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XIX

The Story of the Streetcar Conductor Max Eckert

“The little bit you leave behind,

Lives on for the good of all humankind.”

Frank Wedekind. From the “Cabaret Songs”

A day is dawning in the way countless days have begun before it, with the sun lifting itself to the horizon and climbing above it. The sun’s rays are sending their light onto the earth, and there’s nothing to show what events will unfold in the interval between the sun’s rise and its descent below the horizon. In these hours when the light is flowing down onto the earth or seeping through deep layers of cloud, the clock measuring the lives of two billion people will tick on and on. For many it will stop, and for many it will be wound up again, everything is still hidden in darkness. The morning which receives the two billion after the night has passed is like every other morning, their souls have no inkling of the disaster which is hastening towards each one of us.

On February 3, 1945, the streetcar conductor Max Eckert left his apartment at 144 Residenzallee in the Berlin suburb of Reinickendorf to start the early shift, he’s a conductor with the city’s transport services and works on Route 141, and the first car leaves shortly after 05:00 from the street terminus in Pankower Allee. Shortly after 16:00, after the shift has changed, Eckert returns to his apartment. Until now the day

has been like every other day, he's done his shift, wrangled with the passengers, and tried to keep to the timetable, although there was quite a long air-raid warning, but there's been nothing extraordinary about that for a long time. What is extraordinary is the fact that his wife and his 16-year-old daughter aren't at home. That never really happens, and on the few occasions it did happen he'd find a note on the kitchen table, a few lines from his wife to tell him that she'd gone to the movies or to visit friends, and he only needed to heat up his dinner. But on this day Eckert finds nothing, neither his wife nor his daughter, neither a note nor his dinner. The apartment is in perfect order, because Frau Eckert is a housewife of the old school, the beds have been made with great care as usual, the comforters have been spread over them without a single wrinkle, but no food has been prepared in the kitchen. It's obvious that his wife left the apartment in the morning, but now it's the afternoon, and she hasn't returned yet. That makes no sense at all, so Eckert starts to feel uneasy, but then he remembers that of course the Americans made a daylight raid round about midday and that, according to what he was told before the end of his shift, it was mainly the city center that was hit, and this supplies Eckert the explanation for his wife's absence. Two days a week, she always takes their daughter to a doctor in Ritterstrasse, their daughter suffers from a persistent skin rash which until now has withstood every form of treatment, and people assured them that the doctor in Ritterstrasse was a particularly good one. And in fact the girl has been much better since this Dr Wiedemann began treating her.

So Eckert is reassured for the moment. He knows that there are disruptions on Subway D, from Neukölln to Gesundbrunnen, which his wife usually takes, and also that the streetcar routes which connect the south and the center with the north are out of service because of the air raid, so his wife and his daughter will have to make the journey from Ritterstrasse to Reinickendorf on foot, and probably by a very

roundabout way too, because everyone knows that there are always lots of blocked roads and detours after air raids.

Eckert heats up some leftover coffee which he finds in the pot, and makes himself a few sandwiches, then he reads the *Midday News*, but he soon realizes that he's not interested in any of it, at least not in his present state of mind, because while his eyes slide over the lines, stopping here and there at a heading like "The German People Are More United Now Than Ever," "718th and 719th Knight's Cross With Oak Leaves Awarded," and "Fresh Triumph For People's Militia," his senses are completely concentrated on the noises which he can hear from the stairwell. The instant a footstep becomes audible, his whole body tenses, he's poised to leap to the door the moment a key is pushed into the lock, but the footsteps always die away before they reach the second floor, or they walk past his door and climb higher, once they also pause on the second-floor landing, but then his neighbor's doorbell is rung. Eckert walks up and down, his hands clasped behind his back, now and then he looks out the window, but even that can't distract him from the crushing silence of the apartment and the torment of waiting. As always, the street is lively with hurrying, urgent pedestrians, packed streetcars, and rattling trucks. The people are already trembling with the fear of the approaching night, of the sirens' howling sound, and of the disaster which is rushing towards them.

Two hours pass, dusk falls and flows through the windowpanes into the kitchen. Eckert switches on the radio set, but the loudspeaker remains mute, and when he twists the light switch the globe is not illuminated. The district's electricity has been turned off yet again. So the consolation of light and the distraction of music are denied to him. Eckert feels his way back to the wickerwork armchair, and drops heavily into it. The minutes creep by even more slowly, because the torment of

waiting has now been overlaid by the funeral pall of darkness. Eckert sits motionless in the kitchen and waits, he rests his hands on his knees and looks at the wall, which moves further and further away as the darkness thickens. A single thought lives within him, it fills him completely, and threatens to shatter him into pieces. His wife should have been home long ago, you don't need more than an hour and a half, or two hours at the most, to get from Moritzplatz to Residenzstrasse, the All Clear was given at about 14:00 – as a transport worker, he tells time only by the 24-hour clock – so his wife, even if she was forced to make some detours, should have been home by about 17:00 at the latest, but it's 18:30 now, and she's still not here.

Eckert is a rational, sober man, he has no time for extravagant talk, he's neither sentimental nor romantic, he'd be astonished if anyone wanted to characterize the feeling which he experiences for his wife as love. Rather, it's made up of a steadfast affection, an unqualified attachment, a force of habit which has been tested and proved, but these three components, affection, attachment, and habit, are a firm bond, a more reliable and more lasting bond than the wreathed roses of eternal love and fidelity. So in these hours when he's touched by a dark foreboding, he doesn't suffer emotional turmoil, it's more the fear of losing a valuable possession which is part of his own self. They're the last possessions left to him, wife and daughter, after two sons were lost, in the way you think that you've lost a watch, only to realize later that it was stolen by a conjuring trick. The younger son, who was serving with the Luftwaffe, was taken from him even before the war, after his letters, which seemed to come by a mysterious route, arrived at longer and longer intervals, and finally stopped altogether, until one day a message arrived that he had crashed during maneuvers, sustained fatal injuries, and been buried with full military honors. It was only very much later, when the veil of secrecy surrounding the "Condor Legion" lifted, that

Eckert learned his son had died in the Spanish Civil War, the Nazi airforce's full-scale dress rehearsal. The older son, a master carpenter with "Rheinmetall Borsig" in Tegel, a quiet, skillful boy with a minor artistic talent for carving figures in wood, was devoured by the war: he returned from the Kazakh steppes with frostbitten hands and feet, a helpless, amputated lump of a human being with black stumps on his limbs, who at his first attempt to move without help threw himself from the fourth floor of the military hospital and shattered to pieces on the sidewalk. That's how two stones were broken out of an apparently so firmly constructed circle of life, like two good teeth out of a healthy jaw, and each time it was like a dagger-blow aimed at his heart, which unleashed a rage in him even more than it caused him pain, because his sons' deaths had been accompanied by the crude screaming of marching songs.

That was why only the wife and the daughter were left. All care and affection were united now for their benefit, but this circle of life is in daily and hourly danger too, like everyone's circle of life. The circles are drawing in more and more, they're wrapping themselves around the hearts, the threatening shadows are becoming ever blacker and deeper, but it's not a supernatural power to which they must bow unresistingly and submissively, not the omnipotence of a god, and not the force of a natural catastrophe beyond human will and human foresight. It's the grasp of a tyranny, threatening life and security, happiness and peace, so that the loss of lives and goods doesn't bring forth sorrow and submission to an inevitable fate, but rage and rebellion.

At this hour, as Eckert perches motionless on a kitchen chair in his dark kitchen, he understands why the sorrow for his lost sons has not overshadowed his life completely, and this understanding causes rage, fury, and hatred to rise from his unconscious to his consciousness, the subdued restlessness of waiting turns into an

explosive restlessness which demands action. He stands up and shoves the chair away vigorously, shakes off his brooding, puts on his gray-green uniform cap with the cockade and the golden oak wreath signifying 25 years' service, buttons up his heavy, dark-gray uniform coat, and leaves the apartment. He doesn't really know yet what he intends to do, but he has to take some action, the waiting has become unbearable, it's hollowing him out from inside, the silence and emptiness of the apartment and the darkness are crushing the life out of him. He stands uncertainly outside the door of the apartment building, and then walks slowly down Residenzstrasse to Osloer Strasse. There he comes to a stop again. The shadowy silhouettes of the high-tension masts and the endless lines of the wires etch spookily skeletal figures into the dark night sky, outside the Gestapo's Jewish holding camp in Schulstrasse the external lamps are already burning, and in their murky glow a sentry with a red armband and a yellow star is pacing up and down.

Eckert turns uncertainly on his heels, ready to go back into Residenzstrasse, which now lies lifeless, wreathed in gray, in front of him. The black-out curtains in the windows of the buildings give the apartments the appearance of well-draped coffins, in which beings move back and forth who hope to escape death, who attempt to outsmart it by placing the emergency valises, the gas-masks, and the protective goggles close to hand, by listening attentively to all the reports from the air-defense stations, and by dampening all their other senses to improve their hearing. But then Eckert curbs his steps after all, no, he can't go back to the empty silence of his apartment now, but what should he do?

He stands alone on the street corner, and looks around aimlessly. All the energy which sparked up in him before has ebbed away again, a paralyzing indecisiveness begins to take control of him. Then his glance falls on the telephone booth outside the

school in Osloer Strasse, and instantly the encroaching paralysis recedes again. Make a call, that's what he has to do now. Taking long strides, he hurries towards the little square booth with its red iron framework and thick opaque glass, opens the door, and lifts the receiver. This all happens so spontaneously that it's only now he realizes that he has no idea what the doctor's telephone number is. The directory is in tatters, and anyway it's so dark in the booth that there's no point trying to look up the number. He leaves the booth, slamming the door shut behind him. For several seconds Eckert is defeated, and leans against a lamp-post, but then he walks determinedly into Schwedenstrasse, he knows that there's a big restaurant there, on the right-hand side, halfway between Osloer Strasse and Exerzierstrasse, he'll phone from there.

He enters the restaurant with a brief "Good evening," orders a beer, and asks for the directory. Wiedemann is the doctor's name, Wiedemann, there's quite a number of people with that name in the Berlin telephone directory, four dozen at a guess. His finger slides down the lines slowly and carefully, architect, painter, auto painter, tobacconist, then he's got it, towards the bottom of the first column. "Wiedemann, Dr Heinrich, Dermatologist, 44 Ritterstrasse, Berlin SW 68, 17 48 64." Eckert goes to the phone and dials, one, seven, four, eight, six, four, the engaged signal buzzes, Eckert hangs up, and tries again after a few minutes. Again it's no good, the deep humming tone of the engaged signal sounds in his ear after he's dialed only two numbers. Three further attempts, at short intervals, bring the same result.

The owner of the restaurant sees that Eckert is at a loss, and informs him that all the lines to the exchanges in the center and the south have been disrupted, the air raid... Eckert stops listening, throws a fifty-pfennig piece onto the tin counter, and leaves. A compulsion has arisen within him, to speak with Dr Wiedemann, today, he doesn't really know himself what good he expects that to be, but the compulsion is

irresistible. At the corner of Koloniestrasse he jumps onto the 88, rides as far as Gesundbrunnen, and crosses over to the subway. “Trains not running according to timetable,” he reads mechanically, “Line cut between Alexanderplatz and Kottbuser Tor,” and walks down the deep staircase to the platform. “Train terminates at Alexanderplatz!” the female platform attendant calls in a hoarse, uncertain voice, “Train terminates at Alexanderplatz!” At Alexanderplatz, Eckert thinks. He wants to get to Moritzplatz, that’s – he works it out quickly, Jannowitzbrücke, Neanderstrasse, Moritzplatz – another three stations, but none of that matters now, if the subway terminates at Alexanderplatz, then he’ll just cover the last stretch from Alexanderplatz to Moritzplatz on foot, even if he has to crawl on all fours.

People who, like Eckert, are suddenly gripped by a manic compulsion can be transformed by their relentless focus into murderers, they’re capable of committing deeds which they have never given even the shadow of a thought to in all their previous lives. But for the moment Eckert is peaceful, because no obstacles are opposing him, he’s just uneasy and agitated, he’s still repressing the dark forebodings, those forebodings are still no more than dull sensations.

In the subway Eckert hangs onto a strap, not even letting it go when the seat directly in front of him becomes free at Bernauer Strasse, he’s so completely concentrated on his goal that he hears and sees nothing, the words Moritzplatz, Moritzplatz, Moritzplatz are going round and round ceaselessly in his brain. He knows the area like the back of his hand, because he worked in an auto-repair shop very close by, in Sebastianstrasse, before he joined the city transport services. Moritzplatz, where Prinzenstrasse and Oranienstrasse intersect, is a proper four-cornered square, with the big Wertheim’s department store (he hasn’t been able to get used to the “Aryanized” name, Awag, yet), and opposite it Tam’s Cinema and Dance

Hall, where in the old days he drank quite a lot of bock beer beneath the paper streamers, and showed quite a few of the fast-talking Berlin girls a thing or two on the dance floor, with the branch of Aschinger's at the corner of Oranienstrasse, which oddly was decorated in the blue-and-white checks of Bavaria, but nevertheless was one of Berlin's gastronomic landmarks, and with the Dresden Bank at the corner of Prinzenstrasse, and the café which kept going bust, across from the Prinzessinnenstrasse, where the postal service's red trucks roll out of the telegraph construction office in an unending stream. For Eckert, Moritzplatz isn't just a place-name, it's part of his life in Berlin, even if the Square has changed its appearance considerably in recent years, since the four subway exits were added, and the roundabout was built.

Eckert leaves the subway at Alexanderplatz, he knows the subterranean labyrinth like the back of his hand, and leaves it through the correct exit opposite the Teachers' Association building. It's 20:00 now, the time when the air-raid warnings start, and a mass of people is gathering outside the bunkers in the corner formed where Neue Königstrasse and Landsberger Strasse meet, people who have come to rely on the unvarying punctuality of the English airmen, and are waiting for the alarm to sound and the doors to open. A velvet-soft sky spreads itself above the city, lots of stars are shining and flickering. As it's the time of the new moon, it's quite dark, Alexanderplatz is a broad, dark field with a high, black backdrop, the signal lights hang randomly in the air, the blacked-out above-ground trains glide over the viaduct with a dull rumbling and squealing brakes.

Eckert walks with long strides into the trench formed by the two rows of buildings in Alexanderstrasse. The street is empty, dead, the officer outside Entrance A of the police headquarters building across from Kaiserstrasse is leaning against the gate, he's

looking bored and smoking furtively, holding the cigarette in the hollow of his hand. Eckert's steps sound dully, there's no echo from the ruins to the right and the left, the stars shimmer on the dark, taut cloth of the night sky behind the empty windows. When Eckert catches sight of the Jannowitzbrücke behind Blumenstrasse, the sky is no longer dark blue and velvet-black; wide, red shapes are pushing upwards from the south, the reflection climbs almost directly overhead, and if it wasn't night-time you could imagine for a fleeting moment that the sun was setting. But Eckert no longer imagines such things, he's experienced all the big day and night raids and knows exactly what this red wall of cloud means: the city is still burning, nine hours after the raid.

At the Jannowitzbrücke Eckert is stopped. He's not allowed across, a policeman explains that he has no chance of getting into Brückenstrasse, no chance, it's completely impossible, the whole district on the other side of the river is blocked off. The uneasiness within Eckert slips into agitation, as he sees that he's being pushed away from his goal, but he's still in a condition to assess every thought, every word, and every movement, and subject them to his will. Before his agitation transforms itself into action, an attempt to force his way through, the sirens' horrifying voices shatter the stillness of the night. With a movement of his head, the policeman points in the direction of the Waisenbrücke, where a yellow-and-red sign indicates a public air-raid shelter. Eckert walks a few steps in that direction, and stops behind a blown-up bollard, he has absolutely no intention of taking shelter, the alarm can only assist his plans, he'll carry them out under the protection of the alarm, as it were. When the barrage starts, the policeman will probably take cover too, and the bridge crossing will be open. Eckert waits patiently. The arches of the Jannowitzbrücke are inscribed like a huge spider web into the dark sky, the massive tower of the Berlin-Brandenburg

Museum rears up on the right, the façade of the destroyed and burnt-out Josetti cigarette factory rises sharply, like the battlements of a castle, on the left.

Eckert feels no fear, only an unspeakable horror is within him. Even if he can't make out what's on the other side of the river, he still knows that over there it's Hell, from which the flames are still shooting into the sky, and in which the city is being incinerated. Time flows sluggishly on, the sky is still profoundly dark, but a low, even buzzing is becoming audible, soft at first, and then more and more distinct. Then a grand spectacle unfolds against the black backdrop, red pyramids which seem to be compounded of countless lively little flames emerge from the dark sky, shedding light in all directions and floating gently to earth, whereupon other signs appear, three yellow balls, which turn white after a few seconds and are absorbed by the dark again.

It's like a spell has been cast on Eckert, he's never seen something like this before, but he knows that the red pyramids, the so-called Christmas trees, indicate the aiming points for the bombers, and that the bright balls are the markings of the fighters, and then suddenly the searchlights appear, shooting up from the silhouetted circle of buildings, they stretch out like ghosts into the darkness, their long, white arms frisk the sky like a human body, unite in one powerful beam, and then fan out into separate rays again. When one of the searchlights is switched off, the dark descends again all the more heavily, and when another one shoots up from directly behind the savings bank a little bright, silver fleck appears in it: a plane. Immediately, all the other searchlights fall upon it, criss-crossing and almost stumbling over each other in their excitement, relentlessly pursuing the path of the plane, which continues steadily and unerringly on its course. Then the silence is violently interrupted, and hard, dry detonations begin to roar: the flak has begun to shoot. It glows yellowy-red around the plane before it bursts, right and left, below and above, then a glow rises on

the eastern horizon, explosions cast their bright red mushrooms of light high into the dark backdrop, and a few seconds later there's a rolling sound like nearby thunder.

Eckert can't tear himself away from the spectacle, but then he makes a move after all, and cautiously approaches the bridge. It's unguarded now. Eckert gathers his coat more closely around his body and runs across the bridge, panting a little up the slight incline, then he's passed the highest point of the bridge, and his legs run of their own accord. In Brückenstrasse he slackens his pace, the run and the agitation have taken his breath away. The closer Eckert gets to the intersection at Köpenicker Strasse, the hotter the breath of the flames becomes, and the thicker the smoke and haze. It's too dark for Eckert to distinguish details, but he can still make out enough to see that there's not a building left standing here, the tongues of the flames are still licking everywhere, from windows and skylights, from shop-fronts and basements, the strong wind is whipping them up and damping them down, quelling them and fanning them again. The street is like a path across a shingle beach, stony and uneven, the signal-masts and lamp-posts are broken in the middle, the overhead cables for the streetcars are hanging down. One of the wires slashes Eckert's cheek, but he barely attends to it, using his glove to wipe away the blood which spurts out, and finally pressing his handkerchief against the wound, he stumbles on through the rubble, every step is dangerous, because chunks of masonry are still poised precariously, deep holes have been blasted in the roadway, Eckert doesn't pause even for a moment, the thought of turning back doesn't even enter his mind, it's as though an invisible fist is driving him onwards. Darkness and fire, debris and rubble enclose him, the gas streams from burst mains, hissing evilly, water is spraying from blown-up pipes, high above the flak shells are exploding, British Mosquitos and German Messerschmidts are circling, but Eckert stumbles on into the landscape of rubble. When he falls, he lands in a soft,

sticky mass, the blood in his arteries stands still and seems to drain away, hot and cold shudders shake him, an incomprehensible horror takes hold of him and drives cold sweat onto his forehead. His hands, which he threw out to break his fall, have sunk into a slimy mass which is giving off a sweet odor of blood, and he senses without quite acknowledging it that he has grabbed inside the torn-up body of a human being. For a few seconds he lies as though paralyzed, as though he has touched the bloody, distorted face of the raging war, then he drags himself up violently and staggers on again, only one thought is within him, Moritzplatz, Dr Wiedemann, his wife, his daughter. Eventually he's just tottering, every stone and every hole is a subtle, malicious trap, and when the three long notes of the provisional All Clear split the sky he has only got as far as Dresdner Strasse, and at every step he's been surrounded by nothing but mountains of fire and rubble, by the vapor of blood and the smell of burning. He can barely see anymore, because his eyes are sticky with blood and soot and dust, but he gets through to Ritterstrasse at last, because he does know the district like the back of his hand, and he finds Dr Wiedemann's building too.

As he enters, almost falling through the street door, the last residents are just emerging from the basement air-raid shelter. When one of the women catches sight of him, she stands for a moment as though frozen, then loud, shrill screams rush up from her lungs, a young woman cowers at the bottom of the staircase and begins to whimper softly, a child puts its hands over its face and weeps silently.

Eckert looks dreadful, like a dead man who has arisen from a horrible mass grave. His face has been torn open by a terrible wound on the right cheek, from which blood is still seeping, his ripped-up coat is covered in blood and dust, pieces of human flesh have caught on the buttons of his right sleeve, the soot which has covered his face frames two wild, rolling eyes with bloodshot pupils. Eckert tries to say something, but

he can only babble, the words are welling up in his mouth, he walks a few more steps, then his knees sag, he tries to stand upright again, but then his feet slide from under him, he collapses.

When he regains consciousness, he's lying on a sofa, a man with severe-looking rimless glasses is bending over him, and rubbing something wet over the wound on his cheek. The man with the glasses cautions him to lie still, not to move, because the wound has to be stitched. Eckert lets his head fall again, suddenly there's an ice-cold sensation on his cheek, and he feels fine needle-pricks which don't hurt. Who is the man with the rimless glasses? A doctor? Of course he's a doctor, it must be...

"Dr Wiedemann?" Eckert asks with an effort.

The other man nods, he's finished stitching the wound, steps over to a wash-basin, and washes his hands carefully and thoroughly. "How do you know me?" he asks over his shoulder.

The fact that the man who is now in the same room with him is actually the Dr Wiedemann to whom he has fought his way through debris and rubble, through bomb craters and corpses, through fire, gas, and water, revives him immediately, he swings his legs cautiously off the sofa and tries to stand up, but Dr Wiedemann pushes him gently back onto the sofa with one hand. "Stay lying down," he says in a friendly but firm tone. "You're in a really dreadful condition," he adds. "Where can you have come from?"

But Eckert isn't in the mood to answer questions now, the questions which he has to ask are burning inside him. He slides back cautiously onto the pillow. "My name is Eckert," he says.

Dr Wiedemann looks at him questioningly.

“Eckert, Max Eckert from Reinickendorf,” Eckert repeats, “my daughter is one of your patients, doctor.”

“That’s right,” the doctor says, “I understand you perfectly now.” He looks closely at Eckert. Fluxus salinus, he thinks, so this is the father. “And what brings you to me at this late hour?” he asks.

Eckert breathes deeply. He has reached his goal at last, he still has no inkling that it’s only a stage in the journey. With short, hasty words, all in a rush, he tells his story.

Dr Wiedemann listened to him calmly, without interrupting. “Yes, your wife came to me with your daughter this morning, Herr Eckert,” he says, when Eckert is finished. “I put your daughter under the sun-lamp, and gave her an injection of Detoxin. Your wife was in a great hurry, because there was already a report that the bomber groups were approaching, she left here at about a quarter past eleven, it was probably too late to reach home, because the sirens sounded only about ten minutes later. Presumably she sought shelter somewhere in a bunker or in the subway.”

Dr Wiedemann is at pains not to mention the fact that a bomb fell right through the ceiling of the Moritzplatz subway station, killing an as yet unknown number of people who were standing inside the station, he also says nothing about how the first wave of bombers had been enough to set the whole district between Moritzplatz and Köpenicker Brücke, Hallesches Tor and Friedrichstrasse station ablaze, and that precisely when the people were fleeing from the basements of the burning apartment buildings and factories into the street, the second and third waves flew in and again dropped massive quantities of explosive and incendiary bombs over the same target area.

“My wife and my daughter still hadn’t got home by half-past six this evening, doctor,” Eckert says agitatedly. “Something’s happened, I’m sure, I can feel it in my blood.”

“Calm yourself, Herr Eckert,” Dr Wiedemann says soothingly. “Maybe the raid upset your wife so much that she stayed with friends.”

“We don’t have any friends around here,” Eckert answers bluntly.

“Or perhaps she was nervous about making the long journey on foot,” says Dr Wiedemann, trying to allay his fears.

But Eckert won’t accept that either. “Think about it, doctor, they still hadn’t got home four and a half hours after the All Clear,” he says urgently. “Four and a half hours!”

“There is little point indulging in speculation,” Dr Wiedemann suggests. “After all, your wife could have reached home while you were on your way here, it’s after half-past nine now. I mean, you set out more than three hours ago. It’s quite possible that, while you’re here talking with me, she’s sitting at home worrying about you.”

Eckert jerks upright. He hasn’t considered that possibility at all before, he’s spent too much time thinking that some disaster has occurred. “That might be it,” he says quickly, puts his feet on the floor and stands up. “Where are you going now?” Dr Wiedemann asks.

“Home,” Eckert answers, “where else?”

“Impossible.” Dr Wiedemann is having none of it. “In your condition, in the middle of the night? Wasn’t the journey here enough for you?”

The fight about going or staying lasts for several minutes, Dr Wiedemann eventually wins after promising to take Eckert to Reinickendorf in his car first thing in the morning. He stealthily adds a powerful dose of Bromural to the coffee, and indeed

it's not long before Eckert has fallen fast asleep. Wiedemann is a doctor for whom his profession is also an inner vocation, who sees only suffering human beings, not private patients and insurance-company patients. Of course, it's not only his humanity, but also his medical specialty which is important, because he wrote his doctorate about dermatitis with particular reference to fluxus salinus, to weeping sores, but that can't be held against him, really it only influences him subconsciously, because he realizes that Eckert has worked himself into a condition of serious mental and emotional depression, that an almost manic compulsion is threatening to tear him apart from the inside, and he resolves to deal with this man very cautiously.

Promptly at seven o'clock the next morning, while Eckert is still fast asleep, Dr Wiedemann fetches his car from the garage, which has remained miraculously undamaged in the midst of destruction, and then he takes Eckert, as promised, to Reinickendorf. To get to Residenzstrasse, he has to make a huge detour, via Schöneberg, Friedenau, Charlottenburg, and Moabit, as the previous day's raid has laid waste to the city on an unimaginable scale, and diversions keep forcing the car to the west. It's only towards nine o'clock that they reach Residenzstrasse, Dr Wiedemann walks up to the apartment with Eckert, he feels very uneasy too. Even if Ursula Eckert is only one among his many patients, she and her mother, who always came along with her, are still people whom he knows personally, and the fate of someone you know personally always affects you more directly than the most terrible mass catastrophe.

Eckert's hands are shaking so much that he's incapable of unlocking the door to the apartment. Dr Wiedemann takes the key out of his hand, unlocks the door and pushes it open vigorously. A few glances show him that the apartment is empty: Frau Eckert and her daughter still haven't returned. He knows what that means, and it's

written all too plainly on Eckert's face as well. Nevertheless he tries some words of consolation, but Eckert simply doesn't listen, he walks through the apartment in a few quick strides, stands pensively for a few seconds in the kitchen, aligns a chair carefully with the table-edge in a completely mechanical movement, and then walks purposefully out.

He doesn't say a word as they descend the staircase together. He doesn't rush down the stairs, he's plunged his hands deep into his coat-pockets and takes every step carefully, but precisely this slowness is more disturbing than ranting and screaming. It's only when Dr Wiedemann is unlocking his car that Eckert asks for a ride again. Dr Wiedemann doesn't dare to deny him this request, and he also thinks it's not a good idea to leave the man, whose eyes are as dead as if he's been turned to stone, alone for a while yet. On the journey back to Ritterstrasse Dr Wiedemann tries a couple of times to engage Eckert in conversation, but without success, so eventually he gives up. When the doctor stops at the corner of Ritterstrasse and Prinzenstrasse to let a column of fire-trucks go by, Eckert opens his door quickly, gets out, nods briefly to the doctor, and slams the door shut behind him. He does this with such swift and adroit movements, which Dr Wiedemann would never have expected of this rather slow and brooding man, that the doctor is taken by surprise, and can't stop him. He catches a last glimpse of Eckert striding directly and purposefully towards the landscape of rubble. And now begins the odyssey of the streetcar conductor Max Eckert, on February 4, 1945, the day after the Americans' most destructive air raid on Berlin. Of course, the devastated district is cordoned off all around, but Eckert still knows how to get into the devastated streets, and his conductor's uniform is a help. He's convinced that there can be only one possibility left for his wife and his daughter to still be alive, and that's if they're trapped in some basement somewhere. In

Schmidstrasse, near the intersection with Neanderstrasse, an excavator is working, because it's thought that people are still alive under the rubble there. Eckert quarters the area between Köpenicker Strasse and Moritzplatz, but he goes back to the excavator again and again, and watches its sharp jaws eating their way into the mountains of masonry, swiveling round, and spitting their mouthful out to one side. He observes the process carefully, dividing his time between Schmidstrasse and searching elsewhere. What he perceived only vaguely during the night, what could only be guessed at in the darkness, is now, as the bright daylight floods over it, an inferno of inconceivable dreadfulness. Between the collapsed and still burning buildings lie shattered streetcars, autos and wagons, crushed humans and horses, parts of corpses and fragments of cadavers, heads without bodies, bodies without heads, torsos without legs, legs without torsos, indefinable piles of burned, charred, ripped human flesh, and despairing, lamenting, half-crazed people are wandering around, many of them staring with uncomprehending eyes and pointing with impotent gestures at the smoking, shattered, devastated buildings which barely twenty-four hours ago still provided shelter and warmth, still housed a miserable remnant of individual life, some of them stumbling through smoke-wreathed entrances and climbing onto trembling walls to retrieve the pathetic remains of their possessions from the rubble-heaps.

When it becomes clear that nobody can still be alive in the basement in Schmidstrasse, because it has filled to the ceiling with water, the excavator is switched off and withdrawn. As it's towed away by a tractor, Eckert is quite suddenly transformed. He has nourished the flickering flame of his hope until the last moment, but now it's certain that his wife and his daughter died here, somewhere in these streets. Whereas until now Eckert has been relatively calm and deliberate, despite his

agitation, suddenly he is overcome by an idea which won't relinquish its grip on him, which spurs him on: he has to find his wife and his daughter, no matter where and no matter how. He looks into the face of every dead person, turns over every corpse which is lying prone and takes stock of the battered faces, he examines the clothes on the torsos and picks skulls up from the ground, he clammers among the still smoking and still smoldering ruins, he climbs down into collapsed basements, forces himself through debris-blocked entrances. Again and again he roves through the debris-strewn area from the Köpenickbrücke to Schmidstrasse, from Moritzplatz to Alexandrinenstrasse, from St Michael's Church Square to Neanderstrasse, he shifts chunks of masonry away with his bare hands if he thinks that doing so will clear the entrance to a basement, he wriggles through debris-blocked basement windows, he's already seen hundreds of dead people and helped to recover the corpses from the Moritzplatz subway station, he's looked into the black faces of burned and charred human beings without being able to tell if they were men or women, but it was all to no avail. He wasn't able to find his wife and his daughter.

He looks inhuman, he's starving, he has muck from corpses on his hands, he's close to a complete collapse, but still he wanders through the landscape of rubble. He knows that his wife and his daughter have died, but he also wants to know how they were forced to die, and where their corpses are. If they'd died of tuberculosis or cancer or some kind of disgusting disease, that would have been a death which he'd been part of, which would have originated within them, which would have been in accordance with the generations-old ideas about dying. Then he would have followed a coffin and would have thrown three handfuls of earth into the open grave, he would have known where a mound would then have formed and where a simple marble stone would later have arisen, but this way he knows nothing. He can't comprehend it,

can't comprehend that the two of them just aren't there anymore, disappeared, stamped into pieces, scattered to the winds, just not there anymore. The imagination of this simple man is kindled by the horrifying, gruesome sights which he's seen on this day, and which still keep appearing before him. He imagines his wife and daughter sitting on a bench in a basement shelter, as they always sat in the shelter in their apartment building, with their heads drawn down to their shoulders, arms pressed tightly against bodies, knees jammed together, with trembling chins and restless eyes, holding damp cloths which they're ready to press over their mouths at any second, with protective goggles perched on their foreheads which they can push down over their eyes at any moment, he imagines them sitting there, with every fiber of their bodies attuned to the noises penetrating from outside, to the humming of the engines, to the thunderous barking of the flak, to the roaring, vibrating, and whistling of the bombs plummeting down on them. He imagines them sitting there, just for an instant, before they can form a thought, before the event rushing towards them can prompt a reflex in their brains and enter their consciousness, he imagines how in this instant the ceiling of the basement punches down on them like a fist of monumental power. This happened to them without them seeing, hearing, feeling anything, even though, after hundreds of alarms, they were prepared for it.

It might have happened like that, but it might also... Eckert is unable to quell his imagination anymore, it is prompted again and again by the sights in the landscape of corpses which surrounds him. Like every other human being, he is imprisoned in the world of empirical thinking, and he lacks the experience of those whose mouths are closed forever because they are already beyond the Lethe, but that only makes his imagination distort the contours and darken the colors of what he sees more terribly.

Might it not also have been that, when everything was burning, heat, anxiety, and choking attacked his wife and daughter, when the basement door was barred by leaping flames, when the emergency exit was smashed open in a tearing hurry and the fire in the adjoining basement blocked this escape as well? Might it not be that the fires leapt at them with greedy, grasping fingers, stabbing glowing tongues into their flesh and transforming them into ashes or arm-sized lumps of charcoal, or that smoke and haze threw them down and slowly strangled the life out of them? Might it not be that they still had time for many thoughts and for horrible feelings, sudden terror, tormenting anxiety, deadly fear, incomprehensible dread, paralyzing horror?

Might it not also be that they were buried by an avalanche of rubble, were entombed in a dark crypt, and that the water began to spray from a broken pipe, flowing and flowing ceaselessly like a waterfall, spreading over the floor of the basement, rising slowly, but constantly, climbing up the people's bodies, enclosing them in a wet grip, running on and on and finally climbing into the people, forcing the blood into the brain and paralyzing it, flooding the lungs and stopping the breath? Or might it not be that a distributor pipe was damaged and the gas began to flow, an invisible, deadly cloud began to spread through the basement, first hovering under the ceiling and then descending onto the people, a cloud which made their eyes flicker and an unbearable buzzing fill their ears, which dragged the people into a daze and nudged them gently into unconsciousness, which clogged up the pores and pushed out the breath, turned the blood bright red and discolored the mouths?

Might it not have been that a piece of masonry tore them down and pinned them to the floor, like a wrestler holds his defeated opponent down on the mat, so that the weight crushed the body or the legs, but did only that, just held them fast, still let them breathe, think, feel, even speak, but bound them in a grip of stone, ensuring that

the place where the chunk of masonry had struck them was the unalterable and final place they would occupy on earth, that only the hand of a mighty miracle would have been able to remove it and to free them, that the life would be slowly choked out of them by stone pincers in the dark vault of the collapsed basement, and that their bodies would shut down all their functions with agonizing slowness?

Or might it not also be that all that happened was that they were shut up in a subterranean vault, that they were still walking up and down inside it, trying to decide what to do, knocking on the ceiling and the walls, but that nobody heard them knocking, because huge mounds of rubble were spread out on top of them, so that now, while he, Eckert, is climbing over a kind of shingle beach, they are still alive and hoping to be freed, but this hope is becoming ever more feeble and more fleeting, and despair and madness are kindling in their brains the more that hunger and thirst and darkness take possession of them and the more unlikely it becomes that anyone will discover their stony grave and free them from it?

The streetcar conductor Eckert is standing on the threshold of that world to which there is no entry, which no human eye has yet seen, whose walls can be penetrated only by thoughts, and of which there is no picture or representation, for it is surrounded by a cold, quaking uncertainty.

He knows the word “Missing,” but until now it’s had no meaning for him, he has read it and repeated it, but it hasn’t signified anything. During his life he has used many words heedlessly and superficially, without attaching a meaning to them. One of these is the word “Missing,” until now it’s rolled smoothly off his tongue, but now it’s standing before him like a living being, a monster, of incredible size, with a gaping maw and razor-like teeth, with bloodshot eyes grinning in mockery, long arms greedy to grab their prey: “Missing.” Now he knows what it means when you reach

out and find nothing there, when your thoughts, hopes, and desires circle around a deadly uncertainty: “Missing.” Never to have complete certainty, again and again to be imagining the basements and tunnels, hollows and craters, again and again to be wondering whether they were squashed by masses of masonry, covered over by water, knocked out by gas, thrown into the air by exploding shells, chewed by rats, whether their screams died away slowly, or whether life fled from them swiftly: “Missing.”

Even in these days of complete chaos, a man like Eckert was bound to attract attention. A police patrol picks him up eventually, and tries to get him to leave the devastated area firstly by calling out to him, and then by grabbing him with practised hands. Eckert struggles desperately, but the policemen are stronger than he is, so he gives in eventually, lets them hold him on either side and lead him away.

One of the policemen, a youngish man with a smooth, expressionless face, pats him sympathetically on the shoulder and suggests inconsequentially: “It’s bad, my friend, but don’t worry, we can only die one death.”

Eckert barely listens at first, then the words sink into his consciousness after all. What did the cop just say? We can only die one... Eckert stands in front of the policeman and looks into his face, despairingly and threateningly all at once.

The policeman becomes uncomfortable under the threatening gaze, he pushes Eckert away with a dismissive movement and asks: “What’s going on here? Why are you staring at me like that?”

Eckert doesn’t turn his eyes away, he keeps looking at the policeman. “We can only die one death, can we, son?” he murmurs. “Yes, obviously, only one death.” His voice gets louder, rising finally to an animal’s roar: “Yes, only one death, but it matters what kind of death that is, whether you die, just die, because syphilis eats you up slowly, or because one day your heart just can’t go on, but what’s happening here

isn't a proper death, burning, charring, choking, drowning, battering, or being torn to pieces, ripped to shreds or pulverized by air pressure..."

"It's alright," the policeman says, taking a step back. "Might very well be, but come along now."

"Surely you understand, friend," the other policeman says, an older man with solid features, signaling to his colleague with his eyes, "that you can't keep crawling around here where everything's damaged. Just who are you looking for?"

"My wife," Eckert answers, "my wife and my daughter, this is where they must be, somewhere." He points at the ruins with his right hand. "Here or there or over there, somewhere. Maybe they're already dead, but maybe they're still alive, and we're standing right on top of their tomb."

"But there's no sense searching here, you won't find them if you look your whole life," the older policeman says. "And now enough of all this wandering around. We don't actually want to arrest you. Just go!"

"Go where?" Eckert asks. "Can you tell me where?"

"Home, of course," the younger policeman replies. "Where else would you go? Or do you live here, and you've been bombed out?"

Home? The word stabs like a thorn into Eckert's consciousness. Home? To the empty, dead apartment, where every object reminds him that his wife and daughter were living there only two or three days ago? Being there would be almost worse than searching in this landscape of corpses.

"Just be reasonable, friend," the older policeman says, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Go home!"

"Good luck," the younger one says. "Heil Hitler!"

Eckert, who has already half-turned from the policemen and taken his first step away, turns back with a jerk. It's as though something has burst open suddenly inside him, as though the crust which has covered his soul until now is splitting open, and everything he has repressed and pushed down again and again for years is welling up through the crack to the surface. The pictures race through his brain: the deaths of his two sons, what happened to his wife's sister, who was married to a Jew that they beat to death in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, the arrest and cold-blooded liquidation of Provost Lichtenberg of St Hedwig's Cathedral (for Eckert is a pious Catholic), the complete secularization of the people, the invocations of God in the mouths of predatory murderers, the insane continuation of a war long lost.

"You say 'Heil Hitler' here among the rubble of Berlin?" Eckert roars, pushing his head forward like a steer expecting an opponent's attack. It's possible, it's even probable that the young policeman said "Heil Hitler" purely from habit and without meaning anything in particular, but Eckert is beyond thinking about that now, his brain is being swamped by a red wave which extinguishes all considered distinctions, hatred, fury, rage, contempt, despair are filling every cell and every pore of his being. That kid there, with his smooth, self-satisfied face, his green uniform and his helmet, at this minute he's the system itself, beneath the peak pulled down over his eyes grins the repellent, distorted face of the the hated Devil from Branau, of the Antichrist.

Eckert is upon him in one leap, his two hands encircle the throat, take a firm grip, squeezing the airway shut, Eckert's weight has made the young policeman lose his balance, he totters and falls to the ground, but Eckert doesn't let go of the airway. A fever has overcome him, the world around him has ceased to exist, he is all there is, and underneath him the other one, this distorted, devil's face with the little black mustache on its upper lip.

The other policeman was so surprised by Eckert's sudden attack that he missed the right moment to intervene. He tears his pistol out of his side holster. "Let go!" he bellows. "Let go at once!"

The voice gets through to Eckert as though from very far away, the blood is roaring tumultuously and uncontrollably in his ears, his hands press more and more tightly on the airway, the young policeman is already almost unconscious, his face has turned bright red, and is now starting to go blue.

The other policeman tries to tear Eckert away, but he fails, Eckert's hands are like iron pincers around the young policeman's throat.

"Let go!" the older policeman bellows again. "Or I'll shoot!" He starts hitting Eckert, but Eckert's grip doesn't slacken, he presses his opponent's head further and further down among the stones, his breath is coming in jerks, foam appears on his lips. Then the older policeman kneels down next to Eckert, puts the pistol to his temple, and pulls the trigger.

A short, sharp explosion and a dull crackling sound, then it's over. Eckert's head falls to the side, his body spasms upward, then he slides down and rolls a few meters away across the uneven stones.

Not everyone who lost his life for Führer, Volk, and Vaterland was accorded an obituary in the form of an official record of evidence. So here is the statement of Police Senior Sergeant Wilhelm Schikorra of the 13th Police District.

"On February 6, 1945, Reserve Station Sergeant Günther Dietzler and I were patrolling the bomb-damaged areas of the 13th Police District. Towards 16:15 we observed a completely derelict man busying himself among the ruins of No. 12 Annenstrasse; he was subsequently identified as the streetcar conductor Max Josef

Anton Eckert, born November 19, 1894, in Bielefeld, resident in Berlin-Reinickendorf, No. 11/144 Residenzstrasse. When first ordered to leave the bomb-damaged area, the said Eckert immediately offered strong resistance. We eventually succeeded in inducing him to leave the bomb-damaged area without the use of force. At this juncture, Reserve Station Sergeant Dietzler took leave of him in the appropriate manner. In response, the said Eckert turned around and bellowed: ‘You say *Heil Hitler* here among the rubble of Berlin?’ At the same time he leapt at the throat of Reserve Station Sergeant Dietzler, throwing him to the ground, and choking him with considerable force. Dietzler was stunned by the fall and the choking, and therefore unable to defend himself. I therefore twice gave the said Eckert a loud and explicit order to let go of Dietzler. As he did not comply with that order, and as further attempts to free Dietzler from this direct threat to his life were unsuccessful, I made use of my firearm. The said Eckert died immediately.

The present case accords with III Ic of the Police Operations Act of August 1, 1931, and further with Para. 53 of the Criminal Code.

Berlin, February 7, 1945

signed: Wilhelm Schikorra

Sen. Police Sergeant”

That is the story of the streetcar conductor Max Eckert, which might seem to be the accidental fate of an unknown, insignificant man. His story unfolded amid the maelstrom of monumental events which shook the continents, and it was only one drop in an ocean of blood and tears, but even the greatest, all-encompassing events are made up of small and minuscule incidents, and only the sum of those incidents creates

the great whole. The death of the streetcar conductor Max Eckert is only a tiny little stone in the dreadful mosaic of this monumental war. Many people died more senselessly, most died without the triumph of having grasped their hated opponent's throat. Eckert died because his tortured and downtrodden soul erupted with the force of a volcanic explosion. And he didn't die senselessly and in vain, because every death in the struggle against tyranny influences what follows, even if it's not a visible influence. Such a death is not a conclusion and an ending, it's a new seed and a new beginning.

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