible to explain what happened today? Easy. I, a man who always deeply believed in God, fell into the trap, some time ago, of reading some scientific books. I too, damn it, wanted to be able to hold an intelligent conversation in the company of others, if the opportunity ever arose – it never did, of course, because my only companions are my own self and a stray cat which comes around every morning and I give it a bit of sour milk. And so I was reading about the descent of man, as it's called, and I must admit I didn't believe a word of it. But my mind was agitated. And the outcome of this agitation must have been today's hallucination. Or maybe that cursed inferiority complex, which I've had since childhood, is now making me appear before my very eyes as an inferior being. That's it, it must be one of the two,' he contentedly reflected. 'I might not have achieved anything in life, but when it comes to psychology, ah, all in all, I am perfectly qualified. It's such a source of solace, at times of loneliness, to delve into the mysteries of the soul.'

So as to rest he switched sides, not without difficulty, of course, and he tried to get some sleep. 'In the morning everything will have passed. In any case I must consult a doctor – my nerves have frayed a bit. But what should I say to him?' he pondered, more surprised than terrified. 'That for a

whole night I was the head of the bank, or that I was transformed into an ape? He'll think I'm mad. No, I'll find another way. Besides, doctors, just like confessors, must take your secrets to the grave.' Then he had an idea: 'I'll simply tell him everything, and when he's finally cured me, I'll kill him.' He smiled at this stupid thought. Ideas of this calibre would often occur to him, but as a rational person, he took care to forget them as quickly as possible. But he would always wonder: 'Why do these ideas occur to me?'

The alarm clock, which he wound up fastidiously every night, went off as always at quarter to seven. 'So it's not as early as I thought.' He jumped out of bed with the vague hope that the nightmarish hallucination had disappeared. 'See, I told you, it was just a slight illness.' He didn't dare, of course, to look at his right hand, and so as not to yield to temptation he slid it into his pyjama pocket. He went into the kitchen to make some coffee and suddenly he found himself (and he couldn't even remember how swiftly it happened), he found himself knelt down before the garbage can, clutching and greedily eating some apple peels, which may have been there for who knows how many days. Now he realised that this time something much worse than a hallucination had befallen him. The hand holding the peels, ridiculous and furry, was – there was no doubt about it – the hand of an ape. Newspaper reports came to mind about freaks born with two heads and no arms. Sure, but all these things were from birth. He was already thirty-eight. 'And now how to make one's way to the office?' he wondered.

The night before he would always place his shaving tools on the little kitchen table. With great difficulty he shaved, cutting himself all over, his left arm, you see, was of no use, he was especially careful with the right cheek, where the hairs reached all the way to the eye, and worst of all was this eye: small, red and gummy, full of fear and malice. 'There's no denying it, something's going on. But what?' He looked at the diseased arm – and he remembered how, many years ago, he would have been five or six, there was a party at home for his uncle, his mother's brother, who had just returned after travelling for ten years as a sailor. He was only a little boy and no one paid him any attention, and so he grew angry and, finding no other way of ruining the festivities, he cupped his hand around the glass of the lamp which was alight on the table. He let out a loud scream from the pain. His mother rushed from the dining room, took it out on everyone for not looking after the boy, and then embraced him and began kissing the burned hand, tearfully murmuring: 'His little

hand, his little hand…' 'Mother, if only you were here now to see what's become of this hand,' he plaintively thought. But his gaze fell upon the clock. Twenty to eight. 'My God, I have to hurry! But what will I do with this?' and he looked at his hand. 'I'll keep it in my pocket. No, no, I might take it out without thinking.' A lovely idea occurred to him. He had a drawer where he kept various useless things (a toy, some hairpins he found on the street, two bus tickets when he first went out on a date with a girl, and half a skull from a dead dog), and he remembered that he also had a large bandage in there. He carefully wound it around his arm, beginning from the elbow, all the way to the fingers. 'I'll tell them I burned it – but they'll surely say to me that I had burned my hand years ago, when I was a child, hasn't it already healed? And so I'll say that I was hit by a car. Every day all manner of accidents occur.' As for that eye, he put on a pair of dark glasses that he had for summer, and he went out.

He arrived an entire ten minutes late. The enormous room which served as the bank's accounts department was crammed with small tables, typewriters and hunched over clerks. All of them, one by one, would lift their heads and look at him as he passed through. 'Have they noticed anything?' he anxiously thought. He looked at the arm, it was wrapped up well. He reached his desk, at the back, and sat down.

"What happened? Did you hurt yourself?" a colleague sitting nearby asked indifferently.

"Kind of… sort of, yes…" he stammered, while his mind was elsewhere: where had he found that dog skull and why had he kept it? When he gets home in the evening he's got to throw it out at once.

For a moment he considered undoing the bandage and taking off the dark glasses, to see at last how his colleague would react. If it was a hallucination, that lowly clerk will look at him vacuously, as always, and return to his work. On the other hand, if that change really has taken place, then he will surely start screaming. In this way, at least, he'd find out what exactly has happened and would no longer be eaten up with doubts. But what if it isn't a hallucination? What will happen from then on? First off, they would fire him, most naturally. Who would want a man at their workplace who is already on the way to no longer being a man? Then there are the newspapers: Freakish Event! would run the headlines. They'd print his name as well as his photograph. The police would intervene, and most certainly the Medical Academy would too. Because the state would have to

make up its mind: To which species does he belong? Should he be allowed to continue living and associating with human beings? And perhaps, in the end, it can't be ruled out, they might lock him up in a zoo.

He made the irrevocable decision to hide it without fail. Before him lay a large book, Receipts and Payments, he opened it but immediately turned pale. 'How will I write with my left hand? Don't be stupid. Since your right hand is injured, you obviously won't be able to write. You'll go to the department head and request a day's leave. You'll then have all the time you need to think things through.'

The sound of the typewriter keys clicking seemed to arrive from far off in the distance. The clerks hunched over their desks were writing uninterruptedly. Only now and then they'd raise their heads, as though they were trying to take a deep breath. 'What are all these people writing?' he thought, seeking to forget that other matter. 'Huge, dizzying sums go in, go out, and no one notices them, we simply record them. Hunched over so long, most of these clerks end up walking with a stoop. But what do I care? I exercise every morning. A bit of exercise each day does a lot of good, all the magazines say so.' The strange situation he was in abruptly crossed his mind again. 'I'll tackle it from all sides. No one will find out about it.' He has allowed others to rule his life long enough. No, now he would fool them. This too was a way for him to take revenge. 'I must place my life on a new footing,' he thought. 'I must also get hold of an encyclopedia to find out what these animals eat. Most likely they're herbivores. Furtunately, I'm naturally inclined that way.'

He felt somewhat better and got ready to go to the head of the department. Luck was on his side. The door at the back opened and in came the department head: towering, imposing, with a smug smile, and overall with an air of magnanimous condescension. He was always wearing a pair of sunglasses, with an expensive frame, in an attempt to camouflage his short-sightedness. 'What a coincidence!' he thought, as soon as he noticed, not without surprise, the department head's hand wrapped in a bandage. He got up and approached him. 'I must speak as politely as possible, he likes that kind of thing.'

"Good morning, Sir. Are you well? You have hurt yourself, my God, you must be careful. All of us here have such deep affection for you."

The department head was taken aback. He had no respect at all for this anaemic clerk.

“Sir, I would like, and appealing to the kindness that distinguishes you, I would like one day’s leave. You see, I hurt myself, I have a bit of a fever, and besides it’s impossible for me to learn to write with my left hand in the space of one day…”

‘I’ve given myself away,’ he panicked. ‘Why did I say: I can’t manage in one day? It’s as though I had said to him that my right hand is no longer of any use and from here on I must make do with the other hand.’

The department head’s voice was like everything else about him, imposing and not without some, albeit agreeable, affectation.

“My dear, I too am not very well,” and he displayed his hand. “But that doesn’t mean that we should give up our work at the merest trifle. I must point out, moreover, that of late you’ve frequently been absent, and you’ve been distracted and making mistakes in the books. Management intends to take serious action.”

“Sir, you are an invaluable man, but you see, I don’t feel well, my health…”

“Your health cannot matter to a financial organisation, only your performance matters. I’m afraid that at the end of the month you will receive some unpleasant news.”

As he sorrowfully lowered his head, he noticed the department head’s well-polished shoes. One of the laces was untied. He remembered a classmate in high school, someone who limped on crutches, who had that premature facial hair common in sickly boys, and who would strangely adore him, following him everywhere, his atrophied leg in tow, even to the point where one day, in order to please him, he bent down to tie his shoelaces. And he, with one of those bizarre reactions that would sometimes come over him, kicked him in the face – that facile gesture got to him. The limp boy fell on his back and looked embarrassed, as though he himself was to blame. He died a few years later.

“Allow me to help,” he made an instinctive movement, ready to bend down before the department head’s shoes. But he restrained himself right away: ‘Why did I do that?’ he wondered, abashed.

“Excuse me,” exclaimed the department head, caught off guard.

And to change the atmosphere, the head of the department took off his glasses and wiped them with a light, silk handkerchief. It was the first time he saw him without glasses and his myopic eyes made an immediate impression on him. They were full of fear and malice – just like his own diseased eye. A thought suddenly occurred to him: Is it possible? He looked at the department head's bandaged hand. That must be it! How didn't he see it before? And why not, when all's said and done? Why can't what happened to him also happen to someone else?

"Sir," he said in a loud voice, "can you remove the bandage so that we can see your hand?"

The department head, at first, didn't understand. He stood there looking at him baffled.

"Sir," he repeated in an even louder voice, so that everyone in the room turned in their direction. "Can you remove the bandage so that we can see your hand?"

"You don't know what you're talking about," the department head managed to say and began to move away. But he soon came to a stop. His face had turned pale.

"You're fired!" he shouted, somewhat hysterically. "You're fired this very instant! I have approval from management."

'He wants to kick me out so that I won't unmask him,' he immediately reflected.

"The head of the department is afraid of showing us his hand so that we don't find out the truth. The head of the department has begun turning into an ape!"

The department head had already left. He may not have even heard these last words. The others were looking at him startled, uncomprehending. The typewriters had stopped. A great silence, reminding him of distant, peaceful forests, and a boundless nostalgia to lose himself in their green, calming wilderness. 'The evil is spreading,' he thought. 'I even feel the urge now to return to my natural habitat. No one can escape their fate. I may as well go.' And his steps on the floor could be heard as he approached the exit.

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