

Christos Boulotis

**TAM TARATUM  
AND THE TOWN THAT CUT ITSELF IN TWO**

Translated by Bruce Walter

**T**here was once a town divided into two by a broad river. Of course, there are towns of this kind by the dozen, but what made this particular town like two completely separate ones was not the river. No, it was its people.

A hundred and fifteen whole years had gone by since that winter morning when they sent the stone bridge with its seven arches crashing down. All because of a petty disagreement –so petty that nobody could now remember what it was. And knocking down the bridge was their way of showing that all relations with the opposite side were ended. From now on, half the folk would keep to one bank of the river and the rest of them to the other.

Since what they had decided could not be undone, they cut the name of their town in two as well. So what had once been Elkazini now became Elka and Zini.

None the grown-ups was sorry it had happened. No, not a single one of them. It was their own pig-headedness, their own decision and their own willful hands that had tumbled down the stone bridge with the seven arches. It was only the children who were puzzled and dismayed. Tears welled in their eyes, for it was on that bridge with its seven arches that they had played their wildest games and it was there that the closest friends from both sides of the river always met.

Now the moment that the bridge came down two strange things happened. First of all, every single clock stopped working. And try as they might, the clock-repairers -not only local ones but famous craftsmen brought in from afar- could never get them going from then on. The second thing was stranger still. Everyone lost their voice, both young and old. It didn't disappear entirely but all that now came out was a kind of rusty whisper you could hardly hear.

This made life difficult in Elakazini -or in Elka and in Zini, rather. It really turned things upside down. All kinds of jobs were no longer getting done on time and people kept on being late for their appointments or missing them completely. Losing their voices made things even worse. How could teachers give their lessons? The sound of singing died, along with the happy shouts of children in the streets. The two theatres closed, for how could the actors play their roles without a voice?

And so the years rolled by, till one day fortune told herself she would give the town of Elkazini the tiniest of smiles. In Zini, on the right bank of the river, a baby boy was born whose words came loud and clear from the moment he began to talk. A miracle! A real

miracle! This boy didn't whisper, he could really speak! There was rejoicing, pride and hope in Zini, for who knew, maybe things would change now.

His parents named him Tam.

He was a lovely boy, was Tam -as handsome as an angel, his clear voice filled with all the coolness and soft colours of a springtime afternoon.

But there was more to Tam than just his voice.

He was almost seven years old when he astonished everyone a second time. It was as if he had a clock inside his head, a well-wound clock that could tell the right time to the second.

There was more rejoicing in the town of Zini.

From now on they all ran to Tam to help them make arrangements.

'What time is it, Tam?'

'I have to leave town soon, Tam. Can you tell me what the time is?'

'Tam, is it time for me to take my medicine?'

People crowded in impatient queues outside Tam's house. Things reached a point where they hardly gave him time to breathe, so he decided that instead of answering each question he would announce the time each hour, upon the hour. He slung a drum around his neck and started marching round the streets, drumming away with a "rum a tum tum", and calling out at the top of his voice:

'It's five o'clock!'

'It's six o'clock!'

'It's seven o'clock!'

"Rum a tum tum... tum tara tum... Tam Taratum". That was the pet name they had given him by now. And he liked it.

As Tam Taratum passed by, the children would crowd round him, showering him with flowers and sweets. 'Ah,' they would sigh, 'if only we had voices!' Young, middle-aged and old, the whole of Zini loved their Tam. But what he didn't yet know was that they loved him just as much in Elka, the other side of the town that lay on the far bank of the river. They may not have seen him from up close but they could hear his voice as he shouted out the hour and beat his drum -and that meant they could get things done on time themselves now.

'Our Tam must be very, very happy,' the children whispered admiringly among themselves.

'What a voice he's got, our Tam!'

'And he's the only person in the whole town who can tell the time!'

But in reality -and there is no point trying to hide it- Tam Taratum was not as happy as they thought.

For every time he looked across to Elka, on the far bank of the river, he was overcome with sadness.

'Why? Why?' It nagged away inside his little head, that great big "why?" Why didn't they rebuild the stone bridge with its seven arches? A hundred and fifteen whole slow