

NACH VORN, NACH SÜDEN

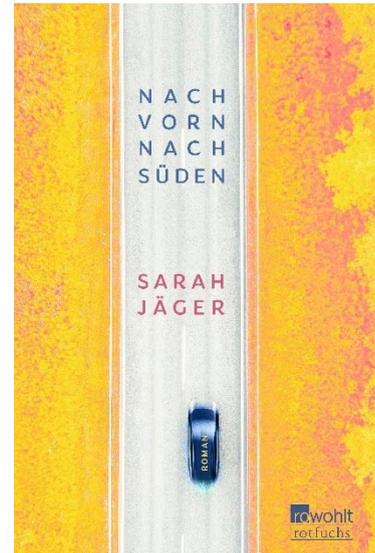
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Winner of the Lynx of the Month March 2020!



THE BACKYARD of Lidl isn't just a backyard.

It's more than a square, grey slab of concrete surrounded by a six-foot wall. More than the wooden pallets stacked there or the rubbish bins and skips filled with expired food. More than the metal chairs Otto brought so people don't have to sit on the floor, more than the kettle barbecue Marvin stole from an allotment.

It's so much more.

Sometimes I think most of us work at Lidl just so we can hang out in the backyard. Us part-timers spend eight to twelve hours a week, lurking between the shop shelves and the stockroom, but most of us hang out in the backyard full-time. The last site manager, Wendthoff, hated us. He used to stand at the back door, his face red with anger, getting the answers he deserved.

"It's another half-hour before my shift starts ... what do you mean I'm not working today?"

"I'm waiting for Marie to come off work in a minute ... in two hours? Well she must've given me the wrong time then."

"Me? What do you mean I don't work here? Don't you know who I am? Khan said, I could start, maybe ... You don't go by Khan? You don't say!"

At some stage Wendthoff realised he didn't want to spend the rest of his working life standing at the storeroom door with a flushed face and got himself transferred to a branch further south.

"He'll worm his way up to the top down there, I bet," Khan said. The new Wendthoff is smarter than his predecessor. He's actually called Müller, but no one here gives a damn. You don't get to choose your name - you're given one at birth and then renamed here in the backyard. Our backyard is just a grey slab of concrete as far as the new Wendthoff's concerned. He's let us keep it without putting up a fight, "I don't want to see any trouble, no fights, no drugs, no dealing and no fag butts in the skip, got it?" Then he installed a TV in the full-time employees' break room, so they don't start thinking they're missing out, don't realise there's a better place to rest up. They get their daily soaps, but we've got a small patch of heaven out between the bins. The full-time workers have their say between the shop shelves and the stock room and we're not rocking that because we want more. We want more than they'll ever have.

There aren't any complicated initiation ceremonies. If you want to be one of us, you just have to hang out in the yard. That's rule number one and there aren't many more. Our Pavel built us a shelter out of shrink-wrap off of the pallets. All he needed was a plan and his two hands and a stapler. So now even the rain can't stop us.

It's not like all of us sitting around on top of each other all the time. Only on special occasions and days off, or after work. We all show up if someone's got something to celebrate. Everyone's there then, because of friendship or fellow-feeling or because there's something for free.

Like this evening when Marie is celebrating her GCSE results. Everyone's going to show up, because we all like Marie. Everyone's going to show up ... everyone except Joe, that is.

I'm late, I had to pop into Uni first and arrive totally out of breath. No one looks up. In the backyard some people are missed more than others.

Khan is standing at the grill. He's my age and comes here the same as me, but that's all we've got in common. He's always the first person you notice. He's one of those people. They walk into a room and everything lights up and sparks start flying.

He's making a show of turning over the sausages and vegetables on the grill. Marie bought the sausages at Lidl and we fished the veggies out of the skip yesterday after work. Behind Khan, I see Marie sitting on a wooden pallet. She's wearing a white T-shirt and blue joggers. Marie is the only person I know who makes joggers look elegant. She's chatting to Vika, sitting next to her. Vika is wearing joggers too, without the elegance but with white stripes instead. It says 'Born to Win' in golden letters on the front of her top. There's half a bottle of white wine standing between them and a free space next to Marie on the left. That's where Joe used to sit. And that's why no one else is sitting there. Joe's not dead or anything. He's just gone. Otto and Pavel are sitting on the two metal chairs. I get to stand or sit on the ground. I hesitate and then decide to sit down in the space next to Marie on the pallet. If she flinches, I hardly notice.

Vika looks over to me and lifts an eyebrow.

"Wassup, Duckbutt," she says. No one gets to choose their name here.' Duckbutt'. That's what they call me. Marie gives me a quick smile and then turns back to listen to Vika. If humanity had a face, I'm sure it'd look like Marie. She doesn't need any make-up because she's got nothing to hide. Marie's not a saint. She calls me Duckbutt like everyone else. Jesus wouldn't have done that, but Jesus let Judas kiss him and ordinary people don't want to be crucified. Ordinary people aren't expected to be godly, but if they could be a bit more like Marie then the world might stand a chance.

"I keep thinking I should be doing stuff 'cos everyone else is, you know?" Vika keeps pouting her red painted lips.

"Well, doing nothing isn't an answer. ," I say, because her whining gets on my nerves straight away. "Let's face it..."

"You do lots of stuff," Marie says, interrupting me.

"You've got Fini, that's more than most people manage at your age, or ten years later, or twenty. There are mothers out there, twice your age, who can't get it right."

Vika can't really get it right either. Fini spends most of her time at Vika's Mum's. Almost always, in fact. There's not much going for Vika. She's done one internship after the other. Hairdressing, sales, food service, childcare. She's been through a lot -in more than one sense.

Vika's got no idea what she wants, except for Otto. She's always wanted him, but that isn't what Otto wants anymore.

Despite Fini.

And I've put on so much weight," Vika moans, clutching her side. She leans over to Marie and whispers, "That's why Otto doesn't fancy me anymore. I'm too fat."

"No you're not," Marie whispers back, "And Otto's not like that." They both look at him, sitting under the plastic roof with his best mate Pavel. It's not raining, but that's not the point as far as our Pavel is concerned. He's busy admiring his makeshift shelter while Otto talks his ear off.

"That's when he said it's final," Otto is coming to the end of a monologue.

"He said that?"

"He did ... can you believe it?"

"No way."

"Maybe I should just quit?"

"The name is rubbish though."

"What? The name's the best bit about us."

Otto plays the bass in a punk rock band called 'Fancy Pants'. He works at Lidl during the week but never at weekends because he's always out playing a gig somewhere.

The band has been around for decades and all the other band members are twice Otto's age. Over forty at least. Any time anyone says punk's dead, Otto just closes his eyes and says all he wants to do is make music. "Would you rather I get into African folklore and start banging a drum in the pedestrian zone?" Otto's the guy wearing red chucks and pinstripe trousers with a white shirt. On stage, next to the ancient punks in torn jeans and T-shirts, he stands out like a square peg in a round hole. Somehow that completes the picture.

As if he can sense he's being watched, our Pavel stops staring at his beloved plastic contraption and turns around to look at us instead. He smiles. Of course he does. Sometimes I'd like to slap him in the face for being allowed to keep his name despite his glasses and spots and greasy hair. Pavel is eighteen but his skin thinks it's still in the middle of puberty. If our Pavel were a girl, he'd be having a hard time at

the moment. But because he's a boy it's his inner values that count all of a sudden and in that respect he's absolutely gorgeous.

"If our Pavel learns to fly, he'll be a bleeding Superhero." Khan said, thumping Pavel on his slender shoulders when he finished the shelter. Pavel actually blushed and mumbled something like, "I need to... to get some A-levels first." Our Pavel gets stuck in the middle of his sentences. But Khan is right, if any of us ever manages to get out of this backyard, this town, this life and do something great it's going to be our Pavel. The only one who might stop him is his mum, because she's hoping he's the next Wendthoff in the making.

"I'll build us ... a watch-tower ... next to the wall," he shouts over to us. "Down by the lake near the new estate ... there's lots of wood. We can go and get it and then ... I think things'll start to look good around here."

"What do we need a fucking watch-tower for?" Marie laughs, "to protect the backyard?"

"Enemies round every corner, you know' Vika says and takes a swig of wine straight out of the bottle.

"We could look out into the distance. It'd be good to look out into the distance every now and then ... don't you think?" our Pavel says and his eyes behind his glasses look even bigger than usual.

"Most people stare at their screens, but our Pavel stares into the distance, that's life for you. So who's for sausages?" Khan shouts, holding up a sausage with his tongs. 'Our Pavel', I call him that, too. Pavel didn't have to give up his name when he entered the yard. He got to keep it and even has an extra added on. A bit like 'His Royal Highness' or 'your Honour', he's *our* Pavel. It's a sign of respect.

"I'll make us a watch-tower like you've never seen ... like music to your eyes."

"Music to your eyes?" Otto asks, looking at our Pavel sceptically.

"You'll see,"

"Sausage?" Khan butts in.

"Sod off with your sausages," Otto shouts and Khan sighs and put down his tongs.

"It's music to my ears, not eyes," Otto says to our Pavel.

"That doesn't ... doesn't make any sense,"

"But that's how the saying goes."

“But music to the ears isn’t anything special.

“It’s music to my ears and a sight for sore eyes.”

“Music to my eyes ... a sight for sore ears.”

“Have it your own way,” Otto gives up. Our Pavel pulls a bottle of lemonade out of his rucksack and mumbles “eyes ... it’s got to be eyes,” before he takes a sip. Our Pavel loves orange lemonade.

Suddenly the door flies open. It’s Wendthoff – the new Wendthoff that is. Leroy and Marvin are leaning against the wall by the door. They’ve kept their mouths shut so far, or since I arrived at any rate. Instead they’re both busy typing on their smartphones. Leroy hasn’t been working for at Lidl’s for very long, and he’s not going to last. Marvin is Leroy’s brother. He’s only thirteen which means he’s the youngest.

“What are you doing out here?” the new Wendthoff asks Leroy.

“Taking a break?” Leroy says without looking up from his phone.

“For an hour?”

“Yes?”

“When did your shift start?”

“About an hour ago?”

“Notice something?”

Leroy gives Wendthoff a blank look.

“Um, should I?”

No, Leroy won’t last long.

The new Wendthoff just shakes his head and holds open the door for Leroy. Leroy sighs and puts his smartphone in his pocket. The door bangs shut loudly behind them. Marvin puts his phone in his pocket too and slouches over to Khan and the barbecue.

“Let me have a go,” he says, trying to push Khan out of the way.

“Forget it, dude,”

‘Dude’, Even Marvin is better off than me.

“But I’m the one who stole it. There wouldn’t be a grill if it weren’t for me.”

“You’d better shut it or I’ll tell on you,” Khan says, threatening Marvin with the tongs and a sausage. Marvin balls his fists but I can see his mouth twitching

nervously. Khan's mouth twitches, too, but not because he is nervous. He grins and ruffles Marvin's hair.

"Joke, here take the tongs and look after the sausages."

Then he grabs a can of beer and steps away.

"Boy oh boy, you young kids are so easily riled."

"Khan," Marie says and he turns to her at once. "Next time you want to be Rambo, don't use the tongs."

"Yeah, that didn't work, did it? But I thought the look on my face was pretty impressive. A serious killing look and the sausage and the tongs. It was almost epic."

"Yes, a sight for sore eyes," Pavel shouts, and everyone laughs.

"Khan and the Killer Sausage," Vika shouts, and everyone laughs.

"The part-timer with a banger," Otto shouts and everybody laughs.

"A Greek tragedy," I shout, but that's when the laughter stops.

"Bah, I'd have licked you," Marvin mutters under his breath.

"I know." Khan says, crossing his arms. I can't see his face but I know the corners of his mouth are twitching again. Marvin throws the tongs on the grill and pulls a flick-knife out of his back pocket. He snaps the blade open and folds it shut again and again, without taking his eyes off the knife. His free hand is clenched into a fist. None of us are surprised. We all know he keeps a knife in his pocket. Only a few months ago, a friend of his brother stabbed someone down by the lake. Just like that. For a few days everyone thought Joe had done it. There was a lot of excitement in the backyard then, until they arrested Leroy's mate and things quieted down again.

Khan sighs. "All right. We all know you're a tough guy, so you can put it away now."

"Next time I'll do you in," Marvin mutters, shoving the knife back in his pocket.

"I'll remember that," Khan puts an arm around Marvin's shoulders. "But right now it's time for the good things in life." Marvin doesn't react, but he doesn't shake off Khan's arm either. "So what do you say?" Khan asks no one in particular, "Are these sausages too black or not?" I see Marvin's clenched fist start to relax.

"Deffo too black," our Pavel says, "It's bad ... for your health, you know?."

"Marie, we need more sausages."

"Why?"

“Our Pavel says these black bangers won’t do. Otto, how about you?”

“You burned the fucking sausages?” Otto looks angry. But then he stops frowning all of a sudden.

“Hey, Jasmin,” Otto calls, and his voice has gone all rough. There’s a girl standing at the entrance to the backyard. She’s our age, about eighteen, dressed in black with her hair in two plaits. “Come on in,” Otto waves her over and of course our Pavel leaps up from his chair so she can sit down next to Otto.

“This is Jasmin,” Otto says.

“Wassup, Jasmin” everyone says, except for Vika.

“That’s why we need the tower,” she whispers to Maries, “for sluts like her.” But Marie just shrugs her shoulders.

“Fini’s at Mum’s, in case you’re interested,” Vika hisses. She bends forward, keeping her back straight. She presses her hands against the pallet she’s sitting on and her feet against the one at the bottom. It doesn’t matter why Jasmin’s here. Just one wrong word and she’ll fly at Otto and Jasmin, she’ll tear them apart bit by bloody bit. I’m sure.

“What’s so special about that?” Otto asks quietly. “Your mum looks after her all the time.” His hand rests on Jasmin’s thigh and he gently strokes the seam of her black jeans with his thumb. That touch tells us Otto and Jasmin are sleeping together, and Vika gets it.

“Fini is our daughter, Otto’s and mine, in case you didn’t know.” Her remarks are intended to hit Jasmin, like spitting in her face. Vika does this every time a strange girl shows up in the backyard and sits down next to Otto. But it never works.

Jasmin smiles at her in a friendly sort of way. “Of course she knows,” says Otto. The verbal spit misses its target. It’s more like a disgusting drool coming out of Vika’s mouth, dripping onto her ‘Born to Win’ T-shirt.

“Fini’s so sweet,” our Pavel says to Vika. He leans against the wall next to her, but Vika can’t stop staring at Jasmin and Otto. The temperature in the backyard drops noticeably. The rest of us freeze like we’re playing ‘musical statues’. Nobody moves, we’re all waiting for someone to turn the music back on.

This is a Khan moment. He knows which button to press to stop the cold winter darkness from spreading.

"Anybody want a black sausage?" he asks, "or would you prefer charred veggies?"

"Can't you get anything right?" Marvin asks and suddenly we're all smiling again.

"It's odd, my parents keep asking me the same thing. At least I'll have finished school next year, unlike you, you little squirt."

"On your second go, though," I can't stop myself from saying it.

"Oh, Duckbutt," Khan sighs and shakes his head. "It was so clear. You always have to rub it in."

Before I can think of an answer, the storage room door opens and Leroy strolls back into the yard.

"What um... what are you doing here?" our Pavel asks, looking nervously towards the store door.

"It's break time."

"If Wendthoff catches you..."

"Wendthoff can go fuck himself."

Leroy looks at Otto who is making out with Jasmin. Then he goes over to his brother and stares at the grill. It doesn't matter if Leroy's staring at people making out, or at a wobbly grill or a massive car crash, his face reveals nothing. His lips are a thin line, his mouth turns down slightly at the corners, and so do his eyelids. He's only seventeen, but sometimes you think he's seen it all.

"All the sausages are black," he says.

"Khan failed," Marvin grins.

"I think it was the grill's fault," Khan defends himself.

Leroy goes into the storeroom and comes back with two more packs of sausages.

There are hardly any rules in the backyard. If you want to be one of us, you have to hang out in the yard. That's rule number one. And rule number two is you don't steal from your place of work. Leroy doesn't care about rules. He won't last long.

"I've been thinking about learning to dance," Khan says, sitting down on the arm of Otto's metal chair. "Meet some girls. Salsa, maybe. What do the ladies say? Girls think it's cool if a guy knows how to move his hips, right?."

"If you're dancing is anything like your barbecuing then forget it," Otto says and shoves Khan off the chair. "Too right," Vika shouts, laughing.

"You mind what you say, missy," Khan says, taking her hand and pulling her down off the pallets. He puts an arm around her hips and prances around the yard with her. Vika squeals like a child and I find myself thinking, all she needs is a red balloon and it'd be a picture of perfect happiness. They both move faster and faster until Vika hits Khan on the back and starts screaming "I've got to stop." Khan lets go of her and grabs Marie's hand instead.

"I'm going to dance you all off your feet," he yells.

"Marie, mind your toes," Vika shouts. She's leaning against the wooden pallets, gasping for air.

But Marie doesn't have to watch out. Marie knows how to control Khan, we all know that. Before Khan steps on Marie's toes, he'd rather chop off his own. Khan and Marie's friendship is that sublime.

He pulls her close and gently rocks her to and fro. She wraps her arms around his neck.

"There are plenty of girls here," I hear her saying.

"You're all too much like hard work," Khan replies and throws back his head. "And if a new girl shows up, she's all over Otto in a minute. It's not good for my ego."

They keep on swaying round and round. I can't tell who's leading who any more. It's perfect unison.

"So Salsa?."

"Or Zumba, maybe," Khan says, "Joe and me, we were going to join a Zumba class." Mistake, I think, when I see the look on Marie's face.

"Just for a laugh, not because of the girls, just for a laugh is why we wanted to go," Khan says quickly, but of course words are a bad eraser.

Marie and Khan have stopped swaying together. They are standing perfectly still, and for once Khan doesn't know which button to press.

I open my mouth to say something, but our Pavel is quicker, "Marie, we've got another present for you," he shouts, helping Khan to get it together. The same words are on the tip of my tongue. I swallow them back down again and feel a scratch in my throat.

"Exactly," says Khan, sounding relieved as he lets go of Marie's waist. He hurries over to the wall and pulls a deck-chair out from behind the wooden pallets. He puts it up for Marie. It's got red and white stripes.

"It's from all of us. And it's not stolen - we bought it perfectly legally," Khan says when he's finished, and flops onto the wooden pallets beside me. He's so close, it's almost like we're touching. "You can spend the whole summer lounging around out here now." Vika cheers and claps her hands. Marie doesn't join in. She's still standing there, but her arms aren't around someone's neck now. They're just hanging there the way arms hang when they've lost their grip.

"I'm going to find him," says Marie. "I'm going to find Joe."

Everyone nods as if they've all been waiting for Marie to say this, as if it were only a matter of time. I nod too, although I haven't been waiting for her say anything of the kind. Joe's been missing for six months. He didn't get kidnapped, or stolen away, he just left. If you want to be one of us, you have to hang out in the yard. That's rule number one. If Joe ever comes back, he has to come back of his own free will - no search commands or reception committees, no brass bands playing and no tear-soaked handkerchiefs. I haven't missed Joe, not for one second. But I know I'm the only one who feels that way here in the backyard. Of course I know.

Otto and Jasmin stop kissing each other. They join Leroy and Marvin beside the wobbly grill. Me, Khan and Vika are still sitting on the wooden pallets and our Pavel is leaning against the wall next to Vika. We're a circle around the deck-chair, and Marie's the beginning and the end.

"Where are you going to look?" Vika asks as she puts a bottle of fizz to her lips. The white wine was finished some time ago.

"I've got the postcards he sent with the postmarks on them," Marie says. "He's bound to be somewhere. And I've got all summer."

"Did you talk to that freak from Joe's house again? The revolutionary?" Khan asks and his leg is still so close to mine. "Maybe he heard something?"

"No, he would have told me for sure."

"What about Joe's father?"

"He doesn't know anything either."

"My mother just sold her car..." Our Pavel breaks off his sentence and lifts up his hands apologetically.

"I haven't got a driving licence," Marie says.

"Marvin could steal a car," Khan suggests.

"I'm sure I could."

"And then what?"

"Then we'd have a car."

"We?" Marie's eyes widen.

"I'm in," Khan says, sliding off the wooden pallets and putting his arm around her shoulders. "You don't expect me to survive all summer without you, do you?"

We're all staring at the brightly striped deck-chair in the middle of the circle. And suddenly I remember every kid's birthday party I ever went to, me playing musical chairs again and again. But this time it's different. If you sit on the chair you're out. Whoever sits down first loses ... loses this summer forever.

"I've got a car and a driving licence." I look around to see who's speaking and realise it's me.