

# PILVAX

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**Lajos Grendel** is the author of more than a dozen novels and story collections, written in his native Hungarian and translated widely into Slovak, German, French, and English. Among the leading novelists of both Hungary and Slovakia (where he was born in 1948 and lives to this day), he has received numerous literary honors, including Hungary's Kossuth Prize. He teaches Hungarian literature at the University of Bratislava.

## **from The Cousin**

by Lajos Grendel

(translated from the Hungarian by Paul Olchvary)

Every story can first and foremost be understood within its own context, and only then based on the circumstances which brought it into existence. I owe at least this much of an explanation; for not even the story to follow below is missing reality, but only the mortar, which is to say, time, that might bond its elements.

The friend who told me this story had been a classmate at university for a little while, and now teaches in a high school in a small town off in the provinces. We hadn't met in more than ten years, so at first I didn't even recognize him when he greeted me on the street. His employer had sent him up here on a one-week training course, and he was just headed to lunch when he saw me leaving the university library. After racking our brains a bit, we ended up at the wine bar on Lakatos Street. My friend looked quite worn or, rather, panicked, and I remarked about this; whereupon he told me his story. When I asked his permission to write it all down, he consented on condition that his name be left unmentioned.

"Last year we went on vacation in a small town in southern Hungary, at my wife's relatives," he began, lowering his voice. "The town lies in the middle of the great Hungarian plain, and disregarding a few public buildings and its lovely churches, it looks more like a village, as do most towns thereabouts. My wife's relatives are simple, commonsensical folk who like to eat a lot and spend money like there was no tomorrow; for they have money to spend. Not far from town a calm, unpolluted little river winds its way westward toward the Tisza, and every afternoon the two of us would bathe in its water, so as to work off the tiredness and sleepiness which hit us after yet another hearty lunch. As sure as it has a bed and banks, this river has a name, too, and the hands of expert cartographers have drawn its blue line into every atlas. From the perspective of the story, however, its name is insignificant; for a story without time doesn't demand precise geography either. But since one must pay heed to the visual element in every story," — and here he looked upon me a tad scornfully — "I will at least say that our side of the bank, where the river is shallower, and in the drier seasons the water lays its pebbles far and wide, a band of

aspen groves interrupted here and there by clearings accompanies the river to the edge of the nearest village; while the bare, steep wall on the opposite side sheaves the surface of the water perpendicularly, and bank swallows have gouged out their nests in its side. The steep bank on the other side gives rise to an optical illusion, as in the foreground the river doesn't appear as wide as in reality it is. Such optical illusions can have numerous consequences. Thus I believe that perhaps what happened to me wasn't so coincidental after all; and that it happened precisely here, and nowhere else.

"It was four in the afternoon. I was sunbathing alone in the little clearing while my wife swam down to the mill at the edge of the village, at least a kilometer away. On the blanket and on my back, I'd covered my face with a handkerchief to block the sun; as for my legs, which at first hung out over the blanket, allowing the grass to tickle my feet, I pulled them up slightly by bending my knees. I wasn't asleep, that's for sure. I'd swear to this, but it's unnecessary, for there are other bits of proof as well. I was musing that my vacation was over, that the next day we were traveling home, and how two weeks flies right by if we're having a good time somewhere.

"That's when I was called.

"Bandi!"

"Having heard my name, of course I removed the handkerchief from my face at once. An unknown girl in a bathing suit stood above me. While I don't recall her face, so much the more I do recall the two red ribbons in her reddish-blond hair, her red-painted toenails, and the fresh, raw smell of the river exuding from her skin.

"You don't recognize me? I'm Szilvia."

"Perhaps it was the two red ribbons, I don't know, but by all means she seemed much younger than myself.

"I'm Szilvia," she repeated. "Your cousin."

"At this I really did stand up, and took her hand, so as to convince myself that I wasn't imagining things. I was exactly a head taller than her; and when I grasped her hand, my chin accidentally brushed against her forehead.

"But I don't have a cousin. . . . Or I do. . . . But he's a man, he's above forty, and lives in Canada. I've never seen him, only in pictures."

"The girl removed her hand from my palm and stepped back, as if offended.

"There now, didn't I say you'd forget me? Remember?"

"Forget?"

"But you said that you can only be happy with me, because I'm your closest female relative, I resemble you the most. If you had a sister, you'd love her, for love between siblings is the most perfect love; but since you've got just two brothers, you can love only me. Because love is nothing other than the most consummate self-adoration. You said that when you penetrate me, it's as if you're making love with yourself, and no other woman can give you this feeling. . . ."

"I said this?!"

"The girl, or Szilvia, or whoever, I'm not even sure what to call her, for when I mention her name the whole thing is so disenchantingly absurd, as I was saying, the girl then completely toned down her voice.

"So, you really don't remember? Is sixteen years such a long time? Don't you remember your Uncle Ödön either? I'm his daughter."

"Uncle Ödön? . . ."

"Okay, then," she said sadly. "Nothing happened. I'm glad you got married, and that you're happy. I've been spying on you for three days already, but didn't dare

come up and speak to you with your wife around. No doubt she'd have misunderstood.'

"Then I let the girl go off, because what she'd said had stirred me up, and for several minutes yet I was in a daze. I stood in place where, a moment before, I'd grasped her hand, like someone whom a magician had just pulled from a hat, feeling dispossessed either of my own will or a single thought of my own, but that the whole of my fate thereafter was in the hands of this magician. This must be what it feels like the moment one has a stroke. Everything around you is real, yet it isn't, as if there is a kind of filter between the world and yourself.

"When, soon thereafter, I glimpsed Elza through the trees, I heaved a sigh of relief, like an accused man whom a court has found not guilty although both he and the judge knows he is; only that the evidence is lacking to lock him away. But the tension within me did not completely abate. A long time had passed since I'd been as happy to see Elza as now. But naturally this didn't include even a trace of emotions well-nigh aflame with happiness. Elza is my wife, after all. As such I see her every day; it is with her I go to bed at night, and she is the mother of my children. Now it was precisely those banalities she restored to my life that we ascribe to habit, which at other times are so burdensome that I rise up against them. At this moment I felt that these banalities had come to the rescue of my sound mind.

"Elza threw off her bathing cap, grabbed her clothes, slipped into the trees, and returned a couple minutes later all dressed up. She cast me an odd look. As familiar as I am with this look of hers, and although she's been my wife for more than ten years, not even today could I figure out what's going on inside her head at such times — suspicion or jealousy, or, perhaps, vile thoughts? Who's to say? We don't talk much.

"'You've been roasting bacon?' she asked.

"I didn't understand what she was getting at, but then she broke into a wry smile.

"'Your chin is sooty.'

"Suddenly gripping my chin, I felt my life was in danger. It's obvious, huh? When I'd taken Szilvia's hand, my chin, caught up as I was in the momentum, had touched the girl's forehead.

"'Don't you feel good?' asked my wife.

"'She dipped her handkerchief in the stream, then rubbed the spot off my chin.'

At this point in his story my friend paused momentarily and raised his hand, as if to touch *that* spot, but perhaps he feared I would ridicule him, for the motion became something quite different: a bitter, helpless wave of the hand. He was out of sorts indeed.

Having gone over the menu, we ordered lunch . . .

*More of Lajos Grendel's fiction can be found in the WINTER 2007 issue of PILVAX.  
Locally available in Budapest.*