

Just outside of town, the little town where my time stood still, is a small castle, and in that castle is now an old folks' home. There is only one road leading to the castle, an avenue of old chestnuts that winds its way up the hill, the branches of these old trees form a tunnel, so that when you walk uphill it is as if you are striding through a long, Gothic vault, all the branches are intertwined, the branches not only support each other, they are completely entangled, locked together by storm and wind. Somehow these trees, in their struggle for a bit of light, seem to have grown weary in the crown and are wasting away, so that the lane is forever strewn with dried branches, black and charred, worn bare with constant friction. Sometimes when the wind is still a whole branch will suddenly drop into the sand, you stand and stare as if a tile has just fallen from the roof, then you lift it up and toss it aside and feel the weight that might have injured you. Each time I set foot in that lane, I'm putting my life at risk. I look up and see the five-hundred-meter-long tunnel, held up by black barriers that rise to the treetops like lances raised to honor some victory in a jousting match. If I chose to I could take the footpath that runs along the lane, where the branches dip nearly to the ground, from spring to autumn, it's lovely to walk up that path along the road enjoying the leaves and flowers, in the autumn you see the burrs splitting open and firing their brown chestnuts, but I prefer to walk beneath the colonnade of black trunks, at the end of which is the entrance to the castle, like a great black curtain, the iron has been worked by a goldsmith's hammers and tongs, while the gate itself is forged in the shape of the two black wings of a fallen angel, a gate, I should add, that opens only on visiting days. Even on a sunny day, when you climb up the hill to the gate, you're walking in semi-darkness, all around you on either side of that double road sunlight and colors come trickling through the branches, as you walk slowly up through that shadowy crypt from which now and again, but always suddenly and unexpectedly, a black branch falls. And because on a sunny afternoon the white light in the castle courtyard is intensified by the gravel scattered there and on the road, against this dazzling background the black outline of Count Špork's initials and arms stands out even more clearly, inscribed in the wings of the gate the way Francin used to

spell out the first and last names of the publicans in his brewery book, always embellishing the names with a calligraphic initial in red and blue ink, like the initials in a missal. Next to the gate, under the last gigantic chestnut tree, is a porter's lodge. Even on a sunny day the lights are on in that lodge, the shadows on the road are so deep, the treetops so dense, covered from spring to fall with an awning of leaves that keeps out the sun. We each take turns acting as gatekeeper, many of the pensioners here consider it an honor to perform this service at what was once the Count's gate. Everyone who spends ten hours on duty here, keeping watch over that beautiful gate, feels like a changed person. It is a great honor to inspect each pensioner who enters the gate. There are some pensioners who live side by side, have their beds side by side and sit side by side at the table, but here at the gate they act as if they don't know each other at all, as if they're seeing each other for the very first time. They question each other about the purpose of their visit, even if they're friends, during those ten hours the gatekeepers even seem to have forgotten the faces of their fellow pensioners and demand accordingly of everyone who passes through the gate that he not only state his name but also show the papers that prove he really does live in the castle. It's lovely to walk up the hill along that lane, to be just an ordinary pensioner, an ordinary mortal, exhausted and nearly at the end of her strength and yet still climbing up the hill through that deep darkness, looking up at the elaborate black ironwork of the imposing gate, the lances and curves and points, the circles and great billowing waves all forged under a goldsmith's hands, it's lovely to walk through that gate and stroll through the castle park down the sand-strewn path past the stunted yews in the courtyard, meeting other pensioners no better off than you are, old men and women just wandering around, hobbling along and stealing glances at one another to see whether there might be someone worse off than they are, until hearing the bell for morning coffee, for lunch, for afternoon tea, and finally, for dinner. I still always think it's lovely to stop in front of the castle and look up at the façade, which, when lit by the sun, is completely beige-colored and radiates such light and warmth that it blinds you. After a while, when you've gotten used to the beige glow of the walls, you focus your eyes on the huge wrought iron clock, so big that it fills the entire space between the second and third floors. The hands were

made by a goldsmith and are as big as a grown man. When I first saw that clock it gave me a terrible fright, because even though it was just before noon, those hands were pointing to twenty-five past seven. At twenty-five past seven the clock had stopped, and no one had been able or even had a reason to repair it. The sad thing was that this clock, which always showed the same time up there on the castle wall, was like a memento mori, because people here and in the area know that most old folks die in the evening, at just around half past seven. And when I first stood here and saw how the poplars and oaks and dark spruce trees towered over the castle, how the park enclosed the castle on the south side in the shape of a horseshoe, when I turned my gaze back to the castle I saw that there were large, bare patches on the front wall where the plaster had crumbled. Here and there the original masonry showed through, as if the wall had been decorated with giant envelopes, engraved in the hardening plaster. And because the castle was on a hill outside the little town where time stood still, I could hear the wind, a stiff breeze that whistled around the castle and surrounded it with the rustling of leaves, the century-old aspens trembled even when the wind was still, millions of leaves fluttering endlessly and trying to free themselves from millions of stems. I noticed at once, on that very first day, that you could walk from the great halls onto the balconies, which, like the gate, had been forged by goldsmiths, the balconies were all shaped like great transparent bathtubs, they resembled transparent sleighs, fit for a nobleman, or transparent coaches, or the flowerbeds around lavish tombstones. I noticed that the pensioners liked to sit here in the sun, silent and motionless, their heads resting on the railings decorated with flowerboxes, from which hung withered petunias and snapdragons and zinnias blackened by the sun like tobacco leaves. And below the clock I saw limp human arms hanging down, weary arms, some crossed for no particular reason, palms dangling like droopy flowers, wrists in dazzlingly white shirtsleeves. Through the ironwork I could see a chair and on that chair were a pair of outstretched legs, the rest of the body was blocked by a green flowerbox. And at that moment a gutter came loose from the side wing of the castle and swung down like a barrier at a crossing, as it fell it spun quickly around a fixed point like the big hand of an astronomical clock, but the rusty gutter stopped and remained there, it

swayed back and forth, threateningly, spilling rust and old leaves and a bird's nest. At that moment I saw that the facade of the castle resembled the faces of each and every elderly pensioner, with that crumbling plaster and the hands stuck at twenty-five past seven, those hands that looked so much like arms resting on knees, I noticed that in places the plaster was so ravaged by time that the original masonry was exposed, great blocks of marl and sandstone cemented together with coarse mortar. It was just like the faces of the elderly pensioners! Because in that castle there are also younger pensioners without a single wrinkle. But even the younger ones always seem to be looking elsewhere, they stand there as if trying with all their might to remember something, but can't, not for the life of them. And they're probably not trying to remember anything at all; they look amazed, as if at any moment they'll be able to remember something pleasant, something that will cure them, something that will do them good. Their faces give the impression of nobility, and the impression that they were once highly educated, but actually it is only now that they have reached that point, they are perpetually on the verge of a realization that everyone else in the world is after, too. But perhaps this is only my impression. For these people it is a great achievement if they can even find their way back to the castle, their rooms, their beds. Then the glazed front door flew open, the reflection of the glass panes made a half-moon on ground below and blinded me, I lifted my head and on the second floor a bearded man stepped out onto the balcony, he leaned his hands on the balustrade and turned his profile to the right and then to the left, the old man looked like Count Špork himself. His raised chin shone with a trimmed white beard as he pretended to be observing the weather, the landscape. He remained in this exalted pose, frozen, lost in thought, as if he were enjoying his situation, by which he meant to show that he had ended up in the old folks' home by mistake. Then, just beside the row of columns that led to the castle vestibule, a face began to move, and I saw, to my dismay, that the face belonged to an old woman in a wheelchair, her hands were firmly gripped around the armrests, she tensed her arms and shoulders so tightly that her back formed a straight line against the back of the chair so that I kept imagining she was a sphinx. And opposite her, next to another column, sat an almost identical woman, equally solemn, equally sphinxlike. Her wheelchair

also had its back to the column, and there they sat, two feeble old ladies in their little black wheelchairs in the sun, each of them had their skirts rolled up so high that you could see a white enamel chamber pot gleaming under the sliding seats of their chairs. And as a breeze blew from the north, softly singing and rustling the leaves on the trees, I heard music in the distance, string players, the kind of music they always played as an accompaniment to Chaplin's *Limelight*, or that film about the life of Toulouse-Lautrec, music that brought a wistful smile to your lips, a composition for strings that moved me as deeply as the elaborate castle gate. But though I was touched by the sound of those strings, I saw that the old folks were just wandering around paying no attention to the music, they sat on benches drawing silly pictures in the sand with their canes, or sucking quietly on lozenges and peppermints. And all along the wall of the castle stables was a large open corridor, a gallery, not nearly as pompous as the balconies on the front, and on this gallery were ten brown doors that led to various rooms, on each of the ten doors was a kind of small brown box. A few pensioners, all men, walked onto the gallery, leaned over the balustrade and looked down, they looked at me, stiffly, rigidly, but I could tell they didn't see me at all, their gaze was elsewhere, they were looking back, to the old times, when they were young, or still grieving bitterly about some incident they could do nothing more about, which was beyond their control, even though the incident had only now reached maturity, while the reasons for what had happened were long since past... And I saw how that same music drifted down from the long gallery, swirling like smoke around all those figures, I could even see the music wafting out of the little brown boxes on the doors, which were open here and there. I shook myself out of my reverie and walked back to the vestibule, where the two old ladies in their wheelchairs with their fingers clutching the leather armrests still looked like sphinxes, only now they were surrounded by the sounds of a string orchestra, and I saw that the music was coming from the speakers, that this music was winding around the two old women like a wild rose bush around a statue, I looked up and saw that between all the doors on the balcony and on the gallery, mounted on a bracket, was the same little box, like a cage for a blind bird, and that from each little cage music was pouring, music for strings, the poignant melodies of the strings intertwined,

sometimes they played in unison, and then all of a sudden one of the players, with great urgency, would play a solo, the theme... yes! It was Harlequin's Millions, the same millions that accompanied silent movies in the old times, an amorous scene, a declaration of love, kisses that made the viewers, moved to tears by the string players, reach for their handkerchiefs... Now here I stand in the courtyard of the old folks' home, the former castle of Count Špork, Francin has rented a room here for the two of us, Francin's older brother 'Uncle' Pepin has been here for three months, in one of the wards of this poorhouse, as they used to call a home like this in the old days. In the ward for bedridden patients. I used to visit Uncle there now and again, and then, too, I'd always stroll through the vestibule, I'd walk up the slowly ascending corridor and steal a glance into the side corridors, where old ladies came to life and pushed aside their curtains to peer into the courtyard... Then, too, I'd steal a glance into the corridor of the ward where the old women lay and where the sharp smell of babies' diapers hung in the air, I peeked into the dining hall, years ago Count Špork held banquets here for hundreds of noble guests, finally I walked into the ward for bedridden patients, where Uncle Pepin lay in his bed in the shadows and where nine other bedridden pensioners looked up at me, here, too, I could hear Harlequin's Millions, but only after I had sat down and looked at Uncle Pepin, who lay there staring at the ceiling with unblinking eyes and without speaking, without agreeing, without disagreeing, just lay there, only then did I hear Harlequin's Millions in the distance and I had the strong feeling that I was hallucinating, as a kind of defense against everything I had seen here. So strong was my revulsion, so heavy my suffering after all that I had seen on my first visit to Uncle Pepin in this former castle! Yet something had happened to me, something that completely shocked me, I decided we should sell everything and Francin agreed, and now here I stand in the courtyard, Francin has rented a room for us, it costs a whole month's pension and for a small additional fee we can live here like members of Count Špork's own family, in one small room, it's true, but for that extra fee we can have our breakfast, lunch and dinner in the same room where the Count and his family are said to have eaten their afternoon and evening meals, in the dining hall, I'll walk past the sandstone statues in the park and someday I'll be able to say that I know what each of those statues represents, I'll be able to