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Before the Law

Before the law stands a doorkeeper. A man from the country walks up to the doorkeeper, and asks to be admitted to the law. But the doorkeeper says he can't admit him just now. The man considers, and then asks whether that means he will be admitted at some future time. 'That's possible,' says the doorkeeper, 'but not now.' As the gate to the law remains open as ever, and as the doorkeeper steps aside, the man stoops to get a view of the inside through the gate. When the doorkeeper realizes what the man is doing, he laughs and says: 'If you're so tempted, why don't you try and get in, in spite of my refusal to admit you. But remember: I am mighty. And I am just the lowest doorkeeper. From room to room there are doorkeepers, each one mightier than the one before. Even the sight of the third is more than I can bear.' The man from the country has not expected such trouble; the law is supposed to be open to anyone at any time, he thinks, but taking a closer look at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, his big pointed nose, and his long, thin, black Tartar beard, he decides he'd better wait for permission to step inside. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and allows him to sit down beside the door. And there he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to gain admission, and tires the doorkeeper out with his pleas. The doorkeeper often conducts little interrogations, quizzing him about his home and much else, but they are neutral questions of the kind that great men...
ask, and, when they are finished, he always says he can't yet offer him admission. The man, who has kitted himself out with many things for his trip, uses everything, irrespective of its value, in an effort to bribe the doorkeeper. He in turn accepts everything that's offered to him, while always saying: 'The only reason I'm accepting this is so that you don't think there's something you've omitted to do.' Over many years, the man observes the doorkeeper almost continuously. He forgets all about the existence of the other doorkeepers, this one now seems to him to be the only obstacle in his path to the law. He curses his ill luck, loudly and recklessly in his early years, then later, as he gets old, merely chuntering under his breath. He becomes a little childish, and since in the many years of his scrutiny of the doorkeeper he has also made out the fleas in his fur collar, he even asks the fleas to help him change the doorkeeper's mind. Finally, his eyesight begins to fail, and he is left unsure whether things around him are getting dark, or whether it is his eyes deceiving him. But in the dark he discerns a glory that bursts unquenchably from the gates to the law. He has not much longer to live. Before his death, he assembles all the experiences of many years into one question, which he has never yet put to the doorkeeper. He beckons him over, as he is unable to haul his creaking body upright. The doorkeeper has to bend way down, because the difference in their respective heights has shifted a lot to the man's disadvantage. 'What is it you want to know now?' asks the doorkeeper, 'You are insatiable.' 'Everyone wants to go to law,' says the man, 'How is it then that over so many years no one but me has tried to gain admission?' The doorkeeper sees that the man is nearing the end of his life, and, to reach his failing ears, he bellows to him at the top of his voice: 'No one else could gain admission here, because this entrance was intended for you alone. Now I am going to shut it.'