

[Setz]

## THE SCALES

1

The light on the stairs went out and Daniel was standing in complete darkness in front of an apartment door on the fourth floor. The music that was rumbling out of the flat sounded hard and unchanging on the naked, windowless landing. Daniel switched the light on again; he had to lean quite a way forward to reach the switch. The name plate, that Daniel had been staring at, appeared again and the names were just the same as before, *Gerd & Elfriede Kaiser*.

Daniel stood there for a while and listened as the music reached another epileptic climax - then he let his feet turn him around and went downstairs, back into the flat.

- And?

- I told them, said Daniel.

He bent right down and pulled off his shoes. His wife immediately went into the bedroom.

- Not a bit quieter, she called from there.

- What?

Daniel took off the clothes he had pulled over his pyjamas.

Rita came back from the bedroom.

- Not the slightest difference, she said.

- I can't do more than tell them.

- And what exactly did you say?

- That they should turn the music down, he said. Because there are people living here who want to sleep.

- And?

- Well, the man who opened up just nodded and shut the door again. But he wasn't unfriendly. At least he didn't look as if was going to take the piss out of me or ignore me or... Perhaps he just wants to hear the song to the end.

- It's half past one!

- Yes, I know.

- Apart from which he isn't listening to any songs, she said, it's some kind of endless techno shit.

- Oh, that's probably only what it sounds like to us down here, said Daniel.

- He wondered, if he had turned red. His face felt hot. He tried not to look at Rita.

- You know what? she said. He doesn't give a shit about us or what you've said to him!

- May be. I've done what I could, he said and went past Rita into the bathroom. He washed his hands and splashed some cold water on his cheeks. Later he thought about the name plate again and the names on it, even now, long after he had gone to bed and was trying to forget the music stuck fast in the walls.

2

In the post box he there was a letter in which there was something about time - the word flashed up several times out of the text in big letters. It was promoting a new insurance policy. He had difficulty reading the text, because it was so dark in the stairwell and his eyes had got worse again in the last few months. He hadn't had the time yet to get a new pair of glasses. Then there was the lack of sleep, which made everything worse.

He turned the advertising letter uncertainly in his fingers, then he put it with the brightly coloured special offers leaflets, which were to be thrown in the bin.

He locked the post box, put the key in his pocket and went through the back door into the courtyard. Bright sunlight welcomed him. He shielded his eyes with one hand. At first he thought, that what he saw beside the bins was a big clock; one of those old-fashioned ones to be found in aristocratic country houses and in whose bowels one can watch melancholy pendulums and cogwheels moving to a secret funeral music.

He stepped closer. A small metal box crouched to the left above the clock face, on the box three stylised coins and underneath that the numbers 2, 1 and 50. The scales had a metal tread, on which there were the stylised impressions of two naked feet.

Someone seemed to want to get rid of the monstrous thing. On the other hand, thought Daniel, bulky refuse wasn't collected here anyway.

Daniel cautiously set one foot on the scales' tread and let it jiggle. Nothing happened. He tried again with more force and saw that the little black needle was beginning to tremble a little. The coin operation was still working evidently, the scales were not broken. He didn't think about it, but his hand went down to his trouser pocket to look for small change, then he shook his head at the silly idea. He had scales in the bathroom at home, electronic scales in fact. Apart from which Daniel knew exactly how much he weighed.

He tore himself away from the scales and walked to the car. Only when he had already shut the car door and the sharp edge of the safety belt was running through his hand, did he notice that he had taken all the post with him, without having thrown away the promotional leaflets and letters. It annoyed him and he

put all the rubbish on the passenger seat.

Dumb scales, he thought, as he reversed the car very carefully out of the narrow entry.

When he got to the office, the first thing he did was throw the insurance letter and the rest of the promotional rubbish into the waste paper basket, stuff it all down to the bottom and call his wife at home. She only answered after the sixth ring, she was panting. He heard radio music in the background, so she must be in the room where the stereo was. But why was she so out of breath?

He could have asked her about it, but he didn't. He explained to her, what he had just seen in the courtyard. At first she didn't understand what he was trying to say, then she asked him, why he was calling her because of that.

- Oh, just because, said Daniel.

- OK.

She exhaled once.

- Can you tell me one thing? he said. What kind of idiot puts something like that in the garden?

- What? Haven't a clue, she said.

- It takes up an awful lot of space, said Daniel. You can hardly get to the bicycles.

- How big is it then? she asked.

- Well, huge somehow...

- Sitting in his chair Daniel made a constrained swimming motion, in order to indicate the enormous size of the strange relic.

- What does huge mean? As big as a trampoline?

- No, no, not like a... At most as big as, as...

He searched for an appropriate comparison, but when he heard his wife on the other end of the line clearing her throat, he said the first thing that came into his mind.

- As a child. At most as big as child.

- But that isn't huge, said his wife. Perhaps I'll take a look at the thing later.

- No! Don't go down, exclaimed Daniel.

His wife was silent for a while. He noticed that he was clasping the receiver with both hands.

- It's all right, she said finally. What's up? Did you maybe invent the scales? Is it another of your stories, that are somehow supposed to keep me going. If that's...

- No, no, said Daniel, I only meant, perhaps it belongs to someone.

- It doesn't matter. You sound stressed. Do a crossword.

- OK, I'll do that, he said and put down the receiver.

3

Daniel's daughter Lena was actually called Elena, or also Helena with an unstressed H; both versions were in her birth and baptismal certificates. Daniel and Rita had adopted her. She came from Mexico, she had, however, largely discarded her origins. She still remembered her mother tongue quite well, but only if she was spoken to in Spanish, which virtually no one ever did, at most occasionally someone on TV. By chance she looked a little like Rita. Daniel sometimes thought about Lena's biological parents. Without wanting to express anything in particular, he always imagined them standing by the bank of a wide river.

He had met Rita at work, but shortly after that she had handed in her notice. She had trained as an architect and now wanted to try her hand as a designer. After only a short time she won a small prize for her first efforts; it had been a second prize. The certificate hung on the wall for a whole evening and they sat there and looked at it while a clock ticked in the room. The next day the certificate had disappeared.

Not long after that they had talked about the mystery of adoption for the first time. Since he found it difficult to concentrate all day, Daniel thought about the past, and he thought about the scales standing in the courtyard and - no, of course they weren't waiting for him, what a silly idea.

While assessing a building plan, which showed the ghostly, transparent foundations of a hospital, it was only after the third check that he noticed a clear miscalculation. He talked to one of his colleagues about it, who took the plan out of his hands and silently went through it stroke by stroke while Daniel stood uselessly beside him, rocking back and forward on the balls of his feet.

He asked if it would be very inconvenient if he went home a bit earlier today. His colleague's long beard brushed over the blueprint, then he looked up and nodded.

- Of course not, he said.

4

The next day, when he was about to drive to work, Daniel saw the owner of the house, Herr Greith, standing in the garden. Greith was wearing a t-shirt, which showed an abstract surface of water and a brown island hill. On the island stood a single palm, which was on the brink of losing its balance. A little to the side stood Herr Gruber, a tenant on the fourth floor.

- Daniel! Greith shouted. Have you seen our dinosaur here? We've all already had a ride on it.

He held up a piece of paper, a list of numbers. Daniel could only make out the very top number: 92. He squinted and thought about his ever-weaker eyes, then someone held a coin in front of his face and he started back.

Greith laughed, because he had given Daniel a fright.

- Everything's all right, said Greith. You're not the first. Is he?

Gruber laughed to show his agreement and pointed at his shoes, as if that were a meaningful additional remark.

- I know how much I weigh, said Daniel.

- But it's more fun when all the neighbours are watching.

Greith slapped him on the back. He pointed to the audience of balconies, looking down earnestly at the three men in the garden. On one balcony there was a child's telescope, the neck of which had been bent so far back, it was as if someone had broken its neck. A light breeze brushed over the men, so Daniel took the coin and put it in the slot. He was annoyed about that. He stood on the scales for a second, but only with half his weight, the needle swung wildly from side to side and before it had come to rest Daniel had already got off again and was on his way to the car. His heart was beating.

- Hey, Greith called after him.

Gruber laughed out loud.

Daniel turned round. Greith pointed his finger at him and then at the scales. Daniel shook his head, and although the two men were still well within earshot, he tapped his watch and got into the car. He had difficulties getting out of the entry. Although he was certain that the pair of them weren't watching, he first of all drove far too close to the wall of the house, had to go into forward gear again and start from the beginning. It must be the tiredness, he thought. Once again the walls had been full of music going crazy half the night, and this time he hadn't even gone upstairs, although Rita had asked him to several times.

Before he turned the corner, he risked a final glance back. The men were paying no attention to him at all. Greith was reading from the piece of paper gesturing exaggeratedly.

5

Once again his wife was out of breath when she got to the phone and had to take a deep breath before she could speak.

- Yes? What is it?

Daniel had completely forgotten why he had called her. So he said:

- Were you able to sleep *after all that*.

- No. And you?

- Yes. A little bit.

- Nice for you.
  - Are you mad at me, or something? Because I didn't go up this time?  
She didn't say anything.
  - I'm angry at myself, he said, only I was already so tired... and putting on my clothes again and going up the stairs and making a scene up there -
  - You wouldn't have had to get dressed, she corrected him. People have dressing gowns for such eventualities.
  - Not me. I don't do anything like that.
  - You don't do anything like that, she repeated. Yes, I've noticed.
  - No, I don't mean that, he said. I don't put on a dressing gown over my pyjamas and then go upstairs and ring anyone's door bell.
  - Not *anyone's*, said his wife irritably.
  - Are you angry now? he asked.
  - Oh... you'd better ask me that again later.
  - I thought so, said Daniel and stood up from his chair. You're always so curt.
  - Is that what I am?
  - Yes, you are just now too.
  - Aha.
  - There, you see.
  - You know what, let's change the subject, she said.
- He cleared his throat, but the hoarseness in his voice, which had already been there all morning didn't go away. He noticed that the shoelace on his left shoe was undone. He put back the receiver and bent down under his desk. After he had drawn the knot tight, he realised he hadn't said goodbye.
- He stared at the black telephone. He considered whether he should phone once again to apologise, but he had already called twice and she had responded rather irritably. Irritable, curt. Out of breath. Today as yesterday.
- Daniel turned from side to side in his office chair. He hadn't even got around to telling his wife, that they had forced him to get on the scales. Perhaps not actually forced. I could have said no, he said to himself. And apart from that, what difference did it make? It hadn't been *his* money. And I don't have to be ashamed because of my weight. My weight's quite normal.
- He heard music from the next room and went to the door.
- Quiet please, he said.
- Two colleagues, who had only started in the practice a week before, looked up in surprise. But instead of turning down the radio, which was giving out some popular music which had congealed into harmlessness, they waited until Daniel had withdrawn to his office again.

6

As he was steering his car towards the parking space, Daniel had to stop and wait. Greith, who recently had evidently taken to spending the whole day in the garden, was standing in the way and fiddling with a tin watering can.

Daniel sounded his horn, Greith looked up, laughed, excused himself soundlessly and stood aside. He left behind a wet Rorschach patch on the asphalt, as he walked over to the scales.

Greith knelt down in front of it with a little bottle of oil in his hand, as if he wanted to pray.

Daniel got out of his car and Greith immediately waved him over. Daniel acted as if his mobile phone was just ringing. He quickly dug it out, held it to his cheek, looked worried and disappeared into the house.

There was a note stuck beside the postbox. He stepped closer to it. These idiots, he thought.

Evidently they had fun keeping a record of their pointless results on the weighing machine. The names of all the tenants, including Gerd and Elfriede Kaiser, were listed in a simple chart. Gerd was more than 14 stone, no lightweight. At the side of the page there were a few additions in scrawled handwriting, which Daniel couldn't decipher. But he recognised the piece of paper, it was the promotional letter from the insurance company.

Apart from the Greith and Gruber no man in the house weighed more than fifteen and a half stone. He looked for his own name; there were two question marks beside it.

These nutcases, he thought.

His wife was missing. He breathed out with relief. After he had wiped his forehead with his hand, that seemed quite natural to him. It was completely unreasonable to get worried.

He nevertheless smoothed out the rolled up piece of paper, grateful and a little shaky, then he looked for other names that interested him. There were so many parties in the four-storey building, many had only moved in during the last couple of months, and some names didn't mean anything to him at all. There were only a few constants in the house, he himself was one of them. Greith of course. Gruber too. And an elderly Jamaican, whom everybody called Eric and who - Daniel looked for the appropriate entry - weighed less than twelve stone. He would have thought it was more.

- Far from complete.

Daniel staggered to the side.

- Not everyone wants to ride on our dinosaur, said Greith cheerfully and wiped his oily fingers on his t-shirt.

*Riding the dinosaur*, said the echo in Daniel's head, as he mounted the stairs, maintaining his smile with some difficulty.

Greith stood and watched him. His gaze was not at all unfriendly.

7

It was early morning. The breakfast egg in the red wooden egg cup looked as if it was thinking hard about something. A silent, round object. Daniel tapped the white head with the back of a teaspoon until he could pleurably peel away the shell with his finger nail. The appealing contrast of hard egg shell and soft yolk aroused his appetite. While he spooned out the egg, he looked out of the window.

This morning he had done three crossword puzzles in a row. The final clues were *shipwreck*, *karate* and *Sri Lanka*.

Outside a police helicopter had been thrumming away the whole time.

When Daniel's incisor knocked against the coffee cup, it occurred to him, that he was afraid. The feeling stopped him from moving freely. As if he was standing up to his shoulders in ice-cold water. When he swallowed, he was forced to think *that* he was swallowing.

He stood in front of the mirror in the hall and inspected his posture. He stood up straight, turned back and forward and his reflection did the same. Then he lost patience and turned away.

Rita came out of the bathroom.

- Are you already going? she asked.

Daniel nodded uncertainly. Yes, he was going now. But he remembered that he hadn't said goodbye to Lena yet, so he went back to the child's room and said:

- Bye then.

She looked up briefly.

On the way to work he tried to think only of her. Once she had beaten him at chess, without him trying to let her win. She had been just six then.

8

The next evening Lena insisted that he go down to the garden with her, there was a barbecue. Daniel said No, because they hadn't even been invited, but Lena didn't give way. Herr Greith had waved to her from the garden. She should come down later, he was keeping a nice chop for her.

Now it was already dark, and Lena who had felt ill from the meat, had gone upstairs again long ago. Daniel was standing with the other men from the house. They were talking in the light of the small lamps which were activated by a motion sensor. Herr Greith had the system installed in the courtyard a couple of



years before, so that no one stumbled in the dark. Every couple of minutes, however, they had to wave their arms about and hop up and down like idiots, so that the sensor recognised them. The light would probably not have gone out repeatedly, if they had moved about a little, but they were all too tired for that. Most of the men had eaten a lot of meat and were telling each other appropriately dirty jokes.

Herr Greith talked about a *Getting-to-know-each-other party* and introduced the new tenants to each other so often, until at some point they were all able to say the words along with him. The new tenants also included Gerd and Elfriede Kaiser.

Daniel avoided talking to them.

Every time it went dark, Greith waved his arms about, jumped up and down, and the men laughed. With a belated blinking the motion sensor registered the presence of its master. The scales got their long gown-like shadow back, which broke off abruptly at the wall.

- Here's to your corpulence, said Gruber.

- To your's too, said Greith.

- Cor-pu-lence, repeated Gruber giggling.

Gerd Kaiser laughed so much he spilled his beer and licked his wrist. Elfriede Kaiser was the only woman who had stayed. She handed him a handkerchief, but he refused it.

After a while the light went out again. Greith swore and started to wave.

But since the light no longer responded to his attempts at resuscitation, he finally jumped clumsily in the air a couple of times.

Gruber applauded wildly.

- Damned electronics, said Greith. It seems to get less sensitive every time.

- It already knows you, said Gerd Kaiser very familiarly.

Greith gave them all the finger. They giggled.

Daniel was cold. He stuck his hands in his trouser pockets and clenched them.

9

The men stood around late into the night talking. Daniel didn't feel so lost any more and got involved in a conversation with Greith.

- Tell me, how old is your daughter actually?

- Ten, said Daniel.

- I always see her going past downstairs, said Greith respectfully. Ten. Looks more like twelve.

- Yes, they grow fast at that age, said Kaiser. It's what they get fed.

- Could be, said Daniel.

- The meat products, remarked Kaiser.
  - You don't happen to know how much your daughter weighs? asked Greith.
  - Yes, and all the additives, said Daniel.
  - And if they're out in the open air so much, said Kaiser, then they shoot up like saplings. My son's already a whole inch taller than me, but he's only - anyway he'll be thirteen next month.
  - Yes, children, said Greith to himself. To weigh a real child, that's almost a rare pleasure.
  - Yes, they grow very fast, it's true, agreed Daniel in a rather more serious voice.
  - Because they make a fuss, said Greith to his raised index finger, which hovered quite close to his eyes. When it comes to their weight, they're as sensitive as pin cushions.
- Then the light went out again.
- Right, I'm not moving again, said Greith. You can all do what you like.
  - Fourteen, said Kaiser loudly. Did I say thirteen a minute ago? He'll be fourteen next month.
  - I don't mind if we go on talking in the dark, said Gruber.
  - As you like, said Greith.
  - Go on, rescue us, said Gruber and gently pushed Daniel.

Daniel moved both arms like a runway controller trying to stop an approaching aircraft from landing. It took a while, then the light showed mercy again. The men applauded. Greith sucked in the night air noisily through his nose, held it there and then exhaled pleurably.

- Wonderful, he said. Have you noticed how the stars disappear, when the light in the garden comes on?
- And so quiet, added Gruber and pointed at the empty balconies and the windows, nearly all of which were dark. Everyone's asleep.
- Summer night, said Greith and rubbed the palm of his hand on his shirt.
- I think, I'll go to sleep now too, said Daniel.

In the flat Daniel switched off the light in the rooms overlooking the courtyard, so that the men below couldn't see him going to bed. He avoided making any sound, and for a long time sat immobile in the dark, until he at last grew sleepy. In a dream he was confronted by a mile-high bell tower, which played him croaky, dry tunes, which dyed his finger tips black.

The next morning Daniel thought the garden was empty, but Greith, bedraggled as a dog after rain, was still there and getting everything into a mess. He had

swept the remains of yesterday's party, cardboard plates and beer bottles into a heap, which he had then stepped into with all his weight. Daniel greeted him cautiously. Greith immediately told him that the men had made a lot of fun of him, Greith, after Daniel had gone to bed, because he was still living alone, without a woman.

- Well, said Daniel.

- I'm a human being too, said Greith defiantly.

- Of course.

- It may be a surprise to some people, exclaimed Greith, but my feelings can be hurt too.

- Oh, but I'm sure they didn't...

- Especially that new guy, Gerd, said Greith disappointed. Acts as if he knew...

- I'm sure everyone was just a bit -

- ... how much children weigh, muttered Greith, and his chin was almost resting on his chest. He had again placed his hand on his t-shirt. It remained there for a while and the fingers fidgeted uncertainly, then the hand suddenly shot out and gently took Daniel by the shoulder.

- Dinosaurs have to be fed, he said. Just like me, I'm a dinosaur too, a relic of ancient times. Of primeval gourmet times. So, now let's see... I'm right, aren't I? There's a limit to snide remarks. He hummed a confused little tune, as Daniel got on the scales.

- No doubt the Kaiser guy is smarter than I am, he went on, in a sense, I don't deny that at all.

Daniel didn't move. Greith had pulled him onto the metal tread of the scales, but basically he had taken the last step *himself*, of his own volition - just so as not to stumble, he told himself. But now Greith was firmly holding him there, in fact, he was adding to Daniel's weight, by lightly pushing him down with his heavy hand. He's falsifying the result, thought Daniel and immediately corrected the thought, because of course it was stupid and foolish. What did he care about his weight - he just wanted to get off the scales. So he tried to and cautiously shrugged his shoulders once.

- Oh, said Greith and let go of him. Excuse me.

The needle sank back in relief and showed ten stone ten pounds, his normal weight. Daniel was infinitely pleased to see the familiar figures. He had almost been expecting a completely monstrous result, a fifteen stone figure, which he perhaps wouldn't have been able to cope with. He turned round and wanted to get off the scales - an urgent need to shower - but Greith was blocking the way. Not deliberately, as Daniel realised, because Greith wasn't paying any attention to him. Greith rooted in his trouser pockets, finally found what he had been

looking for, and held it up: a biro. He tried to write, but it didn't work without something to lean on. The paper was too soft.

- Would you be so kind, he said with cheerful impatience, and his hand described a low semi-circle.

Daniel had understood. He apologised softly, got off the scales and turned round so that Greith could use his back to write on the paper. He felt the brief circling dance of the ballpoint tip on his skin. Once the number had been entered, Daniel ran, without putting on the light, up the stairs to his flat.

His daughter was just getting dressed for school. He stroked her head and murmured something encouraging.

When he was finally lying in the bath tub, under a rustling mountain range of foam, he had the feeling, he had once again got away and no more. Later he called the office and excused himself many times, till they assured him, he wasn't urgently needed.

11

Daniel opened his eyes. He had dreamed he could see his own shadow floating over the tops of pine trees. He was sitting in a chairlift moving towards a mountain peak, out of which grew a vast visitors' centre.

Forgetting that it was Sunday, he dressed, brooding over the curious dream image. Not until his left arm entered the cool sleeve of his jacket and his watch was caught for a moment on the lining, did he notice the dull light coming from the child's room. The curtains were still drawn. His daughter was still asleep - he struck his forehead with the flat of his hand, then with an apologetic smile he slipped off his jacket and put it back on the hanger.

Daniel went into the kitchen. Chairs, a heavy kitchen table, a bread-slicing machine, a lonely coffee cup - everything seemed to be sleeping. Only he was awake.

Why on earth had he got up so early? He was always the last to get up on Sunday and was annoyed, if something prevented him staying longer in bed. Absurdly, he felt his heart beating.

It was raining outside.

He dressed again and went down to the garden.

In the shelter of the old courtyard door he looked at the drizzle, then, without opening the umbrella, he stepped out into the open and let himself get wet. The scales were standing in the rain, it fell on the circular head and softened the earth underneath, so that one could hope they would soon sink down and disappear.

He saw, that something had changed, and narrowed his eyes. But the picture

didn't really come into focus, and he had to go closer. Something was different, but he couldn't tell immediately what it was. The scales stood there as before, the broad clock face stared threateningly into mid-air and the massive body looked as if it weighed tons and was immovable, like a pendulum which had stopped many decades ago.

Had it perhaps grown a little larger overnight? No, it wasn't that. At first Daniel thought it was to do with his eyes, then he saw it: There was something missing from the scales. It was an ear, the left one - the clock face with the imperious twitching needle in the middle had really lost an ear.

He felt hot. No limits any more, he thought confusedly.

He passed his hand over his forehead, and realised that he had begun to sweat. He stepped up to the scales, to examine the alteration closely.

At the place where the coin box had been attached, with which the scales could be brought to life, there were now three black holes for three screws which had presumably been thrown away long ago.

His right foot dared to step forward to see what would happen. The needle, strangely light-footed and liberated made a cheerful leap at the very first contact, as if pulled by an invisible thread.

- Daniel!

His wife was looking down from the window, her face was innocent astonishment and surprise, a carefree Sunday face. He couldn't bear it any longer, so he said:

- Close the window!

- Why? What is it?

She was out of breath again, he noticed. And for some reason, he couldn't bear the sight any more and called:

Close it! Close it!

He waved both arms to drive her away. But she stayed where she was, only her expression and her posture had changed.

Daniel felt the eyes of all the neighbours collecting on his left cheek, as if on a concave mirror. His skin was burning. One hand over the left half of his face, he turned round and picked up a small stone which had appeared within reach by his dirty slippers. The window with the face of his wife closed just in time, but the stone didn't even hit the pane, but bounced off the wall with a dry crack.

Then, in the shelter of the dustbins, arranged according to colour, Daniel, half crouching, half on his knees, looked for a much bigger stone.

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)

