Before the Law

(From *The Trial* by Franz Kafka, trans. Breon Mitchell pp. 215-217)

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. A man from the country comes to this doorkeeper and requests admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he can’t grant him admittance now. The man thinks it over and then asks if he’ll be allowed to enter later. ‘It’s possible,’ says the doorkeeper, ‘but not now.’ Since the gate to the Law stands open as always and the doorkeeper steps aside, the man bends down to look through the gate into the interior. When the doorkeeper sees this he laughs and says, ‘If you’re so drawn to it, go ahead and try to enter, even though I’ve forbidden it. But bear this in mind: I’m powerful. And I’m only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall, however, stand doorkeepers each more powerful than the one before. The mere sight of the third is more than even I can bear.’ The man from the country has not anticipated such difficulties; the Law should be accessible to anyone at any time, he thinks, but as he now examines the doorkeeper in his fur coat more closely, his large, sharply pointed nose, his long, thin, black tartar’s beard, he decides he would prefer to wait until he receives permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at the side of the door. He sits there for days and years. He asks time and again to be admitted and wears the doorkeeper with his entreaties. The doorkeeper often conducts brief interrogations, inquiring about his home and many other matters, but he asks such questions indifferently, as great men do, and in the end he always tells him he still can’t admit him. The man, who has equipped himself well for his journey, uses everything he has, no matter how valuable, to bribe the doorkeeper. And the doorkeeper accepts everything, but as he does so he says: ‘I’m taking this just so you won’t think you’ve neglected something.’ Over the many years, the man observes the doorkeeper almost incessantly. He forgets the other doorkeepers and this first one seems to him the only obstacle to his admittance to the Law. He curses his unhappy fate, loudly during the first years, later, as he grows older, merely grumbling to himself. He turns childish, and since he has come to know even the fleas in the doorkeeper’s collar over his years of study, he asks the fleas too to help him change the doorkeeper’s mind. Finally his eyes grow dim and he no longer knows whether it’s really getting darker around him or if his eyes are merely deceiving him. And yet in the darkness he now sees a radiance that streams forth inextinguishably from the door of the Law. He doesn’t have much longer to live now. Before he dies, everything he has experienced over the years coalesces in his mind into a single question he has never asked the doorkeeper. He motions to him, since he can no longer straighten his stiffening body. The doorkeeper has to bend down to him, for the difference in size between them has altered greatly to the man’s disadvantage. ‘What do you want to know now,’ asks the doorkeeper, ‘you’re insatiable.’ ‘Everyone strives to reach the Law,’ says the man, ‘how does it happen, then, that in all these years no one but me has requested admittance.’ The doorkeeper sees that the man is nearing his end, and in order to reach his failing hearing, he roars at him: ‘No one else could gain admittance here, because this entrance was meant solely for you. I’m going to go and shut it now.’