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The Man with the Watch

Is it a consolation that the kindergarten is closer than the cemetery, Viktor wonders, as he steps onto the street and turns the corner, where he can hear the children's laughter and see their happy faces, as they soar up over the hedge on the swing, could it be a consolation today? So far he has never sat down on a park bench in front of the kindergarten, but always only on one of the cemetery benches. He chooses the cemetery, because he values the quiet, just the quiet, not the silence of the grave, as Marie liked to suggest on rainy days. Apart from which the benches at the kindergarten are occupied by mothers during the day and Tamils in the evening. They come here to play, they have every right to sit on these benches. While they wait for their children the mothers play with the younger ones, in the sand box or on the climbing frame. The Tamils deal cards in the light of the street lamps and pass round whisky, which they dilute with coke. Viktor can only speculate on what they're waiting for, on peace in their homeland, on news from relatives. When Marie brought up his frequent visits to the cemetery, he patiently explained to her that for him, as he saw it, there were no other benches left. The fact that he goes to the cemetery has nothing to do with the graves, not at all to do with the dead who are there, he didn't know a single one of them, although it's a big cemetery, he utterly denies a macabre preference for the company of the dead, it's because of the availability of park benches, the peace and quiet and nothing else. He cannot at all agree with the suggestion that he's a sad person. He's no more melancholy than anyone

else. Today, however, he has to admit to himself, today he lay in bed, although it had long been light outside.

Viktor walks past the kindergarten, past the green shutters of the social housing block, he crosses the main road and even before he reaches the cemetery gate, he knows that today he will walk past it, although he can't name any other goal. If, like today, he doesn't turn onto the central avenue of the cemetery, then there's nothing else he can do except walk right round the outside of the cemetery. The streets, with their heavy traffic, which pass the walls of the cemetery, are a poor alternative to the meadows with flowers, the old spreading oaks and plane trees, the fountain and the park benches which await him within the walls. After once going round the outside of the cemetery he will make a second attempt to pass the big cast-iron gate after all and feel the crunching pebbles of the central avenue under his feet. If the second attempt doesn't succeed either, then without having achieved anything he will go home, where many long hours still lie before him until darkness falling allows him to put on the light. And that despite the fact that it doesn't take much darkness before the gloom in his shadowy apartment on the upper ground floor makes it necessary to reach for the light switch. On a fine day in high summer the vertical rays of the sun at midday fall through the windows of his two rooms which face the street for an hour. Already by the end of September Viktor has to sit on the window sill in order to feel the warming rays of the sun on his face. The only sunlight which falls through the windows of the kitchen and the bedroom on the courtyard side is that reflected at night by the moon.

The restricted view never bothered Viktor. In front of his window there's a short one-way street. There are only three house entries on each side.

Narrow pavements are sufficient for the few pedestrians. A no-waiting sign ensures that delivery vans don't block the traffic. Anything else but the next façade a few yards in front of Viktor's windows would amount to a waste of public space. Marie almost managed to put him off his own apartment. She lost no opportunity to complain about the darkness. He would wither away in this flat, that was her prediction, which he countered by pointing to his house plant, which had been growing for years, slowly for sure, but continuously. He ate fruit every day, he said, assuring her of his health, and in addition took vitamins in the shape of a fizzing pill which dissolved in water. His argument that the rays of the sun encouraged serious illnesses also left Marie cold. She stuck to her negative attitude with respect to the position of his apartment. Her words still ring in Viktor's ears. It's a while since he helped her out of her boots and neatly hung up her coat on a hanger. She tended to slip it off and thoughtlessly leave it lying. Nevertheless a defiant, satisfied smile accompanies his memory of her complaints. He is very fond of his apartment, and many fresh, delicate green shoots have sprouted on his plant since he repotted it.

This morning the postman had to ring twice to get him out of bed. It made him jump up, because the postman only rang the doorbell, if there was something important about his delivery, and he wasn't a patient man, Viktor knew that. Anyone who didn't appear at the door within a short time was not at home, at least as far as the postman was concerned, so Viktor jumped up, slipped on his trousers, which were lying on the chair beside the bed, and hurried to the door. The postman had already turned away, and Viktor began to make his protest at the ever shorter period of

time, in which it was possible to convince the postal services that one was at home, when the postman turned round. He had pressed the wrong bell, bottom instead of top, it wasn't very clear, however, both push-buttons exactly the same distance from the name plates, only by counting it out could one come to a definite conclusion as to which name plate belonged to which bell. The packet was not for him, whose name was under the mistakenly pressed button, but for the person in the flat above. No offence, he excused himself and was already gone.

It was an unusually large package, which the postman had to deliver. It was so big that he couldn't tuck it under his arm, but had to hold it with both hands, to carry it up the stairs. What could not have been sent to him in a package of such dimensions, it occurred to Viktor, an illuminated globe with a stand made of cherry wood, an Italian coffee machine with a free-standing grinder, the first half of a leather bound edition of the Brockhaus Encyclopaedia. He took the usual two or three rejections out of the letter box and with a feeling of disappointment, because the urgent ringing had not been for him, closed the door. His melancholy at least had been outsmarted and he had been brought out of bed, he thought, and defied the desire to lie down again.

He grated an apple. The package was addressed to the woman above him, he could have taken it in for her, it occurred to Viktor. She would certainly not be at home. Every morning at half past seven she left the house with single-minded efficiency and was rarely back before seven. He would have saved her a trip to the post office, and it would have been an opportunity to enter into a conversation with her. On meeting on the stairs she responded to his greetings and passing questions as to health and the weather in a concise but friendly manner. Perhaps she would even

have invited him in for a glass of wine and so blotted out yesterday afternoon. He left the apple lying, and ran to the living room window, but the postman's maize yellow van had already left the no-waiting zone. He mixed the apple with five heaped table spoons of oat flakes. While the water for the tea boiled, he let the apple infuse the flakes, then he mixed a carton of yoghurt with the oatmeal. It was a breakfast which for many years had fortified him for the day.

Viktor is again and again just about to sit down on a bench by the kindergarten. If there's a bench free, which is not claimed by any mother, and there's not enough night yet for the Tamils, he begins to walk more slowly, sometimes he even stops briefly. Today, too, he hesitated in front of a free bench, he reflected that the cheerfulness of playing children, the sight of carefree and unthinking, because still endless, life would do him good. But today, too, he walked on, his hesitation didn't stop him from crossing the playground, although he knows no other benches will be available to him, on which he could sit down in order to avoid the cemetery. Today in particular he would like to avoid it, because it's not least his visit to the cemetery which is to blame for him having stayed in bed longer than usual.

Did he like sitting in the cemetery, he was asked yesterday, and today he doesn't dare go again to the place, where until recently a copper beech stood and now a sign explained that the beautiful old tree had to be felled because it had been sick. Not for the first time he sat down in the gap

which had been left by the felled tree, the sun shone longer here than elsewhere. Yes, he liked to sit here, he had replied, and only after he had come home, did he realise what kind of a light, shadow rather, this first sentence, this assent, which he had expressed without hesitation, had thrown on him. A person, who voluntarily and without reservation, admitted that he liked to sit in the cemetery, he had unfortunately only realised at home and so too late, could easily be thought of as a strange person. So it was likely that from the start the man, whose name he didn't even know, had thought him a strange person, which is why he disappeared so quickly. He probably thought Viktor an oddball, a queer fish, perhaps even a harmless nutcase, and yet Viktor had had such high hopes of this meeting. It seemed to go so far beyond the everyday encounters with the man sitting beside him on the bus or the lady at the checkout who had forgotten to weigh the apples. When was the last time there had been an encounter out of which a friendship could have developed?

The man was of the same age. He wore a suit, which one could see at a glance was not a funeral suit worn to a burial. It was an ordinary business suit, such as were frequently seen in the city, but rarely in the cemetery. The gents clothing stores sold such suits by the hundred to the employees of the banks and the insurance companies, so many of which had their headquarters in the city centre or had at least rented a branch office there. Usually such suits were sold in combination with a shirt, whose label fibbed that it was easy to iron, and an unobtrusive tie.

He must apologise, he didn't want to disturb, on no account, probably Viktor just wanted to sit here, which he liked to do, as he had just said, the man continued, and it did not yet occur to Viktor at this point, that the

repetition of his reply, was an indication, that a more precise explanation would have been necessary on his part, to avoid misunderstandings concerning his presence in the cemetery. Probably it would have been enough if he had added he was only sitting here because the benches in front of the kindergarten were occupied, and it would never have occurred to the man, that Viktor might be an oddball.

He was terribly sorry, but he just couldn't keep quiet, he had to talk, and if he didn't mind, he would gladly talk to him, but if it was unwelcome, and a mere nod was enough to express that, he would immediately be on his way and not spend a moment longer at the bench.

A conversation could hardly have had a better beginning as far as Viktor was concerned.

Did he know what time it was, asked the man, at the same time pointing at his watch. He would like Viktor to confirm the exact time, because in situations like the present one he always doubted his own watch, although it had gone faultlessly since his confirmation and he had never missed a single plane or a single appointment, since confirmation at least he could not blame the watch for him being even a minute late on any occasion.

Viktor told the man the time which had been struck at the last quarter hour by the church tower clock because he didn't wear a watch himself.

If it struck three, then today too his watch was in fine working order and there was nothing else for him to do except be patient.

The man made as if to sit down on the bench beside Viktor, but jumped up again, even before the material of his trousers had come in contact with the wood of the bench.

Would he mind, said the man to Viktor, if he sat down, he had already threatened to do so, he laughed, he couldn't keep quiet, and his words would rain down on him, that couldn't be prevented, if he were permitted to sit beside him on the bench.

Viktor nodded, and the man sat down. The state of sitting together did not last. The man's knees didn't stay still, which meant that the upper part of his body didn't stay still either and even the strands of hair over his forehead, kept in place by hair wax, started moving. The man was very much aware of his restlessness and, in order to control it, soon crossed his legs and stuck his hands between his thighs. Condemned to motionlessness, he tried a couple of times to slide back and forward, then he jumped up from the bench, sighed in relief, like someone freed from his chains after years in a dungeon. He spun round and stood behind the bench. As his feet pawed the pebbles raising small clouds of dust, which settled as a grey film on his black slip-ons, he continued.

At four at the latest he would know. At four! That was still almost a whole hour. A stroke of luck that he had met him. If Viktor had not been sitting on this bench he did not know how he could get through the hour at all. He had already feared that it had been a bad idea to come to the cemetery. He hadn't expected to meet a patient person like him, the chance of meeting someone in a bar who would talk to him for an hour would definitely have been greater. But in a bar there would have been the risk that he would have got drunk in an hour and, whatever decision

the committee came to, that would be disastrous. He couldn't afford that, coming back to the office drunk, that would without a doubt be interpreted as intolerable weakness, if in such a situation he could only cope by getting drunk. At worst such an occurrence would even lead to a re-assessment of the situation. But he had been lucky, he had met a person, who was standing by him in this long hour, and he was grateful to him for that.

Viktor turned his head in the expectation of looking the man in the eyes. He was happy that someone was grateful to him, and he wanted to glance warmly at the person who spoken this beautiful sentence. The man, however, was staring at his mechanically scraping shoe tips and it took a while before the image of the dusty shoes reached his consciousness and he became aware of the scraping. He made another attempt to sit down. Once again he failed because of his irrepressible urge to move. He placed one foot on the bench and his upper body rocked back and forward. He was now standing in front of Viktor and he took his wallet out of his back pocket.

The day before yesterday his son had turned three. Wow, already three, exclaimed the man and struck his knee with his hand. And the second was on the way. They had known that for certain for a couple of days now. There had been a children's party for the little boy. For the first time he had been allowed to invite his friends. It starts very early, that children either like one another or they don't. And he, the little boy, had known exactly whom he wanted to invite and who not. He had spent the whole evening beforehand blowing up balloons, his wife didn't like to do that, blowing up balloons, also postage stamps or envelopes that weren't self-adhesive, she couldn't stand that, on the other hand she baked very well.

The man held out a photograph to Viktor on which small, blond boy could be seen, sitting in front of a huge piece of cake. Viktor smiled and got his warm glance to the man after all.

A beautiful child. Alert eyes. His son must have an exceptional character, that was easy to see. His strong will no doubt sometimes also caused his parents embarrassment.

Embarrassment, the man laughed, that was, to put it mildly, quite an understatement. The little boy regularly drove both his mother mad as well as him, the father, when he came home in the evening. It was unbelievable what fixed ideas someone who was only three years old could get into his head. A month ago, on that unusually hot weekend, they had driven out into the country, they had parked the car at the edge of the forest, and with their rucksacks had immersed in the refreshing coolness. They had found a nice spot by a stream, where they had spread out their picnic cloth. The little boy had immediately run to the stream, water was at least as attractive to children as fire, like everything that was dangerous and keeps parents on their feet. He ran after him and just managed to grab him by the waistband, before taking off the boy's shoes and his own and wading into the cold water. At a shallow point he had started piling up stones, in order to dam the stream. For the little boy it was his very first damming up of a stream. He, the father, even if he was long past childhood, couldn't sit down beside any stream without wanting to dam it up. Naturally the little boy hadn't been in the least interested in his, the father's, experience, rather, he, who was damming up a stream for the first time, showed him, the experienced dam-master, where to put which stone.

The man put the photo back in his wallet and suddenly became very thoughtful.

He was certain the little boy had managed a faultless damming up of the stream, said Viktor in the pause that had arisen through the man's thoughtfulness.

From the very beginning he had been thinking of laying out a biotope in the garden in front of the house, and then of course a little stream must also lead to the biotope.

The words came out of the man's mouth without any conviction, without the strength of a vivid image. He said them without thinking and his thoughts were obviously elsewhere. He began to crack the joints of the little finger of his left hand. The tension from which the man freed himself joint by joint was transferred to Viktor. By the ring finger of the right hand he could no longer control himself and he broke in.

Did he also plant flowers in the garden or only vegetables. In the city the only chance of getting a plot of land of one's own larger than a balcony flower box was to get hold of an allotment, an idea, however, which he was not seriously pursuing.

Viktor noticed just in time, that he shouldn't go any further. He had interrupted the man's heavy silence. And in a conversation about gardens he would be sticking his neck out. Gardening was completely alien to him. Why though, he reflected, it didn't have to stay like that, after all, he felt close to nature, even if the sick copper beech hadn't given him any

sleepless nights. He didn't look after his house plant in order to spite Marie, but out of pleasure in the way it thrived. He resolved in future to extend his job search to gardening as well. He regularly applied for jobs as a mason or carpenter, not because he had learned these professions, but because he was convinced that he could acquire the skills of the mason or carpenter. He had also applied for work as a locksmith and a precision engineer, once even as a forestry worker, he remembered, he had come very close to the profession of gardener there. It couldn't do any harm, perhaps there was a post for him as an assistant gardener, which would allow him to get a foothold in flowerbeds or lawns.

It was all very much at risk, sighed the man, now walking back and forward in front of Viktor's bench. He looked at his watch. Perhaps his fate was being sealed right now, at exactly eight minutes before half past four. If the committee came to an unfavourable decision, if the situation should change and the department head be unable to keep his promise, which he had only just made, accompanied by a firm handshake, when he left the office, then all was lost.

Viktor would gladly have said something reassuring. If the man sat down beside him again, thought Viktor, he could perhaps even put a hand on his shoulder. He had pleasant hands, warm and soft, he cut his nails regularly and didn't bite them, but filed them when necessary. Marie had always praised his hands.

For something like that there were only bad moments, he knew that of course, but the present was as bad a moment as could be imagined. The second child on the way, the new house moved into, but far from

completely furnished. Even if he wanted to, he could not imagine what it would mean.

The man put his hands to his face and interrupted his walking back and forward, as if he wanted to get an idea of what might befall him in the next few minutes. Viktor likewise stood up and took a helpless step towards the man.

He was quite sure that the committee would come to the same decision as his department head. It was impossible for them to come to any other conclusion, since it was obvious how reliable he was, his industriousness would immediately strike anyone with even a spark of intelligence, and committees without doubt consisted of intelligent people. He should set his mind at rest.

Viktor sensed that there was a connection between the two of them, and he wanted to use the opportunity to ally himself with the man. The latter could not have failed to notice the sympathy he felt for him. Two had met here who could sit on a bench together, even if they happened to be standing in front of it instead.

He hadn't told his wife anything about it. The man shook his head. She had to take care of herself. He couldn't even begin to imagine how he would manage in future to sit at table with her, to fall asleep beside her and to wake up, without being allowed to talk to her about the worst of all possibilities, if it should indeed befall him in the next few minutes.

The mobile phone rang out in the middle of the greatest apprehension. To Viktor it was as if the wan pallor in the man's face even turned a touch paler. Slowly the man took the telephone out of his jacket, then hastily put it to his ear. For a frozen moment the man still looked anxious, then the tension dissolved in a delighted beam. There could be no doubt, the man's superior was treating the employee with the news, that everything would remain as it was, that the committee's examination confirmed what he had predicted. The man laughed, still talking on the phone, he turned away from Viktor and took a couple of steps. Viktor followed him with his eyes until he disappeared behind a tomb. He sat down on the bench and waited.

It was several minutes before Viktor realised that the man would not be back. He had gone to his office, without giving Viktor the chance to congratulate him on the good outcome to the worrisome story. It was even longer before the surprise at the abrupt departure turned to sadness. The sun had set and evening had fallen, when Viktor stood up and went home.

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)