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True Life: I Supported My Family and Turned into a Cockroach

Going through life, an individual will continuously experience waves of being selfish but will also revert to being kind as well. The Dalai Lama once said, “Our prime purpose in this life is to help others. And if you can’t help them, at least don’t hurt them.” I never used to like helping people because I thought it wasn’t cool and I thought that no one ever cared about me so why should I help a stranger? As I got older I realized an important aspect in life is about being selfless and putting others before yourself, to an extent. This trait is something I proudly get from my mother. The woman that birthed me would give the clothes off of her back for someone else who needed to be clothed, just because she has crawled through the mud many times and came out clean each time.

There are similarities between my personal life experiences and the story of Gregor Samsa in the *Metamorphosis,* by Franz Kafka, regarding the idea of giving and taking something from an individual. My mother and I now live together in a small house with one dog and two cats. My half-brother, on the other hand, who is twenty-seven and lives in an apartment with two other roommates, exhibits completely opposite thoughts and manners from my mother and me. Lately my brother has been struggling with money, his health and overall life. He has been stuck at the same pizza place for as long as I can remember and only attended one semester of community college. Whenever he has a problem (i.e. no money, no gas, and no food) he comes crying to my mother for help. Ever since she and I moved into this house in February of this year, we have been financially stable and have avoided any interruptions (ex-boyfriend and other unnecessary involvements). Over the past few months, since my brother moved into his apartment, he has been non-stop asking my mother for a few extra dollars for cigarettes and gas. My mother seems to struggle with him for a few reasons: he comes to take care of our puppy when my mother is working and the other being he is simply her son. She has a difficult time saying no to him because of their relationship, but it is causing her grief at the same time.

In regards to Gregor Samsa’s life, I picture my brother represented by the family that he supports and my mother represented by Gregor. Whenever my mother can’t help my brother because she has her own bills to pay, he retreats with a tantrum of some sort and extreme attitude…at twenty-seven nonetheless. My mother doesn’t support my brother one hundred percent like Gregor his family, but she still pays for his cell phone bill and tries to help him back up whenever he is down. As a sister, I find that I take Grete’s placement in my brother’s life at first, by guiding him several times in the past as to what he should do with his life (quit smoking, find a better job, etc.) but I find myself giving up, in the same way Grete at others. I certainly, however, do not plan to off my brother, considering he is not a burden in my household. I still love him dearly and just hope that life takes its course in leading him on a better path.

The relationship between Gregor and his sister is a natural one in the beginning, whereas the relationship between Gregor and his entire family as a whole is odd right from the start of the story to the end. Almost as soon as Grete realizes Gregor’s situation as an immobile human turned cockroach in despair, she attempts to cater to him night and day with food and cleaning his room. I believe that she does this to reassure his mind and also to see if she can help change him back to her real brother. Little does she know, Gregor is still himself and as much as he has changed on the outside, he is still completely himself on the inside—all of which upsets me because, due to the lack of communication between him and his family, the family eventually isolates him. Kafka writes: “’What a quiet life the family used to lead,’ Gregor said to himself, and, staring into the blackness, he felt considerable pride that he had made such a life possible for his parents and his sister, and in such a lovely flat. But what if all peace, all prosperity, all contentment, were to come to a sudden and terrible end?” (107). Gregor’s thought, in a nutshell, explains the entire story: how Gregor made this new life for his family and just because one strange alteration happens that prevents him from working, they act like chickens with their heads cut off.

Gregor’s family acts foolishly and seems to have a weak and shallow personality as a whole. I understand that Gregor can’t communicate with them to assure them that he is fine, but they give up on him so easily. His parents even refuse to visit him in his room, that is in the same building as them. Their immediate anger toward the situation is normal because the fact that they will no longer have a steady money income, but that doesn’t mean it is acceptable to isolate a family member. Gregor sacrificed years of his own life that were dedicated to working and making sales that flew past him right into his parents’ wallets. Similarly, why should my mother have to give in to my brother when he doesn’t even live in the same house as us? Gregor sounds almost as if he willingly chose his path of supporting his family. If he wished anything otherwise, I suppose he would engage in some sort of evening social life, which his mother claims that he lacks. Gregor’s intentions are described in the following way: “And so he had begun working with an especial zeal and almost overnight had moved from being a little junior clerk to a travelling salesman, who of course had earning power of an entirely different order, and whose success in the form of percentages were instantly turned into money, which could be laid out on the table of the surprised and delighted family” (112). Instead of his family crying about Gregor’s sudden physical change, they choose to sob over what they do not have any longer. As opposed to helping their troubled son, they give up on him and treat him like an alien—all cowardly behavior.

In a way, Gregor becoming a disgusting insect is his gateway to a break from his strenuous duties toward his family. Unfortunately, he may not have realized that his break would sooner or later end for good. Even though in part two of the story it may seem as if Gregor’s family accepts his change, their underlying feelings physically creep into their minds as they slowly create distance between Gregor’s room and the idea of a family. Grete eventually stops taking care of her brother and the family hires a woman to take care of him in the morning and at night, who is quite disrespectful and unkind.

One of the scenes in the story that I find disheartening on a smaller scale is when the mother and daughter think that they can help Gregor by removing the furniture in his room so that he can have wall and floor space to crawl around on. Gregor’s thoughts, as well as his mother’s, quickly jump up and down during the scene as to what would be better for Gregor. Mrs. Samsa thinks out loud, “’I think it would be best if we try to leave the room in exactly the condition it was before, so that, if Gregor is returned to us, he will find everything unaltered, and will thereby be able to forget the intervening period almost as if it hadn’t happened’” (119). Mrs. Samsa speaks as if her son physically left the house for some time and she hopes he will come to his senses and return to the same circumstances as before. She is in denial at this point; during her first visit with her son and after being unable to move a large wardrobe, she comes to the conclusion that if they leave everything the same in the room, Gregor’s alteration will reverse and bring him back to normal. Not to mention, that this scene occurs a few months after the metamorphosis and his mother *still* believes that something so simple could solve everything. This reminds me of how my mother constantly repeats “Your brother is just like his father’ in response to any situation my brother is in that he needs assistance getting out of. She and I hold the same mindset in that if we continue to leave him alone as an irresponsible adult, maybe he’ll come to his right mind and miraculously change into a normal, hard-working, stereotypical, twenty-seven year-old male. Ideally that’s what we believe, and also what Mrs. Samsa thought as she struggled with asthma to move his furniture.

The idea of depending on another person for a service or something or other can only last so long, especially if the relationship with the other person is as close as immediate family. Gregor’s family has ultimately become dependent on him for everything as if he was the father of the family. Because it is such a strange situation, you’d think the family would sit down with each other and figure out a way to fix Gregor in order to further their dependence on him rather than exiling him from the family. In a Washington Post article, Michael Cavna writes, “Gregor also transforms from household breadwinner to family burden, as his parents and sister wrestle with the realities of caring for their beetle-boy.” It couldn’t have been said any better than that for how the family used to perceive Gregor to how they now perceive him, as a ‘beetle-boy.’ I suppose I used to see my brother as an innocent sibling who was going to attend college, get a girlfriend and then get married, just like everyone else, but now I’m not too sure how I think of him, or his future.

A passage Kafka wrote about Mr. Samsa ties in with some comments Zora Neal Hurston’s Janie makes about her husband Jody in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In the third section of the story, Kafka shows the deterioration that is happening to Mr. Samsa each night after work; he grows tired at the dinner table and then in the living room chair, only to remain in his place for sleep. It is ironic that the sister and mother assist Mr. Samsa at night by getting him to sleep, whereas in Janie’s situation, she supported Jody Starks from day one and once he became ill, he wanted nothing to do with her—exactly the way Gregor’s family treats him once he has changed. Hurston writes: “There was already something dead about him. He didn’t rear back in his knees any longer. He squatted over his ankles when he walked” (77). Both Mr. Samsa and Jody show signs of their bodies becoming weaker by working hard and for a lot of hours. Even though Mr. Samsa’s appearance is not noted, it is important to mention Jody’s changes because Hurston then signifies Janie’s beauty versus her husband’s ugliness that has grown on him inside and out.

Even though my views on how my brother lives his life are negative, he may think the complete opposite. It is sad to read the story of Gregor Samsa and how his family ultimately abandoned him because of his differences. At one point he was the money-maker supporting his loved ones, but the second something happened to him, they gave up and moved on with their lives. Similarly, Janie gave up on Jody once he changed and treated her like an enemy rather than his wife. My mother and I treat my brother like family all of the time, but I am concerned that he will forever continue to contact my mother only when he is in need of something. Unfortunately, my place in such a situation is unknown, but I can say that my best efforts will be to treat my brother as Grete treated Gregor when he first transformed and needed food. People change depending on how you treat them and before you know it they’re out of your life with no looking back. Gregor was the victim of his story and his family didn’t care because they moved on without him.

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