***Unhappiness***

*by Franz Kafka*

*Translated by Willa and Edwin Muir*

WHEN it was becoming unbearable - once toward evening in November - and I ran along the narrow strip of carpet in my room as on a racetrack, shrank from the sight of the lit-up street, then turning to the interior of the room found a new goal in the depths of the looking glass and screamed aloud, to hear only my own scream which met no answer nor anything that could draw its force away, so that it rose up without check and could not stop even when it ceased being audible, the door in the wall opened toward me, how swiftly, because swiftness was needed and even the cart horses down below on the paving stones were rising in the air like horses driven wild in a battle, their throats bare to the enemy.

Like a small ghost a child blew in from the pitch-dark corridor, where the lamp was not yet lit, and stood a-tiptoe on a floor board that quivered imperceptibly. At once dazzled by the twilight in my room she made to cover her face quickly with her hands, but contented herself unexpectedly with a glance at the window, where the mounting vapor of the street lighting had at last settled under its cover of darkness behind the crossbars. With her right elbow she supported herself against the wall in the open doorway and let the draught from outside play along her ankles, her throat, and her temples.

I gave her a brief glance, then said 'Good day,' and took my jacket from the hood of the stove, since I didn't want to stand there half-undressed. For a little while I let my mouth hang open, so that my agitation could find a way out. I had a bad taste in my mouth, my eyelashes were fluttering on my cheeks, in short this visit, though I had expected it, was the one thing needful.

The child was still standing by the wall on the same spot, she had pressed her right hand against the plaster and was quite taken up with finding, her cheeks all pink, that the whitewashed walls had a rough surface and chafed her finger tips. I said: 'Are you really looking for me? Isn't there some mistake? Nothing easier than to make a mistake in this big building. I'm called So-and-so and I live on the third floor. Am I the person you want to find?

'Hush, hush,' said the child over her shoulder, 'it's all right.'

'Then come farther into the room, I'd like to shut the door.'

'I've shut it this very minute. Don't bother. Just be easy in your mind.'

'It's no bother. But there's a lot of people living on this corridor, and I know them all, of course; most of them are coming back from work now; if they hear someone talking in a room, they simply think they have a right to open the door and see what's happening. They're just like that. They've turned their backs on their daily work and in their provisionally free evenings they're not going to be dictated to by anyone. Besides, you know that as well as I do. Let me shut the door.'

'Why, what's the matter with you? I don't mind if the whole house comes in. Anyhow, as I told you, I've already shut the door, do you think you're the only person who can shut doors? I've even turned the key in the lock.'

'That's all right then. I couldn't ask for more. You didn't need to turn the key, either. And now that you are here, make yourself comfortable. You are my guest. You can trust me entirely. Just make yourself at home and don't be afraid. I won't compel you either to stay or to go away. Do I have to tell you that? Do you know me so little?'

'No. You really didn't need to tell me that. What's more, you shouldn't have told me. I'm just a child; why stand on so much ceremony with me?'

'It's not so bad as that. A child, of course. But not so very small. You're quite big. If you were a young lady, you wouldn't dare to lock yourself so simply in a room with me.'

'We needn't worry about that. I just want to say: my knowing you so well isn't much protection to me, it only relieves you of the effort of keeping up pretenses before me. And yet you're paying me a compliment. Stop it, I beg you, do stop it. Anyhow, I don't know you everywhere and all the time, least of all in this darkness. It would be much better if you were to light up. No, perhaps not. At any rate I'll keep it in mind that you have been threatening me.'

'What? Am I supposed to have threatened you? But, look here. I'm so pleased that you've come at last. I say "at last" because it's already rather late. I can't understand why you've come so late. But it's possible that in the joy of seeing you I have been speaking at random and you took up my words in the wrong sense. I'll admit ten times over that I said something of the kind, I've made all kinds of threats, anything you like. Only no quarreling, for Heaven's sake! But how could you think of such a thing? How could you hurt me so? Why do you insist on spoiling this brief moment of your presence here? A stranger would be more obliging than you are.'

'That I can well believe; that's no great discovery. No stranger could come any nearer to you than I am already by nature. You know that, too, so why all this pathos? If you're only wanting to stage a comedy I'll go away immediately.'

'What? You have the impudence to tell me that? You make a little too bold. After all, it's my room you're in. It's my wall you're rubbing your fingers on like mad. My room, my wall! And besides, what you are saying is ridiculous as well as impudent. You say your nature forces you to speak to me like that. Is that so? Your nature forces you? That's kind of your nature. Your nature is mine, and if I feel friendly to you by nature, then you mustn't be anything else.'

'Is that friendly?'

'I'm speaking of earlier on.'

'Do you know how I'll be later on?'

'I don't know anything.'

And I went to the bed table and lit the candle on it. At that time I had neither gas nor electric light in my room. Then I sat for a while at the table till I got tired of it, put on my greatcoat, took my hat from the sofa, and blew out the candle. As I went out I tripped over the leg of a chair.

On the stairs I met one of the tenants from my floor.

'Going out again already, you rascal?' he asked, pausing with his legs firmly straddled over two steps.'

'What can I do?' I said, 'I've just had a ghost in my room.'

'You say that exactly as if you had just found a hair in your soup.'

'You're making a joke of it. But let me tell you, a ghost is a ghost.'

'How true. But what if one doesn't believe in ghosts at all?'

'Well, do you think I believe in ghosts? But how can my not believing help me?'

'Quite simply. You don't need to feel afraid if a ghost actually turns up.'

'Oh, that's only a secondary fear. The real fear is a fear of what caused the apparition. And that fear doesn't go away. I have it fairly powerfully inside me now.' Out of sheer nervousness I began to hunt through all my pockets.

'But since you weren't afraid of the ghost itself, you could easily have asked it how it came to be there.'

'Obviously you've never spoken to a ghost. One never gets straight information from them. It's just a hither and thither. These ghosts seem to be more dubious about their existence than we are, and no wonder, considering how frail they are.'

'But I've heard that one can fatten them up.'

'How well informed you are. It's quite true. But is anyone likely to do it?'

'Why not? If it were a feminine ghost, for instance,' said he, swinging onto the top step.

'Aha,' said I, 'but even then it's not worth while.'

I thought of something else. My neighbor was already so far up that in order to see me he had to bend over the well of the staircase. 'All the same,' I called up, 'if you steal my ghost from me all is over between us, forever.'

'Oh, I was only joking,' he said and drew his head back.

'That's all right,' said I, and now I really could have gone quietly for a walk. But because I felt so forlorn I preferred to go upstairs again and so went to bed.