

Josef Strau  
*White Nights*

The first night. It was a non-existence, which I inhabited, so to speak, since I had left existence. At such nights at home, I left the flat and sometimes walked about in the city without going for a drink anywhere. That was a little strange. The slight absurdity of these actions is known, and one often seems obsessive or something like that. After having left, just in front of the building, however, these occupations are repressed, one is freed of any reservations, like a bad conscience and fears of not being completely in control. Only later, back at home, the bad conscience returns. This is probably true for other crimes and misdemeanours too.

Almost two weeks ago, I was out and about again for maybe an hour. I was about to give up and catch a cab to drive me back home. In this situation, the most embarrassing thing I can imagine happened. It was totally banal and laughable to almost disgusting.

I was walking in one of those completely unspecific areas. Everything was relatively deserted during that night from Monday to Tuesday after one o'clock, and it was still quite warm. At one of the big streets I was about to cross over to the other side because of the cab in my direction when from the opposite direction a young woman on foot turned into a smaller street. She walked very fast, almost ran. This fast walking in this nocturnal situation was strange and noticeable. I had to look whether or not I wanted to, and my looking even now seems to me rather disgusting, because this is how sin begins. With looking. Never mind, I followed her. A few buildings later there were some typical men eating behind scaffolding at a snack stand. She leaned into the scaffolding to say something. It seemed to me that the men sitting there reacted in an unfriendly manner and leaned back broadly in their chairs. Just before I reached the scene, she walked on. While walking, she turned briefly and said something to me. I didn't understand her. So I said Hel-le to her. She waited for me and said that wherever she went, she was being sent away again, just like now. I thought she meant the guys behind the scaffolding, so I agreed with her, understandingly, but if you are dealing with people like that, it is just as well. I couldn't think of anything else to say. But I had to stretch out the moment in order to keep this completely unusual conversation with this stranger going. Why could she be treated so badly? Now I can't describe her face anymore, but she did not seem strange. At any rate, she had that certain something of the down and out, and that always looks good.

The conversation continued on its own. Should I have prevented it, how we talked, on the broad, empty street? It was two o'clock at summernight. The unexpected conversation attracted me terribly, overwhelmed by the serious exhibition of her state of being alone. The social distance, which up to that moment had separated me, was hardly present after the first few minutes of the conversation. Now, however, opposite her, I saw my outsider role, not hers.

Next, I remembered that I had already noticed her a few days ago somewhere on the streets. She had stood there with two other rather miserable looking women, speaking pretty loudly. But in passing I had not been able to understand anything. But I remembered it, because her clothes were also quite wrinkled, but in contrast to the two others her face had been noticeable, very typical of some-thing. Her eyes were the most noticeable thing, but it seemed to me as if they were rolling towards each other. Now that I was in conversation with her, I saw how direct her gaze was. I wanted to interrupt and dismiss the desire to keep going. Typical, what happened inside of me was not exactly what I would have wanted to see of me from the outside.

So we stopped walking. I knew, now we need a conversation. I hesitated or could not go on. We passed an empty parking area. All I could say was that I would like to sit down there. She repeated how good it would be not to be always sent away. I looked at her once again and

thought this couldn't be true that somebody who talked as she did and looked as she did had to say something like that. Her clothes were perhaps a little loose, but fitted extremely well and at the same time were quite elegantly casual. She called herself S. I didn't say anything about that, because I just wanted to sit there with her and listen to her, if she would only continue with her unbelievably clear sentences. We sat in the middle of the large parking area and the starry sky was clear and deserted above us. She said that she now had to go on, but if I would give her my telephone number, she would certainly call me, she said she didn't have a telephone and never had had one. Up to now. Up to this moment everything that tortured was forgotten. And the unexpected encounter in the middle of this nocturnal walk was like a rise from the dim experience with oneself to the absolute of authentic experience. Up to the moment when, now, against my will, some fear rose up, disrupting isolated partial streams from isolated cerebral spaces. I passed over the suggestion and did not give her a phone number. After we had already said goodbye I pulled out 20 euros and it was absolute-ly disgusting and I gave them to her. And then we separated.

The second day. Today the sun shines on my new white chest of draws, the lampshade with the greyhound on it, the vases and the Dürer rabbit. I am not doing badly. Best to write a new list. Lists should always be written, what else needs to be done - and complete-ly honestly. The man with the plan can't be killed: „What can I do to have a better relationship to my surroundings." Find the all-encompassing limitless love. Rate love, because it took everything it had given back again. Do you think you are something special, something better?

The second night. In the evening, the priorities of the day were forgotten, the list moved out of focus and was now headed by: yes-terdays' meeting has to be repeated. Seriously, I left the house to go back to the nocturnal site of yesterday. Yesterdays' area: although the street went straight ahead, but always little paths disappearing into broad inner courtyards, not densely built, in generous developments without street-front developments, and with a great density of trees. Longish leafy walkways were so densely leafy under the park lights that it seemed one could disappear into total darkness, to the edge of fear.

At around two o'clock in the morning, one of the streets not far from yesterday's parking lot, it seemed as hopelessly deserted as during the previous hours. What a useless urge to keep going. What a senseless urge to keep walking. Is the best method of liberating oneself from something to at least try to keep going? That forced me to walk on. Nobody was to be seen at first, not even on one of the short cross streets. The other side was completely fenced in. Behind that, a car repair place. Suddenly, a person had come from between the beams of the street lamps, almost a shadow. But from where? Just now, nobody had been visible. Nobody went in nobody out. There was no dark path here from which one could have stepped, not an open development. It was S. She carried two canvas bags, with two fresh looking baguettes, and apparently more shopping. She crossed the street at an angle. I accelerated, and when I reached her I said: „Do you remember, we met yesterday." She said „Remember, remember, yes, maybe I remember." Disappointment, I wanted to give up, then she asked me, what do you do. I tried to explain myself. But she immediately told me that she had to be careful because of the police.

We got to the next larger street. At the corner, there was light in a small kebab shop. Around the corner in front of it were a large police car and a crowd surrounding it. Almost in front of it, she asked whether we wanted to do something. I didn't quite catch her meaning. She asked again and because I didn't answer she walked away briskly, directly to where the police became active. Two policemen pressed a man against the wall, one held him and at the same time throttled him, beat him and beat him from behind at the same time. He called out to the other policeman, who did not want to move. The crowd shouted all the time. Not just against this action and that the police should stop, but they also stated their opinion, screamed all that was good about the man and why did they hurt him, the nicest one, him of all people? S. stood directly next to it all and apparently called out the name of the man being held, which I

however could not understand. It quickly became hysterical. The first, more brutal policeman screamed at the other one. He was larger and stronger than the first and had rather a good face. I looked at him and the tears just came out of his eyes, down his cheeks. The first one kept on being aggressive a little longer, but then left the man pressed against wall in peace. The onlookers kept praising the police victim and reprimanded the police. For the policemen, however, the unsuccessful action seemed to be over. The night was already over; I didn't want to stay, either with the people or with S., who no longer was properly interested in the conversation with me. I went away. Only at the end of the long block I turned around once more. The street was empty, the enti-

re large noisy scene had dissolved, disappeared. Everybody had disappeared so fast, as if it had been a cold winter's night, as if everybody had only come out into the cold because of the police action and then had all gone back in when the whole thing was over and nothing needed to be defended anymore. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was unsure of myself and at the same time the sudden vacuum pulled me back. At the corner there was still the police car with the two policemen inside. At the 24-hour kebab shop there were still a few people. S. stood at the counter. I went in and she came towards me, smiling. We drank tea at the window counter and were able to watch the police car finally disappear.

Soon she told me about her misery, but since she was in such fine form, it by no means sounded like misery. How she grew older in the cheap high-rise in the industrial area, with violence. Her speech was incredibly detailed, concrete, brilliantly told, unsentimental, real. I had nothing comparable to offer. When I tried anyway, it was as if a camera turned on me and simply nothing could be depicted in focus and everything was arch grey, out of focus. This was not so because of the amazing concreteness of her life, rather because it was told by her so concretely, completely in focus. Actually rather old-fashioned, how she spoke, I thought, and because apparently my life has to be told so out of focus, wavering this way and that. Simply more out of focus and more contemporary. I had nothing and told her that last year I had returned, with a great deal of external help, from a depression a kind of psychic death. And that she, apart from one other person, is probably the only one who could imagine what was meant by that. Abruptly I fled to other topics, to things which had to do with me only in an abstract way, and she was very interested. I cannot tell whether that was only acted. I was supposed to tell her what I do. Art. From that point, nothing interested her anymore. Her right eye turned away, she pulled one half of her face, for one moment seemed extremely sad, her gaze is gone. Totally out of tune with her mimicry she calls for tea. She changes sometimes between a loud and a quiet voice, against the context. Acted, and to startle me very softly, just as entertainment, in order to comment on my story. The only thing that did not interest her at all was when I referred to art. She liked to draw letters or whole names. She herself had written a few articles for newspapers sold by homeless people. We still sat in front of the large glass window looking out on the large empty street. If somebody came by outside, then only to come in. Sometimes the guests were rather noisy, but then again completely friendly. I didn't want to go anywhere else. Sometimes, for a brief moment, when I saw the nocturnal neighbourhood in front of me, I thought of the tall policeman with tears on his face. I wished he could come by accidentally and then perhaps by chance sit with us. Then we would be three, S., me, and the policeman. The sky was slightly light, and I gave S. my telephone number.

Alone in the taxi, the echo of the demented list from the day returned. „Do you think you are something special, something better?" While around here, I had never been fearful or lost. That may sound boring, but it isn't. Now I want more. You are starting a new life. Wanted to know why I always lose. At that moment I suddenly thought, now I will do something right. With the words of somebody else, this new transgressed self. The transgression to something else for the first time prevented the simulation of a social life. Even if that also may be the

first stark seduction which led me after one year from my newly won life organisation out and down to de-crepitude.

The third night. Just in the U-Bahn, shortly before twelve o'clock at night, the phone rings. S. asked me whether I could come by. Explains it is her birthday tomorrow. We meet at the corner kebab, just like yesterday. S. is talking to strangers. She interrupts and comes to the door. I can't imagine a birthday celebration in this den. We don't want sparkling wine or alcohol. Then I don't want to be afraid and will stay. S. is beaming tonight and pulls me out of the shop. S-fashion. I thought she knew what was to be done after I told her that I didn't even have a present. We leave to buy something. I pay. Today, on her birthday, to buy something on the street is stupid. We take a taxi and go to a cheap hotel. Room for an hour. The furniture in the much too large room was ancient. The room was huge in a totally old-fashioned way. We were there to have festive surroundings for the birthday. I lay down in an armchair and acted now, beforehand, like the opiate smoker when the effect had already started. S. on the other hand started to greatly accelerate her movements. At a snail's pace, I opened the small plastic package, while S. had already heated up, mixed two colours, and drawn up. Seconds later her movements slowed down dramatically. She stood near a round rickety wooden table and almost fell back. She only just managed to hold onto the table with outstretched arms, and she and the table formed a very precarious balance. I went behind her so as to be able to support her should the balance fail after all. However, after a few minutes there was movement in this still picture. After a longish silence we started talking again, and she was still a little slow. Very precise as usual and detailed, and always with questions, did I know what she meant? She talked of somebody who had been in the kebab shop. Back in the plush arm-chair, for the first time I didn't listen properly and lost the clear - I am sure - thread of her story. A little later, she started preparing the same mixture. Now it all took too long. I wanted to celebrate her birthday here, but our time in the room was running out. Slowly, she had finished everything and went back to the old position. But the second time, everything happened much too fast for me. I was just looking to the side when her body crashed straight to the floor, without any counter movement. The whole building below was shaking and I could still hear the loud thud when she was already lying on the floor. Her face had turned green, and I noticed her face was completely changed, like dead. I jumped down to her, she wasn't breathing. I tried to find her pulse, but there was nothing. I screamed at her to come back immediately. I didn't really know anymore what to do and did what I still could remember from my first-aid course. I did all sorts of stuff and at the same time I thought that I had finally found true love, and that it was immediately ended with the very worst thing. My heart ached like never before. I screamed at her to come back immediately. I ran through the door to the hotel office. The fat man came toward me with the telephone. He saw her on the floor and I started again mouth-to-mouth respiration and a heart massage. Nothing happened. The man first of all started complaining. I gave him all the money in my wallet and ordered him to do as I said. First call the doctor. Before he called he hesitated for a moment. He said the police would come along for sure. I don't know how much longer I went on when I suddenly noticed that she drew a deep breath. And then another and another.

I stopped screaming. S. recovered relatively quickly. Her face was still green, but she was no longer this dead person like before. She heard us speak and mumbled incomprehensibly. The first thing I could make out was, please no police. Now she was even able to get up, she went through the door, supporting herself against the wall, and then with a clear intention downstairs. We accompanied her. Downstairs, we wanted to wait for the doctor. Then she disappeared behind us, behind the last corner of the street. I settled things with the hotel employee, the ambulance arrived and I followed S. At the corner, nobody could be seen in any direction. There was an absolute silence and the night was over, the sky light blue. I checked the building entrances and a few bars still open in the area, where S. could perhaps hide.

The fourth night. I looked from the U-Bahn down onto a rather complicated urban structure, with buildings from almost every decade of the last century, and for a moment I let myself be deceived, I believed that I had just now been moved to the forties, with a déjà vu of urban landscapes that is connected with that, until I looked back at S., then again at the square with her next to it; as the square lay behind her, still brightly illuminated, even the Nazi buildings at the corner seemed almost attractive today. The two to four storied buildings, sparingly structured, in dusty earth tones with hipped roofs and open areas enclosed by hedges, attempted to create familiarity, homeliness, and a sense of confidence. The less I could follow this architectural thought, the more I had to look. Usually I see these buildings and their ghostly concepts with a social discomfort, thinking they could creep up on me and pull me into their shadows.

S. wore the least noticeable shirt, her hair partly bound together, in view of which the entire light, the square, too large, too much light, suddenly looked again like nothing, like an empty pool with a cracked surface, just like an ordinary day in January, but it was warm early summer. We got up without wanting to move anywhere. The whole day I had waited for her call, to hear where she had disappeared to in the night and whether she is better. So today I started looking for her much sooner than before, but my motives had changed completely. I actually met her again, but this time at the U-Bahn she did not want us to go anywhere for a drink or some-thing. She had not recovered from the shock of yesterday. Saying, probably somebody had mixed in some crap with the stuff. She wanted to stop again, try to get a place somewhere, but the previous time had only been a few weeks ago. At any rate, she claimed, she had lost my phone number.

The weather had turned cooler, and I had put on my Burberry jacket. That seemed a little exaggerated. It was the first time in ages that I had bought a new Burberry jacket. Up to now, in my usual milieu, everybody had approved. I was never sure whether I wanted that myself. But that was not really the point for me. I realised that I wouldn't be able to prolong the conversation much longer. We didn't just want to keep standing around like that, so we separated, S. thought it was terrible that I dress that way, and I'm sure she was right.