



NILS NON GRATA by Iben Akerlie

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“The book screams for a follow-up. Note the names Nils and Bruno. I predict that they will become a great literary team. (...) School can be a jungle, where the survival of the strongest rules. That’s why it’s nice to read books like Iben Akerlie’s, which bring so much humor and not least thoughtfulness from an exceptionally generous teacher.”

Anne Cathrine Straume, **NRK 5/6 stars**

“Hits the mark on the modern fantasy of childhood. Sometimes it’s the simplest stories that best help us understand the spirit of the times we live in. (...) Iben Akerlie’s style of writing is effortless with loads of witty observations.”

Eilif Guldvog Hartvedt, **Aftenposten**

Nils is starting on a new school - again. Every time his freelance-working mother gets a new job, they move. This happens so often that Nils remains an outsider who barely has time to grasp the social arena the schoolyard is before they move on to a new place and a new school.

This time Nils is determined to become popular. Because he has moved so often, he’s clever in telling fanciful stories which is slightly careless about the truth to get attention. He knows in theory how to become popular, though he never has had much success. He also knows that it’s important who you make friends with, and he can easily tell who is popular and who is not. Nils befriends Bruno, who is not one of the popular boys. Bruno is too nice, he’s sensitive and in love. Nils and Bruno make a pact and things get out of hand and it goes too far. When Nils is caught lying and accidentally gets into trouble and the whole class is collectively punished, Nils becomes the opposite of popular: He becomes Nils non grata*.

Nils Non Grata is a humorous and charming book about new neighbors and new classmates, about water balloons, toilet rolls and democracy. About strange families, friendship and maybe even love.

*Non grata: The opposite of popular

1. New, again.

I survey my eighth school yard. Mum is right next to me, pleased as punch. She is always happy when we arrive somewhere new, because it's full of potential. But really, that same potential exists in most places. For example potentially becoming popular.

"Nils, honey bunny!" she says, carelessly loudly, "well, this is exciting!"

She hugs me close.

Without answering, I carry on looking at the sea of unfamiliar children. Starting like this, right after the summer holidays, along with everyone else, has only happened to me twice before. Usually I start halfway through the year, which leads to chaos.

It is, in fact, Mum's fault that I'm always changing schools. She is a freelancer in the theatre world, and every time she gets a new gig, we move. But I think it's really all about her not wanting to spend too long in one place.

Above me the sun is baking, and my head burns. I should have worn a cap, I can see lots of kids wearing them. They are also wearing polo shirts and light-coloured shorts. At my last school everyone wore combat trousers and hoodies.

If I were to match my style to every place I've lived in, it would get expensive. That's why I dress plainly, in jean-shorts and white t-shirts, except for when I'm going to a party, when the whole point is to stand out.

"I'll be fine," I say to Mum, wanting to wriggle free of her.

She holds me back with a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't get up to any mischief, now," she says, looking at me knowingly.

I understand what she means, but it's still irritating to hear her say it. I'm not *planning* to get up to anything, stuff just happens.

She gets a quick hug before I go. I'm an expert at crossing school yards like I don't have a care in the world, even if people are looking at me. Goggling eyes don't bother me.

Even so, I'm sweating by the time I get inside. Either because it's hot or because I actually feel nervous. Who cares. I can't think too much about it too much or I won't be able to think about anything else.

On the wall is a plan of the school's buildings, which are linked together by glass corridors. I'm going to block C, all the way at the end.

Seven minutes later I'm outside a door, which is overly decorated with drawings and the names of the people whose class I'm joining.

"Ho!"

A man jumps through the door and I start backwards.

"Nils?!" the man says, grinning widely.

"That's right," I say and smile normally.

"I saw you through the window!" he continues. "I'm Ove!"

He stretches out his hand and I squeeze it firmly.

"Would you look at that," Ove says, "that was a world weary handshake."

"Norway weary," I say, "I've never been anywhere else."

"Right," Ove says, straightening up, "for environmental reasons, perhaps?"

"Not to be ignored," I answer.

"Great! You are very welcome! Come on in!"

Ove holds the door open and shows me into the classroom, which is empty, except for one boy who is bent over a magazine. Ove slams the door shut but the boy doesn't flinch.

"Bruno?"

"Ove," answers the boy.

He peers up from his magazine. His glasses are round, with lenses so thin they make me doubt he actually needs them.

“Yes...” Ove continues. “Bruno, this is Nils. Nils, this is Bruno.”

Neither of us say anything.

Ove clears his throat.

“You can sit next to Bruno, Nils,” he says, “take a load off.”

I notice that Bruno’s magazine is about tennis, which I also enjoy.

“Hi,” says Bruno.

“Hi,” I say.

You have to be careful who you make friends with when you start at a new school. If you hang out with the wrong person, it can mean you’ll never be popular.

Being popular is an advantage when you stay places for as short a time as I do. Everything is more fun and you feel less lonely. Even though I’ve never been really popular, I know, theoretically, how you might come to be so. For example, you could behave mysteriously, as if you were a prince before you moved, or you could tell the most astonishing stories to get lots of attention.

A wave of slightly sweaty students pours into the classroom. I fix my eyes on a marker pen next to the board but notice in my peripheral vision that Bruno says hi to more people than say hi to him. I have a magical ability to understand who is popular and who isn’t. For example, I was right to assume that Bruno is not especially popular. But I notice another boy, with blonde, curly hair, who looks very confident. Two other boys tag along behind him.

“Hey, Mads, let’s sit here,” one of the tag-alongs says.

The one with the curls, Mads, continues on along the rows and sits down almost at the very back of the classroom. The other boys don’t protest and sit down next to him, laughing at the stupid things Mads is saying and I realise that Mads is popular.

I also notice a girl who is almost a head taller than the others. She reminds me of a Sphynx cat, at the same time as she is incredibly pretty. She glides through the room, slips towards a free space, sits down gracefully and seems almost even more indifferent than I do my best to appear. For a moment I am convinced she is licking her paws.

“Carmen!”

A short, blonde girl pushes through the classroom towards the cat.

“Ove says I have to sit here!”

Carmen, as the cat-girl is called, smiles with surprising warmth.

“Hi Mia!” she says.

Carmen hugs Mia, who sits down, and they babble away about something dull. Suddenly Carmen doesn’t look like a Sphynx cat any more, just a regular girl. But a *popular* girl, I understand this right away.

Ove claps his hands to get our attention.

“Right, everyone,” he says, “as you can see, Nils has arrived.”

Everyone turns to look at me.

“Hi Nils,” the class mumble.

I give them a broad smile.

“Hi,” I reply.

“Brilliant!” says Ove, and continues, prompting me: “Would you...”

I get up and look at the class, and then I do exactly what I promised Mum I wouldn’t.

“Nils Hansen, I’m new here, I’ve been to seven schools before this one. I play tennis and collect precious stones from Jotunheimen.”

I’m lying, which is the same as getting up to mischief. There are no precious stones in Jotunheimen and I don’t collect them.

The class responds with giggles and whispers.

“Wow!” says Ove. “That’s a new one! Anything else you’d like to add?”

I shake my head and sit down, my heart pounding.

“That was nice, Nils,” Ove continues, “great intro. You will soon notice that we operate a full blown democratic system in this class. All voices are heard, all the time! That’s the goal. And gosh darn it you didn’t half demonstrate that just now. A quick round of applause?”

He looks expectantly at the class, who reluctantly deliver a few claps.

Lying can lead to unexpected consequences, Mum says, and we agree that I should stop. But sometimes they just happen, automatically. The lies just shoot up, and I have to get them all out, except they’re words, and not the remains of a meal, like when you have a stomach bug.

Besides, it’s quite easy to lie when you’re going to move again anyway. It doesn’t really matter if what you say is true or not. When the truth is boring, you’re doing your audience a favour. Some people actually think liars should be awarded medals.

2. A Dad in the Amazon.

Ove says that we can all move around freely to get to know one another again. Bruno doesn’t seem to have anyone he needs to get to know, so he stays sitting next to me, fiddling with the tennis magazine.

“What kind of precious stones do they have in Jotunheimen?” he asks, without looking at me.

I shrug.

“All the usual ones,” I say.

Bruno nods as if he is aware of all the usual precious stones. Mia goes past him towards Ove, who gives her a thumbs up. When she turns around, I see that she has a pile of envelopes in her hands. She walks along the rows and puts the envelopes on the desks; when she gets to me and Bruno, I realise they say ‘Invitation’ on the front.

“Thank you,” I say.

Mia carries on without smiling. Behind me I hear her whisper to Carmen:

“Well you *have* to invite everyone, those are the rules.”

I wonder if I’m the one she feels she *has* to invite, but I don’t actually care. Invited is invited.

I tug the sheet out and unfold it. In elegant, glittering and colourful letters, Mia writes that she hereby invites me to her very own garden as soon as tomorrow, to celebrate her birthday, which fell in the summer holidays. The address is provided, followed by a disproportionately large heart with a line connecting it to ‘from’ and then Mia’s signature.

“Fantastic”, I mumble.

Next to me, Bruno is at least equally happy.

“Oh yes...” he says, not especially quietly. “My prayers are answered!”

He presses the invitation to his chest. I put mine into my backpack, as if I don’t care, but I’m already thinking about which blazer I’m going to wear.

Ove claps his hands and everyone returns to their seats.

“Right guys!” he says, and gets up in front of us. “I hope you have all had a brilliant summer! And if you haven’t, that’s also totally fine to share...”

He looks around the classroom, which stares blankly back, before he continues:

“Personally, I had a darn well wonderful one! I went to Copenhagen. It was totally fantastic. I’m considering moving, actually. I have a number of friends there, and I made some new ones. Marko loved it. So...yep. We’ll just have to see!”

He rocks on his heels a bit before he continues.

“Shall we do a go round, then? A plenary session?”

There are mumbled responses from around the room.

“Or, would you rather *write* about your summers?”

Now the responses are clear:

“Nooooo!”

“Please!”

“I can’t be bothered to write.”

“Ok!,” says Ove, putting a stop to the whining. “Lets go ahead and talk about it! Mia?”

He looks questioningly at Mia, who stands up and clears her throat.

“Me? Errrrm, I just went to Ibizza.”

She giggles and does a cutesy shrug, pulling her shoulders all the way up to her ears.

“Swam, sunbathed, read...”

Mia continues reeling them off and I can’t understand how she has done such boring stuff in such a cool place. Obviously, I hide how impressed I am. But it gets harder to do as more people talk about their summers.

It seems like everyone has done something at least equally exotic. All of four people have been to the south of France. Mads has ‘only’ been to Greece. Bruno went on a quick trip to see his family in Albania, like *usual*.

Stella-Elisabeth went to Mexico! I’m giddy. When it’s my turn, I feel positively nauseous.

“Nils?” says Ove.

“Well...” I start. “I *just* took a little trip to the Amazon.”

Everyone pays attention. Ove furrows his brow.

“The whole Amazon?” asks Mads.

“Huh”, I reply, turning towards him, “obviously not the *whole* Amazon. I visited a really remote village, in the local dialect it’s called Aztec...istan.”

The room is totally silent.

“My Dad lives over there.”

“Wow!” yells Ove, “so you *are* wordly-wise!”

I stare at him, not understanding.

“You said you’d never left Norway!”

I laugh suddenly and incredibly loudly.

“Haha! And you believed me!”

Someone chortles. I notice Bruno looking at me, dead impressed.

“Anyway,” I continue, “my Dad is researching an almost extinct tribe that can survive without any water at all. Which is pretty interesting when you consider that the Amazon is one of the wettest parts of the world with humidity levels of 101%.”

By now I’ve really got going.

“The tribe is called the Aztetek and they’ve never met any outsiders except for my Dad – and me; I got special permission from the UN to visit him there.”

I pause for responses. Long overdue, one comes:

“What’s your Dad called?”

Mia asks. The world’s dumbest question.

“Er,” I answer, “Edward.”

I’m about to say *Munch* but manage to stop myself, just in time.

The class blinks at me. I can see everyone is thinking it over, perhaps Carmen in particular, who has her feline eyes on me.

Ove pitches in:

“That’s just you!” he shouts.

“That’s just me.” I say.

That’s not me, far from it. The only part that is true, is that I’ve never been outside Norway’s borders. My Dad is not called Edward and he doesn’t live in the Amazon. Or perhaps he does, I have no idea, because I don’t know where he is or if he’s even alive.