

Jana BEŇOVÁ

SEEING PEOPLE OFF (CAFÉ HYENA)  
(Extract)

**Kalisto Tanzi**

**Elza:** Together we ate grapes and washed them down with pink wine. The next day I discovered a damp grape stalk in my pocket. It looked like an upside-down tree.

Kalisto Tanzi disappeared from the town, which was gripped by a heat wave. The heat radiating from the houses and streets burned people's faces and the scorching town seared its mark on their foreheads.

I stopped in front of the theatre's display case so I could read Kalisto's name on the posters and reassure myself that he actually did exist. I derive pleasure from uttering the name that had tormented him throughout childhood and puberty and only really stopped annoying him after my arrival. I slowly walk to the other end of the town, the muscles in my legs tingling slightly in the hot air. It is noon. Drops of perspiration are the only thing really moving on this planet. They run down to the bridge of my nose and spurt out again from under my hair.

I'm going to buy poison.

Yesterday Ian saw a rat in the lavatory.

The rat-catcher has a wine cellar under his shop. We go underground to escape the unbearable heat and sip wine. He tells me how intelligent rats are.

"They have a taster, who is first to try the food. If he dies, the others won't even touch the bait. That's why we use second generation baits. The rat begins to die only four days after consuming the poison. It dies as a result of internal bleeding. Even Seneca claimed that such a death is painless. The rest of the rats get the impression that their comrade has died a natural death. But even so – if several of them die in a short time, they decide the locality is unfavourable on account of the high mortality rate and they move elsewhere. Some people and even whole nations completely lack this ability to assess a situation."

A perfect, repulsive world. I smile over red Tramin. The rat-catcher speaks very fast. His face is in constant motion. As if he had too many muscles in it. As if a pack of rodents were running around under his skin. From one ear to the other. From his chin to his forehead and back. I can feel his restless legs jiggling under the table and his whole trunk sways in a dance.

The sight of this makes me feel dizzy. My head spins like when watching a film that flashes too quickly from one scene to the next. The rat-catcher bends forward and gets tangled in my hair.

"You're such a pretty little mouse," he smiles. I smile back. I sense I stink of loneliness.

He sees me out and on the way he gives me a plastic bag full of rat poison. Instead of flowers. I clutch it proudly. Perhaps it will always be like this, I think to myself. If men want to court me, instead of flowers, they will give me a bag of second generation rat bait.

After emerging from the cool cellar, hot air and a world without Kalisto Tanzi hits me in the face.

I first saw Kalisto at a private preview. A lot was drunk there and a few new couples were formed in the course of the evening. As Ian says – where there are men, women and alcohol... – and he thus gives the basic coordinates for the localisation of sex.

I looked into his blue eyes and for the first time I longed for a being with coloured eyes. Ian's are almost black. Colours have always been a decisive factor for me. Their combination in Kalisto's face attracted me. We sat together and talked until morning. As always in the beginning: you can once more give an account of your life and everything is interesting. You talk, slowly revolving around yourself – the whole room dances with you – fine sparkling powder settles in your hair.

In Kalisto Tanzi's presence my account seemed more exciting. My own life swam before our eyes like a glass mountain. With every word I created it anew. Recreated. I recreated in Kalisto Tanzi's presence. No doubt I could write a book about it. It would be a musical: *Ah, little fairy, if you only knew all the things I've been through...*

But it's lunchtime now. I am sitting in a coffee bar. Dressed in brown: an old woman. I am sitting opposite Ian. An old couple. The silence between us is broken only by the newspaper headlines. From time to time Ian reads one out to me over the table. Then he reads on. The newspaper is a drawbridge. He occasionally lets it down and looks at my face. Our eyes do not meet. The wine tastes like prunes and chocolate. The coca cola inscription on the tablecloth begins to rise imperceptibly to meet my face. I hold it down with a plate. I like things to stay in their place.

Back home I sit at the table and write a letter to Kalisto. Ian stands behind me – Ah, do you have to write such a long letter, you poor thing? Wouldn't an SMS do? For example: Where are you?

Kalisto Tanzi doesn't have a mobile or an e-mail address. He considers this form of communication threatening. (The old English term 'blackmail' referred to extorting unjustified taxes. Non-existent debts, promises not given.)

There did not exist a simple way of interfering in his life, climbing through the window of a monitor or display, appearing in person before his very eyes. Elza could not rely on electronic seduction. Although she had a talent for it – for chatting and sweet nothings. She had the gift of the gab.

But the new possibilities also brought her stronger competition. It was so easy to get involved with someone, to contact them. Everything played in favour of seduction. In particular the time saved by rapid communication.

Nowadays no one had to patrol a dark street at night, travel in a coach, a car, a storm. Repair a wheel, change the water boiling in a radiator, walk around homes and coffee bars or helplessly roam streets where there was a hope of meeting the loved one. Map the possibility of their being there. Follow, track, hide, stay in the same place for year after year or travel endlessly.

Emails and quick SMS messages were windows and mirrors rapidly multiplying in the world. Through them it was possible to climb into a room, onto a roof, into a lavatory, plunge under water and fly into the air. Hang up your own alluring picture – install yourself – anywhere.

**Elza:** In the air, in someone's path. Expose you to my picture.

Elza's morning begins with writing. She puts on some music and for half an hour eagerly gets on with her book. While working she often gets up from her chair damp with perspiration, because when writing she drinks litres of tea and has the music on too loud and she writes and writes. She writes as if she were running downhill. She sweats and that chills her. All her life her body temperature has ranged between 37.1 and 37.6 degrees, which tends to produce slight shivering fits and weak nerves. Apart from the fact that a fever is good for creative work and erotic passion, it enables one to stay at home undisturbed. Doctors are usually afraid to send a patient with a temperature into the whirlwind of working days.

When she has finished writing, she is hungry, thirsty and her concentration is completely exhausted. Elza lacks the ability to keep at creative work for a long time – *sitzfleisch*. Her working day lasts three hours. When Elza gets up from her desk, her husband gets out of bed. They sit side by side on the couch in the kitchen and think about what they will eat and what Elza will go to buy. They usually have open sandwiches for lunch and they drink gin with grapefruit juice. Elza has read that your stomach – what is in it – contributes eighty per cent to how you feel. Open sandwiches and gin are food associated with celebrations. That is why whole years in her life have seemed to her like a really good, endless celebration. Day after day. And, as during every celebration genuinely enjoyed and properly done – in the early evening or early morning, when the light has long been vague and the scenery looks like a lit-up stage setting, somewhere at the back of the tongue and on the roof of the mouth a discreet bitter taste would appear – the taste of the end of a celebration. It had a

fruity bouquet, room temperature, full body and long tail. It woke her up in the night more and more often: that taste of a sad end. Like when at New Year, just a few seconds after midnight, Ian goes outside for a while with another woman and a hairy troll crouches on Elza's chest, head and shoulders: a nightmare, and it tinkles a wave of heat right onto her flat breasts.

On the way home in the early hours of the morning, Elza bursts into tears in the middle of the street:

"I don't want to march. I don't want to keep marching on any more. All my life I have done nothing but march on!"

"Then we needn't walk. I'll call a taxi," Ian tries to calm her.

"You don't understand. It's all the same. On foot or by taxi. One way or another, all we do is just keep marching on."

**Elza:** But in fact it is the marching that has kept me awake. Some people solve the problems in our town by walking, others by swimming, horseback riding or shooting.

"Where are you going, Elza? Aha. You're just wandering, are you? So am I. But where to? You don't want to tell me, do you? I had a friend who never wanted to say either. He would just lean over towards me and whisper: you know, mate, I'm just going to one of *those places*. So you just say the same, Elza. That you're going to one of *those places*."

It's a small town. You've only just set out and the greater part of your journey is already over. If you want to roam here, you must go in a circle – like a pony and on the way you keep bumping into other roaming ponies.

We roam in an attempt to avoid company and to patiently evoke, step by step, a feeling of freedom. But in fact we are like members of a pony sect with the rigid rules of the circle.

I prefer to jump into a swimming pool. My arms and legs work like two mills. My breath grows more rapid, deeper and then steadies. The smaller and larger pools in my head are gradually filled with swimmers: they take turns to race and drown, submerge and float.

There are too many people in the pool today. First I can hardly manage to avoid the arms opening wide under water, and then the kicking legs. There is a circle of children standing in the middle of the pool and throwing a ball full of sand. The fat legs of a woman exercising shoot out towards me from the wall of the pool. In the changing room a blind girl uncertainly changes into her swimming costume. It's as if someone has hit me in the face with a stick.

Opposite the exit from the pool is Kalisto Tanzi's flat. I can't take my eyes off it. I'm not leaving town this summer. I will not change my horizon. I'm not going in search of the sea. I cling to the windows of the deserted flat.

Ian and I meet by chance in town. We spend the whole long summer evening drinking wine. He tells me how he somehow used to think he would remember his life in more detail. "Whole sections, whole blocks, have fallen out. And events don't move into the distance in a straight line with the passing of time. It's not a receding line; it's like a serpentine road. Some sections miles from each other in time come together at the bends, the curves intersect and suddenly something breaks through the surface of the water: an arm bent at the elbow, wet hair, a curtained window, a mouth stretched in a circle as it gasps for breath." I tell Ian what I have read today about a dangerous disease. It breaks out in middle age and manifests itself in such a way that a person begins to dance. "Then all you need is to find some good music to go with it," says Ian.

Ian led Elza to the taxi stand. In an effort to avoid a further bottle of wine and a walk through the sweltering night town. He sat her next to the driver and looked at his face. He himself remained standing on the pavement. He slammed Elza's door shut and his arms were left hanging limply beside his body, useless and too long. He had to be careful not to drag them along the ground. Not to trip over them.

A while later the taxi stops and puts Elza down at the end of the street. She leaps out like a young deer. She dives back into town. She opens her arms, kicks her legs. A man on the pavement looks at her retreating back and slowly begins to dance. The orchestra is not playing.

Kalisto Tanzi, Elza sings to herself. That is what the cuddly little animal that is lazily growing in me is called. Sings Elza.

And women would like to buy it for men and it catches men's eyes. They look at me and see it, sitting inside me and maturing. Sings Elza. Just behind the door. And they would like to slit my belly and break my back in two. Just so they can have it. Sings Elza. They would like to tear off my head and grope inside me with their hands. Sings Elza. Not minding the blood: happily, even in front of the children. Sings Elza.

Even after his return, Kalisto Tanzi's flat remained empty. He spent most of his time in his car. As a dancer at the height of his career, he hardly moves except when on the stage. Driving his car helps him to overcome inertia. The landscape flashes past at a speed comparable with dancing. The car forms the lower part of Kalisto's body. His back grows out of the driving seat. Kalisto Tanzi is a minotaur. When Elza gets in, she sinks into the interior of the vehicle as into a close embrace.

When she and Kalisto hug each other, she remembers the warm rubber internal organs the children passed round when they were learning about the human body. She and Kalisto are the pulsating innards of this dark vehicle. The liver of the car. A paired organ. The kidneys. They work whole nights. Warmly dressed in the cooling car. Their movements keep the vehicle alive.

In the morning she would return through the empty streets. Washed white by a tidal wave: first it swept away all the houses and towns. Then it caught at people's legs. And two days later it returned them: faces smoothed by the hard sand, a pearl in every opening in the body.

At home she lay down beside Ian's sleeping face. It revealed the whole chain of appearances it had passed through in his life. Childhood friends, the endless summer, parents, a bicycle wheel sticking out from under a Christmas tree. Changes for the better and for the worse. Ian's face was ageless. It was a restless swarm that had settled in one place.

When she looked in his eyes, she could see all the forms they shared. Every couple that they were.

She was woken up by a pain shooting from her elbow into her palm and in the opposite direction towards her shoulder. It excited Elza. It was caused by her unnatural position in the car.

Kalisto ruled her life. When she walked through the streets of the town, she no longer looked into the faces of the pedestrians, but into the interiors of the cars. She was searching for the driving body of Kalisto Tanzi. She would have preferred to walk on the line in the middle of the road between the vehicles rather than on the pavement.

At times her arm was really weak. She couldn't work with it. (*Don't panic*, Elza probably thought, *don't panic*).

She couldn't hold anything in her hand. Her fingers went numb. Her arm withered and hung beside her body as a sign of perpetual presence – Kalisto Tanzi was always at her side: when she couldn't write with it, when a saucepan slipped from her fingers. If she needed her hand, but could not use it, she shivered with pleasure.

She stopped eating open sandwiches – just the grapefruit and gin remained, apple and calvados,

whisky and ice. Eating seemed disgusting to her. To have chewed-up food in her mouth. She wanted it to be empty and sublime – prepared to receive. His mouth.

She disinfected herself with gin and at the same time it gave her the courage and shamelessness to meet with someone she liked so much. To look into the face that threatened her with what she desired. The gin made it more bearable and liveable. It was at the same time an answer to what to do with her free time. With the inertia of the night just before dawn.

When Elza felt desperate, she was sorry she had never learned to do cartwheels. She could, for instance, use them to fill in the time while she waited for Kalisto Tanzi. If she could do a few cartwheels around the edge of the car park, her day would no doubt pass quicker. As it was, she was just circling in ordinary figures of eight.

But then she caught sight of his car. It was standing right at the end of the car park, which is why she had not noticed it immediately. She opened the door and slipped into the seat. However, it was to a stranger that she turned her face. "I can't now, love. Look, I've got my daughter in the back." Elza turned her head round and looked at the little girl who was sitting there. "Maybe next time," the man pushed her out of the car.

She had to tell someone about it.

In the evening she described the incident to Ian, as a story that had happened to her Girl Friend. She kept the character of the Girl Friend in reserve. It would no doubt come in useful again. Later she read that lonely children without siblings often invent imaginary companions.

In time the Girl Friend she often talked about to Ian began to behave very like Kalisto Tanzi, they had the same opinions, friends and past. They had been to the same schools and restaurants. They had read the same books.

In this way over time Elza told Ian almost everything about Kalisto Tanzi.

Rebeka had an imaginary friend only in childhood. She disappeared with her first menstruation. Her name was Yp. And apart from her, Rebeka also kept invented animals – one very lively little dog, two ladybirds and a lovely horse that was completely white.

Wolfgang Elfman, the brother of Lukas Elfman, had his animals in the forest. They were wild. That's why he couldn't keep them in the flat. He used to go to see them in the forest. He would call and they would come running. Then they played together and chatted until darkness fell.

When Lukas was a little boy, he wanted to play with them too. But Wolfgang never took him with him to see the animals. Every evening he would just tell him what they had done during the day. He was fervent and his eyes would light up in the dark room. Lukas Elfman decided he would find the animals for himself.

"Wooolfgaaang's animals!" he called to them in the middle of the forest. "Wooolfgaaang's animals!" he shouted, going deeper and deeper.

Elza plunged into the forest. After a while she stopped and turned her face to the tops of the trees. "Kaaaliiistooo Taaanziii," she called, "Kaaaliiistooo Taaanziii," she shouted, going deeper and deeper. The tops of the trees shimmered on the surface. The water swallowed movements and words. With her mouth open, she hit the bottom of the lake.