

Franz Kafka's absurdist novel The Trial is set in an unnamed European town in the early twentieth century. In the excerpt, K. wakes up in his room to find two warders, or jailers, who tell him he has been arrested. Law-abiding K. has no idea why he is being detained, and the warders, Franz and Willem, will not tell him. His landlady, Frau Grubach, is afraid of the warders. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

from **The Trial**
by Franz Kafka

“You can’t go out, you are arrested.” “So it seems,” said K. “But what for?” he added. “We are not authorized to tell you that. Go to your room and wait there. Proceedings have been instituted against you, and you will be informed of everything in due course. I am exceeding my instructions in speaking freely to you like this. But I hope nobody hears me except Franz, and he himself has been too free with you, against his express instructions. If you continue to have as good luck as you have had in the choice of your warders, then you can be confident of the final result.” K. felt he must sit down, but now he saw that there was no seat in the whole room except the chair beside the window. “You’ll soon discover that we’re telling you the truth,” said Franz, advancing toward him simultaneously with the other man. The latter overtopped K. enormously and kept clapping him on the shoulder. They both examined his nightshirt and said that he would have to wear a less fancy shirt now, but that they would take charge of this one and the rest of his underwear and, if his case turned out well, restore them to him later. “Much better give these things to us than hand them over to the depot,” they said, “for in the depot there’s lots of thieving, and besides they sell everything there after a certain length of time, no matter whether your case is settled or not. And you never know how long these cases will last, especially these days. Of course you would get the money out of the depot in the long run, but in the first place the prices they pay you are always wretched, for they sell your things to the best briber, not the best bidder, and anyhow it’s well known that money dwindles a lot if it passes from hand to hand from one year to another.” K. paid hardly any attention to this advice. Any right to dispose of his own things which he might possess he did not prize very highly; far more important to him was the necessity to understand his situation clearly; but with these people beside him he could not even think. The belly of the second warder—for they could only be warders—kept butting against him in an almost friendly way, yet if he looked up he caught sight of a face which did not in the least suit that fat body, a dry, bony face with a great nose, twisted to one side, which seemed to be consulting over his head with the other warder. Who could these men be? What were they talking about? What authority could they represent? K. lived in a country with a legal constitution, there was universal peace, all the laws were in force;

who dared seize him in his own dwelling? He had always been inclined to take things easily, to believe in the worst only when the worst happened, to take no care for the morrow even
30 when the outlook was threatening. But that struck him as not being the right policy here, one could certainly regard the whole thing as a joke, a rude joke which his colleagues in the Bank had concocted for some unknown reason, perhaps because this was his thirtieth birthday, that was of course possible, perhaps he had only to laugh knowingly in these men's faces and they would laugh with him, perhaps they were merely porters from the street corner—they looked
35 very like it—nevertheless his very first glance at the man Franz had decided him for the time being not to give away any advantage that he might possess over these people. There was a slight risk that later on his friends might possibly say he could not take a joke, but he had in mind—though it was not usual with him to learn from experience—several occasions, of no importance in themselves, when against all his friends' advice he had behaved with deliberate
40 recklessness and without the slightest regard for possible consequences, and had had in the end to pay dearly for it. That must not happen again, at least not this time; if this was a comedy he would insist on playing it to the end.

But he was still free. "Allow me," he said, passing quickly between the warders to his room. "He seems to have some sense," he heard one of them saying behind him. When he reached his
45 room he at once pulled out the drawer of his desk. Everything lay there in perfect order, but in his agitation he could not find at first the identification papers for which he was looking. At last he found his bicycle license and was about to start off with it to the warders, but then it seemed too trivial a thing, and he searched again until he found his birth certificate. As he was re-entering the next room the opposite door opened and Frau Grubach showed herself.
50 He saw her only for an instant, for no sooner did she recognize him than she was obviously overcome by embarrassment, apologized for intruding, vanished, and shut the door again with the utmost care. "Come in, do," he would just have had time to say. But he merely stood holding his papers in the middle of the room, looking at the door, which did not open again, and was only recalled to attention by a shout from the warders, who were sitting at a table by
55 the open window and, as he now saw, devouring his breakfast. "Why didn't she come in?" he asked. "She isn't allowed to," said the tall warder, "since you're under arrest." "But how can I be under arrest? And particularly in such a ridiculous fashion?" "So now you're beginning it all over again?" said the warder, dipping a slice of bread and butter into the honey-pot. "We don't answer such questions." "You'll have to answer them," said K. "Here are my papers, now show
60 me yours, and first of all your warrant for arresting me." "Oh, good Lord," said the warder. "If you would only realize your position, and if you wouldn't insist on uselessly annoying us two, who probably mean better by you and stand closer to you than any other people in the world." "That's so, you can believe that," said Franz, not raising to his lips the coffee-cup he held in his hand, but instead giving K. a long, apparently significant, yet incomprehensible look.
65 Without wishing it K. found himself decoyed into an exchange of speaking looks with Franz, none the less he tapped his papers and repeated: "Here are my identification papers." "What are your papers to us?" cried the tall warder. "You're behaving worse than a child. What are you after? Do you think you'll bring this fine case of yours to a speedier end by wrangling with us, your warders, over papers and warrants? We are humble subordinates who can scarcely

70 find our way through a legal document and have nothing to do with your case except to stand guard over you for ten hours a day and draw our pay for it. That's all we are, but we're quite capable of grasping the fact that the high authorities we serve, before they would order such an arrest as this, must be quite well informed about the reasons for the arrest and the person of the prisoner. There can be no mistake about that. Our officials, so far as I know them, and
75 I know only the lowest grades among them, never go hunting for crime in the populace, but, as the Law decrees, are drawn toward the guilty and must then send out us warders. That is the Law. How could there be a mistake in that?"

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