

Driven buggy.

THE VERMIN awoke one morning transformed into a huge, soft creature. Gone were its exoskeleton and the others of its kind.

Fearfully alone, it dropped to search for cover. Instead of its six short, sturdy legs, it had four long, jointed appendages. Its whole body was soft. It only saw directly in front of itself, in a dull way, and it could smell nothing except the strongest odors.

It tried to secrete its pheromones, but there were none that it recognized. It tried to make its sounds, but those failed, too. Its jaws shifted strangely. It inhaled and expelled air through its mouth rather than its body, its body immense in size and weight.

There was a knock on the door to the room. "Good morning, Gregor! You need to get going to work!" The creature - Gregor - froze stock still.

"Gregor! Come out for breakfast! You're going to miss the bus!"

Gregor flattened on his belly next to a couch, but he was too big to fit under it.

"Gregor? Are you awake?" The door opened.

"Gregor, what are you doing on the floor?! What's wrong? What happened?!"

Gregor's mother stepped toward Gregor, but Gregor, bug-eyed, moved into a corner by the fireplace. He pressed his arms and hands against the wall, knocking down a reproduction of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. He tried to press his legs against the wall, too, but they didn't stick to the wall any more than his arms, and he collapsed. He landed on the dog iron from the fireplace and, to his great shock, he felt pain.

"Something's wrong with Gregor!" the mother cried out. "Hurry!"

Gregor's father rushed into the room followed closely by Gregor's sister. "Lift him! Put him on the couch!" Gregor's mother watched and fretted.

The father and sister sat Gregor upright on the couch. "Gregor, say something!" said the mother. "Look at him, his eyes are dilated. We need to call the doctor!"

"His blood sugars are low," said the father. "Get him some juice." The sister ran out and returned with a glass of apple juice. She poured a little in Gregor's mouth; he coughed and dribbled. "I think some went down," the sister said. "He swallowed."

"Be careful, you're spilling," said the father.

"He's going to be late for work," said the mother. But Gregor was not late for work, not in a technical sense, because his mother called in sick for him. He stayed on the couch for the rest of the day. .

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Gregor's sister brought him an assortment of food. He made noises but did not talk; he seemed to have been struck dumb. The mother washed him from a basin as best she could. The father cleaned around him, and the sister rehung the Venus print, the frame of which had cracked. Gregor watched listlessly, his mouth partly open, jaws slowly working, turning his head left and right occasionally.

Night brought darkness, and darkness brought comfort. Gregor slid to the floor in a fetal position and longed for others of his kind. He hurt inside.

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In the morning, the sister softly swung the door open to the smell of urine and feces and the sight of Gregor curled on the floor, eyes blankly open. The food she had

brought him was untouched. She tried to hoist him to the couch, but she couldn't manage it by herself. The father took one look, stifled a gag, and retreated for a bucket of hot water and his mop. The mother stripped Gregor, washed him from the basin again, and called his work to tell them he was still sick.

The sister took refuge in practicing her violin. She was off-pitch, and the notes dropped off precipitously and screeched like fingernails on a chalkboard. "It seems to touch him," said the father. "He's crying."

Gregor tried to call out and moved his hands and feet in tapping motions. "It looks like he's trying to talk," said the sister. "It's as if he doesn't know what to do." The pain in Gregor's abdomen got worse.

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That night, the family heard scuttling in Gregor's room. In the morning, they found Gregor in front of the fireplace smeared with soot. The mother spread a sheet on the couch; the father and sister half carried, half dragged Gregor onto it; the mother stripped and cleaned him; the father mopped rigorously.

The sister offered Gregor apple slices. She wedged one between his lips; it fell out. "He can't go another day without eating," she said. "He'll starve."

"This is revolting," the father said. "We can't continue to suffer this."

"What if it's contagious?" asked the mother. "He was right next to the fireplace. What if he caught a flue [sic] bug?"

The pain inside Gregor had stopped, and in its place he felt nothing. He was unable to move of his own volition, although "volition" was far from the right word.

His body and his brain could not initiate movement. He remained vaguely aware that he was solitary and that something was missing or lost. Thoughts of others of his kind had evaporated, and in their place he felt a strange relief.

“He can’t miss work again,” the mother said. “I’ll take him in the morning.”

“He has to go,” the sister agreed.

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The family dressed Gregor in his work clothes and the mother left him sitting outside the doors of his company before it opened, his hands neatly folded in his lap. He was scrubbed, shaved and groomed so well that, to look at him, you couldn’t tell he was comatose. He looked like all the other employees.

Later that morning, the family got a call that Gregor had died.

“If only he would’ve had more sympathy for us,” Mr. Samsa said. “I can’t wait to sanitize that room.”

Gregor’s sister, too young to work, was invigorated. Her name was Grete. She played her violin with new subtlety and confidence. She felt fluorescent, self-consciously voluptuous, her days scented with possibility that she mistook for promise.

For a few days, Mrs. Samsa took all their temperatures and called the doctor’s office to inquire, had there been some bug going around?

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Inspired by Franz Kafka, “Metamorphosis.”

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