

Translated excerpt

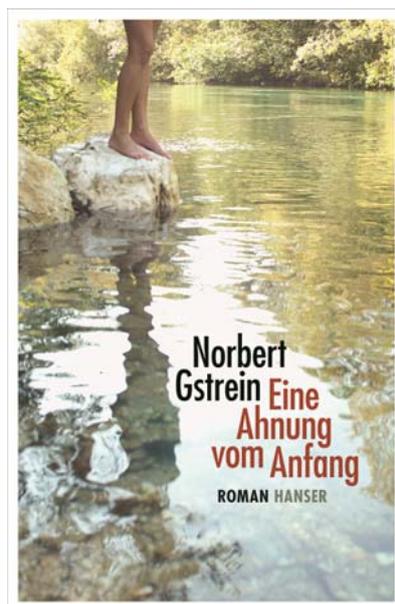
Norbert Gstrein
Eine Ahnung vom Anfang

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Norbert Gstrein
An Inkling of the Beginning

Translated by David Burnett



I went down to the mill on the river almost every day back then, even during the last week of school. My only objective was to flee the classroom as fast as I possibly could. I would sit down in the sun with a book, but found myself laying the book aside with ever greater frequency. Soon I was cleaning up the place, which until then I'd simply left the way it was when I had taken over the property. I started gathering rocks from the yard, piling them in one place, and wondered if I should bring them down to the riverbed, to the gravel bar right outside my house, but finally heaped them up next to the walls or, rather, the remains of the mill walls. It's possible that in some subliminal way I was already contemplating using them as building material without any conscious plan. Indeed, after months in the classroom I was so satisfied to work out-of-doors, pursuing an aimless and apparently useless task, that I finally thought I understood the maxim about Sisyphus being a happy man, having caught myself wishing that someone behind me would undo everything I'd done. Then I could start from scratch, or I'd take my gathering and weeding beyond the boundaries of my property to the surrounding fields and meadows, slowly making my way to the village, and past it. I had done the less pleasant things already, got rid of the trash between the crumbling walls – beer and pop bottles, glass shards, tinfoil, an old shoe, two broken badminton rackets without strings, and excrement from the corners, human excrement, animal excrement, I didn't know. I had taken the half-charred stumpy logs from a fire pit that had evidently been used multiple times, tossed them into the water and watched them float away, lazily bobbing,

until they got caught in a whirlpool, were seized and carried away by a powerful current in the middle of the stream. I spent half the afternoon trying to roll away the last rock, lying there like an erratic boulder, but gave up, panting and sweating, after the first three heaves. Having propped it up with the greatest of effort and rolled it over a couple of times, I left it barely ten feet away from where it was at the start, and where an oval of fresh earth glistened in the sun before gradually scarring over.

It was towards the end of the second week of vacation – I had just begun to build an enclosing wall with the stones I'd gathered – when Daniel and his friend Christoph showed up. I had heard the rattling of a moped, getting louder as it approached along the river, but paid no attention to it; it wasn't the first time, and the last few days I'd often picked up the sound of engines coming from the near-by athletic field in the meadow. I wasn't expecting visitors, and they must have stood there a while before I noticed them, for suddenly everything seemed to go quiet, the murmur of the river accentuating the silence. I straightened up; they were just a few meters away, watching me. They waited until I approached them, and only later did it occur to me that I must not have made a very welcoming impression, standing there wordless with a branch in my hand. We exchanged a few words before they disappeared again. The following day they reappeared carrying a bottle of wine, and asked if they could sit down with me. That was the beginning of the story which in the minds of the villagers would develop into something monstrous.

It had been exactly two years since I'd purchased the mill and its property, and two further years since I'd come back from Istanbul, where I'd taught for two years – another two years – at the Austrian School. Two plus two plus two, six years altogether since Robert had gone down to the river one Sunday morning and put the barrel of a rifle, presumably from the gun club, in his mouth and pulled the trigger. I tell this because the two of them asked me about it, and because they were the first who dared to, or even so much as thought about daring to.

All the same, I was surprised at first that they came back at all. I thought I had showed them clearly enough that I wanted to be alone, that I didn't care to have people around. This time I came to meet them when I detected the sound of the moped in the distance. It's a strange thing, the acoustics by a river. Sometimes you hear what you shouldn't hear according to the laws of physics: occasional voices carried by the wind as if from another world; the murmur of a procession or the clanging of bells from the cows grazing on the meadow, as if the bells of heaven were ringing. But these things scarcely bothered me any more than the noise of a moped engine. Ready for anything, I saw the two of them approaching, slowly coming around the bend and negotiating the moss-covered path through the woods, as if dodging potholes or puddles and fearful of losing their balance any moment. I hadn't asked them the day before if they'd run across me by chance or if they'd heard I'd been spending time down at the river and made the trip for that reason. But the question was suddenly moot; they waved when they noticed I'd seen them, and I waved back without a second thought.

I put the hedge clippers down without having pruned the wildly overgrown bushes into anything less wild, removed my gloves and took a few steps in their direction. I had received them over and over again at my place the last few months when they made their notorious Saturday afternoon rounds and visited their teachers, standing now before one door, now before another, waiting to be asked in, which is why I was surprised now to perceive them as strangers. It must have had to do with the different surroundings, with the remoteness of this place, or with the fact that they were still holding their crash helmets and didn't approach me at all. Not that I felt threatened; but for a moment, without the slightest reason, I thought they might attack me, that there might be a score to settle between us, a score that had been accumulating against me for years without my knowing it and that they now wanted to even up.

Strictly speaking, they were an unlikely couple. By that I don't mean how they acted in school, much less if they were good or bad students, even if Daniel's seriousness was a marked contrast to the slackness Christoph had given himself up to in senior high, probably even earlier. I don't mean the boyishness or even the girlishness of the one and the boastfulness and boorishness of the other, who seemed to have been born that way. Not that kind of thing, and nothing to do with their parents and families. I mean the thing that should have driven them apart, but which brought them even closer together and had made them inseparable by their senior year – in a word, Judith; in two words their love; in three, four or five their unavailing love for her. I had watched them both fall madly in love with her at almost the same time the year before; their

friendship was based on the fact that neither of them stood a chance with her, so that after the first rebuffs they adopted the role of two ironic suitors. It was as if they had decided independently of one another that instead of languishing they would make fun of *her* languishing, and so they pranced around their beloved, made ever new passes at her, strutted around and danced attendance upon her, threw themselves at her feet with outbursts of boundless enthusiasm. You could watch the three of them go down to the schoolyard and smoke, watch them strolling away arm in arm at noon, the girl in the middle, tall, blond, back straight but still with almost no breasts, to her left and to her right the two dandies, trying to outdo each another in their repartees, sometimes walking backwards a few of steps in front of her, hoping for a smile, a glance, a slight remark.

That undoubtedly explained their restlessness on Saturdays, their endless roaming around on the moped, their surprise visits – because Judith's boyfriend had come for her. He was a few years older, was in college already, and was only in town on the weekends; and it must have happened many times that the two tried to talk her into staying, to leave him waiting, when they discovered his car parked outside the school. She let them have their five or ten minutes, let them have one last cigarette outside the doorway, she laughed at their jokes about the waiting man as soon as they could hear his horn – then left them standing in mid-sentence. I don't know how they managed to look at her in disbelief each time when she hurried off with giant strides, turning around to face them briefly, swinging her purse and smiling, as she paused on the landing

before heading down the stairs, walking sideways like a woman in high-heels and without another glance to spare for them.

I remembered that now, while wondering what had brought them to me yet again. They didn't even park the moped properly and didn't answer either, just stood there holding their crash helmets as if they were ready to head for the hills at the slightest sign of not being welcome. It was a picture-perfect Sunday, ninety degrees in the shade, the air above the meadows shimmering from the heat, crickets chirping, and I didn't know yet that Judith, with whom they'd spent almost every afternoon at the swimming pool during the last weeks of school, had gone to Italy with her boyfriend.

They stayed the whole day with me by the river, and it wasn't Daniel, it was Christoph who asked about my brother. We sat at first on the stone steps leading up to the mill, drinking wine from the paper cups they had brought. For a long time no one spoke, we listened to the brawl of the river and the sound of trains from the opposite bank, where the tracks run on a slightly raised embankment. Then we went down to the river, past the puddles, the stagnating pools from the last flood, past the yellow warning signs about high water, all the way to the gravel bar, where you get a feeling for the riverbed's remarkable expansiveness. I don't remember if Christoph had ever alluded to it before, but when he asked me if it had been here somewhere, I knew right away what he meant, and just said yes. Then we fell silent again and looked across the water, and in doing so I had the impression that if I stared at one spot long enough it would suddenly start to ripple.

It was all as unspectacular as what I'm relating here, and yet something must have happened that day, maybe concerning the question and my answer, something that made them feel responsible for me from that point on, or at the very least made them seek my company. They came the next day too, and the following day I was already waiting for the sound of the approaching moped; then, after a few more idle days spent sitting in the sun, reading, and talking, and sometimes heading down to the river to dip our bare feet in or take a quick plunge in the water, ice-cold even in the middle of summer, they suggested fixing up the mill to make it habitable. It was a crazy idea, there was no electricity or water connection, not to mention a building permit, but they paid no heed to my skeptical objections, got to work right way, and I let them. They borrowed a flatbed truck from Christoph's father, pulled it up as close as they could, then used a wheelbarrow to haul the building material they had "organized" outside a sawmill. I watched them stack boards, unload bags of cement, prop several rolls of tar paper against a tree, till one day a veranda was there with a view of shimmering irreality; the walls had been repaired, makeshift windows installed, one facing the river, one next to the door that hung from its hinges on two leather straps; they'd even built a roof out of rough boards, wind- and weather-proof. It was not much more than a comfy shelter for children playing outdoors; there was no house to speak of yet, even if we called it that, but at least it was a place to keep dry when it rained, and in the end they hung a kerosene lamp in one of the two rooms and talked nonstop about what a hiding place like this might be good for.

I'm not sure if the walkers were surprised at first by all the construction work, or if it wasn't just the strange community we had formed. There was, of course, a bathing spot down the river a ways, but I knew that we were attracting attention: sunning ourselves on the gravel bar in shorts during the afternoon, tossing a ball back and forth in a game of three-way catch, or just sitting around a fire and waiting till the meat was done, which we held over the flames on sharpened sticks. I also can't say when I began to notice that the people turning up nearby as if by chance were maybe not there by chance at all. But when a couple of boys came down from the athletic field, ten- or twelve-year-olds in grass-green tracksuit bottoms and white jersey tops, stopping a little ways away until one of them stepped forward and yelled something unintelligible in our direction before bursting into laughter, I sensed that we'd become the talk of the town. They didn't seem outright aggressive, but one of them picked up a rock; he held it up against the sun, as if he wanted us to see it clearly, then launched it in our direction. It wasn't aimed to hit us, was more of a gesture we could take for a game, yet it left a sense of menace in the air, which didn't diminish when the gang withdrew again, laughing.

The high-school principal was quick to confirm it, calling me up one evening to ask if everything was alright with me. It was vacation, and I didn't feel like talking to him, but it was he who had helped me get the job in Istanbul when I'd told him, after the death of my brother, that the best thing would be for me to go away for a while; it was he who had offered to take me back unconditionally when he detected I might be having second thoughts about it; and I was still touched when I thought about

how he had come to visit me with a small delegation of my fellow teachers, that very first autumn, how he had watched me discreetly as I dutifully guided the group from one tourist attraction to another, to the Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque and Topkapı Palace, endeavoring to hide that I knew virtually nothing of the city apart from what I saw on my way to work and back. He'd taken me under his wing ever since, something I of course didn't fail to notice when he invited me to his place for dinner once every couple of months. I began to ask myself if one of the other teachers hadn't told him I was starting to become a recluse again, if he had heard that I'd been spotted at Café Bruckner a lot lately, or if maybe there was no need for alarm and it was just another routine inspection. Granted, I found it exhausting in the long run, yet each time I dutifully showed up with a bottle of wine and flowers for his wife. I liked him, liked how he received me, a little bit stiff, but always with a pat on the shoulder, in one sense from man to man, but also in a way that made me feel like a little boy; and I liked his wife, too, who said he should let me in first when he'd strike up a conversation with me at the door, liked the warmth of her reprimands, and liked how she called him Karl, a name from my childhood which filled me with a totally unwarranted sense of trust, a name from a world where nothing bad could ever happen or, on the odd chance something bad should happen, where I knew there would always be someone to fix it.

Of course I didn't call him that, because for me he would always be Herr Aschberner, however familiar we were with each other. He addressed

me by my first name and I had to resort to circumlocutions in order not to do the same.

"If it's true what I've been hearing, you've been spending a lot of time down at the river," he said, his voice full of concern. "You'll let me know if there's anything I can do for you."

He had known my father, maybe it was that, or maybe it was his son, who had died an untimely death and whom he never talked about, but maybe no further reason was needed for him to want to look after me.

"Weren't you planning to take a trip?"

He had summoned me on the last day of school and asked what I was going to do during vacation, and I told him I hadn't worked out the details but was planning to go on a trip, though by that time I had already started making my pilgrimages to the river, and never would have even considered spending my days any other way.

"I reconsidered," I said. "Anyway, it's still almost another four weeks till school starts up again."

He let out a peevish grumble, and I imagined his wife standing behind him, tapping him on the shoulder and whispering something into his ear.

"And the two boys?"

"What about them?"

"You know how people are around here."

He was a discreet man, and I trusted he would stop himself at the right moment, but he didn't.

"There's a lot of talk," he said. "They might not be your students anymore, but it's not good to expose your weaknesses like that."

I hadn't seen it in this light before, but now I envisioned it: two boys by the river and a man I couldn't remotely picture having anything to do with me the way he'd alluded to it, nor could I imagine what the man's role might be in any story worth telling, any story capable of being told. I saw Daniel, squealing like a child, running into the shallow water along the bank, then heading downstream, following the waterline, paddling with or, rather, flapping his arms, that's how close he seemed to taking off, throwing up his legs left and right, and me chasing after him. I had taken it as a challenge, and ran after him until I'd caught up; then, on a sudden impulse, I had wrapped my arms around him and held him tight for a moment, maybe more than a moment, yes, in my memory much longer. He stood there calmly, slightly bent over, and I'd placed my hand on the chest of this lad and had this word in my head, "lad," had put my hand on his chest and thought "lad," and how cool his skin was from the water that had splashed on it, and I could feel the beating of his heart underneath. There was nothing else to it; it was not that he had perceived the situation as anything special like I had. He walked back beside me, not a word about it, not a meaningful silence either, as you might be inclined to think; he was just like always, it didn't occur to him to comment on what had happened or talk himself out of his embarrassment, and it was absurd for me now to wonder if anyone might have seen us, a walker or one of the peeping Toms who supposedly prowled around in the undergrowth

near the bathing spot but who seemed to me, whenever I heard about them, more like figures from an old wives' tale.

"Weaknesses?"

The principal cleared his throat.

"Well, eh, maybe not exactly weaknesses."

He paused for a long time before he said the word, as if he had had to taste it first, and seemed more satisfied than he was willing to admit.

"We both know that one never finds the right way of putting it, but you know what I'm getting at," he said. "I'd just like to ask you to be a little more cautious, that's all."

I didn't know what to make of his advice, if anything it made me more aware, made me think about things more carefully. I didn't say a word to the two of them, but when Daniel reclined in the sun with a book and used my thigh as a headrest, I would move away from him a little; and when Christoph would sprawl out naked after swimming, on the flat rock jutting into the water from the gravel bar, I'd throw him a towel. I told them they should put something on when they walked down the river to the bathing spot clad in nothing but shorts, but they laughed, of course, and asked me if I thought they were still in school, or why I was acting like some guardian of public morals. I eyed the walkers as much as they eyed us when they got too close to the property, and when I started to worry about what you could see from the passing trains on the other side of the river, which sometimes rolled by maddeningly slow, and whose cars seemed to pass in front of and behind the trees on the embankment at the same time, like some kind of surrealist painting, it was then that I

knew it was lunacy and stopped. I watched the whitewater rafters, who had a camp just up the river, past the bathing spot, pushing off in their big rubber boats, with ten, twelve or more people, always in a party mood, who arrived laughing and departed laughing, an invasion of good-natured conquerors with helmets and life jackets. They raised their paddles in greeting when they reached our stretch of the river, hardly three minutes before entering the gorge with its rapids, where they needed both hands just to stay on course and keep from capsizing. I've never been down there, it can't be more than half an hour on foot along the river bank, but I knew that from time to time friends would leave flowers, and a candle would burn for days that could probably be seen at night from the middle of the river.