

For F.

**I**t was on a Sunday morning in the nicest time of Spring. Georg Bendemann, a young merchant, sat in his private room on the first floor of one of the lightly built low-rise houses of a long row facing the river, differing only in their height and the colour of their façades. He had just finished writing a letter to a friend of his youth now living abroad. After enclosing the letter in the envelope in playful slowness, he rested on his elbows on the desk and gazed through the window onto the river, the bridge, and across to the weakly green banks on the far side.

He pondered on how this friend, unsatisfied with his career at home, had years ago positively fled to Russia and built up a business in Petersburg. In the beginning, the business had developed quite well. But long since then his fortune seemed to be stagnating, about which the friend complained during his ever more seldom visits home. And so he slaved away pointlessly far away from home. His unfamiliar full beard barely covered a face that still showed the characteristics of youth, although the yellow skin tan seemed to indicate a progressing illness of some kind. He mentioned lacking proper connections with the colony of compatriots there, and having hardly any social ties to the families over here, and so he reconciled himself to remaining a bachelor for good.

What should one write to a person like that, someone who has obviously arrived at a dead end, for whom one might feel sorry but whom one cannot help. Should one perhaps advise him to come home again, to transfer his existence back here and to renew his relationships with the acquaintances – there was no obstacle against this – and to simply trust in the willingness of his friends to help? But this would be tantamount to telling him, the more considerately the more grieving, that his past efforts were a failure, that he ought to at last give these up, that he should come back, and, as a permanent homecomer, let himself be stared at with big eyes by all, in the implicit understanding that only his friends had the proper knowledge and insight, and that he was an old child that needed to follow the example of the friends who had achieved success at home. And was it even certain that all the effort they might have to expend on him would in the end serve any purpose? Maybe bringing him home would not prove to be a success at all – he himself said that he no longer understood the circumstances at home – and he might remain abroad in any case, embittered by the advice and more alienated from his friends than ever. And in case he *would* follow their advice, and – of course not of his own doing but through circumstances – fail, and not be able to manage *with* his friends and not *without* them, suffer humiliation, no longer possess a real home and finally lose the friends, would it not have been much better for him to have stayed abroad where he was? Under such circumstances, is it at all plausible to think that he had a realistic chance of progress over here?

For all these reasons, if one had the intention of maintaining a correspondence at all, one could not communicate with him on a practical level, in the manner in which one would exchange common occurrences with even the remotest relation. The friend had not been home for the last three years and gave a scanty explanation for this by referring to the insecure political conditions in Russia that prevented even the shortest absence by a small merchant. This stands in contrast to the hundreds of thousands of Russians traveling around the world without further ado. On the other hand, these three years had brought many changes in Georg's own life. Two years ago, the friend had learned of the death of Georg's mother, and had expressed his regrets in a letter with a dryness

that could only be explained by assuming that the sorrow over an event like that is inconceivable across such a great distance. But since that time, Georg had also tackled the business and everything else with a greater determination. Maybe it was because, during the time in which his mother was still alive, his father had hindered Georg from developing his own activities by imposing his, the father's, own opinions. And since the death of the mother, the father, although still participating in the business, had been restraining himself. Maybe - and this was quite probable - it was simply favourable circumstances that played the dominant role. At any rate, the business had developed unexpectedly well, the personell had to be doubled, the volume grew by a factor of five, and further progress appeared imminent.

But the friend had no inkling of these changes. Previously, perhaps for the last time in that letter in which he had expressed his regret for the mother's death, he had tried to convince Georg to emigrate to Russia, expounding on the bright prospects for Georg's line of business in Petersburg. His estimation of the business volume was negligible in comparison with the size that Georg's business had since assumed here. But Georg had no mind to write to his friend about the growth of his business. In retrospect, it would have made a peculiar impression to do so.

And so Georg confined himself to writing only about insignificant occurrences, such as those that gather haphazardly in one's memory when one ponders over things on a quiet Sunday. He wanted nothing more than to leave his friend with the conception of the home town that must have accrued in his mind over the long interim period, and that he must have since become reconciled with. And so it came about that in remotely separate letters Georg mentioned to his friend three times the engagement of some person of indifference to them both with a girl just as indifferent, until his friend, completely against Georg's intention, began to develop an interest in the subject.

Georg much preferred to write about such inconsequential matters rather than to admit that a month ago he himself had become engaged to a Miss Frieda Brandenfeld, a girl from a well-to-do family. He told his bride about this friend, and of the special correspondence relationship he had with him. "So he is not going to come to our wedding", she said, "but I have a right to get to know all your friends." "I don't want to disturb him," Georg answered, "understand me rightly, he would probably come, at least I believe that, but he would feel coerced and aggrieved. Maybe he would envy me and certainly be dissatisfied and travel back alone, incapable of getting over this dissatisfaction alone - can you understand that?" "Yes, but wouldn't he discover our marriage in some other way?" "I can't prevent that. Though in his situation it's improbable." "If you have such friends, Georg, you should not have gotten engaged at all." "Yes, we are both to blame for that. But I wouldn't have wanted it any differently, even now. And as she managed to add between quick breaths under his kisses "All the same, it does grieve me", he decided that informing his friend would not really be that harmful after all. "That's the way I am, and that's how he has to accept me", he said to himself, "I can't cut a human being out of me that would be more suitable as his friend than the way I am."

This Sunday morning he wrote a long letter in which he announced the recent engagement with the following words: "I have saved the best news until the end. I am now engaged to Miss Frieda Brandenfeld. She is a girl from a well-to-do family that settled here long after your departure, so you will hardly have known them. There will be ample opportunity to tell you more about my bride, suffice to say that I am very happy, and that our mutual relationship has changed only inasmuch as you are now going to have a happy friend in me instead of just an ordinary friend. Moreover in my bride, who greets you heartily and will write you a letter soon, you will gain a sincere friend, which is not such a bad thing for a bachelor. I know that it is difficult for you to pay us a visit for all sorts of reasons, but would my wedding not be the right opportunity to at least once push all obstacles out of the way? Be that as it may, act without regard to anything beyond your own perspective."

Holding this letter in his hand, Georg sat a long time at his desk facing the window. With an absent-minded smile he answered the greeting of an acquaintance who walked by on the lane outside.

At last he put the letter in his pocket and went out of his room, across a small corridor, and into the room of his father, in which he had not been for months. There was no necessity for him to go there, since he had daily contact with his father in the business, and they ate lunch together in an eating house. In the evenings, each of them catered for himself. But they would sit together a while in their common living room, each reading his own newspaper, unless, and this happened quite often, Georg went out with friends or visited his bride.

Georg was surprised how dark his father's room was, even on this sunny morning. It was the shadow cast by the high wall just beyond the courtyard. The father sat near the window in a corner that was decorated with various mementos of the late mother, and was reading the paper that he held inclined to his eyes in an attempt to compensate some sight defect. On the table was the remainder of the breakfast that he seemed hardly to have touched.

"Ah, Georg!" said the father and immediately came towards him. His heavy dressing gown opened as he walked, the ends flattered around him - "My father is still a giant", Georg said to himself.

"It's unbearably dark in here", he said.

"Yes, it *is* dark", the father answered.

"And you've closed the window?"

"I prefer it like that."

"It's quite warm outside", Georg said absently, and sat down.

The father cleared away the dishes, leaving them on a cupboard.

"I only wanted to tell you," continued Georg, passively following the movements of the old man, "that I have announced my engagement to Petersburg after all." He started to pull the letter out of his pocket and let it fall back again.

"To Petersburg?" the father asked.

"To my friend, of course", Georg said and tried to meet the father's eyes. - "In the office he is totally different," he thought, "how broadly he sits here with his arms crossed over his chest."

"Yes. *Your* friend", the father said with emphasis.

"You remember, father, that I first wanted to withhold my engagement from him. Out of consideration, for no other reason. You know yourself, he is a difficult person. I thought that he could find out about my engagement from someone else, even if that's unlikely considering his isolated way of life - I can't prevent that, but I didn't want him to learn about it from me personally."

"And now you've changed your mind?" the father asked, laid the big newspaper onto the window sill and on the paper his glasses, which he held covered with his hand.

"Yes, I've thought it over. If he is a good friend, I told myself, then my happy engagement is also good luck for him. So I no longer hesitated to announce it to him. But before I go to the letterbox I wanted to let you know."

"Georg," the father said and widened his toothless mouth, "listen! You came to me because of this matter in order to deliberate with me on it. That doubtlessly honours you. But if you don't tell me the whole truth now, then it's nothing, it is worse than nothing. I don't want to stir things up that

don't belong here. Since the death of our dear mother certain un-nice things have happened. Maybe the time will also come for these, and maybe the time will come quicker than we think. Things occur in the business that I don't know about, maybe not purposely behind my back - I really don't want to think that it's behind my back, I'm no longer strong enough, my memory is failing. I can't keep so many things in my mind any more. That's firstly the run of nature, and secondly the death of our mom has depressed me much more than you. But because this thing lies before us, this letter, I beg you Georg, don't disappoint me. It's a trifle, it's not worth the breath, so don't disappoint me. Do you really have this friend in Petersburg?"

Embarrassed, Georg stood up. "Let's leave my friends alone. A thousand friends don't replace my father. Do you know what I believe? You don't spare yourself enough. But old age demands its rights. You are indispensable for me in the business, you know that too well. But should the business threaten your health, I would lock it up tomorrow, for ever. It would be unacceptable. We have to work out a different way of life for you. From the ground up. Here you sit in the dark, and in the living room you could have a friendly light. You only nip at your breakfast instead of properly strengthening yourself. You sit with the window shut, whereas the fresh air would do you so much good. No, my father! I'll call the doctor and we'll follow his instructions. We will change the room, you will move into the front room and I will move in here. For you, it will mean no change, we will transfer all your things. But there's time for all that, right now lie down a bit, you really need some rest. Come, I'll help you undress. You'll see, I can manage it. Or do you want to go into the front room right now, then you can use my bed for the time being. Actually, that would be quite sensible."

Georg stood beside his father, who had let his head with the scrubby white hair sink onto his breast.

"Georg", the father said softly, motionless.

Georg knelt immediately next to the father. He saw the widened pupils in the tired face of the father focussed on him.

"You *have* no friend in Petersburg. You were always a joker, and you have also not spared me. How can you possibly have a friend over there of all places! I can't believe that."

"Think back a little, father," Georg said, raised the father from the armchair and, as he stood there fairly helplessly, took off his dressing gown, "it must be almost three years ago, that my friend had visited us here. I remember you didn't like him particularly. Despite the fact that he was in my room I had denied him before you at least twice. I could well understand your bias against him, my friend has his peculiarities. And yet you could converse with him quite well. I was quite proud that you listened to him, nodded, and asked questions. If you think hard, it'll come back to you. He recounted unbelievable stories about the Russian revolution. Like the time he was on a business trip to Kiev, where he had witnessed a tumult in which a priest on a balcony cut a bloody cross into his flat hand that he then raised to address the crowd. You yourself retold that story to people here and there.

Meanwhile Georg succeeded in seating the father again, and pulling off his jersey trousers that he wore over the linen underwear, and his socks. At the appearance of the not so clean underwear he reproached himself of having neglected the father. Doubtlessly he should have seen it as his duty to watch over his father's change of underwear. He had not yet talked with his bride specifically about how they should organize his father's future, because they had tacitly assumed that the father would remain alone in the old dwelling. But now he made a firm decision to take the father with him to the prospective household. On looking more closely, it almost seemed that the care the father was to receive there would come too late.

He carried the father on his arms to the bed. On the way there, he had a terrible feeling as he

noticed that the father was playing with his watch chain. He held the chain so firmly that he could not immediately lay him onto the bed.

However, as soon as he was in bed everything seemed all right. He tucked himself in, pulling the blanket far over the shoulders. His glance up to Georg was not unfriendly.

"You can remember him, can't you?" Georg asked and nodded encouragingly.

"Am I well covered now?" the father asked, as if he could not see whether his feet were under the blanket.

"So you already like being in bed", Georg asked and tucked the blanket better around him.

"Am I well covered now?" the father asked once more and seemed to be especially attentive for the answer.

"Rest easy, you're well covered."

"No!" the father cried so that the answer was pushed against the question, threw the blanket away with such a force that it unfurled itself in flight, and stood upright on the bed. He steadied himself by touching the ceiling lightly with one hand. "I know that you wanted to cover me up, my good-for-nothing, but I'm not covered up yet. And if it's the last reserve I'm drawing from, it's enough for you, too much for you. Sure I know your friend. He would have been a son after my own heart. That's why you betrayed him all these years. Why else? Do you imagine I didn't cry over him? That's why you lock yourself in your office, nobody should disturb you, the boss is busy - only so that you can write your false letters to Russia. But no-one needs to teach the father to see through the son. The moment you thought that you had succeeded in pulling him down, so much so that you could sit on him with your bottom and he couldn't budge, my veritable son decided to get married!"

Georg gazed at the terrible sight of his father. The Petersburg friend, whom the father all of a sudden knew so well, clutched him as never before. He saw him lost in the vast expanse of Russia. He saw him in the doorway of the empty, robbed shop. And he stood amongst the pile of ruined shelves, the wares torn asunder, the fallen gas fittings. Why did he have to go so far away!

"But look at me!" the father cried, and Georg ran, almost absent-minded, to the bed, to grasp everything, but suddenly halted midway.

"Because she had raised her skirts," the father began to warble, "because she had raised her skirts, the disgusting goose," and to demonstrate, he raised his shirt so high that you could see the scar on his thigh dating from his war years, "because she raised the skirts like this and this and this, you approached her, and so that you could satisfy yourself with her undisturbed, you defiled our mother's memory, betrayed your friend, and put your father to bed so that he can't budge any more. But he *can* budge, see?"

And he stood totally free and threw his legs around. He beamed with insight.

Georg stood in a recess, as far away as possible. Once, long ago, he had made a firm decision to observe everything accurately, so that he could not be caught by surprise from other quarters, from behind, from above. Now this long forgotten resolution came back to him, and promptly he forgot it again, like pulling a short thread through the eye of a needle.

"But now the friend is not betrayed after all!" the father cried, and his wagging index finger reinforced it. "I was his local representative."

Georg could not refrain from crying "Comedian!", realized the damage immediately and bit, only too late, - the eyes stiff - so in his tongue that he buckled up.

"Yes, certainly I played comedy! Comedy! Good word! Which other consolation remained for the old, widowed father? Tell me - and for the moment of your answer still as my living son,

what remained open to me in my back room, chased by unfaithful personell, old unto the bones? And my son went on rejoicing through the world, signing contracts that I had prepared, tumbling over with pleasure, and walked before his father with the close-mouthed face of a man of honour! Do you believe that I didn't love you, I, from whom you sprang?"

"Now he'll bend forward," Georg thought, "if he would fall and schatter!" This word whizzed through his head.

The father bent forward, but did not fall. Because Georg did not come closer, as he had expected, he straightened up again.

"Stay where you are, I don't need you! You think you still have the strength to come here but are holding yourself back just because it's your will. That you are not mistaken! I'm still the much stronger one. Alone, I might have had to retreat, but mother had given me her strength. I could get on with your friend marvellously, I have your clientele here in the pocket!"

"He even has pockets in his night-gown!" Georg said to himself and believed, with this comment he could make him impossible in the whole world. This occurred to him for just a moment, because he continually forgot everything.

"Just couple yourself with your bride and come towards me! It will astound you how I can sweep her from your side!"

Georg made incredulous grimaces. The father just nodded towards Georg's corner to affirm the truth of what he said.

"How you entertained me today, as you came and asked, if you ought to write to your friend of the engagement. He already knows everything, stupid boy, he knows everything! I wrote to him, because you forgot to take away the stationary. That's why he hasn't come here for years. He knows everything a hundred times better than you yourself. He crumples up your letters unread with his left hand while he holds up my letters to read them with the right!"

Out of enthusiasm he swung his arm over his head. "He knows everything a thousand times better!" he cried.

"Ten thousand times!" Georg said, trying to deride the father, but already in his mouth the words acquired a deadly serious ring.

"I've been waiting for years that you would come with this question. Do you think I have other interests? Do you believe I read the papers? There!" and he threw a newspaper page that had somehow found its way into the bed towards Georg, an old newspaper whose name Georg had never heard of.

"How long you waited before you ripened! Mother had to die, she didn't live to see the happy day! The friend is perishing in his Russia. Already three years ago he was yellow enough to throw away, and I, you can see how I'm doing. You've got your eyes for that!"

"So you lay in wait for me!" Georg cried.

On the side the father said pityingly: "You probably wanted to say that earlier. Now it doesn't fit any more."

And louder: "Now you know what existed outside of you, until now you were only aware of yourself! Actually you were an innocent child, but more actually still, you were a develish human being! And therefore know this: I condemn you to death by drowning!"

Georg felt himself chased out of the room. As he left, his ears carried the impact with which his father crashed onto the bed. In rushing down the stairs as if they were an inclined plane he surprised his charwoman who was about to go up in order to tidy the room. "Jesus!" she cried and

hid her face in her apron, but he was already gone. He sprang through the house door, and felt impelled to cross the carriageway towards the water. He held the railing tight like a starving man clutches food. He jumped over, like the excellent gymnast that he had been in his youth, the pride of his parents. He continued to hold onto the railing though his hands were getting weak. Between the posts he spotted an autobus that would easily drown out his fall. He cried softly: "But dear parents, I have always loved you", and let himself fall down.

At this moment an almost endless traffic rolled across the bridge.

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