

A WORD OF CAUTION

OVER BLACK:

LITERARY AGENT (V.O.)
(in German with subtitles)
A word of caution...

FADE IN:

EXT. LIBRARY - DAY

A great plume of smoke rises into the sky as wildfires burn all around two characters standing under a banner that welcomes them to America.

The voice belongs to a slim, spruce LITERARY AGENT (40s) whispering into the right ear of FRANZ (138), a lumpy-looking guy wearing a cervical collar.

FRANZ
Hmm?

LITERARY AGENT
(in German with subtitles)
The city is under voluntary evacuation orders.

FRANZ
What?

Her cellphone vibrates and she answers it right away. Franz, shivering in the chill morning air, enters the building without her.

INT. LIBRARY - READING ROOM - DAY

Inside, a curious audience awaits their cue. The room is crowded, with only one way in and one way out. Franz pushes his way toward the center of attention, passing by the table decorated with copies of his novels. We see that he, with his beer belly and receding hairline, looks nothing like the dour yet boyishly handsome specimen pictured on the books' back covers. Nevertheless, he takes a seat in the front row.

Meanwhile, ISABELLA, a rather stubby library director (50s), addresses these bewildered bookworms as if she were preaching to a congregation of folks no smarter than goldfish.

ISABELLA
Good morning, everyone. Thank you all for coming. Without further ado, let's begin... To understand and be
(MORE)

ISABELLA (CONT'D)
 understood, that is what we as a
 species long for, even just a glimpse
 of it.

Speaking of "glimpse," Franz catches one of an incredibly stoned woman behind him swaying in her chair like a buoy in a hurricane. Her eyes are as red as her mask (the only one in sight). We see clear fluid draining from his right ear.

ISABELLA (CONT'D)
 No other writer has expressed this
 longing as painstakingly as our dear
 guest has. This new anthology of three
 re-translated, heretofore unfinished
 stories has already been heralded as
 his comeback, and we are honored to
 have him here on the very first stop
 of his very first book tour. Ladies
 and gentlemen, please join me in
 welcoming to the Denver Central
 Library the one and only Franz Kafka.

All disbelief is suspended as they clap their hands and howl. Franz collapses into the seat next to Isabella's there in the corner, facing the hungry audience.

ISABELLA (CONT'D)
 First of all, welcome back.

FRANZ
 (looking around)
 I've never been here, actually.

ISABELLA
 I meant to life, not this library.

FRANZ
 (squints, nervous)
 Oh.

ISABELLA
 I'm just teasing you! Now, let me see
 what's on the docket here...

The incredibly stoned woman, LEAH (30s), laughs at both of them, unable to control herself. The weird tension between her and Franz crescendos when he sees her see him see her. He is the one who breaks eye contact, though.

ISABELLA (CONT'D)

If it's not too soon, then I'd like to go ahead and open the floor for questions from our audience.

A forest of raised hands sprouts at once. At the sight of this, Franz runs his fingers through his few coiled ginger locks and takes two and half deep breaths.

CLOSER ANGLE - HIS WEDDING RING

What started out as a twinkle in Leah's eyes metamorphoses into an inferno, burning fiercely and brightly until her tears douse the flames, leaving nothing but ashen grief behind.

I/E. BOOKBINDING FACTORY - DAY

It's literally infernal in here--sizzling, scorching, smoking, not unlike Botticelli's map of Hell. Outside, a COMPANY OFFICER leads a team of five other firefighters in an exterior attack. As they charge a hose, he gives his orders.

COMPANY OFFICER

Surround and drown! Put the wet stuff on the red stuff, men!

Over the image of such chaos, we hear a LOCAL JOURNALIST asking a question.

LOCAL JOURNALIST (O.S.)

So, what exactly's going on?

INT. LIBRARY - READING ROOM - DAY

FRANZ

This is not my body, obviously. Next question.

The journalist packs her things and walks away, disappearing into a miasma of smoke and sickness.

Then an annoying, precocious BOY jumps at the opportunity to geek out over the self-proclaimed reincarnation of his favorite writer.

BOY

Thank you so much for coming today. Your work has been a big inspiration to me, and it's really special that you're here. Anyway, I wanted to ask:

(MORE)

BOY (CONT'D)
 what advice would you give to younger
 writers today?

ISABELLA
 Wow. What an excellent...

FRANZ
 (interrupting)
 Don't give up, kid. Despite all the
 distractions, you have to keep
 writing. Really, man. Finish what you
 start. It's not a lack of talent
 that's stopping you, trust me. There's
 nothing more satisfying than to step
 back and look down at your handiwork,
 silently paring your fingernails, and
 say, 'I finished this,' even if it
 takes you a hundred years to do it.
 Does that make sense?

Vague affirmatives. The boy is so awestruck by Franz's advice
 that he hits the floor in a dead faint.

ISABELLA
 That was...

FRANZ
 (interrupting (again))
 Sorry for interrupting.

ISABELLA
 Don't sweat it, Franz Kafka. I think
 we have time for one more question.

Leah clears her throat to get their attention, but accidentally
 coughs up lots of frothy blood-streaked phlegm. Humiliated,
 she removes her mask to wipe her chin with it.

ISABELLA (CONT'D)
 (to Leah)
 You. You there in the back.

She eventually rises to her feet to greet them. Across the
 room, we spot Franz tugging at his neck brace and shaking
 from fear.

A beat.

Still staring straight ahead, he stands up, unsure of what to
 say except:

FRANZ

Hi.

LEAH

(waving; cucumberously cool)

Hello, Jacob.

He crosses himself while she advances toward him at the slowest possible pace, sidestepping the unconscious child lying on the floor.

FRANZ

You must have me confused with someone else.

Leah comes to stand even closer, but her voice seems far away, as though she were speaking to him through a tunnel.

LEAH

Oh, my God. Like I wouldn't recognize my own husband...

FRANZ

How did you find me, anyway?
(sniffing)
Are you high right now?

LEAH

Doesn't matter. I've come to take you home. Are you ready or not?

FRANZ

Fuck off, siren! You shouldn't have come here. Besides, your husband is nothing more than a past life of mine. Don't you get it yet? I am like the jewel wasp to his German cockroach. Give up, Leah...
(to Isabella)
Can we move on?

Leah can barely breathe.

LEAH

Time for us to cut and run, honeybear.

FRANZ

No, no, no. Not before I finish what I started. This book represents the apotheosis of every good idea I've ever had...

LEAH
 "Apotheosis?" Are you serious?

FRANZ
 ...and it's got to make it to print so
 that I may finally be freed from the
 burden of my consciousness. Do not get
 in my way, I'm warning you.

Now that she's eyeball to eyeball with him, he can see those
 blood vessels throb and pulsate underneath her blue-tinged
 skin, can almost feel the low-frequency output of her sub-
 larghissimo heartbeat.

LEAH
 Jeezy peets. If I'd known you were
 still this crazy I might not have
 come.

Another beat.

LEAH (CONT'D)
 (in agony)
 But I miss you.

She reaches out to touch him, but he pushes her hand away.

FRANZ
 You just miss him. I know it's hard to
 accept but face it, he's gone. And now
 you're a widow. Sorry about that.

ISABELLA
 (to Franz)
 I don't know if...

LEAH
 (begging)
 It's not too late, you know.

FRANZ
 Quit it! Fine. The real truth about it
 is that God did your husband a great
 favor. He was an existentially adrift,
 completely identity-less loser. He had
 no idea who he was, even before the
 accident, which mercifully put an end
 to his suffering and to his life.

LEAH
 Can't you hear me? Jacob, the stars
 (MORE)

LEAH (CONT'D)
are falling and the air is on fire. We
don't have much time left.

FRANZ
I know. But you're wrong, by the way.
It is too late. There's no escaping
it.

LEAH
How can you say that with a straight
face?

FRANZ
Because I mean it.

His rediscovered consideration for another human being
triggers a real doozy of a migraine, causing him to drop to
his knees.

She feels equal sympathy for him, but it's as if it's for a
stranger and not her husband. To her horror, she is becoming
unable to recognize the man she married.

LEAH
Your poor thing. And to think that I
sincerely hoped I could save you.

FRANZ
(blushing)
Is that so?

LEAH
(self-castigating)
You're such a dum-dum, Leah!

FRANZ
Hey, stop. You're no dum-dum. You
tried. Guess some part of me should be
flattered.

LEAH
This is it, then. It's all going to be
over soon.

FRANZ
Look around you. It already is.

To her left, she sees his agent making paper airplanes out of
flyers while, to her right, Isabella waits with rapture. What
a rotten state of affairs. And is Leah hallucinating or is

the library filling with haze?

All at once, the danger seems real to her.

LEAH

What do I do now?

Before picking himself up, Franz grabs her hand. A sense of déjà vu sweeps over Leah.

FRANZ

Get out of here while you still can.
Go!

Oh, there's that tenderness that's eluded him. There's that life raft thrown overboard into the sea for her and no one else.

Pressing her luck, she holds his hand a little while longer, not as long as she'd like, of course, but long enough to get in the last word.

LEAH

(whispers)

Please, please try to remember.

With that, she lets go.

FRANZ'S P.O.V. - He becomes dizzy after standing up too quickly, then does his best to stay upright as his head spins and his vision blurs.

As was anticipated, Leah's gone by the time the nightmare comes back into focus. Before he has a chance to regain his composure, Isabella chimes in.

ISABELLA

Are you O.K.?

FRANZ

A little wobbly, that's all.

After tracking down his seat, collecting himself, and popping a fistful of Vicodin, Franz turns to Isabella with an expression that nearly breaks her heart.

ISABELLA

Well, I think you've answered enough questions, Franz Kafka. We covered a lot of ground there. I bet that the people here are eager to hear you read

(MORE)

ISABELLA (CONT'D)
something now.

What remains of the audience resembles an ugly *tableau vivant*, composed of theatrically lit models either too confused to move or else asphyxiated by the carbon monoxide fumes.

Isabella slides a dauntingly large book across the table, which lands right in front of Franz, who opens it and smiles upon turning to a random page.

FRANZ
Here's something that was written during the happiest period of my life, believe it or not.
(reading)
One of the first signs of glimmering understanding is the desire to die. This life appears unbearable, another unreachable.

INT. BOOKBINDING FACTORY - DAY

Everything is burnt here. On the ground there lies a heap of pages reduced to ashes by the fire, the death of each ember like a person dying but their ghost lingering.

FRANZ (CONT'D) (O.S.)
One no longer feels ashamed of wanting to die; one asks to be moved from the old cell, which one hates, to a new one, which one will only in time come to hate as well.

INT. LIBRARY - READING ROOM - DAY

FRANZ (CONT'D)
But in this there is also a residue of faith that during the move God will come along the corridor, look at the prisoner, and say...

For a second we see Leah hiding behind a row of books, prayerfully mouthing the words.

FRANZ (CONT'D)
...this man is not to be locked up again. He is to come with me.

Suddenly, the fire alarm goes off, just as his mental break

breaks.

INT. LIBRARY - READING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Pandemonium! Once the book display bursts into flames, the bulk of the audience tries in vain to evacuate while the others stop, drop, and roll.

All judgment is clouded by the fog of war, through which Leah searches for Jacob.

LEAH

Jacob! Where are you? Jacob!

Here he is. JACOB (30s) is surprised to find himself here, and even more surprised to find Leah emerging from behind a cloud of smoke, but is nonetheless--as always--happy to see her.

LEAH (CONT'D)

Is that really you?

Melodramatic music begins to play over their reunion, at long last.

JACOB

(laughing)

Who else would it be, dum-dum?

The music swells. Jacob comforts her with a hug, which quickly turns into a kiss.

JACOB (CONT'D)

Hang on, I think those people over there're on fire. Shouldn't we help them?

LEAH

Don't worry, honeybear. Just let it burn.

She holds him close.

SLOW ZOOM IN ON THEIR EMBRACE

We see the light from the fire flicker on their smiling faces, the flames singeing Jacob's beard and Leah's eyebrows, and searing their lips until ultimately

FADE OUT