

## Audio file

[2024-11-12 KST Kafka 07 The Great Swimmer v1.mp3](#)

## Transcript

The great swimmer. "Hail the great swimmer! Hail the great swimmer!" the people shouted. I was coming home from the Olympic Games in Antwerp where I had just set a world record in swimming. I stood at the top of the steps outside the train station in my Hometown – where was it? – and looked down at the indiscernible throng in the dusk. A girl, whose cheek I stroked cursorily, hung a sash around me, on which was written in a foreign language: The Olympic Champion. An automobile drove up and several men pushed me into it. Two other men drove along – the mayor and someone else. At once we were in a banquet room. A choir sang down from the gallery as I entered and all the guests – there were hundreds – rose and shouted in perfect unison a phrase that I didn't exactly understand. To my left sat a minister; I don't know why the word "minister" horrified me so much when we were introduced. At first I measured him wildly with my glances, but soon composed myself. To my right sat the mayor's wife, a voluptuous woman; everything about her, particularly her bosom, seemed to emanate roses and the finest down. Across from me sat a fat man with a strikingly white face whose name I had missed during the introductions. He had placed his elbows on the table – a particularly large place had been made for him – and looked straight ahead in silence. To his right and left sat two beautiful blond girls. They were cheerful and constantly had something to say, and I looked from one to the other. In spite of the more than ample lighting, though, I couldn't clearly recognise many of the other guests, perhaps because everything was in motion. The waiters scurried around, dishes arrived at the tables, and glasses were raised – indeed perhaps everything was too well illuminated. There was also a certain disorder – the only disorderly element, actually – in the fact that several guests particularly women were sitting with their backs turned to the table and, further, in such a way that not even the backs of their chairs were between them and the table, but rather that their backs were almost touching the table. I drew the attention of the girls across from me to this, but while they had otherwise been so garrulous, now they said nothing and instead only smiled at me with long looks. When a bell rang, the waiters froze in their positions and the fat man across from me rose and delivered a speech. But why was he so sad? During the speech he dabbed at his face with a handkerchief, which was quite understandable in the light of his obesity, the heat in the room, and the strains of the speech itself. But I distinctly noticed that the whole effect was merely a clever disguise, meant to conceal the fact that he was wiping tears from his eyes. Also although he looked directly at me as he spoke, it was as if he weren't seeing me but rather my open grave. After

he had finished, I of course also stood up and delivered a speech. I felt compelled to speak, for there was much that needed to be said, both here and probably also elsewhere for the public's enlightenment. And so I began:

“Honored guests! I have, admittedly, broken a world record. If, however, you were to ask me how I have achieved this, I could not answer adequately. Actually, I cannot even swim. I have always wanted to learn, but have never had the opportunity. How then did it come to be that I was sent by my country to the Olympic Games? This is, of course, also the question I ask of myself. I must first explain that I am not now in my fatherland and, in spite of considerable effort, cannot understand a word of what has been spoken. Your first thought might be that there has been some mistake, but there's been no mistake – I have broken the record, have returned to my country, and do indeed bear the name by which you know me. All this is true, but thereafter nothing is true. I'm not in my fatherland and I do not know or understand you. And now something that is somehow, even if not exactly, incompatible with this notion of a mistake: It does not much disturb me that I do not understand you and, likewise, the fact that you do not understand me does not seem to disturb you. I could only gather from the speech of the venerable gentleman who preceded me that it was inconsolably sad, and this knowledge is not only sufficient, in fact for me it is too much. And indeed, the same is true of all the conversations I have had here since my return. But let us return to my world record.”