

Ten Minutes in the Life of Franziska Kafka

by Beate Sigriddaughter

Franziska Kafka sits at her glass desk doing her employer's accounts, exacerbated by the fact that April 15 is just around the corner. Isn't April just the cruellest month? Her one consolation is that what became writing tools were originally invented to do the temple accounts, with praise of the gods and of the bright red flowers of life coming only as an afterthought. At least her condition is in tune with how it all began.

Briefly her thoughts go forward to the few minutes she will have later that night to steal some midnight oil and to compose bullet points about her soul. She knows she wants to write like elegant Campari, bitter, yet sweet. In reality, she suspects, what finally comes across is more like dull, angry St. Pauli beer.

If only she could be like her colleague Maria Renée Rilke, wielding lovely, bombastic words, conversing with gods and angels as if they were on a first-name basis. For Franziska it is always Mr. God, or even Dr. God, or Your Honor.

Behind her hangs a poster with a lush red poppy next to a quotation from last year's annual review. "Franziska has an infectious positive attitude," her supervisor wrote. She had it framed to remind herself in biting moments of gloom that she has a reputation to protect. The poppy is as red as the tulips whose mouths cry open in Sylvia Plath poetry.

"How's that spreadsheet coming?"

"Fine. Almost done. I'll be out of here at five for once."

"Oh, the reason I was asking, I got to pick up my kids. Could you stay and run another report on...."

"Impossible. I have a date with Mel Gibson tonight."

"Oh. Is he someone new? I thought you were going out with a guy named Tom."

"Just kidding. Yes, it's Tom. And of course I'll stay. What report is it that you need?"

She thinks about Franz. And did his feet in ancient times walk the gray streets of Prague looking for red tulips and sunny daffodils? Did he stand gazing at the River Vitava praying to gods he couldn't quite believe in for a happiness he couldn't quite believe in either, though it seemed so possible—only a arm's reach away, only a few words away, only a kind father's pride away?

"OK. This is what I need for you to do."

"I'm listening."

When the supervisor turns away, Franziska quickly touches the framed poster behind her for luck, touches in particular the brilliant red poppy. If this were fiction, she would probably stand up and kiss a petal of the poppy, but as it is she doesn't want to look like a fool. In fact, if this were fiction, it would be summer and she'd be in a field full of such poppies, caressing their crinkly silk as it unfolds or their delicate smoothness once unfolded. There's a lot to be said for fiction.

"Very well," she quotes her favorite prince from her favorite fairytale. "I can bear it." Only in her case, nobody reassures her with the comforting words, "You see, you too now begin to be a magician." As usual, she has to do everything herself.

"See you tomorrow," her supervisor sings, leaving exactly on time.

