

# ADVOCATES

Franz Kafka



I was not at all certain whether I had any advocates, I could not find out anything definite about it, every face was unfriendly, most people who came toward me and whom I kept meeting in the corridors looked like fat old women; they had huge blue-and-white striped aprons covering their entire bodies, kept stroking their stomachs and swaying awkwardly to and fro. I could not even find out whether we were in a law court. Some facts spoke for it, others against. What reminded me of a law court more than all the details was a droning noise which could be heard incessantly in the distance; one could not tell from which direction it came, it filled every room to such an extent that one had to assume it came from everywhere, or, what seemed more likely, that just the place where one happened to be standing was the very place where the droning originated. But this was probably an illusion, for it came from a distance. These corridors, narrow and austerely vaulted, turning in gradual curves with high, sparsely decorated doors, seemed to have been created especially for profound silence; they were the corridors of a museum or a library. Yet if it were not a law court, why was I searching for an advocate here? Because I was searching for an advocate everywhere; he is needed everywhere, if anything less in court than elsewhere, for a court, one assumes, passes judgment according to the law. If one were to assume that this was being done unfairly or frivolously, then life would not be possible; one must have confidence that the court allows the majesty of the law its full scope. for this is its sole duty. Within the law all is accusation, advocacy, and verdict; any interference by an individual here would be a crime. It is different, however, in the case of the verdict itself; this is based on inquiries being made here and there, from relatives and strangers, from friends and enemies, in the family and public life, in town and village—in short, everywhere. Here it is most necessary to have advocates, advocates galore, the best possible advocates, one next to the other, a living wall, for advocates are by nature hard

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to set in motion; the plaintiffs however, those sly foxes, those slinking weasels, those little mice, they slip through the tiniest gaps, scuttle through the legs of the advocates. So, look out! That's why I am here, I'm collecting advocates. But I have not found any as yet, only those old women keep on coming and going; if I were not on my search, it would put me to sleep. I'm not in the right place - alas, I cannot rid myself of the feeling that I'm not in the right place. I ought to be in a place where all kinds of people met, from various parts of the country, from every class every profession, of all ages; I ought to have an opportunity of choosing carefully out of a crowd those who are kind, those who are ale, and those who have an eye for me. Perhaps the most suitable place for this would be a huge fairground; instead of which I am hanging about in these corridors where only these old women are to be seen, and not even many of them, and always the same ones, and even those few will not let themselves be cornered despite their slowness; they slip away from me, float out like rain clouds, and are completely absorbed by unknown activities. Why is it then that I run headlong into a house without reading the sign over the door, promptly find myself in these corridors, and settle here with such obstinacy that I cannot even remember ever having been in front of the house, ever having run up the stairs! But back I cannot go, this waste of time, this admission of having been on the wrong track would be unbearable for me. What? Run downstairs in this brief, hurried life accompanied as it is by that impatient droning? Impossible. The time allotted to you is so short that if you lose one second you have already lost your whole life, for it is no longer, it is always just as long as the time you lose. So, if you have started out on a walk, continue it whatever happens; you can only gain, you run no risk, in the end you may fall over a precipice perhaps, but had you turned back after the first steps and run downstairs you would have fallen at once—and not perhaps, but for certain. So, if you find nothing in the corridors open the doors, and if you find nothing behind these doors there are more floors, and if you find nothing up there, don't worry, just leap up another flight of stairs. As long as you don't stop climbing, the stairs won't end, under your climbing feet they will go on growing upwards.

Translated by Tania & James Stern