

Audio file

[2024-11-12 KST Kafka 02 Children on the Road v1.mp3](#)

Transcript

Children on the road. I heard the carts going past the garden fence and sometimes I could see them too, through the shifting gaps between the leaves. How the wooden spokes and axels creaked in that hot summer day! Labourers came home laughing from the fields, laughing scandalously.

I was sitting on our little swing, just having a rest among the trees in my parents' garden.

The activity in front of the fence was never ending. Children ran past and were gone, carts loaded with grain with men and women on the sheaves, and and all around the flower beds were getting darker; towards evening I saw a gentleman strolling along with a cane and a couple of girls walking arm in arm the other way stepped aside into the grass as they greeted him.

Then birds flew up like corks out of a bottle, I followed them with my eyes, saw them climb in a single breath until I no longer felt they were rising, but that I was falling, and clinging on to the ropes in my dizziness, I began involuntarily to swing a little. Before long, I was swinging harder, the breeze had grown chillier, and quivering stars had replaced the birds.

I was given my supper by candlelight. Often, I slumped on the tabletop with both elbows and took tired bites out of my bread and butter. The crocheted curtains billowed out in the warm wind, and sometimes someone passing by outside would grip them with both hands to get a better view of me or to talk to me. Usually the candle would soon go out and the midges that had gathered would continue to trace their patterns for a while in the dark candle smoke. If someone asked me a question from the window, I would look at him as though surveying distant mountains or empty space, and he didn't seem to be very interested in my reply either.

But as soon as someone vaulted in through the window and announced that the others were waiting outside, I would sigh and get up.

'What are you sighing for? What's the matter? Is it some irreparable calamity? Will we never recover? Is everything really lost?'

Nothing was lost. We ran outside. 'Thank God. There you all are at last!' – 'Nonsense. You're just always late!' – 'What do you mean, me?' – 'You stay at home if you don't want to come out!' – 'No mercy!' – 'What do you mean, no mercy? What are you talking about?'

We put our heads down and butted through the evening. There was no day or night. Now we ground our waistcoat buttons together like teeth. Now we ran along in a herd, breathing fire like wild beasts in the tropics. Like high stepping cuirassiers in old wars, we urged one another down the short lane and careered on up the road. Some of us dropped into the ditch, but no sooner had they disappeared against the dark hedges than they stood up on the field path like strangers looking down at us.

‘Get down from there!’ – ‘Why don't you come up just to have you throw us down? Not likely! We got more sense than that.’ – ‘You mean to say you're too scared to? Go on try!’ – ‘Ohh yes, you're gonna throw us down. You and whose army?’

We attacked and were pushed back and lay down in the grassy ditch, falling freely. Everything felt just right. The grass was neither warm nor chilly, only we could feel ourselves getting tired.

If we turned onto our right sides and tucked our hands under our ears, we felt like going to sleep. Of course, what we really wanted to do was get up once more with jutting chins, if only to fall into a deeper ditch. Then with our arms extended in front of us and our legs skew whiff, we wanted to hurl ourselves into the wind and so almost certainly fall into an even deeper ditch. And there was no end to that.

We barely gave it any thought how we meant to stretch out properly, our knees especially, in the last ditch of all, and so we lay on our backs like invalids, feeling woebegone. We flinched when a boy came flying over us from the bank onto the road with dark soles, arms pressed against his sides.

The moon was already quite high and a post-coach drove by in its light. A light breeze got up; we could feel it even in our ditch and nearby. The woods began to rustle. We no longer felt so set on being alone.

‘Where are you?’ – ‘Come here.’ – ‘All of you!’ – ‘What are you hiding for, stop being so silly!’ – ‘Didn't you see the post-coach has gone by already?’ – ‘It can't have! Is it really already gone?’ – ‘Of course, it went by while you were asleep.’ – ‘I was asleep. I was no such thing!’ – ‘Of course you were.’ – ‘Come on.’

We ran closer now, some of us linked hands. We had to keep our heads as high as we could because we were going downhill now. One of us shouted an Indian war-cry. We felt a gallop in our legs as never before, as we leapt, we felt the wind catch us by the hips. Nothing could have stopped us; we were running so hard that even when we overtook one another, we could keep our arms folded and look calmly about us.

We stopped at the bridge over the stream. Those of us who had run on too far turned back. The water ran busily in and out among the stones and roots; it didn't feel like late evening at all. There was no reason why one of us shouldn't have hopped up onto the bridge rail.

Away in the distance a train appeared behind the trees. All its compartments were lit, the windows were sure to be open. One of us started singing a ballad, but we all wanted to sing. We sang far quicker than the speed of the train, we swung our arms because our voices weren't enough, our voices got into a tangle where we felt happy. If you mix your voice with others' voices you feel as though you're caught on a hook.

So with the woods behind us, we serenaded the distant travellers. In the village, the grown-ups were still awake, the mothers making up everyone's beds for the night.

It was high time. I kissed whoever stood next to me, shook hands with three more fellows, and started to run home; no one called me back. At the first crossroads, where no one could see me, I turned, and followed a path back into the woods. I was heading for the great city in the South of which they said in our village:

'The people who live there, I tell you, they never sleep!'

'Why don't they sleep?'

'Because they never get tired.'

'Why didn't they get tired?'

'Because they're fools'

'Don't fools get tired?'

'How could fools get tired!'