

Translated excerpt

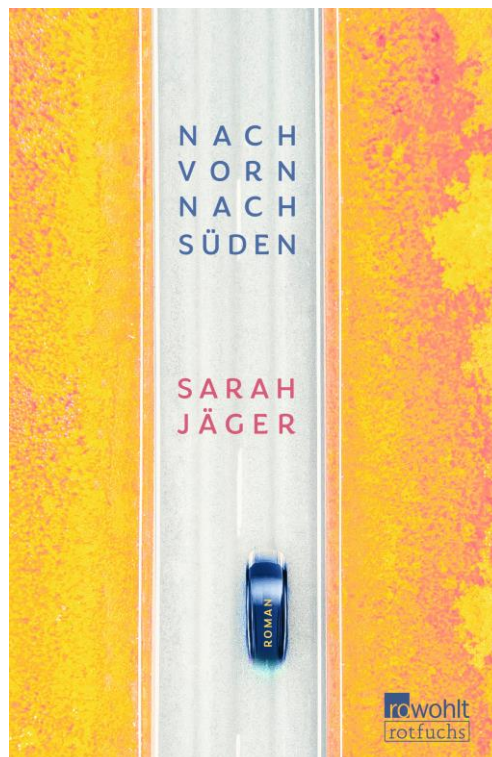
Sarah Jäger
Nach vorn, nach Süden

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Sarah Jäger
Onwards, Southwards

Translated by Helena Kirkby



The back yard of Penny Market is more than just a back yard.

More than a grey concrete square enclosed by a two-metre high brick wall. More than the wooden pallets piled up against the wall, which serve as rubbish bins and containers for food that has gone past its sell-by date. More than the metal chairs which Otto provided so that we don't all have to sit on the pallets. More than the kettle grill which Marvin nicked from an allotment.

So much more than any of those things.

I sometimes think the only reason that some of us work at Penny is so that we have an excuse to hang out in the back yard. We temps spend eight to twelve hours a week lurking somewhere between the sweet aisles and the deposit-bottle machine, but most of us spend our whole time in the yard. Wendthoff, the store manager, didn't like that. He always stood in the doorway, red-faced, and got precisely the answers he deserved.

"My shift starts in half an hour ... what - you mean I'm not on the rota today? Seriously?"

"I'm just waiting for Marie - she'll be finished in ten minutes ... What, two hours, you say? So she's been talking shizzle?"

"Me? I work here. You don't recognise me? Well, Can said I could ... what do you mean, he doesn't get to say? Don't tell ..."

At some point, Wendthoff presumably decided he didn't fancy spending the rest of his working life standing red-faced in the doorway, and got himself transferred to a store down south.

"Just you wait - he'll brown-nose his way to Head Office," was Can's sole comment.

The new Wendthoff was rather more cunning. New Wendthoff was actually called Müller, though that's irrelevant. Nobody chooses their own name; they're given a name when they're born, and then another one here in the back yard. For New Wendthoff, the grey concrete square was nothing more than a grey concrete square, and he just left us to get on with it - "but woe betide you if anything kicks off. No trouble, no fights, no dealing, no dumping stuff in the bins." He installed a telly in the common room for the full-time staff, to stop them thinking there would be better place to hang out than the common room. They get their daily dose of trash, and we can see our little sliver of sky between the rubbish bins. The full-timers hold sway between the sweetie shelves and the deposit-bottle machine, and we don't try to usurp them because we want more. We want more than they have got.

There aren't any complicated initiation rites. If someone wants to join us, then they have to hang out in the back yard. That's the first rule, and there aren't really any others after that.

Last Autumn, Pavel designed and constructed a roof out of the pallets' plastic shrink-wrap. Using skill and a stapler. Now even the rain can't see us off.

We don't all spend our entire time hanging around together. Just when there's a particular event. We're all there if there's an occasion to mark. We're all there out of sympathy, friendship, or because there's a freebie on offer.

Like this evening, when Marie is celebrating having passed her school certificate. Everyone will be there, because everyone likes Marie. Everyone will be there. Everyone, that is, except Jo.

I get there late, because I have to make a detour to the uni. I'm completely out of breath by the time I arrive at the yard. Nobody looks up; we don't keep tabs on one another. Can's standing at the kettle grill. He's the same age as me. We both hang out in the back yard. That's where the similarities end. Can's always the first one you notice. Some people are like that. The room lights up when they walk in. He turns the sausages and vegetables on the kettle grill with a flourish. Marie bought the sausages in Penny; we fished the vegetables out of the bins yesterday. Marie is sitting behind Can on one of the wooden pallets. She's wearing a white t-shirt and blue joggers. Nobody looks elegant in joggers. Nobody, that is, apart from Marie. She's chatting to Vika, who's sitting to her right. Vika's wearing joggers too; decidedly not elegant, but with white stripes. Her t-shirt has "Born to Win" emblazoned across it in gold letters. Between Vika and Marie, there's half a bottle of wine. The space to the left of Marie is empty. That's where Jo always sat, so nobody sits there now. Though Jo's not dead. He's just not here. Otto and Pavel are sitting on the two metal chairs; I can either remain standing or sit on the ground. I weigh it up, then sit on the left of Marie on the wooden pallets. She might have winced slightly, but nothing more than that.

Vika looks across at me and raises her eyebrows slightly. "Alright, Duck's Arse," she says. You don't get to choose your name in the back yard. Duck's Arse. That's what they call me.

Marie smiles at me briefly then returns to her conversation with Vika. If humankind has a face, then it ought to look like Marie. A face which needs no make-up because it has nothing to hide. Though Marie's no saint. She also calls me Duck's Arse every now and then. Jesus wouldn't have done. Jesus let Judas kiss him. But humans won't end up dying on the cross. Humans don't have to be saints; they just need to be like Marie. Then maybe the world could be redeemed.

"Why do people always have to do stuff just because other people are doing it?" Vika twisted her red-painted mouth into a pout.

"Because doing nothing isn't a solution either," I said, because her whinging was already getting on my nerves after just one sentence. "To be honest..."

"You do loads," Marie interrupted me, addressing herself to Vika. "You've got Fifi, and you deal with that. Other people don't manage that, even people who are ten years older than you. Or even twenty. Just look at those old mums, They're twice your age, and they still don't really deal with it."

Vika doesn't really deal with Fifi either. Fifi spends most of her time - in fact, all her time - with Vika's mum. Generally, there's not much going on with Vika. One apprenticeship after another. Hairdresser, shop assistant, fast food, childcare worker: she's done them all. And more besides.

Vika doesn't know what she wants to do. The only thing she wanted was Otto, but at some point he dumped her.

Despite Fifi.

"And look - I've still got this roll here," Vika carries on moaning. She grabs at her stomach. Then she leans closer to Marie and mutters: "That's why Otto doesn't fancy me anymore. I'm too fat for him."

"I don't think so," Marie mutters back. "Otto's not like that." They both look across at Otto who is sitting under the plastic roof with his best friend Pavel. It isn't raining, but Pavel doesn't give a toss. The plastic roof is Pavel's pride and joy. His eyes keep being drawn to the plastic tarpaulins whilst Otto is speaking.

"And then he said there wasn't anything else to say about it," he ended his monologue.

"He said that?"

"Yeah, so you wouldn't say anything else, would you?"

"Nah ... don't say anything else."

"Maybe I'll just sack it off."

"The name ... that's shit too."

"Really? I reckon the name's the best thing."

Otto is the bassist in a band called The Shart Goblins. He works at Penny, but never at the weekends. He spends the weekends travelling around with his band.

The band has been around on the punk scene for decades, and all the other band members are at least twice as old as Otto, like over forty. If anyone says that punk isn't their thing, Otto just shuts his eyes and says he wants to make music. "Do you expect me to sit in the pedestrian precinct, doing African folk drumming or something?" Otto always wears red Converse All-Stars, pin-striped trousers and white shirts. When he's on stage with all the ageing punks with their ripped jeans and t-shirts, he looks like a round peg in a square hole. But he somehow completes the ensemble.

As if he had sensed that we were staring at them, Our Pavel stops staring at his plastic roof and looks across at us. He smiles. Of course he smiles. I'd sometimes like to smack him in the

face. Right in the middle of his face, because he was allowed to keep his own name. Despite his glasses, his greasy hair, and grotty skin. Pavel is eighteen, but his skin still thinks he's right in the middle of puberty. If Our Pavel were a girl, he'd have a horrible time of it. But it's always their inner qualities which people bother about with boys, and in his respect Pavel is absolutely fabulous.

"Our Pavel just needs to learn to fly, then he'd be a superhero," Can said after Pavel installed the roof. He clapped an arm round Pavel's slender shoulders. Pavel immediately went bright red and muttered: "Um ... I think I'll do my BTECs first." Our Pavel always breaks off mid-sentence. But Can is right: if any of us manages to get away from this back yard, from this town, from this life; if any one of us achieves something big, it will be Our Pavel. His own mother could be the only fly in the ointment, as she's always banging on about how she wants him to be the Next Wendthoff.

"I'll build us ... Over by the wall. A watchtower," he calls to us. "Behind the lake where the new houses are, there's loads of timber. We can fetch that, and then ... I reckon it'd be pretty good here."

"Why do we need a watchtower?" Marie laughs. "To protect the back yard?"

"You never know," says Vika, swigging wine from the bottle. "There's enemies everywhere."

"To see into the distance. You have to look into the distance ... you need to, don't you?" says Our Pavel. His eyes open even wider than they normally look behind his spectacles.

"Some people watch telly, and Our Pavel watches the great wide world. That's the way it goes. Anyone want a sausage?" Can called, waving around a sausage with his tongs. 'Our Pavel'. I call him 'Our Pavel', too. Pavel didn't have to surrender his name when he came to the back yard. He was allowed to keep his name, and even had a bit added. We don't use 'Lord' or 'Sir' or any of those monikers; 'Our' is the mark of respect here.

"I'll build you a watchtower ... it'll rock your blocks off," says Our Pavel.

"Rock our blocks off? What's that supposed to mean?" Otto demands, giving Our Pavel a sceptical look.

"That you'll be amazed by it."

"Sausage, anyone?" Can interjects.

"Shut up about your sausages," Otto snaps at him. Can sighs and puts the tongs down.

"It's 'knock your socks off', not 'rock your blocks off'. Socks off," Otto persists.

"That doesn't ... it makes no sense," says Our Pavel.

"But that's the expression."

"Why would anyone's socks fall off?"

"Well, why would anyone's block be rocked off?"

"Well, you know ... with excitement."

"Socks off. That's the expression. Blocks off is something else."

"Socks, blocks ... then there's get your rocks off."

"Oh, whatever." Otto gives up. Our Pavel takes a bottle of orangeade out of his rucksack, murmurs: "Socks off ... sounds stupid", and takes a swig. Our Pavel loves orangeade.

The warehouse door is suddenly flung open. Wendthoff. Or, rather New Wendthoff. Leroy and Marvin are leaning on the wall next to the warehouse door. They haven't said a word today. Or not since I arrived, at any rate. They're just tapping away on their phones. Leroy hasn't been working at Penny for long, and he won't stay for long either. Marvin is Leroy's brother. He's only thirteen and is the youngest of us.

"What are you doing here?" New Wendthoff demands.

"On a break," Leroy replies, without looking up from his phone.

"An hour?"

"Yeah?"

"When did your shift start?"

"About an hour ago?"

"So what does that tell you?"

Leroy looks blankly at Wendthoff.

"Um ... should it tell me something?"

Leroy won't last long.

New Wendthoff just shakes his head slightly and holds the warehouse door open for Leroy. Leroy breathes heavily and puts his phone in his trousers pocket. The door bangs shut behind them.

Marvin also puts his phone in his trousers pocket and shuffles over to Can at the grill.

"Let me have a go," he says, trying to push Can aside.

"Look. Just butt out."

Butt out. Even Marvin is more on the ball than I am.

"But I nicked it. There wouldn't be any grill if it weren't for me."

"And if you don't want me to grass you up, keep your trap shut," Can says. He takes a step towards Marvin. The tongs in his right hand are slightly raised, complete with their sausage. Marvin clenches his fists, but I can see the corners of his mouth twitching nervously. The corners of Can's mouth are twitching too, but not with nerves. He starts to grin, and he ruffles Marvin's hair with his left hand.

"Come on, I'm just kidding. Have a go." He hands Marvin the tongs and opened a can of beer.

"God. It's so easy to wind you youngsters up."

"Can," says Marie. He immediately turns to look at her. "Next time you try out for Hollywood, then maybe ditch the tongs?"

"Yeah, they don't quite work, do they? But I thought I looked pretty impressive. The way I was standing there. With my killer expression and the sausage. It was kinda epic, I reckon."

"Yeah, it knocked ... my block off," Our Pavel calls. Everyone laughs.

"Can and the Killer Sausage," Vika added. Everyone laughs.

"It was Colonel Temp in the back yard with the sausage," Otto calls. Everyone laughs.

"All the power of a Greek drama," I call, but everyone had stopped laughing.

"I'd have flattened you," Marvin mutters.

"I know you would." Can folds his arms. I can't see his face, but I know that the corners of his mouth are twitching again.

Marvin throws the tongs down onto the grill and pulls a flick knife out of his trousers pocket. He flicks the blade out, and back in again. He does this several times in a row, his gaze fixed on the knife. His other fist is tightly clenched. None of us turns a hair. We all know he carries a knife in his pocket. A few months ago, one of his brother Leroy's mates stabbed someone down by the lake. Just like that. For a couple of days, everyone thought Jo had been the guy with the knife. There was big drama in the back yard, but then they arrested Leroy's mate, and it all quietened down again.

Can sighs. "Whatever. We all know you've got a knife and that you're a hard man. Now just put it away."

"I'll flatten you next time," Marvin mutters, returning the knife to his pocket.

"Noted." Can puts his arm round Marvin's shoulders. "But let's get on to the really important stuff now." Marvin doesn't react, but he doesn't try to shake off Can's arm either. "What are the golden rules for grilling sausages, again? Burnt or not?" Can asks the assorted company. I can see Marvin's clenched fist relaxing.

"No way burnt. That's not good ... for your health," Pavel replies.

"Marie, we need some more sausages."

"Why?"

"Our Pavel says burnt sausages are out. Otto, say something."

"Why? Just because your stupid sausages are burnt?" Otto's face starts to darken - but moments later, the dark cloud passes.

"Hey, Yasmin," Otto says. He sounds a bit hoarse. A girl is standing in the entrance to the yard. She's our age - so about eighteen - and is clad in black. Her dark brown hair is in two plaits.

"Come in," Otto gesticulates to her. Our Pavel stands up so that she can sit on the metal chair next to Otto.

"This is Yasmin," Otto says.

"Hello Yasmin," we chorus. All of us except Vika, that is.

"Slags like her are the reason we need a watchtower," she whispers to Marie. However, Marie just shrugs.

"Fifi's at my mum's, just in case it occurred to you to wonder," Vika snaps. Her upper body is slightly pointing forwards, though her back is straight. She is propping herself up with her hands; her heels are touching the lower palette. One wrong word and she'll launch herself at Otto and this Yasmin girl and tear great bloody strips off them. I'm quite sure of it.

"She's always at your mum's," Otto says calmly. His hand is on Yasmin's thigh, and he strokes the black fabric of her jeans with this thumb. The stroking tells us that they've already been to bed together. Otto and Yasmin. Vika knows this too.

"Fifi is our daughter. Otto's daughter and my daughter. Just in case it's of any interest." Vika says this as if she were spitting in Yasmin's face. Vika always pulls this trick. Whenever any unknown woman comes into the back yard and sits next to Otto. It's never really had the desired effect.

Yasmin just smiles pleasantly. "She knows that - obviously," says Otto. So the verbal spit misses its target yet again. All that's left is a sad bit of saliva which trickles from the corner of Vika's mouth and down onto her t-shirt, right through the "Born to Win" slogan.

"Fifi's so cute," Our Pavel says to Vika, leaning against the wall next to her. Vika, though, is just staring silently at Yasmin and Otto. A sudden chill has descended on the back yard. We all pause, as if in a game of Musical Statues. Nobody moves. We're all waiting for the music to start again, even if it's just some cheesy old pop song.

We can always rely on Can in these situations. He knows how to press the play button even in the middle of the night in mid-winter. "Anyone fancy a burnt sausage? I can also offer you some gourmet carbonised vegetables."

"Can, is there anything you're any good at?" Marvin asks. He's grinning again now.

"There certainly is. My parents are always asking me that, too. But I'm taking my A levels next year - unlike you, young whippersnapper."

"Re-taking." The words just slip out of my mouth.

"Ah, Duck's Arse," Can sighs, shaking his head. "That was to be expected, wasn't it? Can't resist sticking the knife in."

Before I can digest this, the warehouse door opens and Leroy saunters into the back yard.

"Why ... what are you doing here?" Our Pavel asks, looking anxiously at the warehouse door.

"On my break."

"What if Wendthoff sees you?"

"Wendthoff can fuck off."

Leroy glances at Otto, who's smooching with Yasmin.

Then he walks over to his brother and looks at the kettle grill. It makes no difference whether Leroy's looking at a smooching couple, a wonky grill, or a multiple pile-up. His expression betrays absolutely nothing. His lips are in a permanent narrow line; the corners of his mouth are very slightly turned down, just like his eyelids. He's only seventeen, but it sometimes seems as if he has seen everything.

"The sausages are completely burnt," he says.

"Can fucked them up," Marvin smirks.

"It wasn't me, it was the grill," Can retorts.

Leroy disappears back through the warehouse door, and emerges moments later with two packets of sausages.

There are hardly any rules in the back yard. Anyone who wants to belong just has to hang out in the back yard. That's the first rule. The second rule is: don't steal from your own Penny store. Leroy doesn't give a toss about the rules. He won't last long.

"By the way, I was wondering about joining a dance class," said Can. He perches himself on the arm of Otto's metal chair. "You know, to meet girls. Maybe a salsa class. Women find it a turn on when men can waggle their hips, don't they, girls?"

"If your dancing is anything like your cooking, then forget it," Otto replies, shoving Can off the arm of the chair. "Too right," calls Vika. She laughs.

"Now, you listen to me, young lady." Can takes Vika's hand and pulls her down from the wooden pallets. He puts an arm around her hips and prances around the yard with her. Vika squeals like a little girl, and I think to myself that she just needs to be holding a red balloon, and it would be the picture of pure happiness. The pair of them whirl around ever faster until Vika whacks Can on the back. "I've had enough!" she gasps. Can lets go of her and immediately reaches for Marie's hand.

"I'll dance you all into the ground!" he bellows.

"Marie, watch your toes!" Vika yells. She leans against the pallets, gasping for breath.

But Marie doesn't need to watch her toes. Marie has Can wrapped around her little finger, and we all know it. Can would chop his own toes off before he stood on Marie's. That's how pathetic their friendship is.

He pulls her towards him and sways her gently to and fro. Her arms are around his neck.

"You've got quite enough women here," I hear Marie saying to him.

"You're all just too exhausting for me," Can replies, tossing back his head. "And the minute a new woman finally appears, she's instantly snuggling up with Otto. It's toxic for his ego."

They carry on swaying. It's no longer clear who's in charge of the swaying. It seems that they both are.

"Salsa, then."

"Or maybe Zumba," says Can. "Jo and I were planning to go to Zumba together." Mistake, I think, as I look at Marie's expression.

"Just for a laugh, not because of the women. We just wanted to go for a laugh," Can said quickly, but words are not erasers.

Marie and Can stop swaying. They stand still, and this time Can can't find the play button.

I open my mouth to say something, but Our Pavel beats me to it and helps Can out of his stupor. "Marie, we've got something else for you." The same words were on my lips. I swallow them back. They make my throat feel a bit scratchy.

"Exactly," Can says, relieved, and removes his hands from Marie's waist. He hastens to the wall and pulls a sun lounger out from behind the pallets. He opens it up in front of Marie. It is made of red and white fabric.

"From all of us. Not nicked, but bought, completely legally," Can declares, parking himself on the wooden pallets. He's sitting next to me. He's so close to me that it's almost as if he's touching me. "You can spend the whole summer lying in it," crows Vika, clapping her hands. Marie doesn't clap her hands. She just stands there, in the same way that she was doing with Can. Only her arms aren't around his neck now. Her arms are just hanging down limply in the way that arms hang down when they have just stopped gripping something.

"I'm going to look for him," Marie says. "I'm going to look for Jo."

Everyone nods, as if they had been expecting this; as if it were just a matter of time. I nod along, though I hadn't been expecting it at all. Jo disappeared six months ago. He wasn't abducted, he wasn't snatched; he just did a bunk. Anyone who wants to belong just has to hang out in the back yard. That's the first rule. If Jo wants to be one of us again, then the very least he can do is be kind enough to come back. Of his own accord, with no search party and no welcome committee, no fanfare and no tear-stained handkerchiefs. I haven't missed Jo, not for one single second. But I know I'm the only one who feels like that here in the back yard. Of course I know that.

Otto and Yasmin stop smooching and go to join Leroy, Marvin and the knackered kettle grill. Can, Vika and I remain sitting on the pallets. Our Pavel is leaning against the wall next to Vika. We have formed a circle around the sun lounger, and Marie is the one holding the circle.

"Where are you going to look for him?" Vika asks, putting a bottle of Prosecco to her lips. The white wine ran out a while ago.

"I've got his postcards with postmarks on them," Marie replies. "He has to be somewhere. And I've got the whole summer to find out where."

"Have you asked the weirdo in Jo's house? The anarchist?" Can asks. His leg is still almost touching mine. "He might have heard from him?"

"No, he'd definitely have told me."

"What about Jo's dad?"

"He doesn't know anything either."

"My mum ... she's just sold her car." Our Pavel breaks off and makes an apologetic gesture.

"I've not got a driving licence," says Marie.

"Marvin could nick one," Can suggests.

"Yeah, I could."

"What then?"

"Then we'd have a car."

"We?" Marie raises her eyebrows.

"I'd come too, of course." Can slides off the pallets and puts his arm round Marie's shoulder.

"What would I do all summer without you to hang out with?"

We all stare at the lounge, so cheerful and stripey in our midst. And I am suddenly reminded of childhood birthdays and of Musical Chairs. But this is different. This time, the one who gets the chair is the first one out. Whoever gets the chair is the loser. They've lost this summer forever.

"I've got a car and a licence." I look around to see who said that. And then I realise that it was me.