

ISTVÁN NEMERE

Vismar and Company

 Publio
KIADÓ

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2013

Publio Publishing

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*To Ilona, thankfully,
for being with me in the worst and best times.*

Chapter 1

Vismar is walking on a bridge.

He has never seen such a bridge before, he vaguely senses that; he can't see the end because the middle bulges up, or is this not the middle all? The edge? He is going upwards, the concrete doesn't smooth itself against his feet - if this is concrete, if this is an upward slope, if this is a bridge. Everything is so weird, so strangely hazy - also that one can hear nothing, bridges arch above valleys or rivers or sea-bays, and almost always a wind blows there. But no wind is blowing here.

And yet, the bridge tenses, he feels the tenseness with his body through his legs. The bridge is not his friend - because it moves under him, or is it him moving on it, is it him moving the bridge? It seems impossible, but here and now, everything is possible, he feels it faintly, not from in himself at all. The feeling-suggestion comes out of the bridge; Vismar doesn't understand it, so he turns around. This way he can see more, he believes. But the bridge bulges up behind him, as well, he cannot see the end. And no one is walking hereabouts, no cars are rolling, no passers-by pacing by. Vismar is alone on the bridge. Vismar is alone. Vismar.

The bridge stirs under him, the man feels that the whole construction is moving, not only that very part where he is walking right now. He suspects that if this section here is moving, all the others are moving, too - piers that he cannot see, lower rigging elements, upper suspension cables that he cannot see, either. But they are there, somewhere, because they have to be; this is the rule. In Vismar's brain, it is present - although faintly - that the bridge cannot be just the concrete deck slab sloping upwards, on which he is pacing. It would be good to see the river down below. Would it be, though?

There is no fear in him, not yet. But his steps are getting slower. And the bridge has turned into an animal, a mount animal. Instead of him riding a horse, it's him walking on its back, alone. No one else anywhere in front of him, the grey concrete ribbon leading upwards - one has to walk on this. This is where one has to pace along. One foot after another, but the concrete is quivering more and more and, as well, already moving towards the sides.

No, this is not fear yet, only wondering agitation. It is a little bit like looking at himself from far away, at the same time looking out from inwards - out of his soul, with true human eyes. "It's the two of us," says a voice in him, and he hears it at the same time from outside, somewhere out of the reality beyond the bridge, and from inside. From himself. From Vismar-world, without an echo. From close by.

What a silly thing, he already understands. He is thinking of the river, which is there somewhere down below, transverse to the bridge direction. If it is a river at all, and not a sea, or only a valley. He is still going upwards, but drawn already to side, outwards, towards the edge of the bridge. It is then that he notices: the bridge has no edges; he cannot see the landscape. No green anywhere, no earth, no water. All of it is just the bridge. The bridge. All of it.

The concrete is already quivering badly, it resonates, moves on and on under him, pulling his legs apart. He glances down and sees that he is barefoot - he didn't feel it until now. The concrete is dusty-wet, his soles leave no print, it's the other way round, the concrete leaves its print on his feet. As if he could see his own soles, two grey concrete-colored blurs of a shape resembling human feet.

Then Vismar feels that something is approaching. The bridge almost neighs, a wounded animal. The grey field of a concrete deck flinches itself to and fro, a finicky steed, doesn't carry everyone, casts the unworthy off itself. Vismar would cry out - he isn't unworthy, he feels that somehow, he belongs here, to this bridge, if it's a bridge - but no sound comes out of him. The cry he could save his life with dies in him before it can break out. He faintly suspects that here it is indeed about his life already. About the life of the bridge, and his own.

The bridge is dying, he grasps that. And if it perishes, will he go with it? By the time the question gets through to him to-from the world beyond the bridge, he glimpses the first crack. As if his own human skin were cracking up, it hurts.

He senses the danger faintly, doesn't truly receive it into his brain at all; it's cracking, well, then it's cracking, that's what concrete does, a "let-the-world-perish" feeling cries in him. Everything is all the same already. All the same. Already.

Then he, too, is shattered, he who thought himself to be a solid point until now, and not only on the bridge. The sky's firmament also comes closer, the bridge falls to pieces, Vismar would look down through the gaps if he could, but he cannot see anything. Something very white glitters down there; he just about fully apprehends that there is nothing. The ravaging nothing, after-beside-above-below-before-within that there is no continuing any more.

Terror whimpers in him, the concrete steed has cast him off his back, after all. He is unworthy. He feels that his body has become strangely light. He is tumbling down. Tumbling down? For a moment, he manages to look out of himself, getting away from the terror that diminishes his soul and dispels his humanity into nothing. Perhaps I'm not a human at all, he thinks. Not any more.

The tumble pushes a wind into his face and he still feels the cracked concrete in his skin; he is a human and a bridge at the same time. What hurts the bridge is a destruction for him, too, they became one in the last minute. The bridge collapses, and destruction is a defeat. The last defeat in his life? The last life in his defeat.

Vismar tumbles down and his mouth opens, but not because of the wind - the living-fire-terror does it, churning in him, breaking out of his entrails that his whole body grows into a frightful cry, a world-sized howl; Cosmos itself is this voice, and through it, he becomes a cosmos, too. The endless All of terror is crying out.

He is crying out.

His consciousness comes back slowly. His own voice is still resonating in his ears, from this, he suspects that he must have cried out real loud. Suddenly, relief nestles onto him, it is a drowsing-dazzling feeling, it feels good to dive into it, bathe in it. Behold, it was just a dream after all, just a dream. A dream.

His body is still quivering. He is lying on his back, feels that this is his own bed, his well-known bed in the well-known room. His eyes pop open, and he isn't surprised that he cannot see anything. This is a blind night, just like each one hereabouts. The house is far from other houses, far from the street. The garden surrounds him, the trees, with their branches and the back of their trunks cast against each other, standing guard protectively. They even exclude light at daytime.

No matter how loud I cried out, he thinks, only I heard it. Maybe that's what woke me up. No one else could have heard it, I'm alone in the house. My house.

Vismar slowly calms down. In his brain, pictures are still chasing one another. Bridge. Concrete, cracks. Break, tumble. Certain death. But lo and behold, the death believed to be certain isn't so, either, it can always turn out that we are only dreaming.

"Am I dreaming now, too?" he asks half aloud. "Am I dreaming that I'm alive and death will be the awakening? If I die here, I'll wake up there, and get up and go about my business, as if nothing had happened. The events of sixty-two years flit away from that other brain of mine there - after all, it was just a stray dream, only lasted a few minutes perhaps, it doesn't have to be taken seriously."

Vismar is lying on the bed. Happy relief surrounds him. He is alive. It was only a dream. But if the bridge comes to mind - and it does come to mind frequently, until now and after now - he isn't so sure anymore that this was only a dream. It can be, and it can also be something else.

And the dream might be repeated. Maybe it's not the first time he woke up like this, bathed in sweat, with the throttling of terror in his throat?

He doesn't want to think of that now. He would do everything to think of something else. That's why he cannot get rid of it. Bridge, concrete, tumble. Bridge. Concrete. Tumble.

Not a dream.

Vismar likes the garden very much.

He hasn't been living here long enough to perceive the very changes that he made. But still, there are changes, and in his brain, the picture of when he first saw it, and then, at the time he moved here, is continuously fading. To this very day, he can't forget the real estate agent from the small town nearby who didn't understand him. He simply didn't understand it, and that's how he said it, too: "I simply don't understand you, Mr. Vismar. You left the city? Now? At this age? Well, forgive me for saying so but you see, you aren't a young man any more, approaching sixty or even reached it already? And you leave the city now, with its good warehouses, doctors, clinics, pharmacies, not to mention all the rest of its conveniences?"

He was afraid I'd be nagging him two weeks later to cancel the deal and sell the house which was just as good as not even bought, only to be able to move back into the city - Vismar thinks now. It won't cause a problem anymore, he never met the agent again, and he isn't missing him, either. He bought this little house, and what he likes about it is exactly that it's far away from everything, even from the village.

And the garden is wonderful. It's small like the Japanese ones, and not overcrowded. The old trees are shadowy, some of them were planted densely next to one another, now their branches are intertwined; they've grown into a wall. Like the hedge following the fence on the inside, it's better than a stone wall. Because, to top all, it has thorns, as well. He only noticed that later and didn't resent it. No one should come here. The world's place is outside. This is Vismar's dominion. It's small but it's his, and he won't give it to anyone else.

The garden is the second circle, he knows it. The first one is the house itself, where the walls breathe out safety. They protect, they cover, at night they also give warmth. They radiate at night what they absorb of the sun from morning till dusk. It's pleasant. The garden is the second circle of safety, an edgy green defense, a plant bastion. It catches up the noise and the curious glances. Whoever walks this way only sees the fence, the third circle of defense. True, it's only a wire on ugly

concrete pillars, but nicely high. No one could easily climb over it.

And the fourth circle is in him. No one sees it but Vismar knows that it exists. What's more, he too keeps it alive, nourishes it, takes care of it and guards it himself. Let there be a safety zone, a no man's land between him and *those*. He only refers to them that way. There are quite a few of them. Several billions. Those who have no free pass, not only into his house but into his soul, either. The few who know about Vismar sometimes make a try but when that happens, there are always thorns springing out of his body, out of his eyes, he doesn't say anything. He doesn't invite anyone to his place, although some would perhaps expect it. Of course, the hopeful guests sense that - they are waiting in vain. They back off or they are silent. Vismar is also silent. So the atmosphere sours. There aren't any invitations, any guests. People. Friends.

Vismar likes the garden.

Here, he cannot be taken by surprise. Or at the most, just a nice one. Like when a bush unexpectedly sprang into bloom, back in early spring when the other plants were still asleep. The goldfish in the small pond, the way they grow. This is the kind which, if it gets into an aquarium, remains small, but if its habitat is enlarged, enlarges its body in thanksgiving. In the green water - if Vismar looks that way now - he can even see the slowly stirring pale red fishbacks, the small fins with the yellowish-red flanges. "I wonder whether they can see me if I stop by the shore, or am I only a distressing, shadow-inducing blur, something to be afraid of?" There is no answer to the question. Not to this one, either.

Vismar likes the morning, too.

Morning is his favorite time of the day; at this time, he is full of strength and zeal. He never wakes up in a bad mood. He is even glad to wake up earlier than he is used to. At least he can escape the bad dreams. He gets out of bed fresh, although sometimes his back hurts and his legs are pulling. Doesn't matter. Only life matters. Only that.

Vismar comes out into the garden in the morning, and two joys encounter him at the same time: the morning and the garden. He can't have enough of them. The sun has already risen, no matter how early he rises, he cannot overtake that. Nowadays, he doesn't travel anywhere any more, he doesn't have to get up early. He wakes up when he wakes up. He gets up right away, because all the minutes are wasted that he spends lying but awake. Who lives, acts. Those who don't do anything any more, those for whom what they have is enough, who are satisfied - are dead. That is what Vismar claims.

Morning is a miracle itself. A dewdrop rests on the top of every blade of grass, so tiny that if Vismar lies down beside it, and looks at it from the wrong direction, he doesn't see it. It ceases to exist. But if he is facing the still low-hovering, just-risen sun, he can see a million colorful little orbs. It is a refraction, his mind says. His heart doesn't say anything, it only rejoices in the miracle. The sun lights a million lamps, it spreads its own light in a thousand directions, bestowing it on water, leaf, grass blade, tree trunk, house wall. Light trickles down the roof, still red, then yellower and yellower: the visible world becomes complete. At this time, it's already his, too. Vismar doesn't like the night. Only its silence.

Part of the morning is to return to the house and throw down his sandals, wet from the dew. The familiar furniture of the kitchen. The smell of coffee, sneaking perhaps even under his skin. The mixed taste of a lot of milk, a little coffee and hardly any sugar. The white kitchen armchair

embracing his waist with its elbow-rests, its back-rest on his back, a green sight through the window. The relief that there is no hurry anywhere. Then he fusses a bit more in the house, makes his bed, he does that every day, although he knows there won't be any visitors that day, either, just like any other time. But order lies low in him, making its demands. True, there is a cleaner woman, but only once a week. He has to do the washing up five times a week. On the day before the cleaning, he already lets the dishes gather up. On the seventh day, the woman comes and washes up, tidies everything. When she leaves, the house feels indeed a bit strange but at least it's ordered. Vismar's eyes are glad, his soul is glad.

In the morning, he also reads. Novels. Some of them are quite famous, but he never read them back in his time. He makes up for everything he didn't have time for, for more than fifty years. The books are all new and smell like books, lying promisingly in a growing heap on his nightstand. When he goes into the small town, he spends hours in the two big bookstores, and there is a second-hand bookstore, as well. Only before starting back does he remember the empty backpack, the necessity to do the shopping, the paper slip on which he noted the shortages during the week. Vismar doesn't like towns, big ones, small ones, not any ones. Not any more. Once upon a time, he enjoyed the sight, houses, bridges, highways, towers, old and new constructions. He doesn't want to see them any more. Still he has to. Rarely.

It sometimes occurs that he has things to do. Like today.

Vismar is walking on the hill.

This is an old battle, when he goes downwards, upwards. His legs like only even ground. When going downwards, he has the feeling that very soon he will have to run, the slope would give such an impulse but he doesn't want to hurry, that would place blame on his dignity. Particularly if someone saw it, the way he starts running downwards again and again. And sometimes it would be good indeed. But Vismar has already grown out of the age, or much rather, the ages of flippancy. He is afraid of falling down and breaking a bone. Already nowadays he reads the good advice addressed to the elderly. It would be good to hold on without an illness for as long as possible, and then pass away from one day to the other. He is afraid that with him, it won't be like that.

He doesn't like going upwards, either: the earth kicks back, resists, tosses him away from itself. He has to fight it, his ankles are getting tired, and his every muscle, too. He is panting by the time he gets to the top. So both on his way out and back, he hates the hill. But the shorter way to the village runs through the valley. So he goes down a few times weekly. Now, too, he is quickening the pace on the narrow, one-man path. No one is coming opposite him. At this time, the villagers are working. The houses on the edge beckon to him, glistening white and gray.

There are two kinds of houses hereabouts. The old kind, built of the calc-tufa, not too hard, carved out of one of the nearby mountains. These walls are seemingly rough but strong. Grey and pale brown, like white coffee - those are the colors that alternate. And the more modern houses are white, with bricks behind the mortar and the white paint. Chemicals - Vismar grunts sometimes - chemicals. Water-repellent mortar, water-repellent paint, if it evaporates, poison gets into the air, and you inhale it, serves you right! Approaching the village, these are the things he is thinking of. When he goes to a small town, all the more so.

He can already see the school, it pops out from among the foliage. The houses stand on the two sides of the valley; a narrow brook in the middle, with the driveway for the cars on one side, and on the other, a bicycle route and the pedestrian sidewalk. The municipality lights it at night,

although not every day. They don't have that much money. Vismar hardly ever walks here towards the evening. He is a bear, likes the dusk to find him next to his cave. He doesn't lumber around on his own in the dark. That might mean trouble, even for a bear.

He is already walking among the houses. He can see the yards, fences, roofs. The soil is bad hereabouts, so the people are poor. They bestow the little they have on their children, and divide penury even further. A thin dog stares at the man greedily - does it perhaps smell the aroma emanating out of him? The scent of breakfast?

The school is already close. Since he has moved here, Vismar doesn't wear a watch, but at home, he has several of them. He knows what time it must be now. He has always sensed time, as he is at war with it. He likes the park, usually stops on its edge for a moment, with his eyes darting round. It's not as beautiful as his garden, but it's a lot more spacious, looser, airier. Those cypresses on the edge, just like candles. The cherry laurel hasn't grown into a hedge yet, although it is trimmed. The wild privet is thickening nicely, the japonica will show splendidly when the time comes for it. The lawn gets mowed regularly. The village is poor and rich at the same time. Looking this way, he sees privation, looking that way, he sees a neat orderliness.

But then he glimpses the man who was the reason for his coming down into the valley today. Vismar fingers his inner pocket. The envelope is there, the knowledge pleases him. It pleases him that it's in his pocket, on the inside, that it's his. Still.

The milkman and the school's maintenance man are just placing out the big, deep red plastic crates. The rolls have already been taken in, now the milk's next. Vismar knows the time sequence, and also at which part of the corridor they usually put them down inside. He also knows that the man hasn't come as an accident now. The milk cartons in the boxes don't wait for long. A quarter of an hour at the most, and the noise and the flock of children bursts out through all the openings of the now silent building - in the breaks, these two grow together, become one, to break into pieces again at the moment of the end-of-break bells, subsiding into silence. By then the maintenance man, this somewhat handicapped, hulking man, will already be there with one of the teachers, so that all the children in need will get a glass of milk and a roll. The teacher knows all the children. He knows who are the few well-to-do ones who bring their food from home. They would come here in vain, indeed, as they aren't entitled to any milk.

But the building is still silent. Approaching, Vismar casts a glance at it, he hates this cube-structure, if they asked his advice, he would never recommend such a one for the village. But back then, this must surely have been the cheapest, and anyway, it was organized at the regional council, and it was the council that largely paid for it. There was no say to it. Cheap it had to be, and it so became.

"Good morning, Mr. Vismar," the milkman says. He is a round-faced, beefy, lazy man, going his rounds through the neighboring villages, starting from the small town. He respects Vismar, or it is only Vismar believing-hoping for it. One thing is sure, I'm good for business, Vismar thinks. The maintenance man also mutters something, as well; it seems like a greeting, too, a humble welcoming. He carries the last box alone into the school, because the milkman found something to do.

"Good morning. Everything all right?"

The question is a ritual, the answer is a ritual.

"Everything is just as it should be, Mr. Vismar. Shall we go on?"

"We go on," the old man answers immediately. He didn't have to wait, knowing that this would be the question. The milkman also knew that this would be the answer. As long as the schoolyear is on, every week, on this day, in this hour, at thirty-five past nine, the milkman is here, the milk is here, and Vismar is here, too. "Good morning, Mr. Vismar," then a few words coming, "shall we go on?" And at the end, the envelope and the shaking of hands. As for the latter, Vismar is not enthusiastic about it, he is just beginning to get off habits that used to be so natural. He isn't keen on squeezing the palms of people, known or unknown. Why would he do it, anyway?

But now he has to. This is what they seal the deal with. The milkman, for all of a week, carried out the milk and buns for the schoolchildren.

"Forty-four," the milkman says, unnecessarily. The number of children doesn't change. And even if it does, well, there are ritual words for that, too:

"If any of them remain, you know whose they are."

The milkman nods. The leftover is the maintenance man's share, who doesn't come out now, only stands in the door, looking at Vismar. The teacher who helps distributing knows this even better. The maintenance man gets his share of a cup of milk if one of the children didn't come to school. If the child is sick. Sometimes there are more of them, and then the maintenance man gets more glasses of milk.

"Here you are," Vismar hands over the envelope to milkman, who doesn't open it, doesn't count it. He knows there is just as much as needed in it. Of course in the afternoon, when he goes back to town, he'll count it, but it has never been wrong yet. Since it's Mr. Vismar who gave it. Vismar.

"Next week then," says Vismar; that's a ritual, too. This is always his goodbye. He turns away. This way, he doesn't have to reach out his hand any more. He gets the "Goodbye, Mr. Vismar" into his back. Then he goes out of the village, with the houses beside him numbering up; he takes deeper breaths. The hill is now his enemy, only that. He has to go upwards to get back to his house. Soon he'll start again, but into another direction.

Earlier on, he would've wanted to live by the sea. But then something came in between, something he doesn't like remembering, because if he still does, he is overcome by helpless wrath and cannot get rid of this feeling for a long time. But he can deal with this fairly well now; he doesn't think of it if he doesn't want to. So he believes. Something has to happen to call it to his mind, even so. Well, it does happen a lot: little things, nothing but grenades lying around on the way he walks; if he doesn't look, tiny crackers explode. Some of them also wound him, with splinters. And for all this to happen, an old newspaper or a book on the shelf is enough, something that he read *then* or *there*. A piece of news in the radio. Nowadays, that's the only thing he listens to, and not everyday, at that.

Vismar doesn't have a television, he's already gone off the habit. It was a great thing, he feels. A great achievement, and it was after a bitterly long battle that he managed to free his eyes and brain from all those sights. He's been drilling himself for a while now - he doesn't read newspapers anymore, either. Only once in a while. He doesn't miss it, not any more.

These all attacked him *then*, so that's how he punishes them. Of course he knows that his demonstrative absence, his silently uttered punishment, his getting distant is worth nothing. After all, they don't know anything about it - or anything about Vismar now, either. That which used to be

such a big sensation has frayed into nothing by now, not even a memory remaining of it, from it. He can be glad about this. Not anything else.

Vismar is going on the mountain ridge now.

He isn't in a hurry, couldn't be, anyway. His backpack is almost full, making his stride slower. The path is narrow and rather steep on both sides. It's not a long way, perhaps a thousand steps. He is always determined to count it, but it never comes to his mind when he steps on it at the beginning. So he doesn't count it. Perhaps a thousand steps, perhaps nine-hundred-forty-eight, perhaps a thousand-twenty-one. Doesn't matter, anyway.

He has already gone this way in a big wind, even in a storm once. He lives according to a self-made timetable. If on this day he doesn't pass the mountain ridge, and then, on the side of the other mountain, he doesn't turn left, in between the high cliffs, he'll perhaps be missed then. They'll ask whereabouts he could be today. Why has he not come? And at other times he thinks maybe they wouldn't even notice that he hasn't come. This would be embarrassing, so he doesn't think about it for a very long time, shoos it away.

The backpack is heavy. So he moves along with great care, watching his steps. If he happened to put his foot down on the wrong place here, and it got twisted or broken, he would have to wait for a long time to get help. Others have cell phones; after all, this is the twenty-first century. A long time ago, when he was a little boy, he calculated how old he would be when the twentieth century - that he then thought infinite, almost eternal - would end. The number that he got - was more than even fifty. He must've been eleven years old back then, and from that perspective, this seemed to be the uppermost-ultimate limit of old age. When the numbers of years don't begin with a 19 but with a 20, how good that will be! Why it will be good, he didn't know, but that number 20 was a promising future, Time itself approaching.

And Time has indeed come, but Vismar looked at it in a different way, and Time treated him in a different way, too.

So now there he is, walking on the mountain, reaching the bottom of the ridge; at his back, the wind calming down. He stops at the high stone; he knows it so well by now that it's almost his friend on this journey. He has already figured out that if he turns his back to it and 'makes a long arm' a little, like a child standing on his tiptoes, he can just manage to put the lower edge of his backpack onto the ledge. And then he could just as well slip out of the shoulder straps, his burden being held by the stone, the earth. So he can rest.

It's afternoon, but not late yet. He looks away eastwards, doesn't see the top of the house he is going to. Although it is there, among the cliffs, among the trees. He lifts his backpack off the ledge with a sigh, the burden is his again, and he goes on. The goal isn't far away any more.

He reaches the wood, the wind doesn't blow here, he stands on his legs more securely. The backpack has grown heavier, too, since he reached the top. The house unfolds itself slowly in front of his eyes, it becomes larger and larger, together with its surroundings. On the courtyard, the grass has grown out at many places; very few feet tread on it these days. And maybe fewer and fewer. A window glitters for a second, the sun darts its beams on it and it reflects the light, dazzles Vismar, but the man goes on without stopping. A little mongrel runs there, pitch black, friendly, they know each other. The old man stoops down, caresses the dog, which yips with joy. Rarely does anyone attend to him, not even this much. A minute of Vismar's life, a huge joy, maybe hours for the animal.

It's not a wasted minute, although the bag weighs down on his back; he moves on, the dog runs in front of him, signaling with a happy yelp: a guest. At the entrance, there are three high stairs, so he goes round the side, that's where the ramp for the wheelchairs is located, he can go upwards on a little slope with his shoulder-wrecking burden. It's easier this way.

Inside there, the shadow is pleasant. Two figures are sitting, one of them reading a newspaper in a rocking chair while the other one has set himself on a rickety chair - like some kind of a worn-down piece of clothing. That's how he sits, too: among thrown-down rags, there is some human to be found, too. He is solving a crossword puzzle. Or *sudoku*, because one can see on his lips that he is counting, without a sound. Back there on the corridor, a man is coming, carefully, slowly, leaning against the wall, deliberating on every step. A quarter of an hour more, and he will reach the end of the corridor, tired.

A wizened little old lady with a crooked back stands in front of the window. Whenever Vismar comes, he finds her there. She doesn't talk, only watches. She has been silent for years. She is harmless. Her voluntary muteness is a shield, a garb, perhaps a weapon, as well. She watches the garden, but never goes out to see the trees from closer. When the dog barks outside, she winces. She is waiting for someone. Waiting intensely.

The boss is coming, someone has already told him: "The old man with the backpack is here!" The brains of some residents are all right, they are just old. One of these inmates is in the courtyard all the time, was perhaps there now, too, and called in to the boss through the office window. Ah yes, the old man is here, the one who comes once a week and brings such a lot of things.

"Good afternoon, Mr.Vismar!"

The leader of the elderly peoples' home - and its cook in one - is a short, thin man, well above forty. He always wears a dirty apron, even in the office. The residence home is high up on the mountain, visitors are very rare here. A bad, graveled, steep path leads on the hillside. It doesn't like cars, either. According to the boss, in the faraway town they were forgotten about, although the payments arrive regularly. As for the food, that arrives less frequently. Walking down into town, doing the shopping, coming back, that's an all-day program. And there is little money.

Rituals are working here, too. Vismar likes things to be repeated regularly, he loathes haphazardness. Unless there is rain and storm, this is the day he comes up. He talks himself into believing that this trip upwards onto the mountain on foot with a full backpack does him good, then back with an empty backpack, relieved. As if he did it for himself, because of himself, the top of selfishness. He likes going down with an empty backpack, that's a fact. But something drives him upwards, too. Somewhere inside.

"Good afternoon. I've brought something."

This is what he always says. The boss is very thankful. This "something" from Vismar unburdens the meager budget for the day every time. Although the elderly don't eat much, even the little they do costs money, something they don't have.

Vismar unpacks the backpack. Two old people, in a helpful mood, are already standing there. They take little at a time but even so, everything disappears from the discolored table. They are taking it to the back, into the kitchen.

Another part of the ritual is that the boss brings a glass of refreshment. From the fridge. This feels nice. Vismar feels how the orange juice diffuses in him, he doesn't think of how many real

oranges can be in it, and what else is there in it that has never seen an orange tree. That was born in a test tube.

“A room is waiting for you here, Mr. Vismar,” says the boss thankfully, and smiles. He has a wart on his face, a mole on his hand, already this young, Vismar thinks automatically. This offer-promise is also part of the rite, it’s uttered every week. Just like Vismar’s answer:

“I hope that will be quite a while off yet.”

And hope he does, indeed. It is quite a while off, indeed. He believes so. The old lady is standing by the window, looking out. The lips of the old man with the sudoku are moving on. Time has stopped here. Vismar shakes hands with the boss, and goes outside. The little black dog is waiting for him at the door, his tail almost tearing off with all the wagging. With the empty backpack on one shoulder, Vismar already strides jauntily like a stripling down the stairs. Then he crosses the courtyard, the dog accompanies him to the gate. There, he gets some caresses again, let it be enough for him for a week.

Then on he goes towards the ridge between the two mountains. The path, then the road downwards. Back.

Chapter 2

Another day. Another kind of day.

That other shelter is almost halfway between the little town and the village. According to the documents, it's part of the town but got crowded out of it, a good way off. It isn't close for the villagers, either. It takes Vismar a thirty to forty minutes' walk in one direction. A good bit of walk.

It is a blue-sky morning. Vismar is still envisioning the bushes of the morning garden, the battle of the light, crawling downwards on the fence wall, with the shadow. And in his nose the fragrance of roses and lilies, these have suppressed everything else in him, even the beloved scent-taste-memory of coffee.

The time of morning joy, however, is past. It's good that it was there, it had to be, too - but now it's already late morning and Vismar paces on. In thought and in space. The house remains behind him. He always stops at a certain distance and looks back. The distance from where he has to look back - this is a self-order, stronger than everything - is signified by a mossy stone on the edge of one path, and a decaying old pillar by the other edge. So that he knows where to halt and turn round. Where to look at and see his house from, which he is very proud of, although sometimes ashamed that it's only as big as it is. But then a bigger one isn't needed - he says-lies to himself. Once upon a time, he dreamed of a bigger one. True, he dreamed of a different old age to go along with it, too.

One can stop a car at its gate, as well, but who would do that, and why? He never gets anything brought to him that isn't lifted up-carried by one or two human arms. The stones leading to the gate have gotten off the habit of taking the weight of cars. They would be pressed into the earth painfully, a conflict of tormented stones and indifferent wheels would cry up to the sky, if only mutely. Vismar doesn't want anything bad for the stones. Either.

This one is a path, too, but here, he doesn't have to go up a mountain. There is only a hillside with a mild declivity on the way: first he has to go upwards a bit, then on the other side, the path is somewhat steeper, true, it's more winding, too, like some kind of a tiny serpentine trail, wizened into a dwarf, that wandered onto a hill by mistake - a caricature of real big ones, mountainside ones with asphalt.

Vismar likes coming this way, a happy excitement is stretching itself in his soul. The shelter isn't the same any two times. He always sees it as different, because it is different, too. Even if only his eyes see it. For others, it's perhaps a job, although they like doing it, but still, it's merely a duty. For him, it's pleasure. He is happy to come towards it, he is yearning for a task. He goes home when it's already evening, at dusk or silvery cinereousness, with a tired well-feeling. At such times, he is glad to be approaching his house.

But now, he is still making towards there, he bites the distance humming, massaging the back of the earth with hundreds of steps, the distance diminishing more and more, and joy increasing in him. And when he strides over the last hill and sights the well-known buildings in the tiny valley, his soul is already laughing. There isn't much missing until one can hear the dogs barking. The wind blows from behind his back; true, it's a weak wind. But even that much is enough for several dozen noses to get lifted up and sniff, then for the small brains to give their orders to their throats. By the time Vismar reaches the corner of the fence, where he is the only one who has trodden out a path, there

is no one else walking this way - the barks are already merged into one. The people inside there can learn from this, too, that Vismar is coming. Vismar is approaching. Vismar.

The people from here are just standing by the gate; are they perhaps waiting for their new masters? At least as much as the dog residents of the shelter. The wire fence encloses half a hectare of territory. Inside the office, the storehouse, and the kennels in four rows, with concrete-covered sidewalks in between. Trees cast their shadows in the summertime. In the winter, wind walks among the kennels, sneakingly, biting under skin-fur, stealing the foliage of trees.

But now it's summer, a warm one, Vismar gets a bit sweaty, too, by the time he gets into the entrance shadow. Of the few bicycles propped against the wall, he recognizes that of the Girl and the Assistant, and two cars are sitting in the little parking lot constructed in front of the entrance. A territory strewn over with white gravel, nothing else, with some reedy but still thinnish saplings casting some shadows. One of the cars belongs to the Doctor, the other one is a stranger. And that's how it sits, too, a bit askew; obviously, the owner is parking here for the first time. Perhaps for the last one, too.