

THE VISIT.

Unexpectedly, the boy will be coming for a visit. The old man is slightly confused by this fact, but nevertheless somehow happy about it. After all he is honestly proud about the boy's existence, if only for the fact that he is his daughter's son.

He remembers that the boy had been a calm child, who could spend the whole afternoon and evening of a family visit alone in the living room reading, while the rest was gathered in the kitchen, talking and laughing. He recalls the memory of the tiny figure curled in the big armchair, totally absorbed by a book. It seemed a bit strange to him, but the parents apparently didn't mind, and the boy made no noise and no mess, so why not let him?

He also knows the boy has been good in school and now is studying at the university, in the capital. He clearly remembers his daughter's voice reporting the boy's achievements on the phone. But that is about all he knows.

A long life has made the old man who he is and he is confident; but now, due to the visit, he catches himself feeling unsettled. Of course he knows that he is old, but that is by no means his fault. It rather just happened. Maybe it would have been good to keep up with the times, but almost all of his life there have been more important things; he would even go as far as saying: substantial things, which he had to take care of.

When he rings the doorbell the young man is suddenly nervous, as if he was there for a job interview. It makes him collect his thoughts and straighten up. He bites his lip, but has a polite smile prepared and at hand, for the moment when the door will open.

The boy had been there before, but it had always been clearly in his function as a grandchild, coming along with the parents, the old man's daughter and her husband. Usually those family visits were for some sort of celebration, and the whole house was filled with guests. It is in fact quite likely that the old man and the boy have never before been by themselves. The old man skips through his memories, but is unable to find any situation of him and the boy being alone in a room, not to mention in the house.

The sound of the doorbell pulls the old man out of his train of thoughts and back to reality. It must be the boy. He stops stirring the soup and closes the lid, turns the heat a bit down, and goes to open the door.

The young man is grateful for being able to stay the night at his grandfather's house. It makes things a lot easier. He would not have been able to afford a hotel, and now luckily does not have to take the night train.

When he was a child, he used to be scared of his grandfather, who always talked in such a loud voice, especially to the young man himself, as it seemed, only in reproof. Standing in front of his grandfather's house arouses his old anxiety and the feeling of being inadequate, however hard he would try to avoid anything possibly considered as misbehavior.

The young man has to remind himself that he is not a schoolboy anymore and that there is nothing to be afraid of. He holds his breath when he hears the grandfather's steps approaching, slants his head and smiles.

The old man opens the door and sees a polite young man standing there in front of him. With one hand still holding on to a traveling bag, the tall slender figure makes a small awkward movement towards him, undecided whether to hug, instead putting forth his free hand. His handshake is firm, and the old man has to look up to smile back at him. He realizes that this is not the boy anymore; it is a stranger.

Suddenly the old man is fully aware that he is merely a side-character in the story. He knows

that he is not even the cause for the visit; something related to his grandson's studies brings him here. The reason was a lecture at a place close by, the old man recalls. He is slightly embarrassed that he cannot remember whether his grandson came to attend, or was possibly even speaking himself.

In any case the event was somehow of importance - of far more importance than the old man is to his grandson. But in any case this young man is his grandson, and will spent the night here. The situation is somewhat exceptional, and for exactly this reason the old man wants to do something good for his grandson. He has already prepared the soup and finds a certain comfort in the fact that he can let his vague and somewhat intangible feelings manifest themselves in the physical world as something as concrete as food.

The young man has trouble stretching his skinny long legs under the small kitchen table. He carefully tries not to derange the tablecloth. Restlessly he stirs his tea, even though the dash of sugar has long dissolved. He is suspecting what will happen. From the moment they entered the kitchen and he saw the large pot on the stove he is searching for the appropriate words in advance.

The young man has been vegetarian ever since he was a teenager. The meatball soup is his grandfather's specialty. The young man finds the sound of his own voice hard to bear as he politely turns the offer down. He doesn't dare to look into the grandfather's face while he speaks but his eyes follow the unsteady movement of his grandfather's knobby hands. The sleeves of the familiar brown cardigan seem to fall rather loosely from the bent shoulders and reveal the fragile, spotted skin of the wrists. Not only the kitchen, but also his grandfather himself, suddenly look smaller than in the young man's memory.

The old man feels a sudden dizziness. He had already gotten up from his chair at the head of the table and turned towards the stove, to fill a bowl for his grandson. Now he pauses and holds on to the backrest of his chair. He has the impression that the rotation speed of the world has just now increased a little and became too fast for his breath to keep up with. He stands for a moment and waits for his surroundings to slow down. He breathes in, and breathes out again. He remembers that there is at least some dessert in the fridge. The world starts to decelerate again.

Aware of the delicateness of the situation, the young man is in despair. His grandfather's home-made rhubarb pudding is so sweet it will etch away his teeth. It is impossible to yet again decline it, but the young man knows well that there is not much point in even trying: he vividly remembers the sensation of the large rhubarb chunks gliding down his throat, as well as the instant emetic nausea they cause. The young man opens his mouth to say something, but helplessly closes it again. He has no idea what to do. In his panic his heart starts to beat faster and faster, at odds with the unimpressed world that seems to be still slowing down, decelerating until deadlock.

In the small kitchen of the small row house the old man is standing by his chair, the young man is sitting by the table and time is standing still.