

# Encounter (Widerfahrnis)

by  
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Translated by  
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That story. The one that, as people like to say, continues to rip his heart to pieces. He normally would not say such a thing, only this time, right here, he is willing to make an exception. That story, how would he have started it? Maybe with the steps he heard in front of his door and the doubt in his mind as to whether they even were steps or just something born out of the agitation that he'd felt since he longer helped books to emerge from others' chaos. Now, were those steps? After nine pm? Down in the valley, the first lights had already gone out. Or was it him? Then would come the cigarette, the snap of his eternal metal lighter as it was lit, the noise that would break the spell, even if it originated from within. Cigarette in his mouth, Reither – it was precisely at this moment that he would have introduced the name into the narrative – went into the hallway to get a bottle of Apulian red from the case. The wine is a peaceful, guilty pleasure that can put some distance between you, the world and its misery, even that which is taking place right in front of your door, it need not touch you.

Yes, they were steps. As if someone were walking up and down, absorbed in thought. Reither got his bottle opener, then knelt down on the living room floor. The floor, first because this was where the ashtray was and second because that was where he had placed the book after he had discovered it earlier that night. In the end, all he did was follow a habit. He tended to do all things that required devotion while kneeling down. As he had done no more than a year ago, when he had spread the new designs for the book-sleeves of his tiny publishing house on the parquet flooring beneath him. It was impossible to get an idea of the whole on a table or, god forbid, a computer monitor. Even one of the few photographs of himself that he considered genuine, shows him kneeling, a cigarette in his mouth, observed by a woman. Her legs, the only trace of her presence in the picture, while he appears to be full of purpose: his arm stretched towards the ground, the cigarette pointing upwards at the very same angle, the profile defined by the nose below the still thick head of hair. He gazes at what he is doing, applies something to the rotten sign that he has selected as the cover image with his thumb. Over the last thirty years, he has applied some kind of finishing touch to every single one of his books, until one day all of that was over. Last fall he chose to liquidate the Reither publishing house along with the adjacent miniature bookshop. He also sold his first floor apartment in a pre WWII residential building which had allowed him to clear his debts with the printers and turn his back to the big city in favor of an apartment that had a view of mountains and meadows. Despite the fact that the meadows were still covered in snow at the end of April, being here in the upper Weissach Valley meant an escape from the world of the weary smiles that someone like him would normally have to endure twice a year, as he presented the bound and printed goods he had to offer.

Reither drilled the spiral of the corkscrew into the cork. When that photo was taken – the one that

still sat in his kitchen, already framed but not yet hung, since he could not make up his mind whether he wanted to or not – he still drank in public and those legs in the picture belonged to a woman who was going to leave him a short while later. A picture taken with the help of a self-timer, one could call it a happy accident. Now he pulled at the cork until glittering spirals materialized before his eyes. It was a vain endeavor. He was not focused; he was with the steps behind the door. Someone was in the hallway, which in fact, was not even in itself a proper place. It was painted in a color that refused to betray whether it was color at all or merely the faded remains of a shallow idea of what it's color could be. Nobody walked up and down that hall without a reason. Reither stubbed out the cigarette in the bulbous ashtray – who could want something from him? Did he want somebody to want something? Maybe. But maybe that was simply because spring refused to show itself. Winter was not a good time of year for him, he'd confirmed that impression sixty-four times, excepting a few winters he had experienced as a toddler. And the wine he used to fight that winter – the remains of a trip to Apulia he had taken with his old Toyota estate-wagon, the windows down instead of an air conditioner in the scorching, August heat. And that book by the ashtray, a wee little book, barely fifty pages long and clearly self-published, though it's design was rather appealing. That is what had captured his attention. That and the fact that it did not have a title. Or maybe the title was the name printed on the sleeve: Ines Wolken – he'd never heard that name, he presumed it was made up. Most of the time he had ignored submissions like this one for weeks on end. And when he finally glanced over the first and last page, his aversion was usually confirmed.

He pulled again; this time the cork came out with an almost human sound and he filled one of the two glasses. He had given away most of his dishes and sold the rest at a loss- just like all the book rights and that old Toyota. Glass and book in hand, he approached his leather chair, something he had taken along, as well as some items for the kitchen, a few pieces of furniture, clothes for every season and books for every mood, a hundred sufficed.

They sat on the dinner table and were stacked on the floor; he stored everything he had ever published, a maximum of four deserving books per year, in a room in the basement. He really wanted to sit down now but instead, he took off his shoes and returned to the hallway, glass and book in hand. He stepped closer to the door. Somebody was breathing on the other side, yes, a throat was cleared quietly, as if words were about to be uttered, or like they were already being uttered but only by an inner voice: I did not mean to disturb, just wanted to talk briefly. He took a deep breath, the breath for that first sip of the evening when all thought is consumed by the sensation of taste and for just a moment, the whole world fits on one tongue. He took the sip but the effect did not set in – the world was the quiet clearing of the throat on the other side of the door. A

glance through the peephole could have brought clarity, sure, but he preferred looking at the book. He had not expected a find like this. He had gone to visit the so-called fireplace-lobby, to search through the wall of left-behind books. He chose the time when people were out for dinner at area restaurants so that he could be alone. Afterwards, he hastily made for his apartment careful not to run into anyone, especially none of the members of the Wallberg Apartments' book club. Wallberg Apartments being what they called the whole set of building; the driving force behind it's book club a woman who looked like a florist in the picture that had recently been printed by the local newspaper. Once she had nodded to him from a distance.

Reither went into the kitchen, got some alpine cheese, cooked ham, some butter and fresh bread. It was not that he enjoyed eating by himself but he also did not like being watched while he was eating. He had avoided making contact with people in general since he had come here; it was only with the two young ladies from the reception that he talked from time to time. Reception – just a word he had picked up at the owner's meeting, as if they were living in a hotel but really the reception served only one purpose: to make sure that after the janitor had left the building in the evening, the comings and goings were still being monitored. There was not much of a budget for this, which meant that the two sitting there were the kind of people who were glad to have any work at all.

Both of them had left a world behind, just like he had. One, Marina, came from Bulgaria, the other from Eritrea. Her name was Aster, the star, and she was the kind of beauty one might encounter in a children's bible. They took turns with their shifts: one from four pm to midnight, the other worked the rest of the night until eight in the morning. With the blonde from Bulgaria who always dressed a tad too elegantly for her position, he chatted about celebrities she believed to have spotted in the valley and with the woman from Eritrea he spoke about language itself. Aster was afraid of making grammatical mistakes in the foreign language, something that he encouraged her to do albeit in the soft voice that was so characteristic of her. Quiet but uninhibited, that was his advice to her.

He began to eat, a piece of cheese wrapped in ham. At Easter when the place had been overrun with duplicitous, visiting relatives, he had finally stopped frequenting the restaurants that were located on the grounds of the complex. Either he opted for a local inn or he ate at home by himself while writing emails to old companions who he would not have called friends, like the booksellers who had stuck by him for a long time, those men and women who sometimes walked past their old shops and marveled at the smartphones in the windows. He had even written an actual letter to his longtime employee, his only employee, which assured her that he had everything he needed here in the Weissach valley. The Kressnitz, as he still liked to call her to himself, was in a way his closest relation, since there really was no one else.

Now there is a noise in front of the door, could be a stifled sneeze, once, twice – no wonder with this weather- a blow to the soul and to the immune system. The Kressnitz had suffered from colds every year in April, literally every year, yet even with a head cold, she had made sure to fulfill her duties, like consoling talented writers whose work proved too jumbled to be turned into a book. She had believed until the very end in all of the dejected souls who were trying to recover through writing, while he took them to the Italian restaurant around the corner, despite the fact that he had no hope for them. There had to be an end to that. Reither lit another cigarette and returned to the hallway. Of course, many had encouraged him to keep going; many claimed that he was still young, many who were themselves reaching his age and yet Reither had been the only one willing to look matters straight in the eye. Very soon, there would be more writers than readers in this world. He put his ear to the door. He suspected that either there were two people holding their breaths now or that the spell had passed – too bad actually, he had not heard somebody else's breath in a long time; so he was left with the book he had discovered that lacked even a blurb or any hint as to who its author was. Reither put it on the dinner table, he brought the butter and the cheese, the bread and the ham back into the kitchen, helped himself to another glass of wine and then did something he would never have done in his previous life: he placed it on the small book.

Right away, of course, two drops of the Apulian red materialized on the sleeve that had so appealed to him – no design, just an Arial font on sand-colored paper. He tried to wipe off the drops, but the stains just grew bigger. The smart thing to do would be to have a smoke before he tried again. Ashtray in hand, he stepped up to his panorama window and gazed into the darkness. No more cars on the street that leads up to the lake, night falling on what used to be another busy hour in his day – he had talked on the phone with booksellers, had asked them to put this or that book into the window, but those old people with their old phones that had no voicemail and therefore always answered the phone personally, they had died one by one. He returned to the table, rubbed at the stains again and ended up making it worse still. He would have to remove the sleeve before returning the book, as if it had never had one. But it did, there was nothing to be done about that. It was a fact, everything that ever was remains a fact. He had learned that more than twenty years ago from a woman, from her leaving him, on a journey that was so close to being complete; she too remained a fact, a fact with a beautiful name that had not been made up.

At the precise moment when Reither stubbed out his cigarette, the doorbell rang, a short but decided ring. He looked down at himself and his sweater, the kind of sweater that is so hard to get rid of once you have gotten used to it. It had been a gift, the Kressnitz had given it to him on his last milestone birthday. Just a second, he called out and approached the cupboard he had recently bought. He took off the sweater and put on a collared shirt, his book-fair shirt, with breast pockets

just large enough to fit his cigarettes and the small brochures containing the autumn book offering. Over the shirt he used to wear a leather jacket, one that he had owned just as long as the lighter. And just like the lighter, he had taken it here with him. It was right there on the coatrack in the hallway. On his way to the door he reached for the collar of the jacket, a jacket which had been with him through more than the mere greeting an unsolicited visitor. Only then did he reach for the door handle. Sometimes you just know something before it even happens, it announces itself through a whiff, an oscillation; just like an animal gets restless right before an earthquake hits. He had the door no more than halfway opened when he saw what only a second ago had been a part of that mysterious world of particles: there, behind his doormat, stood the driving force of the book club and she stood there in a summer dress.

What can I do for you? Reither brushed the hair from his forehead, then managed to add a good evening. He found himself under the spell of her summery looking shoes and saw that he was only in socks. It is late she said, and if I happened to disturb you, maybe you were watching television, I am sorry. I really do not want to keep you from anything, I would just like to arrange a meeting, maybe tomorrow at eleven in the fireplace-lobby.

The visitor – even though she was not yet technically one – both of her shoes now protruded halfway onto the doormat. It would be more fitting to speak of feet in this case since her shoes consisted of nothing but a pair of mint-colored straps, which is to say, she stood there in sandals, but not the kind of sandals one would associate with orthopedic purposes, no, there was something nervous about them, like a dragonfly and it took Reither a moment to take his eyes off of them. I do not own a television, he replied, so I could not be torn away from it. That conversation tomorrow, what will that be about? A question anyone would have asked probably, though maybe using different more engaging words to do so. It was only now that he finally lifted his eyes far enough to actually look at the woman in front of the door who had retreated a little – still, it was more of a stare than a look, incredulous would probably have described it best.

He looked into a face that makes you think of how it must have looked at a younger age, startlingly beautiful, just because it was still somewhat startling with these eyes that were of a blueish gray, loosely piled hair that had the color of pistachio shells, fine nostrils but an otherwise solid nose, along with a pale full mouth, full actually because of its pallor. She was younger than he but not dramatically so. It is about our book club, she said. Let us talk about this in the daytime, tomorrow? A few hairs had come loose, she brushed them from her forehead then chased the last one away by blowing at it, and Reither looked again at the shoes that seemed so very summery. But excuse me, since when is the daytime more suited than the nighttime for conversations about reading? He himself was surprised at his objection, not because it was wrong but because it was reckless, almost

an invitation. The head of the book club quietly cleared her throat, seemingly weighing the pros and cons of day and night. The question was, what did she know about him? His name had not yet been mentioned and there were nothing but his initials on the door of the apartment.

But some conversations, she objected, are better had when the two people talking are wide awake. Wide awake, that sounded like a warning, as if the conversation would touch upon delicate issues. Tell me, how long were you standing in front of the door? He had to ask that, expose her to a little surliness. How long? Well, I did not look at my watch. But for a while there, you were standing on the other side. I smelled your cigarette – an unfiltered cigarette. And there we both hesitated. Because human interactions do not become easier with time, do they? She said it with a smile that looked like she had already entered the apartment, and that even though she had retreated again, her feet crossed casually, which went well with the open shoes, more turquoise, blue speckles on the sides. Her linen dress was the color of her eyes and it did not cover her shoulders, as if to spite the wintry night that was descending on the valley.

What did he think about humanity and time, he had not forgotten her question. Again he looked at her hair and noticed the natural pewter-gray which some of today's wannabe-writers have their hairdressers recreate in order to appear more original. All things human, do they not begin to resemble each other at a certain age? Because you know how and where to get your hands on them, like the cigarettes that you've become used to. Unfiltered, you were right. So your club, it consists of people who live here and talk about their experiences with different books?

People who live here, women, replied the summery woman. Now she was rubbing her bare arms, something which seemed to imply that a decision needed to be made: to either ask her to come inside, to say goodbye, or to offer her the padded leather jacket. And no, she continued a bit more cautious, it really was not just reading for them. Reading provides a reason to get together but most people in our club also write.

Reither looked down at himself. To be standing here, in socks, was not making the best impression; on the other hand, it did not matter what she thought of him. All he had to do was get rid of her in a polite way. So “book club” is really a code name?

Let's say it is not a complete name. And the writing takes place in private, I assume you know that – the publishing company that you owned was liquidated? She struggled to get the word out of her mouth: liquidated. And instead of continuing to rub her arms, she put her face into her hands. They looked mature to him, even though hands cannot really be mature, it is only in language that they can be that. I used to run a hat shop in the city, she said, it too was liquidated. Fewer and fewer faces for my hats. Do you own a hat?

Just a wollen cap, replied Reither. Against the wind in the valley. Did you know that the increasingly prevalent desire to have one's own name not just by the doorbell but on the cover of a book has been the death of good books?

The former hat shop owner closed her eyes. And yet we all write, she said. And what we need is someone willing to listen to a page of it. Someone able to tell us whether there is potential. Someone who will at least sway his head in an approving manner. Or silently shake it, to indicate if someone should give it up once and for all.

And in your mind, that someone would be me? Who else? So you smoke unfiltered cigarettes. Yes. Always have. Were you to ask me to come inside, I would have a cigarette with you, even though I have quit since moving here. Then you should probably leave it at that. Is that your last word? What do I know said Reither. Besides, I don't like long dialogues, not in books either. Nothing but evidence of a narrator's laziness. But you and I, we're not in a book. We're standing at your apartment door. No, just you. I'm standing inside the apartment. Unless you come in. And we smoke.