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From the novel *Der Opernball* ['The Opera Ball']

Fischer Verlag: Frankfurt, 1995)

The Cameraman

Fred has died. The French didn't protect him. People were being killed off like insects while the whole of Europe watched on television. Fred was among the casualties. I'd heard it said when I was a child that 'God is Almighty.' I saw in my mind's eye an enormous thumb coming down from heaven and squashing me like an ant. If ever there was anything questionable or dangerous going on, then Fred used to say, "The French will protect me."

That day I was sitting in the control room of the large outside broadcast van with a wall full of monitors in front of me. The camera above the stage was transmitting at the time. All of a sudden a strange trembling and shuddering ran through the crowd of dancers. The music went discordant, and the instruments fell silent within a few seconds. I switched to the close-up from a camera on one of the boxes, and quickly scanned the monitors. All the pictures were the same. People swaying, stumbling, falling over and vomiting. Struggling to their feet and unable to keep their balance. Gasping out a last word, and dropping like sacks of flour. A few screaming briefly, others for longer. Their eyes wide. They see and feel they're being murdered. They don't know why, and they don't know by whom. They can't escape.

While it was happening, I couldn't find Fred on any of the screens. He was the only thing I could think of, as far as I remember, but the records show that I called a few other camera positions routinely before my hands gave out. Millions all over Europe were watching as the people attending the Vienna Opera Ball died.

It was only when he was 17 years old and addicted to heroin that Fred became my son. That's when I began to fight for him. He gained a foothold on his life again. He wanted to cling onto it. He was no longer a danger to himself. And then he was murdered. We all looked on and could do nothing.

There were a couple of technicians around, one of them switched on enough to take over the control desk. The manned cameras were soon transmitting only static pictures, the last captured twitches grew still. Silent shots of the glittering, generous interior, strewn with dead bodies. Pictures of people all dressed-up for the ball, lying in bright confusion in their vomit, framed by thousands of pink carnations. The three automatic cameras set into motion again; they searched in vain for signs of life. Someone at my side was speaking French. I staggered outside, into the noise. I must save Fred, I thought. Chaos was at large. I pushed my way through the crowds to the entrance of the opera, and realized there was nothing I could do for Fred now. On returning to the van, I heard that Michel Reboisson the head of ETV, had been looking for me.

The program was still being broadcast throughout Europe, the silence unbearable. Only two cameras had been cut off, the others relentlessly reflected the unmoving images, transmitted lingeringly one by one. Someone yelled down the phone, "Music, we need music." We hadn't any suitable tracks in the van. After a while the studio, staffed minimally tonight, started broadcasting

Brahm's violin concerto. The debate over whether this should be considered an appropriate choice or not went well into the second movement. Then the violin concerto was interrupted. Announcements by the police and the firefighters were given, and a copy of Mozart's Requiem was located in the meantime. On with the broadcast. It took nearly half an hour before the cameras in the corpse-choked hallways of the Vienna Opera House captured living subjects once more - men in red protective suits and gas masks.

I saw the mass murder on twenty screens at once. My only thought was, Fred is not part of this. I can't see him. He went to fetch a blank cassette. He went to the restroom. He handed over camera 5 to his assistant and took a cigarette break. Fred is a chain smoker. He is not in the building. But I can also see his mouth gaping as he falls onto a woman lying on the floor. I see his lifeless body, vomit flowing from his mouth onto the white evening dress. I see how his head jerks backwards, how he collapses across the balcony railing. I see his face cut open as it hits a plate. I see his body convulsing. I see him being trampled on the grand staircase. Fred is nowhere to be found.

Only three cameras are still being operated. Camera 5 takes a close up. That's got to be his assistant. Fred has taken in the situation and is out of here. Fred is no longer in the opera house. The French have looked out for him. He was needed outside, in Ringstraße. He knows a lot about television cranes. Camera 5's activity has stopped. It's focused on a theater box of dead onlookers. Fred, where are you? The final camera shudders to a stop. Stockstill pictures of rigid bodies. There's scarcely a sound for the microphones to pick up. And somewhere beneath the piles of corpses is Fred.

For a month I died with him, and watched him die. I found his last moments of life on tape. For a month I studied every detail of them, over and over. When the tears wouldn't come, I saw it as a failure on my part, a betrayal. I listened to Eric Clapton's *Tears in Heaven*, and Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*. Then the tears ran freely.

The little boy in London. As he perched on the frontdoorstep of our new house on Talbot Road, clutching his school bag, hour after long hour. I should have been home by 2 o'clock, but didn't appear until 5. I'd forgotten about him.

"Once a week," Heather screamed at me that night. "Just once a week. And you forget that?"

Fred was sitting there in his yellow raincoat. He looked at me as if I were a stranger. He wouldn't give me his hand. The neighbors on our left were out, and we didn't know the others yet. I apologized to him a hundred thousand times. He didn't want to follow me into the house. As if I weren't really there. I opened the door; he stayed on the steps. I carried him in and sat him down on the sofa. He didn't say a word. Later, when I undressed him and put him to bed, I said he could ask for something, anything he wanted. He looked at me and began to cry. I stroked his hair until he fell asleep. When we found our way back to each other, years later, after his heroin addiction, he told me that he'd been convinced that day that his parents were gone for good.

As a child he had heard Heather and me fighting a lot. Mostly we quarrelled about him. He hadn't been planned and Heather wouldn't consider abortion. When the child came on the scene we couldn't cope. Especially not when Heather went back to work. She was an arts editor for BBC radio. I worked in the news department of the television branch. I talked myself into believing that our constant squabbling was all to do with our tiny apartment. So I finally had the excuse to move

into that area, an old student haunt of mine. We got into heavy debt to purchase the house, located in Talbot Road, off Portobello, which meant really concentrating on our careers, and even less time for Fred. In those days I worked in office and had fairly regular hours. Heather spent a few hours in the studio each morning or afternoon, and spent her evenings racing from one social event to the next. Nevertheless, she was the one who looked after Fred. During the evenings it was my turn to see to the child. Usually I hired a babysitter. The only time I actually spent with Fred was the one afternoon a week on which Heather had her editorial meeting. We went to the zoo. We spent hours in the toy section of Harrods. We attended the dog races at Walthamstow Stadium. Fred loved dog races. More than horse races, even more than soccer or rugby. And one day, I simply forgot him. I was sitting in the studio, editing some recording when a bemused colleague inquired, "You're here? Is Fred with friends of yours?"

When Heather returned that night, slightly tipsy and in a good mood, I told her what had happened. She was furious. If I hadn't left the house, she would have wrecked it.

After Fred's death I sat for a month in the studio, doing nothing except watch the last seconds of his life. I was supposed to edit the material for a report lasting 115 minutes. But I simply couldn't bring myself to do it. I sought Fred and found him. The last operating camera brought him briefly into view. Its operator had obviously collapsed. The camera automatically continued its vertical pan right up to the ceiling lights. First piles of bodies on the dance floor, then a jerk and a swing upwards. A quick glimpse of the imperial box, then past the right-hand window of the stage manager's room to the adjacent box where camera 5 was located. Normally, this box is crammed with the overflow of spotlights and is out of bounds. The spots had been removed the night before the ball. Fred had been happy about his camera position because it allowed him to steer clear of the guests, and also because the imperial box, the center of activity for persons of political importance, lay directly beneath it, and was therefore out of his range.

He didn't even try to escape. Right next to him was the door to the stage manager's room. He didn't open it. From here he could have reached the staff exit along the corridor. All those who fled down that narrow stairway survived, the staff exit being non-airconditioned. Fred stuck by his camera. He filmed to the end.

For one month I repeatedly watched that last shot filmed by his colleague. In stills and in slow motion. The view swoops upwards to the right side of the imperial box, where a hand with white buttoned cuff and crumpled tuxedo sleeve hangs over the railing; then proceeds along the golden-beige velvet wallpaper and closes in on a wreath of pink carnations. The window of the stage manager's box comes into view; and now the railing of the lighting box. Fred is suddenly in the picture. He takes a step sideways, arches forward, opens his mouth as if to vomit. His right hand still holds the guiding arm of the camera. He straightens, releases his grip on the camera, extends both hands, sways, his eyes wide open. Then his head is outside the frame. The pan continues up to the gallery, where arms, heads and legs are twitching, upwards to the ceiling, and ends when the crystal chandelier enters the frame. At zero hours 58:57 seconds the mike belonging to camera 5 picks up Fred's final utterance. Shortly beforehand, camera 5 was taking a zoom-shot. At zero hours 58:49 seconds there's no more movement. It shows a closeup of the box opposite, where a dead woman is sitting in a red evening dress. Her body is propped up sideways against the railing, her head hangs back over the chair, her eyes stare.

For a whole month these were the only pictures I saw. In the evenings I sat at home and

"Would you hold my hand?" I begged, and cried my eyes out. Fred wouldn't give me his hand in heaven. He had every reason not to.

Once we'd taken a boat trip along the coastline in Brighton. Fred sat on my lap. He wasn't quite two years old. The shoreline didn't interest him. He had eyes only for the sea. He stood on my legs and stared down into the boat's wake. I kept a firm grip on his legs. The waves fascinated him. He leaned out over the railing. Heather was scared he'd fall.

"But I'm holding onto him."

She couldn't watch and demanded I put him down immediately.

But I said: "I'm holding onto him. What on earth could happen? I have got him tight, you know."

We quarrelled while Fred gazed into the water. After a while, I sat him down on my lap. His eyes were red. Tears stained his cheeks.

These were the memories that flooded my mind while I drank and kneaded my forehead. I imagined the wake drawing Fred's tiny body into the depths, deeper and deeper, his arms outstretched to a world in which he could not survive but from which he could not escape. And I had never even noticed it happening.

After the divorce, I stayed in a hotel. Fred was living with Heather in the house. In the meantime I was the war correspondent for the BBC and had scarcely been home in months. Then came a time in which the wars did not seem to want to come to a head. There were plenty of conflicts, but it appeared that the armies had lost their drive. Brutal dictatorships which only recently had been keeping their critics under surveillance and sending them off to labor camps now allowed themselves to be struck down with scarcely a hint of resistance. A few interviews with opposition groups, a couple of pictures of large-scale demonstrations-and I would fly back home. I hung around in my hotel in Bayswater. BBC teletext with the latest world news was on all the time - I was waiting for a serious job. Every few days my parents telephoned to remind me that I had a home in Hampstead, my room was always ready for me, even two rooms if I wanted. Life in a hotel is no real life. A person needs some permanence, said my parents in German, Mother in her Czech accent, Father in his Viennese.

"I don't need permanence," I replied. "Anything permanent thus far has proven a horror to me. Permanence has always been my downfall." They would not give up. I didn't tell them I'd been looking for a suitable abode for ages, something not too close to Hampstead. Eventually I found a little house in Kensington. It was hidden away behind the High Street. It was quiet there. If a car were parked at the curb, no-one could have driven past. The little house had a living room and kitchen on the ground floor and two bedrooms upstairs. Plenty of space for me. The living room I turned into my office, the second bedroom I intended for Fred or as a guest-room. Fred, it turned out, never set foot in this house. Once I discovered a drawing in chalk on the brick wall by the front door. A mountain range with the sun shining above it. It could have been done by Fred. I liked to think that. I was paying alimony along with installments for the Talbot Road House, but had no contact with Heather and Fred. Until, one day, Heather phoned me up.

"I just wanted to let you know that your son dropped out of high school long ago and is addicted to heroin."

I wanted to meet with Fred. But Heather didn't know his hangouts. She said: "He comes by occasionally to clean me out."

Later she told me that as far as she knew he was often in Walworth Road. Several times I took the Bakerloo line to the last stop Elephant & Castle. Nowhere does London look so bleakly American as in Walworth. I wandered along Walworth Road, patrolled the side streets, entered the East Street pubs and all the fast food restaurants. Every junkie I met I asked about Fred. But no results. One sat hunched up on a park bench. He had a green spider web tattooed on his face. He wouldn't answer me. He merely stared at me with tired, glazed-over eyes. But I got the impression that he knew what I was talking about, he knew Fred. I couldn't get him to respond. The search was unsuccessful.

I called Heather. She gave me a date on which Fred was supposed to come. At any rate, he'd said he would. As soon as I arrived, she would leave. The night before this meeting I tossed and turned, waking up every hour. I was certain of my impending failure. I wanted to offer Fred help. He would be able to turn to me at any time, even if, for the time being, he was interested only in my money. I would give it to him. In rations of a day's worth, to ensure that I remained in contact with him. But what would I do if he rejected me, if he didn't want to have anything to do with me? I pondered ways to bind him to me but reached no satisfying conclusions. At six-thirty I gave up the battle and went downstairs into the living room. One subject dominated the screen: the gulf war had begun. Three hours later I found myself on a plane to Saudi Arabia.

I often think that he's just gone out and will be back home soon. After he died, I did not want to leave him alone for another instant, as if that could make everything alright. He stood behind me. I felt him looking at me. In Vienna, he had an apartment in the same house as me. I heard him unlock the front door. I heard him come home during the night with friends. I ran out onto the stairs, softly tiptoed down, very slowly, until the hall light shut off. I stood in the darkness at his door and listened. I let myself in, lay down in his bed. I breathed in his smell. I imagined him on the threshold of death, staying with his camera. He could have escaped. The people in the boxes and galleries higher in the building died a little later than those on the dance floor. They were still twitching when all was finished below. If he had fled at once he would have been the only cameraman to escape.

Looking at the little monitor, he sees the people collapsing on the dance floor. He senses the bitter-almond scent. He should be running to the stage manager's room. But he isn't. His eyes begin to sting. His intestines push up into his chest. Suddenly he is certain that he, too, is about to die. But instead of fleeing, he begins to survey the scene with his camera. Objects become blurry and seem to swim away from him like waves. Something chokes him. He takes a step aside to vomit, but keeps his hand on the zoom button. It strikes him down, forces him to bend over. He lets go of the camera, seeks a handhold in front of himself. He falls, plummets endlessly, thousands of meters, cannot breathe, cannot move anymore. There is no ground below him. Like bells he hears, distantly, the cries of the dying. A fire inflames his insides. It races through his body. Until a glowing ball shoots forth from him and disappears into the fog.

He'll just have gone on ahead, won't want to come home. In the short interval between the

Gulf War and the war in Yugoslavia I managed to see Fred for the first time in years. He wouldn't come to me, but wanted to meet me on his own turf. The place he named on the telephone was the Village Brasserie on the corner of Stockwell and Brixton Roads. I had never been in this area before. I only knew that it was mainly populated by blacks and Asians. When I entered the pub, I was pleasantly surprised. Contrary to my expectations, the nearly empty pub did not look at all run down. Round black tables, aluminum chairs, music a bit too loud. Fred hadn't arrived yet. I ordered a cappuccino. The TV in the corner was on with the volume turned off. Two reproductions of Joan Miro hung on the wall. The low-reaching windows gave a view onto the street, where black women and children passed by, and the occasional man. Young lads snaked through the pedestrians on their bicycles. Fred walked in. I scarcely recognized him. He had a scarf wrapped around his head, Palestinian-style. His feet were dirty. They were clad in worn-out sandals. He sat across from me and grinned.

"What would you like to drink?" I asked him.

"Worthington Bitter."

I ordered one for myself as well. His hands were unwashed, the nails encrusted with dirt.

The index and middle fingers of his right hand bore a brownish-yellow discoloration from smoking. He took tobacco from his pant's pocket and made himself a cigarette. I saw his hands trembling. The cigarette would not turn out well. Nor did the second one. The tobacco crumbled onto the table, the paper tore. I offered him a cigarette. He took the packet and pointed out its bar code.

"One can trace that. They can follow you everywhere."

"Who?"

"The Nazis."

"How do you know?"

"I'm at odds with them. If the French weren't helping me, the Nazis would have caught up with me long ago."

He explained that the French consulate was holding a protective hand over him. He claimed to have recently bumped into François Mitterrand in a public washroom. As they peed, the president had assured him of his being fully protected. I listened and nodded. Ashes dropped from his cigarette. He smoked greedily. The beer, on the other hand, he consumed slowly. Time and time again he looked into the glass, held it up to the light. He said: "They use poisoned water. Everywhere now, one gets poisoned water."

He asked me whether I had water filters installed in my taps. He told me he drank only filtered water. Then he told me of a new water purifier and how he knew the man who had invented it.

Suddenly he rose and walked away. I thought he was leaving. He went to a table next to the bar and sat back down.

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"To many rays over there," he said. I followed him with the beer glasses and cigarettes.

I asked him where he lived. He would not answer. Instead he grinned again and said:

"Where I live, I've boarded up the windows. The Nazis can't hurt me."

I did not know what to say to that. He said the French, too, had advised him not to sit behind windows.

I asked him whether the rays would penetrate wood as well. He did not respond, changing the subject instead. He said he had read Madame Bovary four times. Then out of the blue, he inquired whether I might be Stan Parker.

"Stan Parker?"

"Don't you know The Tree of Man, by Patrick White?"

"Yes, I read it, long ago. Isn't Stan Parker the man who dies at the end?"

Fred was making another attempt at a cigarette. I offered my packet and added: "Keep it."

He did not take it. There was no bar code on his tobacco pouch.

"How do you make a living?" I asked him.

He grinned. His reddish eyebrows were barely visible beneath the edge of the Palestinian headdress.

"So you're not Stan Parker," he said.

"Do you need money?" I asked him

"I'll sell water purifiers."

"So you do have money."

"Lend me a hundred pounds. Until tomorrow, okay?"

I gave him a hundred pounds. He was suddenly in a hurry.

"We meet here tomorrow at the same time," I said.

He left his beer on the table and walked out. I watched him through the window. He followed Brixton Road in the direction of the subway, then turned off into Electric Avenue. After a while I followed but could not find him. Close to the arches of the railway bridge sat the junkie with the green spider web on his face.

Fred has died. He had a big red beard. Just like me when I was young. During indoor filmings he kept running outside to smoke. Just not on this one evening at the Vienna Opera House. I had not permitted him to.

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"I have to have your camera available at any time," I had said. "It has the best view of the orchestra."

(End of chapter 1.)
