

Carl-Christian Elze

The Cassette

[translated by Margot Bettauer Dembo]

When I woke up this morning there was an object that didn't belong to me lying on my night table. I made coffee, took the dog for a walk, fed him his light dry dog food sprinkled with some white powder, an appetite suppressant, had my own breakfast and finally said to myself: That thing is still lying there. It was a tiny cassette. I've forgotten the exact technical term for those tiny cassettes. Taking the dog along, I went to an electronics store and put, let's just call it 'the little cassette,' on the counter. I asked if they had a suitable player for it. An overweight salesman placed just such a device next to the little cassette, claiming with considerable enthusiasm that it was the very thing to handle the job efficiently, and offering to sell it to me. The price was not a trifling one, and I was surprised to find myself spending such a horrendous sum for a player like that without the least hesitation, even though the thing to be played, namely the little cassette, didn't belong to me. I was really surprised at myself. But on the other hand, not all that much. I went home and sat down on my sofa. I hadn't made any plans for that day so I suddenly considered myself lucky to have found something that would help me kill some time in a not totally unexciting way. I'd already put on the headphones and had my thumb on the 'play' button when it occurred to me that I couldn't remember having had the dog with me when I entered the apartment. I found him still in the electronics store. – The salesman said he'd fed the dog immediately to calm him down. The man was chewing on something and treating my dog quite like a brother, which displeased me. What displeased me even more was that my overweight dog seemed to enjoy carrying on with the overweight salesman. So, they had eaten together – that couldn't be undone, I figured, leaving the shop without saying a word of goodbye. I was so incensed at the salesman's inconsiderate behavior

that I vowed never again to set foot inside that store. My dog was still licking his chops. Although I couldn't really know for sure that he had been fed a lot, I firmly believed this to be the case. Once I'm firmly convinced of something I rely on that conviction – that's how it has always been, and I doubt that this conviction will ever change. I am, after all, attached to my conviction. Moreover, I was firmly convinced that by playing the cassette I would immediately forget the horrendous investment I had made to get the proper requisite player. Sitting down on the sofa I picked up the headset and with a bit of pressure inserted the little earbuds into my outer ear canal. I wasn't used to this, and the light pressure against the inner wall of my ear canal felt unpleasant. But enough of this fussiness, I told myself, and smiling again at my dog, I pressed the 'play' button. A green light glowed on the machine. I heard slight scraping noises, followed by a sudden rushing sound but only briefly, then absolute silence, then a voice, a man's voice I didn't recognize. But why should I have since, after all, the cassette didn't belong to me. The fact that the voice addressed me by my legal name didn't really worry me, for I wasn't guilty of anything. It was odd, but not worrisome. The voice continued, and now I feel I ought to let it speak for itself:

Dear Mr. E: You were probably quite surprised this morning to find a tiny little cassette that didn't belong to you, lying on your night table. I put the little cassette on your night table during the night to arouse your curiosity. My friend and brother-in-law, an unemployed locksmith, helped me get access to your apartment as quietly as possible and without doing any damage to either your door or your lock. We knew, of course, thanks to our preliminary investigations of your circumstances, that you were a dog owner and tonight we gave your dog quite a few delicious tidbits that he enjoyed tremendously. And so, as we had hoped, he didn't make any noise. Can you imagine, your dog even wanted to follow us out of your apartment, but we were able to push his head back through the crack in the door, taking the utmost care not to harm a single hair on his head. You will of course be interested, and

justifiably so, to know why I, a total stranger, and my brother-in-law, an unemployed locksmith, entered your apartment in the middle of the night. I deliberately don't say *broke in*, because as I said before we treated your property with the utmost care and didn't remove anything, not the least little thing. On the contrary, we invested two fresh sausages and a cassette in your apartment if you'll permit me to view and describe the matter from that perspective. Of course there is still the question, Why? Why did I make the aforementioned investment in you and your property, that is to say your dog? Because of poverty and despair, sir! Yes, that's the most honest answer I can give you. And it was also because of poverty and despair and maybe a little bit of boredom that my friend and brother-in-law, the unemployed locksmith, came to the decision to unlock your apartment for me tonight so that I could put the tiny little cassette on your night table. By the way, I didn't stay a moment longer in your apartment than absolutely necessary. I crossed your apartment by the shortest route to get to your bedroom, promptly placed the cassette on your night table and left your apartment immediately – again by the shortest route. Of course, to be quite frank, doing all we did so quickly and without wasting time is possible only if you are already familiar with the layout. For that reason, so as to stay no longer than absolutely necessary in your apartment with you there, I and my friend and brother-in-law, the unemployed locksmith, had a thorough look around your place the day before so as to get to know the layout. We had seen you go out to shop and knew of course that you usually spend a lot of time buying things. So we had plenty of time to go through your apartment undisturbed. On that occasion we also fed your dog for the first time and found out what appealed to him most. We wanted to leave as little as possible to chance and under no circumstances to disturb your nighttime sleep, for we know you are a very busy man, and I have even read one of your books and must admit that in quite a few places it made me laugh heartily. Although one can tell that your underlying mood is one of great sadness. I wish I could help you, but of course I realize that this basic sense of profound sadness is essential for you to be able to write your books in the first place. Look,

like you, I have the same deep-seated feeling of great sadness, but I'm too stupid and untalented to write a book. The same goes for my unemployed brother-in-law and locksmith. For that reason we decided to place the cassette you're listening to right now on your night table tonight to make the most of your purchasing power. Of course we know you're not a millionaire, one can tell this from the way your apartment is furnished, your clothes, the food in your refrigerator, and many other things, but there's no doubt at all that you have a bit more money than we do. And you receive recognition from which, we think, you can always draw some consolation. Only recently we saw your picture in a newspaper, and that's really what prompted us to have a look around in your home. Incidentally, you're not the first person on whose night table we've left a cassette. And take it from me, you can really have some adventures in other people's apartments at night. So far, we liked your apartment best precisely because nothing unexpected happened, and probably also because both my brother-in-law, the locksmith, and I cast a loving eye on your dog. Have no fear, we won't take your dog away from you; we won't take anything away from you; we just happen to like your greedy little dog. I'm sure he is a good companion. Maybe we ought to get ourselves a companion like that, my brother-in-law and I said to each other as we were having a beer outside your house after delivering the cassette. It was a very mild night, and the hedges across the street from your house gave off a pleasant smell. Fact is, you live in a very nice neighborhood. Moreover, you look happy when you're sleeping. Did you know that? Please believe me, I looked at your face only once and very briefly, not a moment longer. My brother-in-law stayed with your dog in the living room, he never set foot in your bedroom, not on the day before either, really, you must believe me. Well now, in spite of my talkativeness I think I haven't yet explained to you that it was because of my poverty and the utter despair I feel about being so poor and desperate that I entered your apartment and left the tiny little cassette on your night table, thereby specifically counting on your proven curiosity as a writer. I am poor, you know, because I'm not really good at anything. I'm just a mediocre, if

not totally untalented salesman in a small electronics store in your neighborhood, and inadvertently I ordered the wrong item for delivery. While my boss was on vacation, I ordered, would you believe it, one hundred completely obsolete cassette players for tiny little cassettes like the one you now have. My boss isn't rich either, but still, he can afford to go away on vacation. I thought I could decisively improve my shaky and underpaid position in this old respectable electronics shop by doing something daring. So I accepted this extraordinarily cheap offering. It involved the shipment of one thousand – now I can speak quite frankly with you – it wasn't just one hundred – it was for one thousand of these completely obsolete cassette players for tiny little cassettes that could be ordered at an extraordinary bargain price. I already told you that I'm not really good at anything. Even where you might expect more of me, that is in my own specialty, electronics, even in that field my knowledge is insufficient. Otherwise I would never have made such a mistake, would never have ordered two thousand of these cassette players with my own money rather than with my boss' money. Oh well, there are exactly two thousand five hundred of these machines, not one more. All right, one less, because you, if you're listening to me at this moment, have bought one of them for the price of two. I apologize for that, but I was desperate. And you are basically the first person whose apartment we've entered; I simply didn't have the nerve to admit it at the very beginning. Forgive me for doing this, but I am really desperate. Perhaps you're wondering how it happened that I had enough money to buy two thousand five hundred of these tape players in the first place. You see, I wasn't exactly poor before – but at what a price! My wife died of childbed fever, which is quite rare nowadays, and she left me a small inheritance. To be precise: the inheritance from her mother who had died shortly before that from an even more uncommon fever. She was gone from one moment to the next, very suddenly. So the inheritance had remained almost untouched by my wife. This, as you can imagine, wasn't the slightest consolation to me, for I had a very close relationship with my wife, even though we had known each other for a long time. And now I

have to raise an infant by myself without its mother. I have no way of nursing the child naturally, even though they say a mother's milk is the best thing in the world for a baby to build up and stabilize its immune system. Do you have even the slightest inkling what good powdered milk costs? And in addition you have to take into consideration that the baby is allergic to protein, that is, to milk protein. And special powdered milk with protein substitutes is even more expensive. Therefore I had to take a chance so that in the future I would also be able to feed my only child with the best possible non-allergenic protein substitute powder. That much I owe my dead wife! And after all, this delicate child is the only thing left to me of my so beautiful and still so young wife. Of course, I made a mistake; I should never have placed that order; but I plead with you to show just a spark of understanding for the difficult position I'm in for which I am only partly responsible and don't report me to the police or bring charges against me. I beg you also to show forbearance, in the name of my brother-in-law and locksmith. His too has been a hard life. Perhaps I'll tell you about that another time, on another cassette. Well, I really thank you with all my heart for buying one of these cassette players, and let me assure you that it isn't always good to buy the latest technical models as soon as they come on the market. I say that with the deepest sincerity as an expert electronics salesman whom I hope you trust. At this point I sincerely offer you my friendship. If you accept, I would be the happiest of men! Come again soon to see me in the shop; then I'll introduce you to my brother-in-law the locksmith. And one more thing, please give my best regards to your dog. I know it sounds odd, but if I ask you to do this I know that you won't think me ridiculous for sending a dog my best regards because you, my friend, are a good and understanding human being.