

Anika Büsing

Magisch

Publication July 2026. 288 pages

- **A story of defiant love, sibling bonds, a feisty village community and a fresh start**



On beautiful failure and the magic of second chances.

Marie never thought she would be sitting at her parents' kitchen table again in her mid-thirties, running a dog daycare centre in the village where she grew up. And yet that is her life now. In the middle of summer, Magisch is back too, Magisch, who slept in her bed for years, with whom she was the local punk couple – whom she hasn't seen since they broke up, but admittedly always missed. But then there's Andi, her brother and staunch right-winger – and for Marie, the time has come to finally stand up to him. In her unmistakable tone, Annika Büsing tells of an enduring love and the rift that runs through a family.

'This author really knows how to tell a story.'

Jens Dirksen, Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung

Annika Büsing (born 1981) lives with her family in Bochum and teaches at a secondary school. In 2022, she won the German Youth Literature Prize, the Ruhr Literature Prize and the Mara Cassens Prize for her acclaimed debut novel Nordstadt. She was also nominated for the Bavarian Book Prize, the Blogger Prize "Das Debüt" and the Debut Prize of the Harbour Front Literature Festival. With Koller, she made it onto the lists for the Evangelical Book Prize and the "Das zweite Buch" prize. Both novels have been adapted for the theatre. Her third novel, Wir kommen zurecht (We're Getting By), was published by Steidl in spring 2025.



CHAPTER ONE

It's not easy to get rid of a dead horse these days. You can try bribery, but the odds aren't good. That's why people have started burying them instead. Just recently the police nabbed a master cobbler from G., caught in the act of digging a hole at the edge of the country road. The man's got some nerve. He couldn't even be bothered to drive as far as the treeline! He'd been trying to dispose of his daughter's Shetland pony, which had died after eating yew. Horses are sweet, but they're not clever, I'll tell you that for nothing, they'll eat whatever's in front of their nose, and the girl had been glued to her phone the whole time, the leading rope had gone slack, and that's when things like this happen. The cobbler tried to talk his way out of it. Surely you're allowed to bury a dead hamster, aren't you? But the police set him straight on that one, because even they want to knock off at some point, and if they have to haul away a master cobbler and a dead Shetland pony at dusk, then their patience runs out fast, and that's a fact. It was actually the council emergency duty team who hauled the pony away, not the police, and after that everyone and his dog started ringing up the emergency team asking whether they might fancy collecting their dead horses and cows too, but no chance, they'd only made the one exception, and they had quite enough on their hands cleaning up the van after the bloated pony came out of it. I've got a mate on the emergency team who told me all this. A horse carcass stinks to the heavens, and that's only one of the reasons nobody wants to come and collect them any more.

Magisch has turned this into a tidy little business. The guy has an uncanny gift for spotting the gaps other people leave, and filling them. I know this. I know him. I probably know Magisch better than his own mother did, certainly better than anyone else round here. Most people had simply forgotten about him anyway, once he went off to study. Round here, people like to forget about anyone who moves away. And they especially like to forget about anyone who moves away to study. Since he's been back, the lads have taken to moseying past every so often for a look at the house, like fish circling something new in the tank, and if there's a light on, they get

ideas and stop for a cigarette or a bottle of beer. Magisch lives behind a wall of brambles and nettles, a plum tree and an oak with fungus on it. There's a snowberry bush there too. I was picking the snowberries off it when he came to the door, and he looked just like before, except his hair's different. It was somehow neater, more meant, and when I was pulling snowberries off his bush he was wearing sunglasses and flip-flops. He used to have to wear sandals, and he hated it, and now he wears flip-flops by choice, the idiot. He's changed, which isn't surprising, we've all changed, but we've also stayed uncannily the same. That goes for Magisch just as much as the rest of us.

With the snowberries, here's the trick: you have to let them drop to the ground and then step on them gently. That gives you the best pop. I've got two brothers who disagreed. They used to smack them down on the ground the way one of them would go on to do with empty beer bottles. And then they'd whine that the snowberries weren't popping properly.

My parents didn't hold back on having kids, mind you. There's barely a year between me and my younger brother. His name's Henning, he's married and has a young son. Two years ago he took over Dad's business.

"Magisch is back," Henning said to me. "Have you been round yet?"

"No," I said, and that was a lie.

"Marie," Magisch had said, "those are my snowberries."

"You're a tight-fisted bastard, Magisch."

"Why don't you come in?"

"I wanted to check first whether there's a woman running around the house, or a dog, or kids."

"No woman, no kids," Magisch said. "Just a cat."

"And people thought you'd amount to something."

"And who exactly was supposed to have thought that?"

He had a point, maybe nobody really believed Magisch would amount to anything. On the other hand, he did have the makings of it. He was good at maths, and he wore sandals. Surely something's got to come of a boy like that! My mother always used to say: "He'll be a doctor one day." I think she got that idea from the sandals. Our GP always wore sandals too, that's definitely where it must have come from.

Magisch asked again whether I wanted to come in, but I said I was just passing through, which he obviously didn't believe, since that was a lie too.

On my parents' farm there are two houses, the main one and the other one, and in the other one there are two flats. When my brother got married, he wanted the bigger flat, since his wife was already pregnant. And I grabbed the chance with both hands and moved to one of the towns nearby, because I was sick of it, always strapped for cash, and always having to lend a hand because something or other had been left undone again. My father isn't a proper farmer, he had nothing whatsoever to do with farms when he met my mother, but my mother was born on the farm, and she was attached to it, so he had to learn how to make hay. By trade he's a plumber, and his business has always done well, which meant my mother could afford to run a farm shop, selling vegetables and homemade jam. These days people are completely mad for that sort of thing. My mother's got an Instagram page, and people come from D. and B. and other bigger towns to her farm shop. I could name the towns, but it's the same story everywhere. People come from the cities and buy organic vegetables from farm shops like my mother's, and then they drive back again. That's how I came up with the idea for the dog day care centre. I thought, if people are willing to drive their veg all over the place, they'll drive their dogs all over the place too. And that's exactly what happened.

"Your brother was already round," Magisch said, before I left.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Henning."

"If Andi comes," I said, "watch yourself."

Magisch just stood there with his sunglasses on, looking utterly fearless.

"Marie," he said, "there's a highly aggressive killer cat living in my house. She eats Nazis for breakfast."

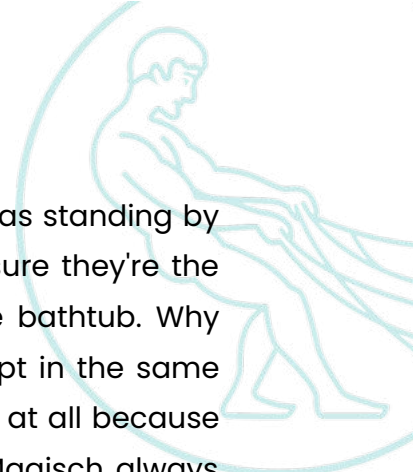
My brother Andi would never call himself a Nazi. He'd say: "I'm just telling it how it is." He says: "Germany's going to the dogs." My parents cut off contact with him again last year, because they couldn't stand his rants any more. And then my mother went and rang him up again anyway. It's hard on her. She's the lefty, do-gooder enemy of her own son, even though she's never once voted Green in her life. My mother is Catholic through and through and the daughter of a farmer – conventional farming, fertiliser and all that – but her vegetables are organic these days, and she helped

out with housing refugees, and Andi said: "You're betraying your heritage!" and my mother said: "You're not right in the head any more!" and then there was shouting and screaming, and my father put a stop to it and sent Andi packing. This isn't exactly a new development. Andi was already the one who used to come back from the public pool ranting: "Bloody Turks!" My father would tell him to get his act together. When I was younger, I was only allowed to go to the pool if my brother came along, and he always used to say to me: "Don't you dare talk to the Turks!" A few times he got into fights, and naturally my father took his side then, you don't hit your own son, that's simply not on, though my mother used to say: "What goes around comes around."

They were of one mind, though, when Andi went off the rails. He stopped going to school and hung around with his Nazi mates at the scrapyard, smacking beer bottles on the ground and shooting at empty cans with an air rifle. Dad got him an apprenticeship. And Andi actually did get his act together; he wanted to make a good impression. His circle of mates stayed the same, though, and once he'd finished his apprenticeship he started working at Dad's business, and he no longer felt he needed to impress anyone, and bit by bit he turned into the family tyrant. He bullied everyone and everything – by then, not even my father could stand up to him. And one day Andi and his mates ambushed Magisch as he was walking home from a party, and they beat him so badly that his own mother barely recognised him. And Mama Magisch had good eyesight, that's for sure.

Magisch and I were the punk couple of the village. We weren't proper punks at all, but I don't think people could come up with any other word to describe us. I had a nose ring and a lip piercing, and I'd dyed my hair turquoise, which was trendy rather than punk, and Magisch looked completely ordinary anyway. I don't know what was ever supposed to have been punk about Magisch, apart from his taste in music.

He was a bit chubby, hated sport, and he always had this wild hair, not long, not short, more curly than straight, but not properly curly either, reluctant curls, the kind of curls that can't be bothered. He never had a proper haircut either. I've no idea who used to cut his hair. I think sometimes I did, that's quite possible, with his head over the bathtub, and I'd have brought my mother's hairdressing scissors along. He took his shirt off and said he was embarrassed. I said: "Don't be daft," just like that, don't be daft, that's what I said, and I reached into his hair and cut it. He had thick, dark



hair, and dark button eyes. He's still got them, I'd imagine. When I was standing by the snowberry bush the other day he had sunglasses on, but I'm sure they're the same eyes. I never understood why he was embarrassed over the bathtub. Why would he have needed to be embarrassed in front of me? We'd slept in the same bed for years before anything ever happened, and it only happened at all because I'd broken up with Daniel Koch, who I'd been with before Magisch. Magisch always claimed he wasn't jealous of Daniel, but that was just as much a lie as me saying I was just passing through, when I nicked his snowberries. For both Magisch and me, it was our first time. With Daniel I'd only ever fooled around – somehow the thought of actually sleeping with him struck me as completely wrong and out of the question, maybe because by then I was already in love with Magisch ... it's all very muddled when you're sixteen. And Magisch was genuinely gentle, completely different from Daniel, everything about it felt right and properly tender, and he said to me: "Marie, if we're going to sleep together, you're not allowed to call me Magisch any more," and I promised that I'd call him Paul whenever we slept together, and I've kept to that ever since.

CHAPTER TWO

The reason I have to go back over to Magisch's is a dead horse lying in Lupus's field. Lupus is our neighbour, and he's at his wits' end, because it's Saturday and thirty degrees, and the horse has already been lying there a whole night. Lupus comes over to ours, tearing his hair out. Mum tells him to just throw a tarpaulin over it, and Henning says he's heard Magisch collects dead horses now, even at weekends.

"And what does he do with the dead horse afterwards?" Mum asks.

"No idea," says Henning. "Buries it, maybe."

I promise Lupus I'll find out for him, and drive over to Magisch's. It's quiet, and the door's standing open.

"Hey, Magisch!" I call, but I get no answer, so I go in, seeing as the door's open anyway.

The house has changed. The old furniture's gone, replaced by new things, a sofa, for instance, probably bought from Ikea, and a table that's almost got some class to it. The sunglasses he was wearing the other day are lying on the table. Next to them, something that looks like the foot pedal off Mum's sewing machine. The highly

aggressive killer cat is sitting on the shelf, purring. No sign of Magisch. I go outside, and there he is in the garden on a lounge, shirtless, just like he was back then over the bathtub, with headphones on his ears. He's asleep. Or he's listening to music. Or he's listening to music and sleeping at the same time. I pinch his nipple, hard, properly hard, and he gets such a shock he nearly falls off the lounge.

Once he's calmed down (from the shock) and I have too (from laughing), he gets up and pulls a T-shirt on. I take his headphones and put them on. Comeback Kid. That's Magisch all over. I wouldn't know him any other way. I take the headphones off again.

"D'you want a coffee, you devil?" he asks.

We go inside and he makes coffee. I watch him do it. Filter paper, ground coffee, perfectly ordinary, except that he grinds whole beans into ground coffee himself instead of just buying a bag of the stuff ready-ground, but if that's how he wants it... there are worse quirks to have, I suppose.

"Henning says you're dumping dead horses," I say.

"Yeah," he says, "I am."

"Magisch," I say, "people really did think you'd amount to something."

He gets cups out of the cupboard, and glasses, a bottle of mineral water, pours the coffee into a thermos flask, and then we sit out in the garden, at exactly the table where I used to sit with him and his mother, when she'd drink white wine spritzers and we'd have beer with cola. She used to ask us what we wanted from life, and we had no idea.

Magisch lights a cigarette.

"Want to get rid of a dead horse?"

"Not me. Lupus has got the dead horse."

"He's still alive?"

"You're actually doing this?" I say.

"Yeah, told you I was."

"Is it legal?"

"No."

I take a drag of his cigarette.

"Lupus won't care either way," I say.

"That's what I'm thinking too," he says.



We pick up Edwin, since Edwin owns the lorry we're going to use to transport the dead horse, or at least that's how Magisch explained it to me before we set off. The guy really has no scruples whatsoever. The whole business rests on his particular knack for talking other people into doing him favours, and then convincing them that the favour can be turned into a business, and the business into money. That's exactly how he won Edwin over. He's got the man using his company vehicle to illegally transport dead horses around.

"And you?" I ask.

"People ring me," Magisch says lightly. "But I come along too, as you can see. Eddy gets ill a lot. For him, it's good business."

"So, you get sixty per cent and he gets forty."

"I get sixty per cent and he gets twenty."

"And the rest?"

"Manuel from the crematorium gets that."

"How much is sixty per cent?" I ask.

"Three hundred euros."

"THREE HUNDRED euros?"

He grins. Magisch. I can't believe it.

"You're taking five hundred euros off people to dispose of their horse?"

"It's a flat rate," Magisch says, and slams on the brakes. He's missed the turning because we've been chatting. He's never had much concentration to speak of. Still, he turns the car round in three smooth moves right there on the road.

"Did you actually study anything, Magisch?" I ask.

"No," he says.

"What did you do, then?"

"I played in a ska band."

"For fifteen years?"

"Some things just take their time," he says.

Then we're at Edwin's.

To describe Edwin, I need eight words: half-bald, boiler suit, smells like boiled potatoes. He's waiting for us in front of the gates of a vehicle recovery firm in W. He's absurdly small and talks non-stop, like a waterfall in full spate.

"Your girlfriend?" he asks. "Lovely, hello, you're late, you were meant to be here ten minutes ago, you're always late, you know that, it's not polite, did you remember the tarpaulin, I need that tarpaulin back, Magisch, and quick today please, I've got to go to my mother-in-law's for coffee, she's making cheesecake with raspberries, her speciality, my wife will murder me if I'm late, you need a woman too, Magisch, get a move on for once, but you'll work that out yourself, won't you, you're a right one, no joke, we need to get a shift on today, I still need a shower, Jesus, this blasted heat, I can't bear it, I'm telling you, this heat's going to be the death of me, lovely to meet you, I'm Edwin."

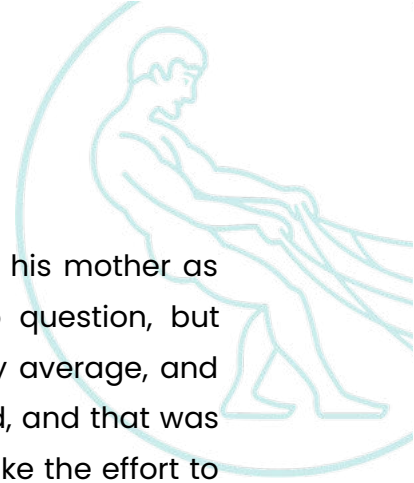
He shakes my hand. The lorry is a seven-and-a-half tonner with a loading crane. 'Van' would be the wrong word entirely. This is a lorry through and through, not a van. Vans are the things a penniless ska band would tour the country in. I'd guess he genuinely did that. Magisch isn't the type to have grand expectations. He'd be perfectly fine eating rice with vegan chilli every single day. He sleeps on grubby mattresses in cheap hostels, wears the same trousers for three weeks straight, none of it bothers him in the slightest. If anyone's spent fifteen years playing in a ska band that not a soul has ever heard of, it's Magisch. As it happens, he's got no reason to lie to me about it.

While Edwin drives and talks, Magisch is texting. He looks serious when he glances at his phone, serious and grown-up, a little worried even. Or maybe he's simply exhausted.

Lupus is genuinely taken aback when he recognises Magisch. It takes him a while, since Lupus has poor eyesight and Magisch has changed quite a bit. He's got a full dark beard now and a paunch, quite unlike before, when he was first a chubby little boy and then a teenager who barely ate, since his head was permanently in the clouds, stoned or drunk, or both, and he burned off vast amounts of calories cycling everywhere, the distances were long, it was hilly, and we were having a lot of sex, too, if I'm honest. In Lupus's memory, Magisch is wiry.

"Lad," says Lupus, pulling Magisch into a hug – he's an old man, you can't refuse him that, and Magisch doesn't refuse him.

"Sorry about your mother," says Lupus.



He can't manage a smile. I've never known anyone as attached to his mother as Magisch. They called him a mummy's boy, bullied him for it, no question, but Magisch stood firmly by his mother, even though she wasn't exactly average, and children generally want average parents. She was everything he had, and that was plenty. Mama Magisch was a wonderful woman, you just had to make the effort to get to know her a little, and very few people ever bothered. Most of them just decided she only thought of herself, and that she ought to raise her child properly, that chubby little softie, so something might come of him.

Mama Magisch died of breast cancer. He can't manage a smile. But he tries. Edwin drives the lorry onto the field. The horse is lying under a tarpaulin, just as my mother had said.

"It's a disgrace," says Lupus. "The knacker's men haven't got the staff. Last month we had a dead cow lying behind the house for two weeks."

"We'll sort it," says Magisch.

Carefully, he pulls the tarpaulin off the carcass. A swarm of flies rises into the air, along with the biting stench of rotten flesh. Edwin starts retching. I gently push him aside and help Magisch fasten the lifting chains round the horse's legs. With the crane, the horse is loaded up in no time at all. Magisch won't take a penny from Lupus, would you believe it! But he plays the bad boy here all the same. The two hundred euros for his partners, he pays out of his own pocket afterwards. Maybe I haven't said this yet: I fell in love with Paul Magisch because he has a good heart. You can see it for yourselves.

Manuel from the crematorium is a thoroughly dangerous gangster, the sort who'll risk his job for an extra hundred euros. Guys like Manuel get away with it for a long time. Eventually they get caught, they're given a patient probation officer, and simply carry on exactly as before. I think, or rather, I know for certain, that his arrangement with Magisch isn't the only crooked thing Manuel's got going on. Normally he cremates animals for people who've paid good money for a proper pet funeral instead of calling the knacker's men, but he reckons one extra horse or cow here and there makes no difference, except that a hundred euros goes straight into his own pocket, tax-free, naturally. Cows don't usually get funerals, mostly it's cats and dogs,

horses more rarely, but when it does happen, customers will fork out fifteen or sixteen hundred, or more; some even have an urn specially designed. If you've got the money, you can bury your pet however you fancy. Manuel reckons that, looked at that way, Magisch's prices are actually fair.

"If they catch you two," I say, "then you've had it."

"But they won't catch us," says Magisch.

That sort of thing winds me up. Why does he say that? Does he want me worrying? Does he want me to go up to him and say, "Please be careful, Magisch"? Or does he actually mean it? Does he genuinely believe nobody will notice some village waster making quick money off dead horses? I know what the regulators of this world are like, never mind the police, they won't show an ounce of restraint once they've got him by the bollocks. When I opened the Huta, some absolutely brainless woman from the regulators said to me, "Proportionality isn't a concept we recognise here." What she meant by that was: we couldn't care less whether a regulation actually makes sense, take it or leave it.

Manuel sniggers.

"Is something going on between you two?" he asks.

And Magisch says: "Shut it, Manuel, and just get this nag out of here."

And Manuel says: "Don't you worry about that, everything disappears very quickly in the fire."

On the way home, there's a Porsche in front of us at the traffic lights. A convertible. Flashy.

"Why do they all have a Hagen number plate?" Magisch asks.

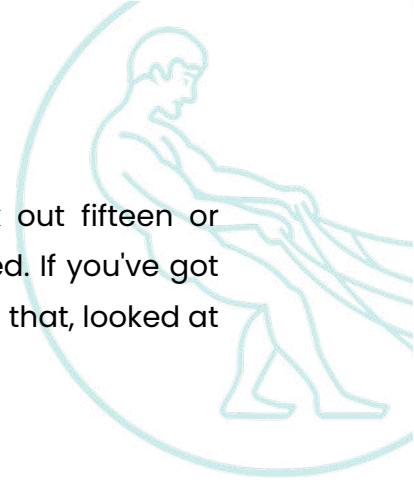
"Magisch, we agreed we weren't naming towns here," I say.

"What?"

"Never mind," I say.

Right, fine, now you know one town. Don't bother remembering it! It's ugly. And we don't even live there. But honestly, I do see a lot of Porsches with Hagen plates. There are evidently rich people in Hagen, who knew? If I say D. or B. or W. again, you'll be putting a mental finger on the map, but it's really not worth it, honestly.

"Are you cross with me?" Magisch asks.



"Why would I be?"

"You're being properly grumpy."

"That's just my nature, Magisch."

"No, it isn't."

"Yes, it is, actually."

"You're cross with me."

"You've only just got back," I say.

That's what he wants to hear right now. That one sentence. That admission. I don't want you getting yourself into trouble. I don't want things going badly for you. I missed you, you great lump. Yes, that's exactly what he wants. Magisch needs love – you could pour whole tanks of it over him, and it would never be too much.

