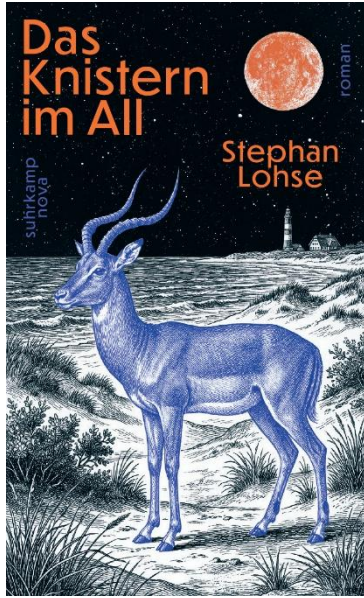




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The Crackling in the Cosmos

A Novel

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Prologue

For twelve years (Nico thirteen), we learned things we would later forget: narrative voice, normal distribution, ore deposits. What we wouldn't forget: how to take insults, resist monotony, make someone disappear. Twelve years. Nico thirteen.

Tenth grade. Other kids got to go to Rome or Paris. Or Amsterdam. Pöllisch, our English and Physics teacher (and since the eighth grade also our homeroom teacher), ruled out Amsterdam from the get-go. He didn't care how we chose to screw up our lives, he said, he just preferred not to have to watch. Since we couldn't decide between Rome and Paris, we ended up going to Amrum. Apparently, Pöllisch thought it was a good idea to take a bunch of tenth graders to an island. Shells and sand. Wind. Seagulls. Bad reception. And a sea that would probably swallow us all up. Leaving nothing behind. Maybe a sock. Or a phone charger.

At the harbour on the mainland, you could get fresh shrimp. The fishermen would cook them directly on deck, in their shells and with everything still on; legs, feelers, heads. The more you shelled them, the more they looked like insects, and after a while, it felt as though you were cracking open grasshoppers that stared back at you while you abused them. Jens, the Nazi, looked across at Can. He feigned disgust and said, "Allahu Akbar, send us lamb," and then laughed. He looked like a character straight out of a comic book. If all Nazis were so unfunny, there'd be nothing to worry about. You could just ignore their speech bubbles. Can achieved this to perfection. The insults didn't get to him. They rolled off him like water off a hydrophobic surface. Increased contact angle equals decreased wettability – physics with Pöllisch. The result was a self-cleaning effect. Each insult led to greater beauty and pride. Can had the most beautiful skin of all of us. I don't know how he did it. He never had a single pimple. His skin was a marvel, grime and grief both rolled off in beads, like droplets on a lotus blossom. It sure pissed me off, though.

It started to rain, and Pöllisch, who had forgotten his umbrella, ushered us onto the boat. Nadine annoyed everyone with her nautical trivia. Starboard this, port that, and it's called a mess deck, not a restaurant. She then proceeded to wave her hands through the stale air and explain ocean currents. Jet streams, polar ice caps, the links between them all. Even Pöllisch was bored and plonked himself on a bench. "But Mr. Pöllisch, we could have bought drugs in Rome or Paris as well." "Not on every corner, Florian. And not in shops made for that sole purpose."

OJ and sodas rattled on the tables as the boat pulled away from the dock and lumbered out to sea. I was squeezed in between Aliya and Flo. My body was the gap between them. Over the last few days, my mother had spent most of her time lying on the couch, and I had sat next to her, talking. When I ran out of topics, I would read aloud from magazines. Makeup tips, royal families, fashion shows. Actresses that had online stores or hip trouble. Sometimes we would laugh about them. I played hooky and my mom wrote me a note. Now I was happy to be stuck between Aliya and Flo. But I was still pissed off. "You're such a jerk, Jens, and you know it." I couldn't stand Jens Itterbeck. He always had a grin on his face. At the same time, I felt sorry for him. He was poor and I wasn't. My parents had money. Radar technology. Unlimited demand. But a Nazi was a Nazi. I was unequivocally left-wing. Having rich parents just did that to you, I thought. Then again. Nadine had rich parents, but she was not unequivocally left-wing; she was a member of a tennis club. She went on about how the bow was the front, the stern the rear, and how at sea, speed was measured in knots.

I looked it up later; there was no signal on the ferry: ships roll and pitch, list to one side, break apart, sink, or drop anchor and put out to sea. The words determine the direction. And at the end of it all, they come into port.

Ten minutes before we arrived, we went out on deck, stood at the railing, and squinted into the distance. Amrum was a wet streak of embankments and sheep lying on the horizon. The wind fluffed up our hair. Lines and markings directed the families in their cars; men in high-vis vests guided them into place. We took the pedestrian ramp. Even at that stage, we were a shrunken version of a school class; in the years that followed, we would shrink even more—through families moving away, students being held back, and a suicide attempt. With a bit of pushing and shoving, we all fit under the roof of a bus stop. Pöllisch studied the timetable. Running his finger down the column, he complained about the patchy public transport, especially here on the North Sea islands. “So, are we ready to go?” In response, we lifted our backpacks – Nadine her aluminium suitcase – and looked toward the spot where the bemoaned public transport would presumably appear.

The bus lumbered across the island. The roads were narrow, the tourists lethargic, and the seagulls stood motionless in the wind, like stuffed animals. Anna pulled me over to her. She was my friend. Not my girlfriend, my best friend. A girl, a woman, like no other, funny and dark, moody and smart, attractive in a complex way; small ears, small nose, small mouth on a normally sized body, with smooth hair and smooth skin, as beautiful as Can’s, even more beautiful, I couldn’t decide, but maybe I didn’t have to. We had kissed once, in a parking garage, on the top floor, but then decided that it didn’t mean anything, because we were drunk, and maybe the real miracle was that we didn’t fall over the railings, and that was our reward, Anna’s reward, my beautiful best friend.

Pöllisch was standing in the aisle waving a guidebook around, “ladies and gents!” There were other passengers on the bus. They didn’t say a word. All of them had been to school and probably understood that once Pöllisch – English and Physics – got started, there was no way to

stop him. The Kniepsand sandbank to the west – geologically and administratively not considered part of the island but of the sea – wouldn't be able to withstand the tide if a storm really hit. The belt of dunes behind it would rise. The beach grass and heather that grew there prevented the dunes from wandering even further, over to Sylt, for example. Pöllisch paused, expecting laughter. When none came, he went again, waxing lyrical about the shallow curvature of the moraine, the glacial core of the island. On the east side of the island were the mud flats. As the tide went out, the sea would dry up, revealing the mud of the North Sea bed. "After how many hours each time?" We all looked at Nadine. Before she could answer, Pöllisch said: "That's right. Twelve. Tidal range. Gravity. Turning moment." He leafed through his guidebook. "Crazy." On the salt marshes in the east, in front of the mud flats, he said, the steadfast curlew nests, what do you know! After remarking that the maritime climate would really knock us about – which was, after all, the point of this trip – Pöllisch nodded at the bus driver and returned to his seat. The rain on Anna's jacket was drying. It smelled of leaves and limestone.

Assigning twenty-three tenth graders – fifteen girls and eight boys – to two six-bed dorms, two four-bed dorms, and two three-bed dorms at the Wittdün Youth Hostel on the North Sea island of Amrum: six girls are assigned to the room *Brant Goose*, six boys to the room *Dunlin*, four girls to the room *Cuddy's duck*, and two boys to the room *Oystercatcher*. Three girls in the room *Black-tailed Godwit*, and two additional girls in *Red Knot*. The teachers are requested to occupy the single rooms *Herring Gull* and *Common Tern*. All rooms are located in Building 2, on the seaward side.

The *Herring Gull* room was not required. Ms. Ebeling, the biology teacher and guidance counsellor, had called in sick that morning, and a substitute couldn't be found at such short notice. "So you're on your own then?" asked Jens-Uwe, the hostel manager, who wished to be

addressed by his first name. Pöllisch shrugged. “Well, have fun then.” A volunteer showed us to our rooms. Can and I were lucky. We got the *Oystercatcher* to ourselves.

I had gotten myself all worked up. While Can unpacked, I held a monologue on the topic of: The Nazi. That jerkface was there for one reason only, I hypothesised, so that the world looks like the real world to the rest of us. Because Nazis, after all, are simply part of the landscape. But he was nothing but a comic-book character; someone who, if you poked him, would play back the same lines over and over like a bot, grinning constantly, an NPC. But the jokes were from the Auschwitz category, as if they had been rendered incorrectly. “I’ve got no idea whether someone like that even has an inner life. He has no shame. He acts as though a species of tree were named after him—or an entire era, something really important. But he’s just a ridiculous drawing in a comic strip. I can’t stand him.” “I actually think he’s kind of cute,” said Can.

The lounge turned out to be just another common room – albeit one with wall decals. Depicting, who would have guessed it, seagulls and dunes. A lighthouse was half covered by a coffee machine. We gulped down one espresso after the other. Outside, it was raining. Some people were seated at the table, while most were lounging around in a seating area. They were all staring at their phones and seemed to be giving off steam. Pöllisch took this all in for a moment. Then he too pulled out his phone and started playing a game in which grey dots exploded colourfully when you shot them. I had assumed he would come up with complaints about the weather (which wasn’t that bad) or about our inadequate clothing (which was). But apparently it didn’t bother him that his school trip already seemed in danger of failing on the very first day. He was getting paid either way.

After dinner – pistachio mortadella, butter punched into the shape of clovers, corn on the cob and a tub full of iceberg lettuce, that Anna ate leaf by leaf because she was vegan and

wanted to stay that way even on this desolate island – Pöllsich announced the plan for the next day. A walk across the mud flats, looking for worms, one of these worms was to be excavated for scientific purposes, transported back to the hostel in a suitable container, and then subjected to close examination. The youth hostel would provide microscopes for this purpose. Pöllsich tapped his watch. “It’s going to be an interesting day. And people, just to be clear, it’s lights out at 10 pm.” At 10:30, he would make his rounds. And if he happened to see a phone screen still flickering somewhere, it would promptly end up in the North Sea – swallowed up by its frothing waves.

I walked outside with Nico. He lit a cigarette, holding the filter between his thumb and forefinger, the glowing tip cupped by his hand. He had been held back a year and he pretty much didn’t care whether or not he was going to get thrown out of school. He gave me a drag and I staggered around a little. “Dizzy?” “Not more than usual.” “It gets better with time.” Nico was sixteen, he’d been smoking since he was fourteen. He flicked the cigarette butt into the bushes and wondered aloud whether he should get some hair pins. “Because of the wind.” To stop his middle part from turning into a bush. His ex thought so too. “Selina?” Nico hesitated. “No, the other one.”

Before we left, Flo had distributed his stash of beer among our backpacks. “I’m not gonna get caught for you guys.” We met in the *Brant Goose*, the biggest of the girls’ rooms and cracked open the cans. Nico’s can overflowed, losing half of its contents. Nadine had a fit. “And where am I supposed to sleep now?” “In the shower. No, I’m sorry. I’ll dry it.” “How are you going to do that?” Anna passed around a bottle of vodka and some iced tea as a chaser. It smelled like pear. It smelled like girls’ hair. She turned out the lights shortly before 10:30 pm and Aliya peered into the hallway. “He’s fast asleep,” she said. “And dreaming about Ms. Ebeling,” said

Grumbach. "Probably a wet one." Lea pulled a face. "You guys are so gross." Can asked me what was up. "Nothing. I'm just dead." "You sure?" "No idea. Something is flickering. Are there mirages here?" "I think so. On the mud flats. The sky gets reflected in the sand." "Really?" "Yeah, like floating puddles."