Old Vicente of Formentera was perhaps the happiest man I've ever known. And also, perhaps, the poorest.

He was a cadaverous, bent juniper of a man, brown and lined, and he owned not one piece of clothing that was not patched. He lived at Cala Pujol, in a lean-to made of stone and driftwood and brush, with a rusty iron brazier for his kitchen and a couple of cracked iron pots, discarded by the fishermen, from which to eat. But he owned also an excellent snorkel and a pair of rubber flippers and a diver's mask, and, as I say, I don't believe there was a happier man.

I had been coming to Formentera for several years before Vicente stood out in my eyes from the old fishermen who drew their boats up under the brush and the bamboo shelters at the end of the beach where the rocks begin. At last I realized he was not a fisherman. He had no time to fish.

I had some Ibicenco, his dialect, a language quite different from the Castilian Spanish, so I could tell, that day I first saw him, that he was asking with dignity, not pleading, for the loan of a fisherman's small boat. I could not understand, thinking him a fisherman, how he got along without a boat, but I offered to lend him the one I always rent in Formentera. I do not use it often anyhow. He thanked me, and again his dignity impressed me.

I watched him load the boat with the snorkel and the flippers and the face mask, an earthen jug of water, and a small parcel of provisions. There was no fishing gear, no underwater gun to go with his other equipment. I wondered what he intended to catch and how. I watched him row out, facing the horizon, a small man, intent.

I watched until he was but a speck on the horizon, and then I forgot about him. At Cala Pujol it is easy to forget. The turquoise waters are deep and clear to the bottom, the sand is untrodden, there is a long sweep of white-silver shore—the year I speak of, it was still that way—and the sun is a constant benediction. In peace, one forgets.
There came a day when the wind blew from Africa and the sea was sultry and the fishermen did not go out. They sat in the bamboo-roofed little bar on the beach and drank red wine and talked. “Vicente got in?”

“Not yet.”

“He is loco, este hombre, a little crazy.”

“Not at all, not so much. He has the good intention.”

“You think so? You, too, are loco.”

“Me? Not at all. I see the point. I understand very well.”

“Vicente?” I asked. “He is the old man with the underwater equipment?”

“Ah,” they said, “aha. Ah.”

I asked for another bottle of the wine of the island, for only that is drunk there. We do not try to be smart by taking better-known wines.

And, so sitting there, with the wind from Africa blowing and stirring up the sea until it was muddy below and racing, sheep-white, above, I heard the story of Vicente.

He had been an ambitious boy 60 years ago, and he had left Formentera, the little island of the past. But 60 years ago there was not much for a Spaniard to do in his country of Spain. So Vicente went to sea in foreign ships, and after a time he came back. He walked the country, trying all sorts of jobs, but he ended where better men than he had ended, as a porter on the quays of Barcelona—a moso.

He had had a dream, but dreams fail a man sometimes. So he carried the luggage of others: the rich Spaniards, the visitors, the tourists. Until ten years ago he stood there at the quay, a number on his hat, waving his hand at the passengers from the boats, pointing to himself and shouting, “Me? Me! Number Seventy-three!”

One day a rich American from a Palma boat saw his frantic wave and beckoned. Vicente got in line with the other porters and pushed his way up the gangplank to the white boat. There this rich American said to him, “Here are six suitcases, and that thing. Be careful with it; it’s an antique.”

Vicente recognized the earthen vessel. It was an amphora, a Phœnician one, a fine, rare specimen of the big jugs used for transporting wine or grain. In the old days fishermen sometimes caught them in their nets. They had often thrown them back into the sea, but this they did no longer, not since the señores from the town came to buy them for their museums.

Vicente hoisted the bags on his back, picked up the big, pinkish, sea-encrusted jug and started down the gangplank. The people were pushing and pulling, getting off the boat, coming on board, and he shouted as they shouted. He came to the quay, and another porter,
stumbling on a mooring rope, fell against him and he dropped the amphora.

Two thousand years went down in a dusty sound of earth falling. Well.

Ten years before there were still amphorae and other relics of the Greeks and Phœnicians and Romans in the shallow coves of the islands of Ibiza, but now there were mostly only almost valueless objects of more recent times; valuable specimens were very rare. The American had paid $500 for this water jug of a Phœnician sailor, having had it verified as authentic by the authorities. Naturally he was angry.

But he was also a sensible man and knew that never in a lifetime could the porter Vicente make $500, so he was resigned and ready to forget his loss.

Not so Vicente. He knew the value men set now on these useless old jugs and pots; he had seen the disappointment on the face of the American. Vicente was an honorable man and he wanted to make amends.

He followed the American to his hotel, pleaded for his name and address, and promised to pay him back. A ragged piece of paper torn from a diary and scribbled with Abraham Lincoln Smith, 72 Hudson Avenue, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S.A. became his most valuable possession. It was to him the ultimate milestone on the long road of his search.

I believe that somehow, in his dreams, Vicente saw himself at last arriving in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S.A., with the ancient Phœnician amphora under his arm, receiving with joy the praise that would greet him there.

Vicente knew that he would never have the money to buy an amphora, but what was to prevent his finding one? Others had, dozens of them in the time of his boyhood. Why not he?

He had no family, so it did not take him long to bid farewell to his life in Barcelona, that bustling, busy city by the sea, where he had carried bags for the price of a small glass of wine in a smoky wineshop, and a windowless room to roof his nights.

When he had sold his few possessions he had the deck fare to Ibiza, and a little more. From the stern of the boat he looked back and saw the city sink into the sea, and for the first time he knew that his years there had been a prison of his own making. He had never, there, lifted up his eyes from the narrow streets to the wide sky.

And once again, as when he was a boy, the sea sang to him.
Back on the islands he set about the task he had chosen. He learned where the last amphora had been found, and he realized, as had others before him, that since the ancient pieces were valuable, all the inshore places must have been searched and emptied of their treasure.

Young Sandik, of Santa Eulalia del Rio, the carpenter’s son, had made himself a reputation as an undersea swimmer. He had found a cannon at the bottom of the sea—but that’s another story. To consult him, Vicente travelled by bus to Santa Eulalia del Rio, and Sandik’s advice was brief. Get a mask, get flippers, go far out into the sea. There, way out, were still unknown shallows, no deeper than the height of a man, or twice or thrice the height of a man, and caught in the caves of the sea bottom, treasures might still be.

Now Vicente, like many of the island-born, had never learned to swim. But he spent the rest of his money, as Sandik advised, on a good snorkel and flippers and a mask. Then he took the little mail boat Manolito back to his island of Formentera. There, camping on the beach, scrounging his meals, intent as are all men with a singleness of purpose to urge them on, he set about teaching himself to swim.

He was over 60 then. An old man, as time makes men like Vicente old. Yet he was young in his urgency to learn and go on toward the far horizon of his purpose.

He learned to swim, and he learned to dive with the snorkel and the flippers and the mask, a froglike, crablike figure in the clear shallows about the beaches of Cala Pujol. He ventured farther and farther, to where the water turned purple, where the deeps began. This was the most talkative time of his life, after his first dives, for he could not contain his wonder at the unexpected beauty of the deep sea. The gardens of starfish, the varicolored, bug-eyed gentle fish that followed him, the slant of translucent sunlight on the mysterious caves and rocks—these he recounted to the fishermen who toiled upon the surface of the sea. And his tales were touched with wonder and awe. Never, he swore, had he known such freedom as at the bottom of the sea.

“But you can’t breathe there!”

“One breathes with one’s eyes, one’s pores.”

Never had he heard such music.

“But there is only silence under the sea?”

“It is a singing silence. Like many instruments sending their purest sounds up to the sky.”

_There is that to the Spanish language. The plowman often speaks the language of poetry. It is the way the words arrange themselves._
Day by day, week by week, month by month, and so into the years, Vicente, searching for the amphora which in honor he felt he must find to replace the one he had broken, grew happier. Each day was a new delight, a new adventure. No longer were his days imprisoned by the needs of the hours. Somehow there was always something for those needs, a fish to grill, a glass of wine, a piece of bread, a box of matches. To the fishermen his search had become a part of their life on the beach and the sea, and their generosity was quick, unthinking.

They told me the story of Vicente, that day the wind blew from Africa and stirred up the depths of the sea and sent the high green waves scurrying, and I, too, searched the horizon for the little boat. Then I turned to Father Pedro, the curé of San Fernando, who had joined us.

“What do you think, Father?” I said. “Will old Vicente find his amphora?”

The fat little priest joined his fingers. His eyes, too, were on the horizon, but he seemed undisturbed. The wind from Africa swayed the bamboo shelter over us.

“Well, now, you see,” he said, “Vicente has the search. It is not what one finds, you know, but the search itself that is important. Only the search.”

Last year, on another day, when the sea rose suddenly, stirred to tumult by the wind, the little boat Vicente had borrowed was tossed back to the beach.

No one saw the old man again.

The seas had been heavy.

But tied, securely, wrapped in seaweed at the bottom of the boat, was an amphora, an ancient Phoenician vessel salvaged from the centuries and the sea.

Father Pedro and the fishermen who had been Vicente’s friends asked me, since I knew English, to write to Abraham Lincoln Smith of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, U.S.A. I did. I wrote a number of times to the address we had and finally to the mayor of the city.

No one had heard of him.

Annoyed by the foolish old man who had dropped his souvenir, the American had fabricated a name to get rid of him. Perhaps, however, he did come from Milwaukee. We do not know.

Eva-Lis Wuorio was born in 1918 in Finland, and immigrated to Canada at the age of 11. Her works include To Fight in Silence, Escape If You Can, The Land of Right Up and Down, and The Woman With the Portuguese. A number of her books have a World War II setting.