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Part 1 – Four Seconds

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Two days before Christmas Eve, minus twelve, 00:53. The town and the villages deep asleep. No moon, no stars, overcast sky, a dusting of snow.

Then the harsh, metallic impact of iron on iron, the screech of carriages ploughing into one another, the crunch of concertinaing sheet metal, a cracking and smashing of splintering wood. All at once, with such violence that it can be heard ten kilometres away, in the town, in the surrounding villages, outlying estates and farms. Sleeping people start from sleep. Then silence once more. Even deeper silence.

The 21st of December 1939 is a Thursday. From the early hours the Postdamer Bahnhof in Berlin is filled with a crush of people and remains so long after dark. German troops invaded Poland on 1 September, the country is at war, which means that any trains not needed to keep the system running have been requisitioned by the military. Wheels must roll for victory, and now there aren't enough of them. The special trains that used to be pressed into service in the weeks around Christmas are no longer available, and yet there are more people on the move now than in peacetime. And so it is no wonder that there are regular delays, especially as the timetables have been slashed.

Late that evening, two trains leave the station – the D10 express to Cologne and the D180 express to Neunkirchen – and they do so half an hour apart. The D10 departs on time at 23:15, and the D180 also leaves on time at 23:45. But neither will ever reach its destination, because sixty-eight minutes later, in the first hour of the morning of 22 December 1939 – at exactly 0:53 – 90 kilometres further west, at Genthin station, the worst disaster ever to hit the German railways occurs and yet, at least for a while, it was practically expunged from the collective memory.

The D180 crashes into the D10 at full speed. One hundred and ninety-six people die at the scene or in the days that follow, and hundreds are injured.

As I got a picture of how it had happened, I saw in front of me the house in which Lisa, a young girl at the time, had lived with her mother, and I assumed that she too had woken up.

Her bedroom looked out the back, over the chicken coop and the adjoining gardens. She must have woken with a start and gone to the window without turning on the light.

As in every winter I remember there, the panes will have been frosted up – a field of ice flowers. She put her mouth to the glass, breathed on it, pulled the sleeve of her shirt over the heel of her hand and wiped the window . . . But there was nothing, only the silhouette of the church with its wide tower, hunched there like a mother hen between the trees on the other side of the gardens, and so she padded barefoot out onto the landing, still in the dark, and across the cold tiles into the living room. She drew back the curtain, opened the window, pushed the shutter away, but there was nothing to explain the noise here either, only the igloo-shaped woodpile her father (already seriously ill) had stacked over the summer and beyond it, on the far side of the meadow, the edge of the pine wood – a thick line, as if drawn with a black marker – through which the track to the fields ran.

Oddly, I always picture her alone, never with her mother who was asleep next door in the adjacent room, which was so narrow that the twin beds didn't fit in alongside each other but (like coupled railway carriages) had to be arranged one behind the other with their sides to the wall. She too must have woken up, but she stayed in bed. Why? Because her sight was bad? Or was that only later? After the war? When she looked after me while Lisa was at work? Then, she could only distinguish between light and dark, and whenever an unfamiliar noise reached her ear, she would not look up but down, as if she were listening within herself and the cause of what she heard was to be found there, inside her body.

Lisa shut the window and since now there was only the ticking of the clock on the wall, which would later, along with her violin-playing, become the defining sound of this room for me, she got back into bed and only found out what had happened on her way to work in the morning.

That night too, I think now, the music stand was next to the window, not in the living room as it was when we lived there on our own later but in the room overlooking the chicken coop which became mine, while Lisa moved after her mother's death to the front of the house and into the small bedroom that had once been her parents'.

Personally, I heard about the accident for the first time in the mid-nineties.

After writing an article about the Romanesque Road for a travel magazine (the town had necessarily played only a secondary role), I received a letter from a certain Herr Weidenkopf I had never heard of. He wrote that he had enjoyed my text and since he had gathered from my biographical

details that I came from Genthin, he was taking the liberty of alerting me to an incident that had largely sunk into obscurity – the great train crash of 1939.

When I unfolded the sheets of paper enclosed in the envelope, I saw that it was an essay published in the Erfurt-based magazine *Der Eisenbahnfreund* in the early eighties – eight fairly yellowed pages, not copies but originals clipped from the journal. The photos inserted in the text revealed a scene of devastation. The second train had crashed into the first with such force that the carriages had been shunted along on top of one another. One carriage was rearing up into the air, while another looked as if it was boring into the ground.

At the end of his letter Weidenkopf mentioned that he himself came from Genthin and had attended the secondary school in Grosse Schulstrasse in the thirties. Reading my name, he had remembered a girl one or two years below him, Lisa Vandersee, who had left school at 15 and started an apprenticeship at a department store.

‘May I ask if you are related to her, and if so, what has become of her?’

I thanked him for the essay and told him that Lisa Vandersee was my mother and lived in Berlin.

Whereupon I received a second letter in which he asked me to say hello to her and wrote that he remembered her as a tall girl who was always carrying a violin case when he bumped into her in the street.

A few more letters went back and forth between us, and each of his contained something else: a photo of the secondary school from the year 1934; an old beermat marked *Genthiner Bier*; a hectograph copy of a two history he had written with the town’s coat of arms – a floating Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus in her arms – on the cover.

He had (I gradually learned) left for West Germany in the early fifties and there, by dint of his nostalgia for the canal town, he had become a collector and a local historian. A local historian far from the locality he was researching, who under other circumstances would have collected stamps or first editions, but had instead directed his passion for collecting and history at his hometown.

‘My archives,’ he wrote. ‘I’ve enclosed something from my archives.’

Yet rather than feeling happy, I noticed that something inside me clicked shut. Was it possible, I thought, that he saw me as a soulmate, as someone he could oblige, through gifts, to assume his mantle at some stage? I was still living in Italy and had no desire whatsoever to allow myself to be forced into any role, least of all that of a local historian. My letters became correspondingly shorter and shorter.

‘Thank you very much,’ I wrote back. ‘Thank you very much.’

Until our correspondence tailed off completely. Over time I forgot him, and if I did think of him, it was as if I were thinking of someone long deceased. But then another letter arrived.

‘Today I would like to send you two photos taken a few weeks ago in Saalfeld.’

One of them was of a maze of tracks, a railway compound with old steam trains, a kind of graveyard for locomotives; the other was of himself (he must have been around 90), holding a stick and pointing at a number in a triumphant pose.

‘01 531! Do you remember? The crashed locomotive was number 01 158. After the accident it was repaired and I found out that it remained in service until the seventies. After a complete overhaul it was given a new number: 01 531. So there you are – I am standing in front of the very locomotive that startled me from sleep on that fateful night.’

And then came the postscript – well calculated, as I now know.

‘Incidentally, it was later used on cross-border routes, so it cannot be ruled out that the same locomotive was also attached to the train that took you and your mother away from Genthin.’

It couldn’t be ruled out, no, but it was fairly unlikely. But isn’t that always the case with coincidences? I fetched out the article again and indeed, there on the last page, were the words: ‘The 01 158 became the 01 531.’

That is how it started. With Weidenkopf’s remark about the locomotive. Or was I already thinking about the four seconds mentioned in the article?

‘If the man in the signal box had given the stop signal four seconds later, the accident would not have happened.’

That counterfactual ‘What would have happened if . . .?’

That evening I wrote two letters. One to Weidenkopf to thank him for the information. The other to the Saxony-Anhalt regional records office – and within a week I received an answer. A Dr Herter told me that the records office held two files that I could consult, one of them in the criminal records office in Magdeburg, the other in the Reichsbahn’s archives.

‘However, you will have to analyse them yourself.’

Yes, it was all about that ‘What would have happened if . . .’. Right now, it is like this. And just afterwards it is completely different. Right now, everything is fine. And the next moment it descends into chaos. And between the two lies the wrong movement, the tiny matter of four seconds.

Or a letter: ‘Lisa, why are you there and not here?’

‘It’s not possible,’ she had noted in pencil in the margin. The letter was in the Kreutzer, which was her bible for a time, along with Bériot’s Violin Method. The paper was so thin that it had stuck to the pages and turned with them, which is why I hadn’t seen it when I took the sheet music out of the boxes and put it down next to the desk as I started my compiling. Her handwriting was so tiny that it took me a while to decipher. There was no doubt that it was her writing, though.

‘It’s not possible,’ she had written in the margin. ‘It’s not possible, my love.’

But then it was.

The essay in *Der Eisenbahnfreund* was written by a certain Herr Bothe from Bad Saarow on Lake Scharmützel and focuses on the role D 180’s driver, Erich Wernicke, played in the accident. He had gone through several signals and at the trial, which was held in summer 1940 in Magdeburg, he was sentenced to three years in prison – wrongfully, Bothe argued. In his opinion it was an arbitrary fascist sentence; that’s what he called it.

He portrays the engine driver, who was 51 at the time of the accident, as a responsible man who hadn’t committed a single mistake in the whole of his long career. He had never done anything wrong and equally to his credit was the fact that he had not been a member of the Nazi Party or of any of its organizations.

Would such a man, he asked, gamble recklessly with his own life and those of the people in his care? No, it was impossible. If he had gone through the signals, it must have been some reason beyond his control.

If I understood the author properly, he thought the weather was to blame. That was the decisive factor: the distribution of warm and cold air streams. There had been a temperature inversion that stopped the smoke gases from rising out of the locomotive’s chimney. Instead, they had been sucked past the smoke deflectors, and entered the open driver’s cab, where the carbon monoxide had poisoned the crew.

Wernicke and Krollmann, his fireman, had been dazed or even unconscious when the train drove through the signals, which is why they weren’t aware of what was going on. Bothe reasons that Wernicke and Krollmann, who was also charged, should therefore have been acquitted.

Does this mean that the train was racing through the night without a driver? As an image it is hackneyed, but in real life it is a nightmare that would send the travellers into a cold sweat, if they were aware of the danger. They aren’t though. They’re sitting in the comfortable safety of their compartment, dozing, leafing through a book or staring out at the countryside.

Part 2 – Carla and Richard

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Yellow, up hill and down dale, as far as the eye can see, oilseed rape fields, with individual rows of bushes and trees standing out almost black in this riot of bright colour; grassy fields, woods, little towns turned away from me (as if their backs are to the railway line). Rivers: the Havel, the Elbe, the Weser, the Rhine. In the notebook on the first trip to Düsseldorf is the question: why do you have to go there? It is, the answer goes, my need always to situate people in places. As if the locations told what the files kept quiet. Or as if I would know more if I see the houses they lived in, the streets they walked along, the corners, the squares.

Hannover, Hamm, Dortmund, Oberhausen, Duisburg, Düsseldorf . . . The same route Carla would have taken if her journey hadn't come to an abrupt end in the canal town. She was sitting in one of the rear carriages, not alone but with a somewhat older man, whose appearance was apparently so Mediterranean that every existing description of him highlights it as characteristic: a Mediterranean-looking man, it says in the complaint lodged a few days before the fateful journey at a police station in Berlin and retracted a few hours later.

The people in the compartment will have looked at them. If it wasn't the young woman who caught their attention, then it was the man, and he immediately struck me, not because of his looks of course, but because of his name. In the alphabetical list of the dead, where I found him, he was between Breuer, Willi from Brandenburg an der Havel and Christ, Walter from Halberstadt: Buonomo, Giuseppe from Naples. It was so strange there among all the German names that I noted it at once, not anticipating that I would come across it again in the Finck dossier.

What happened is that when Carla regained consciousness and was asked for her name, she didn't give her own but Buonomo's, and therefore featured in the list of the dead published three days after the accident as Buonomo, Carla, from Düsseldorf. Reading that, I wondered how they might be related. Was Carla Giuseppe's wife? His daughter? Why did she live in Düsseldorf and he in Naples? These questions proved superfluous, as she was actually called Finck and was neither Buonomo's wife or daughter, but rather (to confuse matters further) the fiancée of a third person, Richard Kuiper, who was not sitting in either of the trains but waiting at home for her.

He had two known addresses. One was his parents' house in the Kanalstrasse in Neuss (where he may not actually have been welcome), the other the so-called Judenhaus in Düsseldorf's Mintropstrasse, where he and other Jewish people driven out of their homes were each assigned a room. Two addresses therefore, whereas there is only one for Carla – the one in the Oberbilker Allee. She was the daughter of Kapellmeister Jack Finck, who had emigrated to London with his second wife in summer 1939 and made sure before he left that Clara was lodged with her aunt, Frau Wesemann.

Finally, regarding Buonomo, who was married and had two children, only his city is known, not the street where he lived; and that he was 44 years old when he died, which is mentioned somewhere in the files.

Carla and Richard's story is told by the letters she wrote him and which he tragically left to the Reichsbahn (which is how they ended up in the records).

'Me too,' Frau Burckhardt said when I told her about my quirky habit regarding locations. She said that she used to choose her holiday destinations according to the authors she was reading. I wanted to tell her that I meant something else, but dropped the subject.

I'd rung her up the previous day to arrange to meet, and she had replied that she didn't really have time, as she was going away that day, but would organise her departure so that we could see each other at the station. She would wait for me by the exit and as I came off the concourse, and I spotted a woman in the agreed place studying the people walking towards her. She was my age, of medium height, and was wearing jeans and an olive-green quilted jacket, with a flowery canvas rucksack over one shoulder.

'Frau Burckhardt?'

'Yes,' she said, offering me her hand.

I had addressed a request for information about Carla and Kuiper to the Jewish community body, and she had answered. We had since exchanged a number of letters and emails. When I asked what her role in the community was, she replied, None. She was doing a research project on the Jews of Düsseldorf commissioned by the regional government. The occasional enquiry would be passed on to her, and she would try to answer. We went back into the station and sat down by the window in a café. I thought I could feel her eyes following my movements as I dug out Carla's file, but when I looked up I saw that she was busy undoing her rucksack. She pulled out a notepad and laid it on the table.

'I've looked it up,' she said. 'Kuiper should have been living in Mintropstrasse long before December. He was registered there.'

'But his mail was sent to Kanalstrasse.'

‘He must have been staying in both places.’

‘Was that possible at the time?’

‘As long as no one noticed.’ She laughed. ‘Your Carla,’ she said then. ‘Your Carla.’

A few days ago she had gone to the district court building and on that occasion had consulted Carla’s fostering case file. She was, of course, still a minor. If one believed what was written there, Frau Wesemann had been reluctant to take the girl in, but she had felt obliged to do so for her dead sister’s sake. She clearly didn’t like Carla but made allowances for the fact that Carla’s boss, the proprietor of the Spiess accessories salon thought very highly of the girl. And as if to blur the favourable impression created by the boss’s words, Frau Wesemann immediately bemoaned the girl’s rebellious nature, her obsession with fine clothes and her lack of adroitness around the house. She would lie in bed most of the time with the music turned up so loud that it filled the entire house, and the neighbours, all of them upstanding people, had complained more than once.

Frau Burckhardt nodded, took a slip of paper from her pad and pushed it across the table to me. She then tilted her head and pointed to the few scribbled lines with her finger.

‘Her father came from Romania in 1920. He was still called Finklkraut at the time, Itzig Rubin were his given names, but he was forced to leave them behind and become Jack Finck. Carla was born the next year. And two years later her parents got married.’

She laughed, closed the pad, stuffed it into her rucksack and the next instant she was out of the door. I saw her running across the concourse to the platforms, her rucksack a bouncing dot of colour.

A week later (by then I had long been back in Berlin) an email arrived from her: ‘I’ve taken another look at the records and actually found something. They say that Carla tried to leave the Spiess salon and go self-employed in March 1939. She wanted to sell tobacco, spirits and textiles, probably in the kind of cornershop that’s common around here. But she was refused permission because she, and I quote, “is a half Jew who is having intercourse with a full Jew, Richard Kuiper” and is “therefore, according to the Nuremberg Laws, also to be considered a Jew”.’

The only mention of Richard Kuiper in a publication about the Jews of Düsseldorf is as a member of Neuss’s Jewish community. He was the son of Martha and Wilhelm Kuiper and worked for the animal feed business his father had set up in 1906, which was still selling 40,000 tonnes of goods in 1935, for a gross profit of 60,000 Reichsmark. There is no note of when their firm was driven to ruin. In any case, it no longer existed after the November pogroms.

Kanalstrasse, which is spelt with a 'C' in the old records, is a quiet, small, late-19th-century street that runs as straight as a die in a southwesterly direction towards a narrow watercourse known as the Nordkanal, beyond which is the town park with its pond surrounded by tall trees. Most of the houses had (when I walked around) been recently renovated and their freshly painted exteriors radiated upward mobility. The house where the Kuipers used to live was the only exception. It must have had the same decorative facade as the other houses in the street, but this was gone and the roughcast finish that had apparently been applied in the fifties gave it a slightly squalid look. Back in the thirties, though, it will have been identical to the other houses.

After the death of the ambassador to Paris and the furious yapping of the short, limping man with the Rhenish accent, it was clear that something terrible was going to happen, but no one knew what.

According to Frau Burckhardt's recommended reading, the Gauleiter of Düsseldorf issued the order to strike late in the evening of 8 November, but they only reached the house in Kanalstrasse in the early hours of the 10th. The mob had been busy elsewhere before that. They broke into the synagogue on Promenadenstrasse, laid waste to the interior and set fire to the building; the leader of the Nazi medical organization came to prominence by providing a number of jerrycans of petrol. As the blaze took hold, the fire service was called. The men unrolled the hoses but, as in other cities, they restricted themselves to preventing the flames from spreading to the neighbouring buildings.

For a long time, the only noises were vehicles driving to and fro, squealing brakes, pattering feet, breaking glass, the drunken or drunk-sounding singing of hate-filled songs, and hopes might have been rising that private houses would be safe, which was wrong, of course . . . Rain had been falling since midnight, barely perceptible yet cool on the skin, and it was still falling as the Kuipers (father and son) were shoved into the lorries to join other people who had been expelled from their homes. The vehicle started moving, taking them across the bridge, to the other side of the Rhine, to Düsseldorf's court jail that was already overcrowded when they arrived, into an overcrowded cell where they stayed until they (and their fellow sufferers) were taken by special train to Dachau, from where they returned in mid-January, frightened and silent, like everyone who had survived their time there.

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It was early afternoon when I looked up at the window where Richard had sat when he wrote to Carla, and I suddenly sensed how abandoned he must have felt after she left. To make the most of the daylight he had moved his desk over to the window but had kept the curtains closed apart from a small crack,

out of fear of being discovered, and so the room was in a kind of eternal twilight. The objects that had not yet been taken away were oddly far apart, as if their backs were turned to him; they were still there, but the people who were usually there with them were missing. There had initially been talk of their house being classified as a Judenhaus, but before it came to that, his parents had been forced to move to Büttger Strasse, and his sister was living in Holland following her escape.

For the letters that were later included in Carla's dossier he used squared paper from his father's accounting office and wrote with a fountain pen and blue ink. He usually got stuck after the greeting – 'My dearest Carla!' He was too tense; he had to loosen up a bit first. Tense? Withdrawn, in a bad way. He hinted at this once: 'My neck, my shoulders and my back all hurt as soon as I try to turn my head.' He would get up, go down the stairs, over to the oval window of fluted glass that turned the daylight yellow, and listen out. No, no unusual sounds, although of course the unusual had now become usual; it was not silence that was the norm but noise, drums and pipes, clicking heels and snapping flags, the pounding of fists on doors.

A friend who had lost his wife to an incurable disease told me that when he was completely at a loss due to the pain, he would sometimes stand in front of the mirror and put on a laughing mask. A laughing mask: his words. He would pull up the corners of his mouth and tense his face muscles until lines formed around his eyes, laughter lines, and after a while he would notice that his mood had adjusted to his expression. The mask impressed itself on his feelings. His unhappiness was still there, but the mask had covered it, applying a veneer of cheerfulness that mysteriously worked its way in from the outside.

Maybe one should imagine Richard's wandering around the house in the same way. Walking (although these walks were now confined to the house) not only relaxed his muscles but also his disposition. He walked around until his mood began to brighten. Only then would he sit down and continue writing.

'Today' – it says once – 'I was at the community winter aid office and paid my contribution of 5 marks. Of course I could have waited until Frau Mendel came round to collect it, but the weather was so nice, you know – cold and completely dry.'

And this was how he wrote to her, imitating the chatty tone of her letters. And she would put the letters in her suitcase alongside the records and the travel gramophone.

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