
Before the Shop

A manuscript found behind heating pipes in the cellar of the Municipal Library of Prague. Translated from the German: *Vor dem Geschäft* by Fritz Kafka.

Before the shop sits a doorkeeper wearing a surgical mask. To this doorkeeper comes a man from the country who prays to gain admittance to the shop. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance to just anyone. The man thinks about this, and asks whether he will be allowed to enter later.

“It is possible”, says the doorkeeper, “but not now.”

The man asks what is required for admittance.

“A certificate”, says the doorkeeper, “a QR code on your CovidPassApp.”

These words make no sense to the man from the country. Since the door to the shop stands open, as always, the doorkeeper moves to the side, and the man looks through the door into the shop. The doorkeeper laughs and says:

“It is very simple. If it tempts you so much, go and be vaccinated and have the certificate scanned into your smartphone.”

The man from the country has not expected such difficulties: the shop should always be accessible for everyone, he thinks. The doorkeeper continues:

“You may try to enter in spite of my prohibition. But although I am powerful, before every other shop stand other doorkeepers, each more powerful than the last, and each will demand your QR code.”

The door to the shop is open, but as the man looks more closely at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, at the mask covering his mouth and nose, and his long, thin, black straggly ponytail, he decides to wait until he receives permission to enter.

The doorkeeper gives him a stool and allows him to sit outside the door, but “at a distance of at least 1.5 metres”. The man from the country wonders at the arithmetic precision of this additional prohibition, but he sits for hour after hour, and watches other customers gain entrance to the shop. They show the doorkeeper a document. He holds it against a device which glows green, and the customers are allowed in. Those who fumble clumsily with their documents are roundly cursed and abused by the doorkeeper for wasting his time, but even they have access to the shop.

The man from the country makes many attempts to be allowed in, and wears the doorkeeper down with his requests. The doorkeeper sometimes interrogates the man briefly about his homeland, a curious country whose citizens reject science, and have no understanding of correlations, exponential curves, or the Greek terms *alpha*, *delta* and *omicron*. But they are unsympathetic questions, the kind that great men ask, and at the end the man from the country is always denied entrance.

The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey, offers everything, no matter how valuable, to win over the doorkeeper. The latter considers every bribe thoughtfully, but as he does so, says:

“I do this only so that you do not think you have not tried everything – except of course the most obvious – getting a vaccination.”

For hour after hour the man observes the doorkeeper. He forgets the other doorkeepers before the other shops, and this one seems to him the only obstacle. He curses his wretched circumstances, at first silently, later in loud but futile protests about supposed conspiracies, and as he grows tired he still mumbles to himself, and becomes childish. In the long hours studying the doorkeeper he has come to know even the fleas in his fur collar, and now begs the fleas to help him.

Finally his eyes grow tired, and he does not know whether things are really darker around him or whether his eyes are growing dim. He sees only the bright neon advertising which shines inextinguishably out of the doorway to the shop. He feels he no longer has much time to live. He is racked with a high temperature and a dry cough and shortness of breath. The doorkeeper says to him:

“You must understand that I am here to protect yourself as much as others.”

The man from the country signals to the doorkeeper. Since he can no longer lift up his stiffening body, the doorkeeper has to bend low down to him.

“What do you want now?” asks the doorkeeper. “You are insatiable.”

“Everyone strives to enter the shop,” says the man, “so how is it that in all these hours only I have been refused entry?”

The gatekeeper sees that the man is dying and, in order to reach his failing sense of hearing, he shouts at him:

“I have told you. Do you still not understand? Here only the vaccinated can gain entry. This door was made for you too, but now I am going to close it.”