

CAMDEN AND KAFKA

In 2006 I bought a one-bedroom flat on a long lease in Kentish Town the freehold of which was owned by London Borough of Camden—a fact which did not worry me. The house was in a Victorian terraced row on a broad leafy street, stucco frontage up to the second floor then brick, and mine was the top-floor flat of four in the conversion. It had its own little staircase, period sash windows and a view over the lime trees to the rooftops of North London. My mother inspected it and her only remark was that if the roof leaked I'd be the one to suffer—but there was no sign of damp. The exterior of the building was peeling, signs of a prior botched renovation, but I didn't worry about that either. At that time I was in my forties, unmarried, working hard in the back-office of a bank.

In the back of my mind, I probably did know that a local borough council was likely to be a nest of ineptitude. In fact I had once worked for Camden Council in the Traffic Division. The permanent staff were supposed to examine the complaints of those given parking tickets wrongly but they never once answered the phone, only keeping me busy inputting the daily batch of new tickets. And as a student I had loved Kafka, *The Castle* and *The Trial*, those characters K and Joseph K up against it. So again perhaps I did realise being a borough leaseholder would mean being subject to interference. It might mean my home was not my castle but subject to the castle on the hill. And, like Camden Council Traffic Division, the Housing Division might contain a cast of strange characters, some whose work was of dubious quality, civil servants by turns ridiculous and menacing, who would be a trial. Still I felt that if Kafka's stories were metaphors of bureaucracy they were nevertheless stories done in the Olympian serenity of high literature, poking fun, rarely causing serious fright.

I lived there happily for a year then I went to work in Hong Kong. A young City professional, Stephen, who was in charge of IT at a small Hedge Fund, became my tenant.

I heard from Stephen by email of a small problem: a damp patch on the living room ceiling, a little bit of dripping. He attached photographs. Nothing Kafkaesque there, only my mother's being annoyingly right in having imagined the worst. The leak began to show in the bathroom too. Stephen contacted Camden Housing by phone, got an inspection and works order raised and was promised a visit. After some months, scaffolding went up, then came down again, so quickly Stephen doubt any remedial work had been done. The leak continued, getting slightly worse.

Meanwhile, several letters from Camden reached me in Hong Kong apportioning costs between the four flats for forthcoming Major Works. My share came to ten thousand pounds. I returned to the UK for Christmas and Stephen and I meet outside the property. It was a freezing morning in December. We stood side by side surveying the street, a sodden, silent scene. Half the houses were now clad in scaffolding which climbed up and over the rooftops. There were running boards, screens of plastic sheeting, fully operational elevators, security cameras, and the contractor's name on advertising shingles, Lakehouse. Lakehouse seemed an outlandish name, I remember thinking, something dreamt up by a slick marketing department that bore no relation to anything real. Would their work then bear any relationship to the sums they were going to charge.

'It all went up last week,' said Stephen. 'Nothing's happened since.'

I wanted to buy Stephen breakfast as some recompense for the leaking roof and for this scaffolding blight on the property. We went to a greasy spoon on the High Street. Having landed a few hours earlier at Heathrow from tropical Hong Kong, the cafe we chose had a certain homecoming charm, freezing condensation on the windows, a familiarity to the way the toast absorbed the margarine, and to the tinned tomatoes, acidic and watery. Stephen was good company, quietly rather suave. Kentish Town was a hip district for young people and he was one of them.

'Lost much light?' I said.

'In the living room. But it's all right, at least the leak should get sorted now.'

'In private life only a lunatic would start their renovations in the middle of winter.'

But the leak got catastrophically worse. I was back in Hong Kong and Stephen emailed me the chronicle of his sufferings, stoically, during a very rainy February. One of Lakehouse's contractors had put a foot through a roof tile though we didn't know this until much later. We both urged Camden to respond and meanwhile, waiting for help, Stephen had four buckets in the living room, sheeting over his furniture, and in heavy rain he felt like a sailor in a storm. I waived a month's rent. Stephen took half-days from work to be there to let Camden in but nobody ever turned up. Only by summer was the flat dry, the scaffolding down. I paid for the Major Works. Stephen, a trooper from first to last, had had enough and moved into a service apartment. Anyway, he had found a maisonette property he wanted to buy in neighbouring Islington and his offer had been accepted. He promised a house-warming poker game when he moved in. Trouble followed him, however. The vendor's solicitor was a seventy-year-old woman who saw fit to deal with every query by second class mail after a suitable delay and Stephen had begun to realise the conveyancing would be screamingly slow.

The Financial Crisis of 2007/2008 arrived and I was made redundant. I returned to the UK and moved back into the flat, making myself known at the Job Centre in Kentish Town High Street. In some newspapers were satisfied reports that ex-bank employees now found themselves serving at the counter of McDonalds and I wondered if I might become one of them. Among my backlog of post I found a red chaser letter from Camden demanding my quarter payment of a three thousand two hundred pound invoice, dating back to that roof repair two years earlier, that time scaffolding went up and came down so quickly and dubiously. This letter, puzzlingly late, threatened me with legal action and the possible forfeit of my lease if I did not pay up. Of the three other flats in the house, two were rented from the council and not liable to pay, while the basement flat was owned by an absentee American. I contacted her by email. She didn't know if she'd had a similar invoice or not and I heard no more from her.

Kafka's protagonist in *The Castle* is a land surveyor, in *The Trial*, a Chief Cashier of a bank, each neither young nor old, Everymans of a sort, single slightly isolated men with some knowledge of life who find themselves in a convoluted fight. These men come out as nimble, resourceful people, often

running rings around the officials who plague them, yet at the same time they are ultimately powerless to free themselves from their menace. So here I was beginning my own passage of arms with the municipal authorities, enjoining in a paperwork battle with their staff.

In *The Trial*, K is woken up one morning by two men who come to arrest him. Kafka makes great play of these two men. They wear suit coats that appear useful, with the fittings of useful coats, yet there is a question mark of what purpose the various pockets serve. There is the outward sign of professionalism but it is not quite convincing, an alert to a masquerade; in fact they look like porters. They eat his breakfast and then offer to go out and buy his if he pays them. They protest they are only acting on instructions and are actually exceeding their instructions by the amount of leeway they are giving him. Another official arrives, makes a desk for himself and sets about an irrelevant investigation counting out the matches in a matchbox which happens to be lying on the table.

The chief correspondent at Camden in my case was Ms Chastree Kose, Collections Officer. I never stood in the same room with her or saw a picture of her and all our exchanges were by email or by the telephone. She had a desk in the Town Hall, I knew that. On the telephone, on the one or two occasions I managed to connect with her, she was friendly and apologetic. I had learnt to be polite and friendly during such conversations, she had a sunny lilt to her speech and was ready to listen. But her negligently composed emails were another thing and made her a difficult adversary. Often she just couldn't be found and my mind drew a picture of a department whose staff were on flexitime absences, sick leaves, training jollies and personal days and only rarely at their desks doing their jobs.

I began my appeal by writing to Chastree that the roof leak had only been remedied by the Major Works (after getting worse first), while the earlier scaffolding had been so short-lived as to call into question whether any work had actually been done. If work had been done it certainly hadn't been effective for the leak had persisted. Chastree wrote that a Mr G Osei had inspected the roof work which was the subject of the invoice. His inspection was completed and signed off. Furthermore, no defects had been raised by anyone in the twelve-month warranty period following the repair. I sent

Chastree the reference number issued to Stephen soon after the repair, when he called Housing Repairs to tell them the leak had not been fixed. I requested sight of Mr G Osei's certificate.

Months passed. Ms Chastree Kose's next email had a veneer of professionalism. The format began by itemising all the points of my email, a methodology pleasantly indicating departmental training to common standards. There, however, the professionalism ceased. Ms Kose omitted to respond to the main points. She made no reference to Mr G Osei's certificate. She did not acknowledge that we had raised an issue during the twelve-month warranty period. Instead, she discussed some irrelevant details, said she trusted she had responded to all my concerns and told me the invoice must be paid.

I don't think anyone would disagree that being in this sort of dispute is uniquely trying. Of course it acts on different people in different ways and they cope in different ways. But I do believe such matters, when they obtrude on people's lives, have a way of going very deep, whether it's a dispute over fifty pounds or fifty thousand pounds.

Of course there is the spectre of an injustice being wrought on you by a half-witted, loonish actor, someone on the public pay-role, in theory a servant of the public, at whose mercy you find yourself, somehow unable to bat them off. The manifestation of incompetence and negligence in a civil servant is itself particularly painful as it strikes to the heart of our optimism for our nation. The lack of access one has (I asked and was denied a face to face meeting) is something of an affront. One is afraid of self-serving, self-aggrandising departments for whom interface with the public is just an inconvenience. There is the dragging slowness of the process, the waiting for replies, particularly maddening. Most likely in one's own trade or career one has been held to stringent standards yet here, on public-funded shores, one discovers the worst kind of negligent – and possibly swindling - behaviour. Again in one's trade or profession one might have had access to senior-level people who could quickly cut through nonsense. Here, you have no channel of communication but a low-ranking interlocutor from the council whose responses are partial and fitful.

In my case I have to say I hated this combat. Though I always remained polite I could muster none of Kafka's playful serenity. Old injustices

clamoured in my head as I faced this one. I slewed wildly between optimism and defeatism. To be done with it I offered to settle by paying half but no response was forthcoming.

I tried to go around Chastree to the Head of Leaseholder Services, a Mike Edmunds. Not having his personal email address I had to use the same group email address which included Chastree. He did not reply but a chastened Chastree, did write to me, one of her most ridiculous emails to date. 'I would like to confirm that I responded to your proposal to pay fifty per cent of the invoice and I can confirm that you are welcome to make that payment.' Further, she invited me to explain what my dispute was about, despite the fact we had been exchanging emails on the dispute for seven months.

Perhaps, to be Kafkaesque about it, this case file, which to me had already been such a trial, far from being one of Chastree's longest cases may have been one of her shortest, and far from being the least efficiently prosecuted from her side may have been some of her best work!

Now I gave up on emails and pursued Ms Chastree Kose by telephone. When I did get through we spoke for thirty minutes. Without blaming her I explained my case in whole, from the first damp patch on the ceiling until the end of the Major Works and a few days later she wrote that the disputed invoice would be 'written back' in full, if I could just be patient with a two-month administrative backlog. I sought clarification on what 'written back' might mean. 'Cancelled,' she wrote. 'The write back was raised for the full amount of seven hundred and ninety pounds.' So it was over. But it wasn't.

Three months later the invoice was still showing on my account and in answer to my query Ms Kose informed me the write back applied only to a small sum under another works order, a matter of thirty pounds. While she apologised for the 'oversight and inconvenience caused,' she did not say this was a U-turn on what she had previously stated and confirmed in writing. Again I wrote to her, explaining my objections to paying. She replied that her investigations were complete and I must pay. I wrote that I found it remarkable, when she had yet to produce Mr G Osei's inspection certificate, that she could say her investigations were complete.

It did finally end. There was an independent volunteer group called the Camden Leaseholders' Forum and I found it, beginning to think of legal

channels, arbitration, a day in court. After all, I was unemployed, so I had the time for all that. The secretary gave me a personal email address for Mike Edmunds and wished me luck. I wrote to Mr Edmunds. Six weeks later a Mr Twelftree wrote to me. He said he had asked Mr G Osei if he had been able to check the roof works and Mr G Osei had said no, he had not, because the scaffolding was already down. Mr Twelftree said he acknowledged there was some confusion caused by the Collections Officer, Ms Chastree Kose. He said he was sorry for the poor quality of the repair on the roof and the subsequent demands for payment despite the persisting leak. He said the invoice would be cancelled.

So after eighteen months this stoutly named Mr Twelftree, who sounded like an archer at Agincourt, had restored some of my confidence in Camden. At the same time, Stephen James rang to say the poker was on. He had at last, after a colossal battle with the vendor's solicitor, moved into his maisonette.

A few days later, swinging a bottle of whisky in a Tesco's carrier bag, I made my way through the tenebrous streets of the Camden-Islington boundary. It was already dark. There were figures up to no good in Caledonian Park. The pavements were empty as if residents took a self-imposed curfew after dark. Inside the maisonette it was by contrast a well of middle-class warmth and security, exuding a kind of bunkered immunity from the war-zones of the streets. The kitchen dominated the ground floor, a country kitchen in chalked maple and Stephen had even concocted a baking smell for the occasion.

Before the other card players arrived we had a chance to catch up with each other's news. Stephen intended to get the vendor's solicitor disbarred and was raising a complaint with the Law Society.

'But isn't the temptation to let it go, now that you've moved in?' I said.

'Yes, but no one else should have to go through that.'

I updated him on my flat, which he knew so well, and of my sufferings at the hands of Ms Chastree Kose, the glorified time-waster, the public servant of slight talents, and then of deliverance by oak-hearted Mr Twelftree.

'All those leaks,' said Stephen.

'This Mr G. Osei is a riddle,' I said. 'A very shadowy figure at the Town Hall.'

'Institutions never willingly provide an explanation of what went wrong.'

‘I don’t even know if Ms Chastree Kose has been properly reprimanded.’

The door-bell rang. In quick succession his three friends arrived. Soon the kitchen was fumed in a friendly atmosphere of whisky and cigars. ‘Stakes please gentleman!’

‘It’s probably best not to imagine the chaos inside a council department,’ I told those around the green baize. ‘I don’t know who fits best, Kafka or Evelyn Waugh. Waugh would perhaps depict cheerful monsters in the Town Hall and eccentric crusaders outside it. It’s impossible not to love Kafka’s embattled characters, their clever manoeuvres, their continual grabbing of sex - fifty pages into *The Trial*, three different women have sat on K’s lap - who plead their cases so brilliantly yet are always doomed to defeat.’

‘Raise you twenty.’

‘Lakehouse were utterly incompetent,’ Stephen remembered.

‘I know them,’ said Stephen’s friend in braces and a loud shirt, who was an estate agent. ‘They take contracts all over North London. By the way, I heard an interesting case involving Camden. They wanted to impose Major Works on a building, installing external wall cladding that would cost each leaseholder around fifteen grand. The leaseholders lobbied, provided a technical surveyor’s report that refuted the claims Camden were making about the benefit of the work and won. Mind you, a great deal of time and money had to be invested by them.’

‘Show. Two pairs, aces and kings.’

It was the estate agent who took most of the table, and a few hours later, bidding everyone goodbye, I began nervily to walk home. There was no starlight, the sky a murky oil spill in colour. I was afraid of a hooded gang of teenagers appearing out of the flood-lit park. But I was ok and got to the safer reaches of Kentish Town.

I was thinking, Stephen and I had more or less been able to fight it out with Camden. Yet put someone old or infirm in our position, isolated in reclusion – these lonely boroughs hide many thousand such souls (and one day I’d be one) – then Ms Chastree Kose would win. Fighting a council is a very hard fight.

Then I thought of the valiant struggles of Kafka’s people, against the machine, the castle, the legal system. The allegory, I decided, was bigger than

all that. It was an allegory on mortality. However valiantly life is lived (with the pleasures of sex on the way), however cleverly, after enfeeblement every life ends in death. It's a fight to ultimate sure defeat. And death here was the black cloak and scythe of Ms Chastree Kose.