

Translated excerpt

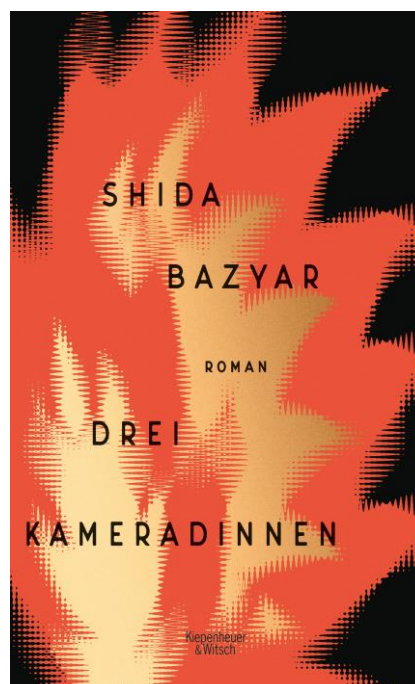
**Shida Bazyar**  
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**Shida Bazyar**  
***Sisters in Arms***

Translated by Ruth Martin



## Inferno on Bornemannstraße

### **Aggressive and blinded: Saya M. from R. became radicalised as the world looked on.**

“At school, she was always looking for an argument, constantly provoking people,” a former acquaintance says of M. “Saya just had this anger inside her, it’s, like, part of her DNA.”

Was it this anger that cost so many people their lives last night? While the authorities are still saying they don’t want to comment on an ongoing investigation, the witness statements paint a clear picture.

Former neighbours report that in the early nineties, Saya M.’s family was already taking in suspected Islamists who came to Germany on tourist visas. It is, admittedly, unclear which groups these people belonged to. But it may be assumed that Saya M. grew up in an atmosphere of radicalism.

M. was apparently attempting to recruit others until the very end: under the guise of careers advice, the young woman had been running workshops in schools for several years. Even on the morning before the crime, she preached to the students of the Wilhelm Gymnasium: “Learn Arabic, it’s the only language that has a future!”

Shortly afterwards, she attacked a man outside a café on Bornemannstraße while shouting “Allahu Akbar”.

Volker M. is currently receiving medical treatment. He has released a statement via his lawyer: “We have been tolerant for long enough. It’s people like Saya M. who are threatening the security of our country with their ideologies. How many more attacks do there have to be?”

The attack on Volker M. took place just hours before the deadly fire on Bornemannstraße, which Saya M. is suspected of starting, and which is already one of the most devastating since the Second World War. The authorities are still not calling it an Islamist terror attack. It seems the left-wing leanings this perpetrator liked to flaunt are shielding her.

Reports that the building destroyed in the fire was home to a member of a patriotically-minded group are so far unconfirmed, though they do point to a possible motive for Saya M.

I would like to remain fair, to clear up all misunderstandings and make no secret of what this text is and what it is not, right from the start.

No, that's not what I would like.

I would like to remain fair, to clear up all misunderstandings and explain who I am and who I am not, right from the start. I am not: the spawn of our integrated society. I am not: the girl you can gawk at, so that you can declare sympathetically that you've paid attention to the migrants and, well, it's all so dramatic, but also so admirable. I am not: the girl from the ghetto.

I am: the girl from the ghetto. But that's a question of perspective. There are real girls from real ghettos who'll laugh at me for using that word, when they find out which grubby corner of which backwater I grew up in – and there are girls who wouldn't have lasted a day there.

I am not: a girl. I'm too old to be called a girl; if certain things in my life had been different, if things had gone worse, I could already be a mother to girls

who would call themselves teenagers now, rather than girls. But I'm not. I do, however, wear a ponytail and a skirt, and both, combined with the absence of children, make me a girl in this world. Until I start spitting and shouting and causing a fuss. Then I'm a hysterical woman.

This text is the attempt to pull myself together for just one night. Not to throw anyone out of the window for just one night, not to become an internet troll; to wait. The attempt to wait for my friend Saya, who is coming out of the slammer.

I say slammer because I'm trying to sound more casual. Because even as a child, I liked the words that sounded more casual. I'm not saying slammer because it's a relic of where I come from. You can grow up in a ghetto that isn't a ghetto, where crime and punch-ups are part of day-to-day life, and still have just as little to do with the slammer as the horsey girls a few streets over have to do with real horses. But when I say slammer and look the way I do and speak the way I do, the horsey girls nod knowingly to me. Sure, they think, the slammer. The place where you went to visit your father as a child; the place your first boyfriend spent several months, before he came out and was suddenly completely changed; the place you think of nostalgically, sometimes. But I've never been in the slammer and I don't know anyone who has, either, at least not in Germany. Until now. But the last thing I want is to end up there as well, and so I sit myself down here, at this desk, the island of my degree dissertation, the island of my – no kidding – 83 job applications, the island of my unemployment benefit decisions, and write.

So, back to what I actually wanted to say, to this attempt to spend the night waiting for my friend who is coming out of the slammer. She'll come to my place as soon as she can, because she's going to stay with me for a few days before flying back to her city and her own life. She was supposed to be having a holiday here with me, and going to Shaghayegh's wedding while she was here.

It's Friday night, 2:28am, and I'm trying to start from the beginning. That won't work, because the beginning would be a time before we were born. So I will go back a little way, but start kind of more in the middle. With last Monday. Because every week begins with a Monday, and so pretends to be a new thing. So that we don't notice everything is just carrying on, miserably, miserably carrying on, and that nothing is happening. But Monday was before Saya arrived. Saya got on a plane in her city on Tuesday afternoon and landed in Hani's and my city on Tuesday evening. So let's start with Tuesday.

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"I smiled at him, and it was just a nice smile, clearly not flirtatious, and he smiled back, and it was clearly flirtatious, and he spoke to me," Saya said, passing the beer bottles to us, "in English." "In English," I laughed, taking the two bottles and passing one to Hani, "how considerate!" Hani laughed as well, albeit a little uncertainly, gave the bottle back to me and held out her lighter. The only smoker out of the three of us, she had the necessary equipment, but no idea how to open a bottle with it. I gave her the opened bottle back, clinked mine against it and said: "I bet he had a thick German accent, as well." I imitated a thick German accent by saying something in English, I did it twice in a row, so that we could clink bottles and giggle twice, an initial, awkward giggle, the kind you let out when you've laughed together plenty before, but haven't seen each other for a long time. "His English not only had a thick German accent, it was also full of mistakes, of course," Saya went on, resting her chin on her bent knees and looking out over the city. "That's the most embarrassing thing about these people who think they have to speak English to us: they can't even do it." "It's okay to speak bad English, though, isn't it," said Hani, whose English wasn't so good either, of course – and to be honest, nor was mine. Hani's wasn't good because she'd been to a bad school, and in my case it was because I'd never needed it before I moved to this city, where it was good manners to start speaking English straight away

when a foreigner came to hang out with you. Saya's English was world-class. She'd only found a use for it after school, too, but then she'd travelled round the world with it, lived in this metropolis and that, had relationships, done a degree. "No one *has* to be able to speak English, I know that," she said now, "but that's the really weird thing about these people. If you're not that good at something, then you wait and see if you actually need to do it or not, don't you? You don't just start babbling away at poor, defenceless people. Guys like him think our German must be so non-existent that their abysmal English is a better way to communicate with us." "And what did he say?" I asked. "Did you answer in German?" "No way," said Saya, "the flight was an hour and a half and he was sitting right next to me. If I'd answered in German, I would have had to talk to him for longer. I said in English that my English wasn't very good. And then he looked really sympathetic and just smiled." "And what if he was simply a nice person and was just trying to accommodate you?" Hani asked, looking out at the city, too, or rather over it, as if somewhere beyond its roofs and church towers lay the proof that people only ever mean well. "You were on a plane, after all, you never know who comes from where. He might have spoken to you in German if he'd met you on the street. I'm sure he just wanted to chat." "Yeah, whatever, but this story isn't over yet," said Saya.

She had been with us for half an hour, had put her hiking rucksack in my room, checked whether she still knew my current flatmates in the kitchen, waited patiently for Hani to come back from the corner shop with the beer, and was then adamant that we had to go up to the roof, because she felt too constricted in flats right now. It was only when she got up here that she wanted to tell us how her flight was. "A catastrophe," she announced; she'd sat next to an annoying man. On every flight she took, she always ended up sitting next to annoying men. So then she told us the story, not looking at all catastrophic. She looked like someone who would ride out any catastrophe in any case, and also knew how to make herself properly comfortable afterwards. Saya sounded completely normal. The way you sound when you're happy to tell an everyday kind of story, to warm us up to one another

again. She told it in such an offhand, incidental manner. So we really had no inkling of all that was to come.

“Then a woman got on the plane wearing a headscarf,” Saya went on. “Uh-oh,” I said. “Uh-oh, indeed,” said Saya. “The people around me started to shuffle about nervously in their seats and look around. After all, the woman might have a bearded man in tow, it was a risk, and he would probably start harassing all the other women and then set off a bomb.” “No, he’d oppress his wife first,” I said. “Right, said Saya, “First, he’d quickly oppress his wife, and *then* he’d set off a bomb.” I wanted to say more, I wanted to go one better. But we hadn’t warmed up yet. “Are you two making fun of terrorists now? Or those people?” Hani asked, glancing at us. We were still looking at the roofs around us, the way other people stare into a campfire. We could hear car horns, the low sound of people talking on the street below. I didn’t want to reply – I thought Hani could have let us go on a bit longer. But since Saya had started telling us about her flight, Hani had been wondering if this was a story to get worked up about. That was what she feared, when Saya started telling stories: that the whole point was that you got worked up at the end. But so far in this story, everything was still fine. In fact, when Saya got on the plane, the whole world was still fine. Saya could almost have forgotten that the world was a place that got her worked up. She had a window seat and was one of the first to be allowed to board, without having to pay for the privilege. That evening she was going to see us and drink her inhibitions away. The most beautiful city in the world was waiting for her, without Saya having to think about its rental prices. When the guy with the bad English sat down beside her, she found it more amusing than annoying. Then the woman got on. And Saya would have taken no further notice of her, if she hadn’t looked at her ticket, the seat numbers, her ticket and back at the seat numbers, with a lost expression on her face. Something seemed to be wrong, her seat appeared to be occupied. She said so several times, said it to the people sitting in front of Saya, often enough for them to listen, eventually, and tell her no, her seat was the aisle, not the window, and that seat was still free. There was

a brief moment in which the woman said something like, “But it’s seat A, seat B, seat C!” as she pointed to each seat in turn, and the woman sitting in front of Saya replied, “No, it’s seat A, seat B, seat C,” starting at the opposite side. “Could you sit down, please, there are other passengers waiting behind you!” the flight attendant said at her back. She was unfriendly but also right: a queue of scowling people had formed, squashed together as they waited on the small plane. Saya knew that the woman in the headscarf was correct in this endless seat-A-seat-B-seat-C game, but she also knew that in a minute, the woman would probably just sit in the wrong seat rather than get into a discussion with the flight attendant as well. After all, a window seat wasn’t that important. And in any case, the flight attendant was annoyed, sounded like a governess and looked as if she was starving herself to keep her figure. It’s no good discussing things with hungry people. But the woman – let’s call her Yağmur for the sake of simplicity, because she looked like Yağmur from the TV series *Turkish for Beginners* – made a move that was completely new and interesting to Saya. “I’ll make a suggestion,” she said to the woman who was sitting in her seat, “Let’s just swap, and then you don’t have to get up, and I’ll sit in your aisle seat.” It sounded like the most agreeable offer ever, and Saya would so have liked to see the face of the woman in front of her. Next, Yağmur turned to the flight attendant and said, “I’m glad you’re here. Could you help me with my case? I’m not allowed to lift anything heavy.” She stroked her belly with both hands to emphasise how pregnant she was. There wasn’t actually an obvious pregnancy bump, but that isn’t something you can really say. The flight attendant had no desire to help, of course, and Saya had no idea if that was actually part of a flight attendant’s job or not. With a roll of her eyes, she eventually lifted the case into the overhead compartment, just to get things moving. “It’s only 12 kilos for hand luggage,” she hissed at Yağmur, groaning under the case. No one helped her. Probably because they were all afraid of her. Or because they all wanted to watch her being useful to make up for her unkindness: a pregnant woman, a suitcase, a good deed. “12 kilos,” the flight attendant repeated, raising a forefinger, as soon as the case was stowed. She sounded as if she was going to get her whip out at any



minute and spur the people standing around into performing strictly timed production-line work. Yağmur's voice shook as she said: "Your colleagues told me that already, they weighed the case before I got on. Thank you for your help, it's very kind of you." The "very kind" was uttered so shakily that Saya realised the shaking was due to anger rather than anything else. Saya, a row behind the three women, was overcome with the two emotions she knew best. Anger and solidarity. Solidarity isn't an emotion, Hani would have put in, if Saya had told us all this in the way I've described it here. But she wouldn't object if I then ended the conversation with a simple, "Yes, it is." Because when you know a person like we know Saya, you know that solidarity is an emotion and unkindness is a reason for raging anger. And that's why it's also silly to call Yağmur Yağmur, because the Yağmur in the TV series never displayed such dignified anger as the woman on Saya's plane, and if you can think of another woman on German TV who wears a headscarf, just give me a call and I'll change the name.

So, when Yağmur's case was finally stowed, she sat down in her wrong seat and took her headscarf off. "Ugh, this weather," she said, running her hands through her curls. It had been raining while they were boarding, but thanks to the scarf it hadn't ruined her hair. The people finally starting moving, albeit haltingly, down the plane, and when the woman approached who had the aisle seat in Saya's row, the man sitting next to her immediately leapt up to take her case. Saya leaned forward to see if this woman was pregnant as well, but couldn't say for sure. The only thing she could say for sure was that he would drone on at this woman in German for the next hour and a half.

"And did she like that?" Hani asked, because now, at last, the moment had arrived when she judged the story to be interesting. I stopped listening for a second; a warm wind surrounded us and down below, someone was yelling something I couldn't quite hear. The haze of flowering trees hung in the air, the spunky aroma that floats over the city at this time of year, along with the smell of exhaust fumes and Hani's cigarette. It smelled so good. Everything was so good. The voices below grew louder as passers-by

responded to the person yelling, and it was so lovely to sit up here and simply have nothing to do with it. Not to have to fear for your life, to be a good citizen, pay attention, have to step in. All the alert mechanisms you get so used to in a big city are no use on the roof. We can't see or hear nearly enough up here to be relevant in any way. It's great. To have Saya's voice, Saya's body beside me, is great, and to know that Hani will put the dampers on anything that might sour the mood is great, too. The fact that everyone is doing what they are best at, and that my beer is lukewarm but still the best drink in the world. Saya told us about the man next to her and his failed attempt to flirt with the new woman beside him, and then finally came to the point, which I had been looking forward to all this time, because I already knew what was going to happen, I had been thinking it all along, I knew that Saya had done exactly what I would have done myself in her situation. "Then the flight attendant came round with drinks. Everyone said things like 'tomato juice' or 'Diet Coke' all expectantly, and then looked disappointed, because they'd been given a half-full, flimsy paper cup that makes you more sad than happy. The guy next to me, quite the gentleman, alerted me to the fact that drinks were being offered, but that he could wait patiently, and said 'Ladies first' in English." Hani and I booed him, but only briefly, because we wanted to find out what happened next. "Then I craned my neck forward and said to the flight attendant, in German: 'A coffee with milk and sugar, please,' loud and clear and without any accent." Hani and I roared and applauded and asked, "Well? How did he look? Did he say anything?" "Of course not. He acted as though nothing had happened. Later, when we were disembarking, I used German again, and said, 'Bye, have a nice evening,' as I was passing." "And did he reply?" "No, he was too busy chatting up the woman without the headscarf."

Saya wrapped herself in her shawl, which was like a huge blanket, and I thought that I should have realised that these shawls are a good look, too. It's just that, as always, I had been too lazy to try them on. When I see clothes in shop windows, the risk is always too great that I'll try them on and realise I'm wasting my time, so I stick to what I know. Saya doesn't shy away from

any risk. Saya tries on, lays aside, tries on, buys, throws away, exchanges, and in the end she looks good. Even the dilapidated bench in the middle of the roof looked better for Saya's visit. Because she'd recognised the potential and the problems at a glance, and then brought all the cushions in the flat up here. And now we were sitting here like pensioners on the North Sea coast who own their own wicker strandkorb, on this roof, in the city that belongs to us. There never used to be any doubt about that, for Saya and me. When we thought about eventually leaving the estate, the only place we considered making our new home was this city, with all the things it promised. The promise of adventures and freedom, but above all the promise that here, at last, we wouldn't stick out.

"Here's to more kilos for pregnant women's hand luggage," said Saya, raising her bottle and taking several gulps from it. Hani reached for her bottle, confused, not knowing if we were really supposed to drink to that, if Saya was serious and we were going to be the lobby for pregnant women from now on, until there was someone else to be saved from oppression.

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When Saya's mother was pregnant with her, she was in prison. I'm saying prison this time because, when someone is locked up for political reasons, wanting to sound casual doesn't seem right, somehow. And anyone who ended up there in times when the photos were not only analogue but black and white has even more right to have it called "prison" rather than "the slammer". We were about 14, and sitting on the rug in Saya's living room when we looked at the photos. It was pretty rare for everyone in our families and their endless guests to all be out at the same time, so we had an agreement that when this happened, we would meet at the flat of whoever had the place to themselves. In a matter of minutes, we became very grown-up, venturing to the fridge, getting some food together and clearing our own plates into the dishwasher afterwards. It was exciting to sit on the finally-vacant sofas to watch an episode of *Beverly Hills 90210* in peace, without fathers and

mothers frowning at us. We drank juice from the champagne glasses that our parents never used. And Hani always had the peculiar need to get up in the ad breaks and stand out on the little balcony, which looked exactly the same in all our flats, because the flats our families lived in were all exactly the same. But Hani was the only one of us who lived in a flat that smelled of cold cigarette smoke, accidentally let in from outside, and the difference between her balcony and ours was what it was used for, and what it wasn't.

Sometimes, when people say things like “weekend” or “a nice evening,” this is the precise image that comes to me. Me, sprawled on a sofa that is usually always occupied, a champagne glass in my hand, spellbound by the ecstasy of the RTL adverts, while Hani stands pointlessly on the balcony, looking out over the roofs of the town. The perpetual smell of those flats, the smell of feet, old wallpaper and dried herbs, different according to whose flat we were in. Just as our mothers' languages and the taste of their cooking were different.

So, when we were at Saya's house one day and her parents were out, she showed us the photo album, and the reason Hani and I were so reverent was not because we were such good friends, but because we knew that this was a private object, in a space where the adults had no private life. Where the children had no private life, either. Where no one had a private life, because there simply wasn't sufficient room for it in the flat, or sufficient understanding of it where life and habits were communal. Most objects in these flats were either useful or decorative. Saya had only seen the photo album for the first time herself a few days previously, when an acquaintance of her uncle's had come to visit and brought it with him. The album must have been passed from one trusted person to the next in convoluted ways over the years. Saya's parents had left their apartment and their country without saying goodbye, and ever since, it had been waiting to be saved along with everything else that had belonged to the three of them. Saya was fourteen when she saw pictures of her parents as young people for the first time. Hani and I couldn't know that this was a formative experience for her; we just