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Iron Curtain

by
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Chapter 1: STEEL MONSTER

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Angermünde
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#

Today is the day.

He propped his arms on the shovel and blew air out of his lungs. A cloud of steam formed in front of his face. It was bitterly cold.

Today is the day when the have-nots win against the *Bonzen*, the party bigwigs. The day when the executioners stand before their executioner. The day when justice prevails.

A smirk flitted across his face. He was not used to so much pathos. At least not since

the socialist dream had been shattered for him. And that had been some time ago. He envied people without ideals. All those who had never believed in them or who had lost their faith after a short time and fled. More than two hundred thousand Germans had left the socialist East of the country for the capitalist West since the Wall had been built on August 13, 1961. It wasn't that he wanted to trade places with them, only that he would have liked to have had their indifference to the great cause much earlier. Then he would have been spared a lot.

He took a deep breath and picked up the shovel again. He jabbed the work implement with the weather-beaten wooden handle and the sooty metal blade into the pile of brown coal. Then he heaved the heavy mass of coal into the lorry. It was already sitting heavily loaded on four steel rollers perched on railroad tracks set into the concrete floor of the factory yard. He threw the shovel into the mountain of coal and braced himself with all his power against the steel monster until it finally moved.

Once it rolls, it rolls.

Every move had been perfected. The procedures had been etched into the subconscious down to the smallest detail over months. He no longer had to think about what to do next.

Push, push, push. With all your power. One hundred twenty-four steps to the factory floor. A few more, a few less. Form of the day. Braking the movement just before the gate to the factory. Bracing yourself against the acceleration with your whole body weight until the rollers come to a standstill. Taking the steps to the enormous gate, tearing it open, feeling the heat of the hall. Immediately setting the monster in motion again. Pressing your shoulder into the cold steel with full force. Up to the coal furnace in which an 850-degree fire blazes. Getting rid of the sweaty quilted jacket. Pulling the hot air into your lungs and wiping your face dry with your soot-smearred undershirt. Opening the hatch to the coal feed with numb

hands. Letting the heat whip into your face. Again using the shovel to force the steel monster to vomit out the coal and throwing it into blazing embers. Driving the fire. Never letting the embers go out. Pulling the quilted jacket back over your blackened skin. Setting the lorry in motion again. Back to the coal yard on the crooked rails.

Over and over again. Seventeen times in one working day. That was a work unit. And his way of counting, so that the working day had a structure. An order that could be grasped. A goal that was attainable. Seventeen times slogging in the cold. And seventeen times in the heat. A cold that ate into his bones. And a warmth that he didn't even know from his homeland at the height of summer.

Everything went by itself. His head could wander while his body slaved away. He was the master of coal hauling. Not that it meant anything to him. Maybe that was why he was perfect for the job. He didn't care. Crushing it between his fingers like a mayfly. It was not his pay, not the fulfillment of duty to the collective, and certainly not the praise of the factory manager that drove him. His reward would come when his work was finally over. And the harder he worked, the faster the time passed.

Today is the day.

He didn't yet have a clear idea of exactly how he wanted to do it. He could block the man's carotid artery. Death by strangulation had been a popular execution method used on deserters by the British Army in the eighteenth century. He would be following a time-honored tradition. But he wasn't interested in that. The advantage of this killing method, however, was that it required little force. Not even two pounds to a square inch were necessary to stop blood flow to the brain, so that brain death occurred. A toddler could do it. If the victim held still. But that was not to be expected.

He could stab him, shoot him, or beat him to death. But the method did not matter. He

realized that he could not think the deed through to completion. His own fate was too connected with the man. Too firmly was his history interwoven with that of the man. Too little could he imagine how his life would continue after the man's death. Just as you cannot dream your own death, he could not imagine the man's end. But he didn't have to. All he knew was that he would do it. How was not crucial. That would come to pass. That was what he was trained to do. His subconscious, muscle memory, would decide for him. He didn't have to agonize over the details. He knew it wasn't hard to end a human life. It happened almost a thousand times every day. In a year, that was as many deaths as Luxembourg had inhabitants. The population of an entire country was murdered in one year. Unimaginable.

For a short moment, he thought about whether he owed it to humankind. But he realized that he expected nothing from humankind anymore and therefore didn't owe anything to it at all.

It was easy to extinguish human life. It was more challenging to get to this human being without notice. The element of surprise was crucial for the execution. But this wasn't up to him. That was why he didn't have to think about it any further. The plan was not allowed to lead to dead ends if a prediction did not come true. And his plan was as simple as it was risky.

He had only a tiny window of opportunity, and he had to use it. The man was in this place of vulnerability for only seventy-two hours, possibly less. He had received the information from a source he didn't know was safe. It could just as easily be a trap. But that was a risk he was willing to take. As long as the man was at the location as bait for him, he had the opportunity to fulfill his self-imposed mission. He just had to get to the man faster than the trap could snap shut. Otherwise, it was a simple undertaking. Ride his bike under the cover of darkness to the target, find the man and kill him.

Until then, he still had two units ahead of him, which dragged on in an unprecedented manner. And yet, they never went off with the same ease as on this day.

He pushed the lorry the last few yards to the coal mountain that towered in front of him. Behind it stood the tall factory wall made of red brick. Above it, only the dull gray of this November day. Crows flew in the distance. He wiped the cold sweat from his forehead and picked up the shovel again. Just as he was about to start the penultimate unit of the day, he heard a man's voice calling his name. "Hedman."

The voice came closer. He turned around.

It was another worker running toward him. "Finish your shift for today and then stay here. You'd best just come to the meeting hall."

He owed his name equally to his parents. His father had chosen his first name, Adam. The first man, the new beginning of the family history. From his mother, he had received the surname Hedman. That the mother gave her name to the whole family had been done on purpose. It was to seal the end of his father's Jewish name and bury the past once and for all.

The worker waited for his answer.

"Is it something important?" he asked.

"Just be there, Hedman. You'll see."

The man grinned, turned, and went back to the factory floor from where he had come. Adam got to work again. Of all days, it had to be this one, he thought. It was probably just a speech, a little ode to the collective. But no matter what it was, he had no choice but to show up at the assembly hall after he finished his shift. So he put the shovel into the coal pile and heaved the mass into the lorry. The same routine as always. The excited anticipation of the end of work gave way to the annoyance of having to stay in the VEB, the so-called people-owned enterprise, after work.

After completing the last two units of the day, he made his way to the locker room.

#

He hung his jacket on a hook just behind the locker room door. It was stuffy and hot and smelled of sweet sweat. A group of workers came in whose job it was to coat metal vessels with a layer of enamel on the heated factory floor. His was to shovel coal. They were inside. He was outside. They were upstairs. He was at the bottom. So far down that he couldn't go any lower. Whoever was down there could only be imbecilic, which was expressed at least by the lack of a high school diploma, or antisocial, for which a stay in prison was sufficient.

Opinions in the VEB differed as to which of the two groups he belonged to.

“Hey, Hedman, what's the weather like out there?” one of the workers asked.

“Like a vacation on the Baltic Sea,” Adam said.

The men laughed.

“How many runs did you make today, Hedman?” asked another.

“Seventeen,” Adam said.

Every day they asked him this question, and every day his answer was the same.

“Seventeen. Not bad. Seventeen isn't bad at all, is it? It was nice and hot today, the fire, really nice and hot,” said the worker, wiping his sweaty face with his undershirt.

Adam got rid of his coal-smearred workwear. He stuffed everything into the narrow metal locker and took out his civilian clothes. They were spotless. Without a single coal stain. He slipped on his pants and shirt, stepped into his shoes, and was no longer recognizable as a coal shoveler except for a bit of soot behind his ears. And as the signs of the day fell away from him, so did the men and turned back to their conversations. The topics were all too familiar to him. Soccer, booze, and complaining about the wives at home. But new events had joined them. For weeks they had been the topic of conversation in general in the small

Uckermark town, which was nestled in a terminal moraine landscape that had left behind two large Ice Age bodies of water, the Mündesee near the town center and the Wolletzsee further out. Here, in the fertile nowhere halfway between Berlin and the Baltic Sea, densely packed on the Polish border, people told each other horror stories of unprecedented proportions. Depending on who you heard talking, there was once a girl who had disappeared and was then found drowned. Or was it a young woman who had been strangled and then dumped in Wolletzsee? What everyone agreed on, however, was that the girl's death was accompanied by barn fires, ignitions and cows, sheep, and pigs killed in pastures and stables. The people of Angermünde did not disclose the name of the girl. The comrades in the locker room wanted to know for sure that it was murder and that the man—they were also confident that it was a man—was one who happened to roam their homeland as a vagabond or drifter. One who was not from the area. Because one from there wouldn't do such a thing. It could only be one who had set foot on Uckermark soil recently. And this ground should burn under his soles if the men had their way.

The foreman of the work crew called his name. He was a stocky man with a mighty paunch and parted ash-blond hair over a weather-beaten face. So, now he was part of their conversation again.

“What is it?”

“You'll join us when we find the guy who's been killing everything around here, right?”

No way, he thought. “When?” he asked.

“Tomorrow we'll head out. And if we have to, we'll search all weekend.”

“What about the police? Wouldn't that be a matter for the authorities?”

The men shook their heads and laughed contemptuously. Next thing would have been

to spit on the floor in disdain.

“Yes, the ... so far nothing has come out of it. We’ll have to do it ourselves if we want to see results. Our city, our job. You know?”

He nodded and thought about how to free himself from this obligation. The foreman came over to him and planted himself in front of him, which seemed as pally as it was intimidating.

“Hedman, you’re not exactly from around here. But we from Angermünde tend to note very carefully who joins in and who bails on us. You see, what kind of a man is it who doesn’t help to find the man who slaughters our animals and our women?” the worker asked him, putting one of his rough hands on his shoulder. He had the authority of a man whose twenty years of sweaty work hadn’t gotten him down but had only made him tougher. The hand felt as heavy as if all the men in the locker room had laid their hands on his shoulder. And that was not surprising, for the man spoke for all men.

The worker squeezed his shoulder firmly and then released him. “We’ll come to get you, then.”

A threat, not a promise.

“When exactly?”

“When it’s on, it’s on.”

The foreman did not allow any further questions and went back to his locker.

#

The hall was filled with about two hundred workers. Apparently, the entire workforce had gathered. He leaned against the wall right next to the entrance and waited for the beginning. Shortly after that, Lothar Kletzsch, the factory manager, took the podium. He was an athletic man in his midforties with thinning blond hair. He didn’t have a family, but he devoted his

life entirely to the works. Behind him hung the red flags of the VEB Gustav Bruhn and the *Betriebskampfgruppe*, the factory's brigade group.

He stepped up to the lectern and bent down slightly to the microphone. "Dear workers, dear party comrades, without going too much into a hymn of praise now, I would like to inform you that our VEB Gustav Bruhn was able to exceed the planned target for the third time in a row."

The staff clapped. He felt tiredness come over him. Fewer and fewer words reached his conscious mind.

"... Let's toast to that ... beer ... champagne for the ladies ..."

He just wanted to do his work and, after that, be left alone. But a good socialist worker had to master many disciplines. He had not only to do his job in such a way that he exceeded the five-year plan, he also had to know when to duck away and when to show up to strengthen the collective. And the same was true for female workers. Because under socialism, equality reigned. Ordered from above.

He looked around. The workforce was expressionless. They were masters of all disciplines. Words pelted him. Snatches of those words reached him.

"... deserving employee of the collective ... birthday ... finally of age ... Anna Sievers ..."

And then a woman came on stage. It was not Anna Sievers but a woman he had never seen before. She wore a smock apron and presented a tray of thin apple pie. What was going on here? The women in front of him were whispering something.

"You hear that? Sievers, a deserving employee? Don't make me laugh."

"With Kletzsch, she earned that with this and that, didn't she?"

She pointed at her chest and butt.

“But I have to say, there’s quite a lot to be jealous about. She looks like a real star. You know, like the one girl from *Three Angels for Charlie*, only with red hair.”

She probably meant Farah Fawcett. Indeed, there were similarities. The toothpaste grin, the slim figure, the high cheekbones, the wild hair. She was the red Farah Fawcett. A socialist worker’s dream come true.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if we see her on TV sometime. Anna is somehow bigger than all this,” she added.

He could not say whether that was true or not. But she was in any case larger than Angermünde. Perhaps than the entire GDR. But what good would that do her? She was trapped behind the Iron Curtain. Without any chance to see the big wide world or to make a career beyond the Wall. Whatever that would be.

He continued to listen to the conversation of the women.

The other one nodded.

“Right you are. But it’s not really fair. She’s just eighteen, and she’s supposed to have already earned all that hoopla?”

The speech was not over yet. But the factory manager paused for effect. He spread his arms. The woman in the smock apron next to him showed a broad grin. In front of the stage, the birthday girl was persuaded by colleagues to comply with the boss’s request. Her friends clapped after Kletzsch had already started to do so shortly before. Gradually, the rest of the workforce joined in.

As the workingwoman had climbed the three steps onto the stage, the man spread his arms again.

“Anna! Here she is, at last, our birthday Anna.”

When she stopped at the edge of the stage, he took a few steps towards her with his

arms stretched out and pressed the girl tightly against his chest. Then he gave her a kiss on the cheek, left, right, left.

He escorted her to the lectern and spoke exuberantly into the microphone. “Frau Sievers, our Anna, deserves a little birthday serenade. Let’s sing in her honor.”

Adam did not feel like singing. He felt like screaming.

Kletzsch grinned with pride at Anna and then sang into the microphone. “Happy birthday ...”

There was a loud beep, a feedback noise. And laughter among the workers.

Kletzsch stepped to the front of the stage, raised his arms in the air, and made rhythmic movements. “And now, one more time. One and two and three and ... Happy birthday to you ...”

Gradually, the workers joined in. “Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you ...”

And then, apparently, people in the workforce were not so sure how to proceed. Some sang “Dear Anna,” others “Frau Sievers,” and a few, like himself, did not sing at all. When the pitiful singing had come to an end, the VEB boss applauded and once again embraced the workingwoman tightly. The workforce applauded cautiously.

Kletzsch stood behind the lectern again.

“Let’s go, cake and beer in the canteen.”

The woman who had presented the cake walked off the stage. The VEB boss and his female worker followed. This was his chance to slip away undetected. He had already lost enough time. The workers streamed past the stage left into the cafeteria. He pushed off from his leaning position and left the meeting hall.

He had already covered a few yards on the factory floor when someone called after him. It was Peter Heyer. One of the few who forced him to chat. A tall, skinny man who walked bent over and was always friendly. At least to him. That could only be because he was grateful to him. Because when he'd joined the works, Heyer had risen from coal shoveler to metal cleaner.

“Wait a minute, Hedman.”

He stopped. The man reared up directly in front of him.

“Well, Hedman. You're not just going to run away like that, are you? No, no, my friend, that's not possible. Let's have a drink first. We've earned it. We overachieved. We can be proud of that. We should even drink to that. Come on, Hedman.”

Heyer grabbed him by the arm. Today was the day, but he wondered how much time he could lose without getting in trouble. It was still early. He could undoubtedly pinch a few minutes, so he didn't want to oppose the proud metal cleaner and went along. They were the last to enter the cafeteria.

He glanced over the well-filled rows of chairs. “Too bad, there's nothing free at all.”

“Oh, I'm sure we'll find something.”

Heyer pointed to a table in the corner. “Look, there are some open seats in the back.”

He walked straight toward one of the aft tables, where two seats were still free. Adam followed him at some distance.

One beer. He just had to have a beer with Heyer, and then he could go, no doubt about it. That was all the time he had for the collective. This afternoon was not going according to plan for him. He saw Heyer sitting down at the table and immediately opening a bottle. The man seemed engrossed in the drink. Maybe he should turn on his heel and get out of the factory into the cold. He couldn't even finish the thought when he felt a hand on his shoulder

leading him in another direction. He turned around and looked into the eyes of Evelyn Sievers. The birthday girl's older sister had another plan for him.

“Hey, Adam, weren't there any chairs left for you? You can join us. It'll be fun, I promise.”

“I was actually going to join Heyer. He's sitting in the back.”

“Well, no one *wants* to go join Heyer, am I right?”

She pulled him along with her.

“Come on, don't resist.”

It was the birthday table. Besides Anna's boyfriend, Sebastian Koslowski, VEB manager Lothar Kletzsch, her sister Evelyn and the workingwomen Anita, Susanne, and Maria were also seated at the table. From Heyer, he could have gotten away more quickly, he thought.

He was assigned the seat next to Evelyn. Kletzsch looked around and stopped at him.

“Oh, you brought us Hedman. Good man. Gets something done.”

Before he had even taken his seat, Sebastian shoved a beer into his hand. The birthday girl came to the table with a glass of champagne in her hand. Kletzsch examined her from top to bottom. In the process, he smiled at all the body parts one by one. Shamelessly. He didn't do that with her sister, who was twelve years older. Her gaunt figure, thin brown hair, and pale skin were apparently unsuitable for ogling.

“Hedman, tell us. How many loads did you do today?” asked Kletzsch.

“Seventeen.”

“Seventeen, that's something. Heyer made thirteen in his best days. Not once more than that. Thirteen was probably his lucky number. That's why he never made more. But seventeen, that's something. So let's drink to the overfulfillment of the plan. Comrade

Council Chairman is proud of us.”

He raised his beer to toast.

“Here’s to plan overachievement!”

The others toasted each other. The VEB boss whispered something in the birthday girl’s ear. She laughed and playfully slapped his hand. Sebastian watched the two of them and took a deep sip of his beer.

“Lothar, tell us again about old Hepper,” Evelyn said, laughing.

“Not today. You all know the story anyway.”

“Oh, come on. Please!”

“All right, persuaded.”

He set his beer aside.

“Well, you all know old Hepper. A real daredevil, our party comrade, I can tell you that much. And what did Hepper do for his birthday? He invites them all ... the State Council, the party presidency, his people from the Ministry of State Security. It’s a big deal for him. Thirty people for sure, if not forty. With their entourage. So all the women were there too. Well, how could it have been different, you know? Except Hepper’s wife wasn’t there. And that’s where it starts to get interesting.”

He looked at the women in the circle, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

“She must have been on a beauty treatment in Crimea, I hear.”

The women laughed. When he thought of the Crimean Peninsula, the first things that came to mind were not beauty, champagne, or caviar but death and destruction. A mass murderer had been active in the area for years and had already killed several dozen women. The Soviet authorities tried everything not to let the world know about it, but it was an open secret. These were only his thoughts. He didn’t let it show and smiled.

Sebastian didn't follow his lead. "Yes, we already know the story. And what happened to Hepper afterward?" he asked.

Kletzsch had not yet taken off his put-on smile and looked at Sebastian.

"Easy there, what's all the fuss about? It's a perfectly normal matter of job transfer. Hepper is now taking care of matters in Saxony. And comrade Stahl, who succeeded him, is and remains in Berlin. But he now lives here with us in the beautiful Schorfheide."

"Saxony? That's where Bautzen is, right?" Sebastian said, letting his words hang in the air, alluding to the prison for political prisoners.

"You know what they say about Stahl. And why he's here with us now."

Everyone was silent. Sebastian did not speak further. It became quiet at the table. The VEB boss became friendlier by the minute.

"That's right, Sebastian. But that has nothing to do with Hepper. In any case, we are pleased that party comrade Stahl is with us now. I'll say hello to him from you, Sebastian, when I pay him my next visit."

Dismayed expressions at the table. They looked past Kletzsch and Koslowski or took a sip of their drinks.

"Where was I?" asked the VEB boss, and everyone laughed again.

"That virtually everyone was at Hepper's hunting estate."

"Thank you, Maria. Look at that, she's quiet all the time, but she does an excellent job of paying attention. So they were all gathered at the hunting lodge, the Schalck-Golodkowskis, the Stophs, the Honeckers. And they have a big dinner in the evening with the game they've shot. And at first, everything is still good. They eat, they drink, they talk animatedly. But Hepper drinks one too many, and the good man gets a little cocky."

Everyone at the table waited eagerly for the punch line. Anna looked at the VEB boss

and giggled. She obviously could hardly wait. Only he didn't know the story yet.

“Anyway, at some point, he has to carry his beer away, and as he's going to the bathroom, he meets the wife of the comrade Chairman of the Council of State, and they chat a little. No big deal. *Hello, how are you? Yes, I'm fine. Thank you for asking.* And so on. But Hepper is dead drunk already. And then, out of the blue, Hepper is like, *Well, how's it going with Erich as far as marital duties are concerned? Wouldn't it be nice to hear whether everything is going according to socialist principles?* And Hepper looks at her in all earnestness. Because he really wants to know. And Margot is not at all shocked, as one would think, but she even giggles like a young pioneer and then apologizes. And when the Chairwoman of the Council of State is about to leave, and he feels challenged by her schoolgirlish manner, he—”

“It's burning, it's burning.”

A murmur went through the crowd. One of the foremen came running into the hall, shouting repeatedly and as loudly as he could.

“It's burning, it's burning.”

He didn't even know what had happened when everyone was already making their way out. Reluctantly, he went along. Like a startled flock of sheep, everyone ran agitated into the factory yard and from there into the street. Those who didn't know any better might have thought that a spontaneous protest march was rolling through Angermünde.

He walked alongside Evelyn. “Where are we running to?”

“There's a fire in the city.”

“Isn't that a task for the fire department?”

She laughed. He didn't know what was so funny. Every time he drew attention to the responsibilities of the authorities, nobody took him seriously anymore.

“Nah, really, why are we running there?”

“The monastery church is burning. By the time the fire department shows up, the whole building will be gone. We’ve seen that before. It was the same thing with the old town hall. The bigwigs don’t give a damn about old masonry. So everyone has to lend a helping hand.”

He nodded and mimed understanding. But he still could not fathom it. So far, he had not met any religious people. The people in this atheistic fire brigade probably considered themselves rebels against the state and its mandated God-aversion rather than feeling genuine affection for the church building. No matter from which angle he looked at it, he didn’t care. But he did not want to destroy their enthusiasm and left it at that.

“How did the story end?” he asked.

“Well, the town hall burned to the ground. Nothing was left. There’s this ugly new box now.”

“Nah, I don’t mean that. The story Kletzsich told.”

“Ah, I see ... well, Hepper slapped Margot on the ass.”

He nodded. “I see.”

He thought about it for a moment and saw that more and more people were joining the procession. Some had buckets with them.

“Yes, and where is Hepper now?”

“You heard Kletzsich. He’s been transferred. Besides, that’s just one of Kletzsich’s stories. You don’t have to take it so seriously. What do I know about Hepper? A funny story is a funny story. Nothing more, nothing less.”

That was one way to look at it, he thought. It was just a little story for amusement. Whether Hepper was punitively transferred or imprisoned didn’t make much difference for

the punch line.

He raised his hand in farewell and moved away from Evelyn.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home.”

“Nah, my friend, you will help us.”

She grabbed him by the arm, as she had done in the cafeteria. He wanted to tear himself away, but that would have been an exaggerated gesture. He wondered how much more time he could afford to waste. According to his calculations, it would be advisable for him to arrive at his destination before ten p.m. It would take him half an hour to get there. If he stretched the time window to the limit, he could still help put out the fire. Besides, it was an excellent alibi.

They came to a square. People had fallen silent. The enormous Gothic nave of the Franciscan Monastery Church of Peter and Paul was on fire. The flames crackled and hissed. The wind kept fanning it. Then they ran to the helpers, who had already formed chains and passed buckets filled with water from the extinguishing pond to the church. Firefighting work like from a century long gone, he thought. Where were there still fire ponds? Apparently in Angermünde. He lined up and let one heavy bucket after another slide through his hands. The monotony was comparable to that of his work at the VEB. The only difference was that the people around him were almost frenetically motivated. After what felt like an eternity, he heard sirens. The fire department arrived with a fire engine. Many of the helpers shook their heads, some cursed. By now, the fire had reached the wooden roof truss. The arrival of the official firefighters only fueled the efforts of these ordinary people. He took advantage of the excitement to get away unrecognized.

Back in the factory yard, he was all alone for the first time since his shift. He stood

there for a moment, soaking up the cold night air and enjoying the silence. Then he went to his bike. But he couldn't find it. Had it been stolen? He hadn't locked it. That had never been necessary before. However, he had never left his bike in the factory yard at night either. He had devoted almost four hours of his precious time to the collective. And the project, from which he would not let anything in the world stop him, he could not carry out without his means of transportation. He searched the yard for another bicycle and found none. He ran out into the street. But there were no bikes parked there either. He cursed. He could no longer put his plan into action. At least not that night. But what was one lost night against years he had endured? The man had to wait a little longer for his death.

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