**Bettina Wilpert, nichts was uns passiert**

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It was May and he’d introduced himself as Joni, though she never called him that; nor did anyone else. Perhaps she’d misheard the name, Anna said. She’d seen him before – Leipzig wasn’t that big a city. And it was a Tuesday or a Wednesday, a weekday for sure.

The day she’d met Jonas, Anna told me, she and Hannes had been sitting on the steps of the Albertina, the university library. They were having a cigarette break – not the first of the day, maybe the third. It was late morning, and she was hung-over. She’d been working until 5 a.m. in the Lindental, a pub in the west of the city. A band from Vienna had been playing, and she’d had a few vodkas with the guys. The sun was just coming up, and the birds were twittering as she cycled home through Clara-Zetkin Park. That was nice. It was the first time she’d pulled an all-nighter that summer and seen the dawn, one of her favourite moments. She hadn’t met a soul in the park, and it wasn’t till she was on Karli, Karl-Liebknecht Straße, that she saw people up and about. Doctors or bakers maybe, people who had to head off to work at that early hour.

She’d woken up when her roommate, Verena, had left the apartment (around 9 a.m.), and hadn’t been able to go back to sleep. As she had nothing better to do, she went to the library, where she met Hannes. As usual, he’d been there since 8 a.m., had already written two pages and deleted three. When she arrived, they went on their first cigarette break. They discussed the essay Hannes was writing. At the time, he was still researching how Nazism was remembered in the GDR as exemplified by schoolbooks. Anna remembered this well because Hannes had been working on this essay for almost six months even though it only needed to be fifteen pages long. He’d got carried away, read far too much literature, and couldn’t organize his thoughts. Anna had tried to help him – she was good at editing others’ writing – but he wouldn’t listen to her, and so the essay had gotten worse instead of better.

On the day she met Jonas, then, she’d been discussing Hannes’s paper with him on the Albertina steps. She hadn’t had any breakfast and was feeling a bit queasy from the vodka the night before. Cigarettes and coffee weren’t helping. She spotted Jonas coming out of the library and approaching them. He asked if he could bum a roll-up. She handed him her tobacco without a word. She expected him to turn away and smoke by himself, but he and Hannes greeted each other like old friends, clapping each other on the back. They started making disparaging remarks about someone Anna didn’t know, cracked an inside joke, remembered an evening boozing together. Anna was confused – how come Hannes knew this guy? They quickly explained. They’d both been on a tour of the Buchenwald Memorial recently and had hung out together there. They mentioned a lecture they’d heard and launched into a discussion about it. Anna smoked away and didn’t pay them much attention. Their conversation became too silly for her and she was beginning to feel distinctly nauseous – afraid that the cigarette on her empty stomach might wreak revenge – so she announced that she was going to the dining hall, the Mensa, even if it was a bit early. The selection of dishes would be better and fresher at that time of day. On the way, they met Uli, a guy Hannes knew, so the four of them headed to the dining hall together. What exactly they talked about, Anna couldn’t recall. Her memories of the Mensa were blurred because she would eat there at the same time almost every day, frequently with Hannes and Uli. She hadn’t spoken to Jonas much; it was more like a group conversation with people butting in, not really listening to each other. They’d probably chatted about weekend plans, or writing assignments, or the World Cup.

Jonas sad it was June. He’d first met Anna during a World Cup game. Yes, it could have been Germany vs. Portugal; he hadn’t been paying much attention. It was a Monday, and he’d been planning to stay late in the library to work on his PhD – he was usually more productive in the evenings than the mornings. But he’d forgotten to put his phone on silent, and Hannes had rung, asking if he wanted to watch the football. He hadn’t known Hannes for very long at that stage, only from the Buchenwald excursion, but it felt like they were friends. Getting wasted together is a bonding experience.

Jonas couldn’t concentrate after the phone call, so he got on his bike and headed for the beer garden in Connewitz. He’d never been to a public screening before. He wasn’t particularly interested in football, World Cup or otherwise. The game was on in the early evening, so he’d be able to go back to the library later.

Anna had looked familiar, he said. He couldn’t say where he’d seen her before – probably one of those faces you know from the library. She’d arrived after him and taken the free seat beside him.

She was one of those people who complain about everything. He liked that – he had no time for people who approve of everything and like everyone. As soon as she sat down she started to complain about football and the German team, and said it should really be called the “Men’s WorldCup”because there was also the Women’s World Cup.

You could have a good argument with Anna. She stuck to her point of view and didn’t change her mind just because it was easier. Jonas didn’t think there was any need to say “Men’s World Cup,” but talking to Anna was preferable to watching the match. “I hope Germany loses,” she said. She unnerved him, and half the time he wasn’t sure what her remarks meant. He asked her why she was watching the match if she wanted Germany to lose. She leaned over and whispered that she’d nothing better to do, her shift in the Lindental didn’t start until 9 p.m.

Anna told Jonas she’d been hanging out with Hannes a lot in the last few months and didn’t see why that should change because of the World Cup. She didn’t intend to just drop her friends. She pointed out that Jonas didn’t seem particularly interested in the game either. How come he was there? She liked the fact that he was easily needled. He rose to the slightest provocation. He admitted that he didn’t have anything better to do either, and what was wrong with having a beer in a beer garden?

She got the feeling he didn’t like her. There was something arrogant about him, but then shy people often use arrogance as a shield. She couldn’t remember the score, but presumably Germany had won that match because they’d won the whole Cup, she knew that much. She didn’t stay long after the game was over because she had to go to the Lindental. It was quiet enough there. Monday evenings were never busy.

The next time they met was a few days later. Again, by chance. It must have been a Friday or a Saturday. Jonas was sure of this because it had been very quiet in the library, and if there had been more going on, they wouldn’t have crossed paths. Jonas wanted to get some fresh air, have a break and a smoke. Anna was in the entrance hall, at the foot of the stairs leading up to the magnificent gallery. She looked a bit lost, as if she’d been standing there for some time.

She didn’t know what to do with herself. She’d been feeling like that a lot that summer. Maybe it was because she’d just finished her degree – one chapter of her life had ended, the next had yet to begin. She’d only sent off two job applications so far. She hated applying for jobs, and she didn’t really feel like working anyway. Her student grant would keep her going for another few months, till the end of September, when the semester was officially over. She’d need to find a job by then, a proper one, but in the meantime all she had to do was work part-time in the Lindental. Sooner or later she’d get a job as an interpreter, in Berlin maybe, or some other city. The employment situation in Leipzig wasn’t great. Her dream had always been to work with the United Nations in Vienna, and she’d tried very hard to get an internship, but it never worked out and now she wasn’t even sure it was what she wanted.

She had moved house that summer, sharing a two-bedroom apartment in Connewitz. She and her roommate had met through a mutual friend. They got on well but hardly saw each other. The internet in the apartment had been down for three weeks. The contract had been in the previous tenant’s name and, as so often happened, the service was interrupted because the internet provider hadn’t updated the account details yet. This was why she’d gone to the library to surf the net, Anna said.

At this point I interrupted her for the first time: On a Saturday evening? How come? Had she no other plans? She couldn’t remember. Most of her friends had probably left town for the weekend, and she didn’t fancy sitting at home on her own with a book.

At first, she wasn’t all that pleased to see Jonas. He seemed to be everywhere all of a sudden. She asked if I knew that feeling, when you neither like nor dislike someone. There’s no logical reason not to like that person; you might even have something in common, shared interests. But she was fascinated by him at the same time, she said, not necessarily in a positive sense – it was more that she was curious, wanted to know what kind of guy he was. No, it wasn’t infatuation.

Yes, she thought he was good looking, but she didn’t find him attractive. She liked his beard – and his glasses. He was one of those would-be intellectuals, and while she liked that style, she also found it very off-putting when people gave themselves airs: I’ve been to college, I’m very clever.

She wasn’t bad looking, but she wasn’t the kind of woman who made him go *wow* either. Not that that happened much anyway. Sure, he often admired women for their beauty, but that didn’t necessarily mean he desired them. It was the same with men – he could often appreciate their beauty. But he was seldom completely bowled over. He’d only been in love with two women up to that point, and one of them had just broken up with him – after seven years. It wasn’t so bad, really, things had gradually come to an end. Since then, he’d been living in a kind of bubble, trying to keep distracted, especially through his thesis.

He didn’t believe in one-night stands, and had never had one before.

He’d headed down the stairs towards the front entrance, wasn’t even going to say hello to her. He had just been reading a theory text in relation to his thesis and was still deep in thought, but she was standing in the middle of the entrance hall, so he couldn’t pass by without acknowledging her. He just gave her a nod and hurried on out. It was a little nippy outside. He considered going back for his sweater but didn’t, partly out of laziness, partly because he’d have had to pass Anna again. So he stood on his own outside the Albertina, and when Anna came out, it was obvious she’d wanted to talk to him.

She’d probably said something silly like: “What, no football today? Have you nothing better to do on a Saturday night than sit in library?” She’d made some kind of jibe, for sure, and winked at him.

Jonas said he hated it when people winked. I nodded. It reminded him of his Latin teacher in eighth grade, who always winked at him and asked: Which case? Dative or accusative? And Jonas had always felt really uncomfortable because the teacher didn’t do that to anyone else in the class and it started a rumour that he was gay.

Jonas ignored Anna’s jibe about the football and asked her for a light. She produced a lighter from her pocket and rolled a cigarette for herself. She asked what he was working on at the moment.

It varied from day to day. Sometimes he liked talking about his thesis; other times it annoyed him when people asked how he was getting on – when it wasn’t going so well. He’d been working on it for nearly a year at that stage. He was behind schedule, still in the research phase. He’d read all the primary literature but was struggling with the secondary texts. Naturally he’d read Connell on masculinity, but that was only the basics, really. He was still floundering when it came to the concept of space, couldn’t quite find the right theoretical framework, was reading round in circles in different anthologies on place and space in literature.

His PhD was on Ukrainian popular literature. She had to smile, but she didn’t tell him why. Yurii Andrukhovych and Serhiy Zhadan? Her guess was right, and the surprised look on his face made her grin. It hadn’t been that hard to guess – those two were probably the best-known contemporary writers in Ukraine. There were others, of course, but they hadn’t been translated yet, or as widely discussed. Besides, she’d have put money on it that a guy like Jonas hardly ever read books written by women. Was she familiar with Andrukhovych and Zhadan? Yeah, sure, she’d heard of them, though the only one she’d read was Andrukhovych. Yes, *The Moscoviad* – that was it. Interesting stuff, but she hadn’t really been convinced. Too much chauvinism.

He’d heard that so many times. These people – hadn’t a clue about literary analysis, couldn’t tell author and protagonist apart, mistook the representation of sexism for the reproduction of it. They’d argued about the book; at first he’d been afraid the mood might flip and become aggressive, but they both managed to remain fairly objective.

What was she studying? She corrected the tense, pointing out that she had finished. People often thought she was younger than she was, took her for twenty-one or twenty-two when she was actually twenty-seven – twenty-eight later that year. She’d done translation studies, Russian, and Spanish. He was visibly impressed. What was her connection with Russia? She didn’t have any direct connection with Russia but she was born in Ukraine. Her family had moved to Germany in the early 1990s. No, they weren’t among the “quota refugees” from the former Soviet Union, they’d got in as ethnic Germans, so-called Russian-Germans.

He told Anna he’d been to Ukraine twice, spending longish periods in Lviv and Kiev.

She was glad he’d said Lviv, not Lemberg, and hadn’t pressed her to explain how she could be Russian-German and from Ukraine. Most people assumed she was from Russia, but there had always been ethnic Germans in Ukraine too. Perhaps this was the moment when he started to be fascinated by her and she started to like him.

Of course he knew Vinnytsia! Julia, a good friend he’d met in Lviv, came from there, and he’d been to her house for dinner several times. For a while he’d thought Julia was in love with him, and his girlfriend had thought so too – his ex-girlfriend, he meant to say.

Vinnytsia, the city with the famous fountain, he said, and they both laughed. He had never seen the fountain – there were times when he thought people had just made it up, until it turned out that he’d only ever been there at the wrong time of the year, in winter, when it was turned off. It was a bit of a joke, really, that Vinnytsia’s claim to fame was a fountain that sprayed river water high into the sky. The city didn’t exactly have a lot of tourist attractions, but he liked it; it wasn’t as big and noisy as Kiev. He liked the river, the parks, and the second-hand Swiss trams that ran through the city still bearing ads for Zurich Opera House.

She hadn’t been to Vinnytsia very often; she was only five when they’d left, so she didn’t remember much. Her memories were mostly of her grandparents’ apartment; they’d joined the rest of the family later. Now, whenever her family went to Ukraine, it was only to Lviv, because an aunt lived there. Anna didn’t think much of Vinnytsia. She considered it sad and boring – not like Lviv, where she could actually imagine herself living for a while. She liked Lviv’s winding streets and its southern charm, even though it was hundreds of kilometres from the Black Sea. It made Anna feel like the sea was around every corner. With its art nouveau buildings and cool bars, Lviv – the city of “blurred borders” – could just as easily be in Poland, the Czech Republic, or Austria.

It was during his voluntary service year after he’d finished school. He’d been declared exempt because of his poor eyesight – and because of his weight, though he told me he hadn’t shared that piece of information with Anna – but he still didn’t want to go straight from school to university. He couldn’t decide what subjects to take, so he went to Lviv and volunteered, helping survivors of Nazi forced labour camps to cope with daily life. It was as a result of this year in Ukraine that he ended up taking Eastern Slavic studies. He’d picked Leipzig because he wanted to get out of Frankfurt. Berlin was too trendy, East Germany was a bit different.

What was she up to for the rest of the evening? Her first instinct was to lie, to make something up, a friend’s party she had to go to. But she was a bad liar and he’d have seen through it, so she told the truth: “Nothing. And you?”

She said she hadn’t got the impression he had any particular plan in mind. When he’d asked what she was up to, it wasn’t really a direct question, as in: Do you fancy doing something together? It was more a throwaway remark – one of those things people say when they can’t think what to say.

Yes, maybe he did say something like that. It was a perfectly normal thing to ask. It wasn’t meant to sound like he was suggesting they should spend the evening together. He certainly hadn’t expected the evening to turn out the way it did.

He hadn’t had any specific plans either; he’d intended to keep working on his thesis, but it was getting later and later, and there was no point in staring at words if you hadn’t the concentration to take them in.

He began to feel attracted to her. Maybe it was because she was from Ukraine, though he didn’t want to be pinned down on that; it might sound racist. It was nice that they had something in common – especially when there were so few people he could discuss this topic with. Even during his undergrad studies, he hadn’t met that many people who were interested in Ukraine – most of the students on his course who’d been abroad had been to Russia, Belarus, or unusual countries like Kyrgyzstan. A few had been to Ukraine, but he didn’t really like them. In fact, he didn’t like most people. Especially after everything that had happened, he added bitterly.

They’d swapped stories about Lviv, about the bars they’d both got drunk in. Yes – the bar at the end of Virmenska St. that didn’t look like a bar at all, so hardly any tourists found it. The front door led straight down to the basement.

One thing led to another – all that talk about bars gave them a real thirst. The Konsum supermarket was closed already and there was no late-night store near the Albertina. So they’d walked along Karli, bought a little bottle of vodka at Südplatz, and headed for Clara-Zetkin Park.

They sat on the bridge. It was already dark. It wasn’t the Sachsenbrücke where so many people hung out, but the smaller bridge near the racecourse. They were the only ones there. Occasionally cyclists whizzed by and gave them a fright if they had no lights on.

Oh, the Dostoyevsky phase! She’d read all his books one after the other when she was sixteen, she said. First *Crime and Punishment*, then *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Idiot*, *The Demons*. He’d interrupted her here. Usually she hated it when a guy butted in to explain something to her, but she let him speak – maybe it was the effect of the vodka.

Had she not read Svetlana Geier’s new German translations? Her versions of the titles were much closer to the Russian originals.

She began to think she didn’t like him after all. Definitely one of the know-all brigade, a hair-splitter.

Maybe those translations weren’t available back when she’d read Dostoyevsky, she replied.

He was quite sure they’d come out after 2000 – how old was she anyway? Twenty-seven. And he? Only a year older, and soon with a PhD under his belt. It was enough to put her in a bad mood.

He said he had a very clear memory of his mother giving him the books for his seventeenth birthday. Like Anna, he’d read them all one after the other.

She couldn’t be angry with him for long.

Oh, and the pipe phase! He’d taken a pipe to school and stood in the schoolyard, on his own, reading his book in the corner by the flowerbeds. The pipe was far too strong, of course. He was only a teenager. During recess, which lasted twenty minutes, he’d only dared draw on the pipe twice, stifling his coughs to avoid embarrassing himself. When the bell rang and the others were heading back to the classrooms, he put the pipe in his pocket and quickly lit a cigarette, taking frantic drags to satisfy his nicotine craving.

That made her laugh, of course. She could just picture him, the nerd who was teased by the other kids at school, who had only one friend, and they didn’t even get along. The only thing that made allies of them was being equally unpopular. He was the kind of outsider who didn’t have his first girlfriend until his early twenties, and it was around then that his image changed too. The same qualities that had branded him a nerd before made him cool when he got to university, especially since there were very few guys doing his particular humanities course.

And Sorokin, of course. Katya Petrovskaya was too sentimental for him.

He dared attack Katya Petrovskaya? She loved that book of hers. She could relate to the narrator’s search for her family history in Ukraine, whereas he, Jonas, being white, German and male, probably wouldn’t understand. Naturally, he loved Sorokin. She didn’t tell him that she found Sorokin pornographic, vulgar and disgusting.

He was delighted he could talk to her about literature. His friends had studied either philosophy or sociology and were now desperately wondering whether they should get teaching qualifications, as there were no jobs in Leipzig for humanities graduates. They didn’t read literature, only theory. Sometimes he even felt that they looked down on literature. But he loved exactly what his friends didn’t like about literary texts – that you can’t draw any clear conclusions. Indeed, it was impossible to put into words the effect that reading a good book can have on you. Jonas said he’d be a different person today if he hadn’t read so many books when he was young.

Yes, she liked talking about literature. But Jonas was quick to drift into theory, and he insisted on analyzing every book and putting it in a postmodern context, and she had no interest in that. Besides, conversations with him were invariably reduced to exercises in name-dropping.

They’d toasted Russian literature, Ukrainian literature – every kind of literature!

They’d got drunk pretty quickly. It only took a few shots because they hadn’t had anything to eat. He magicked another bottle of vodka out of somewhere, though she was certain they’d only bought the one bottle in the late-night store. No, she hadn’t been under any pressure to drink.

He hadn’t been trying to fill her with drink, Jonas said. It was just a normal summer’s evening in Leipzig, not a lot going on, so they’d ended up drinking. She’d made the first move. He hadn’t slept with anyone since he’d split up with Lisa. Nothing happened while they were still on the bridge.

At some point she said she was hungry; he said he lived fairly nearby and had plenty of food at home. She suggested going to his place. No, she hadn’t been planning anything, Anna said. She was just going with the flow.

He really did live fairly near the park, on Arthur-Hoffmann Straße.

B

Anna knew the area well. The first apartment she’d lived in in Leipzig was nearby, on Körnerplatz. That’s where she’d met Hannes – he claimed he had “cast” her for the role of housemate. They’d lived in that apartment for nearly three years, until the rent went up. Since then she’d shared four different apartments, and her friends had gradually lost interest in helping her move; a different apartment every year. Four apartments, four different parts of the city: Südvorstadt, Schleußig, then the east of the city, now Connewitz, in the south. No, there was nothing wrong with Connewitz, just that she’d have preferred to live in the west. That’s where most of her friends lived, but she’d been turned down for all of the house shares she’d gone for there.

Jonas’s apartment had been spared any major refurbishment. The windows had been replaced, he said, but he and Momo, the guy he was sharing with, had managed to hang on to the stove and the coal-fired heating. They kept bombarding the property management with letters to try to delay further upgrades.

Momo wasn’t in when they got there. Jonas was glad – Momo would definitely have given him a funny look when he saw Anna. He knew that Momo missed Lisa; she’d been a balancing element in their household.

They drank some more in the kitchen. He still had some Ukrainian vodka from his last trip. And then, yes, one thing led to another. Anna couldn’t remember too much detail – just that it had been fairly *classical*, not very dynamic. They were both drunk. He’d been on top, and it was quick. The first time you have sex with someone, it’s never good. They both fell asleep afterwards.

What Jonas mainly remembered was the business with the condom, because he’d been so embarrassed. Normally he kept a packet under the bed – the good ones, the thin kind that allow more sensation. But when he reached under the bed, there was nothing. He hated that moment of having to ask: Should I get a condom? He got up, checked his wallet, found nothing there either. He went out of the bedroom, because he remembered seeing some condoms in the bathroom that Momo must have left there. He found them, and things moved pretty quickly after that, despite the interrupted foreplay. The sex was okay. It was new for him to be sleeping with someone other than Lisa. Anna was slimmer and had smaller breasts, and he caught himself trying moves and patterns he’d practised for years with Lisa; but they didn’t work. Anna couldn’t have known his favourite positions, after all. Besides, he’d been pretty wasted.

Yes, she remembered the condom business. It hadn’t bothered her; it was a good thing, and it was kind of sweet to see him so embarrassed. One of the advantages of using condoms (apart from avoiding pregnancy and STDs) is that you have to have the conversation. You have to establish consent. It gives you a chance to say no when the other person asks: Should I get a condom?

The next morning was awkward. She’d slept badly, wasn’t used to sharing a bed, and he’d curled up to spoon her several times during the night.

She had a hangover. She got up quickly and invented an excuse – she needed to get back to her place to help Verena with something. The main thing was to avoid having breakfast with him, though he’d already invited her to, just to be polite.

It was nice not to sleep on his own. What he missed most since the break-up with Lisa were the cuddles, another warm body in the bed. He got the feeling Anna didn’t like it, so he was glad when she went straight home the next morning and he could go back to sleep. She’d spared them both an awkward breakfast.

She hadn’t spent too much time thinking about it. She didn’t want a relationship and she wasn’t in love. It had just happened. It was nice to have sex again, even if it wasn’t great – it was good for her ego. The longest she could remember going without sex was in first year: it was all new, university and everything, and she was often unsure of herself. Insecurity makes you unattractive. That’s something she’d learned this past year, after everything that happened. If she was happy with herself, Anna noticed people looking at her, men and women. If she was unhappy, people didn’t see her at all; it was like she didn’t exist. That hurt.

After that night with Jonas, she remembered walking home in a good mood. Her bike was still at the library. She was listening to music on her headphones – Future Islands – and thinking: Yay, I had sex! It was about three months since the last time. Three months was her limit – she really couldn’t go any longer without it. Before that she’d had a fling with a guy she’d been in college with – at first she thought she was in love, but he soon began to get on her nerves.

Jonas hadn’t thought much about Anna afterwards, and he wasn’t in love. He regarded her more as a distraction to help him get over his ex. He didn’t miss sex; he missed emotional intimacy, and he missed Lisa as a person. The closeness they’d had. But he had no interest in a new relationship. Sleeping with Anna was a nice change; he hadn’t been spending a lot of time with other people these last few weeks. Since Lisa broke up with him, he’d had to get used to being on his own again. He hadn’t cooked at home since they split. That used to be their thing. Now he felt sick at the thought of cooking for himself, so he went to the Mensa or bought frozen pizzas. He didn’t want to cook with Momo, because he mainly ate meat. Jonas had been a vegetarian for almost ten years.