

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



# Berlin Blues

Sven Regener

## **Contents**

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

1 The Dog

2 Mother

3 Breakfast

4 Lunch

5 Coffee and Cake

6 Supper

7 A Late Snack

8 Star Wars

9 Smoking in Bed

10 The Kudamm

11 The Hotel Lobby

12 The Banquet

13 Art

14 The Reunion

15 The Capital of the GDR

16 Plain Speaking

17 A Surprise

18 Community Service

19 The Hospital

20 Party Time

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## About the Book

It's 1989 and, whenever he isn't hanging out in the local bars, Herr Lehmann lives entirely free of responsibility in the bohemian Berlin district of Kreuzberg. Through years of judicious sidestepping and heroic indolence, this barman has successfully avoided the demands of parents, landlords, neighbours and women. But suddenly one unforeseen incident after another seems to threaten his idyllic and rather peaceable existence. He has an encounter with a decidedly unfriendly dog, his parents threaten to descend on Berlin from the provinces, and he meets a dangerously attractive woman who throws his emotional life into confusion. *Berlin Blues* is a richly entertaining evocation of life in the city and a classic of modern-day decadence.

## About the Author

Sven Regener is the lead singer and songwriter of the band Elements of Crime. *Berlin Blues* is his first novel.

# Berlin Blues

Sven Regener

Translated from the German by  
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# 1 THE DOG

THE CLOUDLESS NIGHT sky was already displaying a pale glimmer in the distance, over East Berlin, by the time Frank Lehmann, whom they'd recently taken to calling 'Herr Lehmann' because word had got around that he would soon be thirty, walked home across Lausitzer Platz. He was feeling tired and wrung out after his stint at the *Einfall*, a bar in Wiener Strasse. Some lousy night that was, Herr Lehmann reflected as he entered Lausitzer Platz from the west. Working with Erwin is no fun, he thought. Erwin's an idiot - all bar owners are idiots, he thought as he passed the big church that dominated the whole square. I shouldn't have drunk all those shorts. Erwin or no Erwin, I shouldn't have drunk them, he told himself as his absent gaze became entangled in the wire mesh fence enclosing the playground. His legs were leaden with work and hard liquor, so he wasn't walking fast. Those shorts were a mistake. I ask you, tequila and Fernet Branca . . . I'll pay for it in the morning, he told himself. Work and booze don't mix - anything stronger than beer is a mistake, and someone like Erwin, of all people, shouldn't talk his staff into drinking shorts. He thinks he's being big-hearted, encouraging his staff to drink shorts, but he only does it as an excuse to get smashed himself. On the other hand, thought Herr Lehmann, it isn't fair to put the blame on Erwin. The truth is, nobody's ever to blame for drinking shorts but yours truly.

Human beings have a will of their own, he thought as he neared the other side of Lausitzer Platz. We can't fail to know what we're doing or not doing, and the fact that Erwin's an idiot and talks you into drinking shorts doesn't

mean he's to blame - far from it. At the same time, he thought contentedly of the bottle of Scotch he'd swiped and stowed away in the big inside pocket of his overcoat, which was really far too warm for September. Although he himself had no use for whisky, not having touched spirits on principle for ages, Erwin needed teaching a lesson now and then, and he could always make a present of the bottle to his best friend Karl.

And then he saw the dog. Herr Lehmann, as they called him nowadays, although the people that did so weren't much younger than himself (in fact some of them were even older, for instance Erwin and his best friend Karl), was no expert on dogs, but he couldn't, with the best will in the world, conceive that anyone had bred such an animal deliberately. It had a big head with huge, slobbery chops and two flabby ears that hung down on either side like a pair of wilted lettuce leaves. Its rump was fat and its back so broad you could have parked a bottle of whisky on it, but its legs, which were disproportionately thin, protruded from its body like snapped-off pencils. Herr Lehmann, who didn't think it overly amusing to be addressed as such, had never seen such a hideous animal. He shrank back and froze. He didn't trust dogs, and this one was growling at him.

No false moves, thought Herr Lehmann, who did not, on the other hand, see any point in getting worked up over a stupid nickname. Look it steadily in the eye, that intimidates the brutes, he thought, and he focused his gaze on the two black, blank holes in his adversary's skull. The dog, whose jowls were rhythmically rising and falling in time to its growls, returned his gaze. They were about three paces apart. The dog didn't move; nor did Herr Lehmann. Don't look away, he commanded himself. Don't show you're scared, just walk past, he thought, and edged aside. The dog growled even louder - a vicious, nerve-jangling sound. Don't show you're scared, the brute will sense your fear and take advantage of it, thought Herr Lehmann. Another little

sideways step. Don't take your eyes off him. Another little step, and another, and then straight ahead. But the dog edged sideways too, so they were face to face again.

It won't let me past, thought Herr Lehmann, who wasn't planning to celebrate his forthcoming birthday in style because of his conviction that it was just a birthday like any other, and he'd never liked celebrating his birthdays anyway. This is absurd, he thought. It shouldn't be happening – I haven't done it any harm, after all. He looked at the big yellow teeth and quailed at the notion of the dog's huge jaws sinking them in one of his legs, in his arm, in his throat – indeed, he even feared for his balls. Who knows what sort of dog it is? he reflected. Perhaps it's been trained for a specific purpose – perhaps it's a canine killer, a crotch-biter, or the kind that goes for the jugular. Then you'll bleed to death in the middle of Lausitzer Platz. There's no one around, the square's deserted. Who *would* be around so early on a Sunday morning? All the bars are shut – the *Einfall* is always the last to close apart from the *Abfall*, but that doesn't count. The only people around at this hour are demented Berliners with trained killer dogs – perverts who jerk off in the bushes while they watch their vicious dogs play lethal games with people.

'Who does this dog belong to?' he called across the deserted square. '*Who owns this fucking dog?*' There was no response. The dog merely growled even louder and cocked its head so its eyes took on a red glow. It's only the retinas, Herr Lehmann told himself reassuringly – the retinas, that's all – the brute turned its head, and now the light is falling on its eyes so the retinas reflect it in my direction, it's the retinas that are red, carotin, vitamin A, stuff like that – it's common knowledge they're good for the eyes. He had a dim recollection of this from his school-days. I always did well in biology, thought Herr Lehmann, but that was a long time ago, and biology won't do me much good now. I've got to get out of here, he thought, and he was filled with an



unprecedented longing for his home, the one-and-a-half-room flat in Eisenbahnstrasse where his books and his empty bed awaited him less than a hundred yards from the spot where his life was currently under threat from a dog he'd never seen before.

If it won't let me past, thought Herr Lehmann, whom everyone had regularly addressed as Frank until that childish trick of calling him Herr Lehmann caught on, I'll simply have to turn back. And he visualised the route he would have to take in order to give this rabid beast in Lausitzer Platz a wide berth: Waldemarstrasse, Pücklerstrasse, Wrangelstrasse, and then into Eisenbahnstrasse from the far side. Child's play. Retreating can sometimes make more sense than attacking, he thought; strategically speaking, a shrewd tactical withdrawal can result in victory. But he didn't dare turn round. Don't turn round whatever you do, he told himself – keep looking the beast in the eye. He took a few cautious little steps back, and the dog, still growling, advanced a few little steps. Don't rush things, thought Herr Lehmann, who had been looking forward to the footbath to which he'd lately been treating himself after work, although he doubted if he'd manage one in his present state. Just don't rush things, he told himself, and resisted the temptation simply to turn and run. That would be fatal, he thought; the dog can run faster than me – it would pounce on me from behind. I'd be defenceless, so that's out. He took a few more steps back, whereupon the dog, which was now augmenting its growls with an occasional bark, veered off sideways and slunk past him with its head down, with the result that Herr Lehmann, rather than lose sight of it, had to turn on the spot until they were confronting each other precisely the other way round. That's okay with me, thought Herr Lehmann; I wanted to go in that direction anyway. He took another few steps back, at which point the whole procedure repeated itself in reverse: the dog slunk past, Herr Lehmann

turned as it did so, and they wound up back where they'd started. I'd better try talking to the animal, he thought.

'Listen,' he began in a low and, he hoped, soothing voice. The dog sat down on its haunches. That's a good start, thought Herr Lehmann. 'I sympathise,' he said. 'You don't have an easy life either.' He rummaged in the pockets of his overcoat for something to give the animal. Sometimes bribery's the only answer, he thought. It doesn't have to be something to eat, maybe it simply wants to play - the owners of dogs like this always claim they only want to play - so maybe I've got something on me it can play with. But all he found was his bunch of keys and the bottle of Scotch, because he wasn't - he regretted this for the first time - one of those people who cram their pockets with all kinds of forgotten oddments and tote them around for years on end. The dog was growing a trifle restive, so he stopped rummaging. 'Just sit there nice and quietly,' he told it. 'I was only looking to see if I had something for you. I'm sure you'll get something sometime from your master, or maybe even your mistress - "master", "mistress", good God, what ludicrous expressions! Who on earth thinks them up?'

The dog didn't seem to care either way. It folded its spindly forelegs, and its obese body flopped down on the asphalt.

'That's right, lie down for a bit,' said Herr Lehmann, for whom lying down had been a favourite occupation in recent years. He went on talking without a break as he gradually edged aside. 'I'm the last person not to let a sleeping dog lie,' he burbled on. 'Sleep, boy, go to sleep, I know what it's like to be pooped, I know the feeling, I'm pooped myself, but you, you poor bastard, are a whole lot more pooped than me . . .' He continued to sidle crabwise by slow degrees. 'It tires a dog out, running around menacing people, heaven knows what possesses a dog to act that way, I'm almost a whole yard to the left of you, and now I'm going to take a tiny little step forward, and another, and another . . .' The

dog watched this for a while, then jumped up with a vigour and alacrity Herr Lehmann would never have thought possible in view of its spindly, feeble-looking legs, and growled and barked so belligerently that his fear turned to utter fury.

*'Fuck this!'* he yelled across the deserted square at the top of his voice. *'Someone take this blasted dog away! Someone take the godforsaken brute away, damn it all! And you, shut up!'* he bellowed at the dog, which actually fell silent.

Herr Lehmann calmed down. I must pull myself together, he told himself – I must keep my nerve. 'You see?' he said apologetically. 'You made me lose my temper.'

The dog sat down again. Herr Lehmann, whose work-weary feet were aching, felt as if his legs were filled with lead and every bone in his body had been smashed. He squatted down so as to take the weight off his legs, however briefly, but it didn't do much good – in fact it was even more uncomfortable in the long run. It doesn't matter now, he thought – I may as well sit down properly – so he subsided on to his bottom and came to rest in a kind of lotus position. If anyone sees me, it flashed through his mind, they're bound to think I'm a hopeless down-and-out. The asphalt beneath his buttocks felt cold, and he was shivering. This is the coldest time of day, he reflected, and adjusted his position so that he was sitting on the skirt of his overcoat. It's cold as charity at this hour, he thought, even though it's still so warm during the day. How light it is already – it must be nearly morning. It occurred to him only now how many birds were visible everywhere. They sat perched in the trees, in the bushes, on the tall fence around Bolzplatz, and on the nearby semicircle of benches regularly occupied during the day by a few alkies or old folk or both. The birds weren't flying around, Herr Lehmann was surprised to note; they were simply sitting there making a din – and what a din, he thought. There's a lot of wildlife in this city, he

reflected as he saw two dark shapes – rabbits, probably – flit across the expanse of grass near the church.

‘Why don’t *you* chase rabbits?’ he asked the dog, which had stretched right out on the asphalt with its head between its forepaws. He remembered the bottle of Scotch he’d acquired by rather reprehensible means. Extracting it from his overcoat, he unscrewed the cap and took a hefty swig to ward off the cold.

‘That doesn’t matter either,’ he told the dog. ‘You’re probably too dumb or too slow to catch rabbits, with those funny legs of yours.’

The whisky tasted as foul to him as spirits in general – Herr Lehmann drew no subtle distinctions in that respect – but it did generate some internal warmth and dispelled the headache that was already giving him a foretaste of the hangover to come.

More and more often of late, Herr Lehmann had caught himself looking back on his childhood with a touch of melancholy, and without inwardly resisting the impulse as he used to in the past. ‘Yes,’ he told the dog, ‘you look a bit like those animals I used to make out of conkers as a boy, the ones with matches stuck in them for legs and so on. If I simply ran off, who knows if you’d manage to catch me, with those legs of yours?’

He took another swig. The dog did nothing. ‘Not that I’m a very fast mover myself,’ he added, just for something to say. ‘What’s your name, I wonder?’

He put the bottle down beside him, drew up his knees, and clasped them to his chest. The dog blinked at him placidly.

‘Maybe we ought to find out what your name is,’ said Herr Lehmann, who thought this a good idea. All I have to do, he thought, is find out what he’s called, then he’ll simmer down. He’s familiar with his name – he’s got a collar, after all, so he must have an owner and a name. All I have to do

is say his name and he'll feel at home – feel I'm in authority. 'Bello?' he hazarded. 'Hasso?' No reaction.

Then he heard footsteps behind him. He turned to see a woman approaching, a fat, voluminously attired woman wearing a headscarf. Ah, he thought, perhaps she could take over from me. But although he knew he must look rather bizarre, sitting on the ground with a bottle of whisky beside him, he didn't get up. He was far too tired, and besides, he didn't want to provoke the dog. Craning his neck, he peered at the woman, who – doubtless because she'd caught sight of him and the dog – quickened her step and steered well clear of him.

'Excuse me,' he began, when she drew level, but she didn't look at him as he spoke, just stared straight ahead and put on more speed. The dog averted its gaze with an impassive air. 'No, wait,' Herr Lehmann called desperately, 'I've got a problem here. The thing is . . .' Fat as she was, the woman broke into a run and disappeared before he could finish his sentence. The dog growled contentedly.

'Stupid cow,' said Herr Lehmann, and readdressed himself to the dog. 'Wolfi?' That name proved just as unproductive. 'Putzi? Rudi? Fifi – no, you don't look like a Fifi. Hulk? Rambo? How do those dogs' names go, damn it? Schnappi?' A long-dead great-aunt of his had owned a dog by the name of Schnappi, a long-haired miniature dachshund that had ended up beneath the wheels of a delivery van. Still a child at the time, he'd loathed it from the bottom of his heart. 'Hansi? Boxi? Lassie?' The dog showed no interest.

Herr Lehmann was tiring of this game. It's all balls, he thought – I'm drunk, after all. He took another swig of Scotch and shuddered.

'There's something I should tell you,' he said. 'I always hated dogs, even as a boy, and that's a long time ago. Dogs don't belong in towns – I've always been scared of them. Hey! Hello there, police!' he called feebly as he saw a patrol

car cruising the square. He raised a hand and waved, but no one noticed. The car drove on.

‘Think yourself lucky,’ he told the dog sternly. ‘They’d have shot you in double-quick time. You still think you’ve got the edge on me, but you can forget it. Strategically, you’re at a disadvantage. Humans are superior to animals. If you were a wolf and I was some country bumpkin plodding through the forest, you might have a chance, but this is the city. People will come and rescue me, and they’ll lock you up. Besides, unlike animals, humans are capable of using tools. Tools, you brute, so put that in your pipe! That’s the crucial difference between us, tools – that’s how it all began. Take this bottle, for instance!’ He raised the bottle, and the dog growled. ‘I could hit you over the head with it, then you’d look stupid! This is twelve-year-old whisky – Scotch whisky. Costs forty marks or more, and Erwin charges six marks a shot, imagine!’ Drinking shorts always makes one talk too much, thought Herr Lehmann, and talking crap to dogs takes the cake.

Just for something to do, he poured himself a screwcapful of Scotch and was putting it to his lips when he noticed the animal’s air of interest. Experimentally, he waved the screwcap to and fro. The dog followed it with its eyes, panting excitedly with its jaws open and its tongue lolling out.

‘Aha!’ said Herr Lehmann. ‘I get it. Okay, watch this!’

Leaning forward, he tossed the screwcap so that it landed between the dog’s forepaws and formed a tiny puddle of whisky there. The dog sniffed it, adjusted the position of its malformed body, and proceeded to lap it up.

‘Here, have some more,’ said Herr Lehmann, and he flooded the asphalt, which, as luck would have it, sloped in the dog’s direction. ‘Looks like you’re used to it,’ he said, when he saw how avidly the dog was lapping up the rivulet of spirits flowing towards it. ‘You probably belong to some alky,’ he said, and took another big swallow himself. ‘Fair’s

fair,' he added. The dog glanced at him briefly, glassy-eyed, and went on lapping.

'It'll knock you out in no time, that stuff, take it from me. Boo!' Herr Lehmann brandished the bottle at the dog, but it didn't react, just lapped away until there was nothing left, then endeavoured to get to its feet.

'Not so easy now, huh?' Herr Lehmann took a final swig, squirted some of it over the dog just for kicks, and then got back on his own unsteady legs. The dog made a feeble attempt to bare its teeth when he very gently tickled it under the chin with the toe of his shoe. The gurgle it emitted was doubtless meant to be a growl.

'Out of my way, you brute!' Herr Lehmann cried imperiously, and thrust the animal aside with his foot as best he could. It snapped at the foot but missed. He pushed it over.

'Come on, then! Go for me if that's what you want, you lump of lard!' The dog struggled to its feet, turned sideways on, and leant against his legs.

'Get off me!' said Herr Lehmann. Now that the hideous creature was so trustfully nestling against him for support, however, he felt a trifle sorry for it. He stepped back a little, and the dog slid slowly down his legs until its ponderous bulk was lying on his feet. He lost his balance, flailed the air with his arms, and fell to the ground athwart the dog's body. It was all he could do to avoid smashing the bottle.

'What's going on here?'

Herr Lehmann looked up and saw two policemen looming over him. He hadn't heard them coming.

'I had to keep this dog at bay,' he said. 'There's never one around when you need one. One of your lot, I mean, not a dog. Problem's solved. Everything's under control, gentlemen, honestly.'

'He's drunk as a skunk,' said one of the policemen, who was about Herr Lehmann's age.

'Come on, get up,' said the other, who was a bit older.

‘Easier said than done,’ said Herr Lehmann. ‘It’s this confounded dog, see for yourself.’ Laboriously, hampered by the dog squirming beneath him and the bottle still in his hand, he propped himself on his knees and elbows. The younger policeman relieved him of the bottle and hauled him to his feet – unnecessarily roughly, it seemed to Herr Lehmann.

‘Is this your dog?’ the other man demanded sternly.

‘No, goddammit!’ Herr Lehmann stood facing them, swaying a little. He tried to grab the bottle, but they wouldn’t let him have it. ‘It menaced me, the brute. Wouldn’t let me go home.’

The policemen looked at the dog, which now made a far from menacing impression. It simply lay there panting, staring into space with its tongue hanging out. The younger man squatted down and stroked its head. The dog tried to stand up, but it was past doing so.

‘It’s pissed,’ said the crouching policeman.

‘That’s cruelty to animals,’ said his colleague. ‘Cruelty to animals is a criminal offence. You could be charged.’

‘With cruelty to animals.’

They’re repeating themselves, thought Herr Lehmann. People always do that – they keep saying the same things over and over.

‘You’ve been pouring booze down its throat, the poor thing. That’s cruelty to animals, that is. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. A poor, defenceless creature like this!’

‘Defenceless? Pah!’ Herr Lehmann said indignantly. ‘It was *self*-defence, I had no choice.’ He was far too tired to go into details. ‘Self-defence, it was. No choice, period,’ he said. ‘Quite straightforward, case closed.’

The policemen didn’t believe him. They asked to see his ID and made a note of his particulars.

‘Right, Herr Lehmann,’ said the older of the two as he returned his papers. ‘You’ll be hearing from us. And now, get off home. We’ll take the dog with us. You’ll never see it



again. Cruelty to animals, this is. I'm a dog owner myself. A disgrace, that's what it is.'

'Hopefully,' said Herr Lehmann.

'Hopefully what?'

'Hopefully I'll never see it again.'

'Push off quick, before I forget myself!'

Herr Lehmann departed with weary tread. At the mouth of Eisenbahnstrasse he looked back and saw the two patrolmen lugging the corpulent animal over to their vehicle.

'Poor creature,' he heard one of them say. Just then the dog awoke from its torpor and bit him. Herr Lehmann walked on quickly. He refrained from laughing until he rounded the corner.

## 2 MOTHER

‘FRANK, IS THAT you? You sound so odd. It went on ringing for such a long time before you picked up, I thought you weren’t there at all. I was just about to hang up.’

Herr Lehmann loved his parents. He was grateful to them for many reasons, one of them being the fact that they lived a long way from West Berlin, in Bremen, which was two national frontiers and several hundred kilometres away. Another of the reasons why he cherished them so much was that it would never for a moment have occurred to them to address him as Herr Lehmann. The only problem was, they liked to get up early and call him at the crack of dawn.

‘Mother!’ said Herr Lehmann.

‘I was just about to hang up.’

Why didn’t you? he thought. I myself, thought Herr Lehmann, who thoroughly prided himself on his consideration for other people, would have done just that. To be more precise, I wouldn’t have let the phone ring thirty times. Here we go again, he thought. Five times is okay, especially as most people own answering machines which cut in – for a very good reason – after four or five rings. He regretted that he still hadn’t acquired such a gadget, but he shrank from the prospect of traipsing out to some suburban warehouse to pick one up cheap.

‘Frank, are you still there?’

Herr Lehmann sighed.

‘But mother,’ he said, ‘mother, it’s only . . .’ It was long since Herr Lehmann had needed a clock that worked, because he’d developed an excellent sense of time and could always, at a pinch, fall back on the speaking clock. He

debated for a moment. 'It can't be ten o'clock yet, and you know I work nights!'

'It's a quarter past ten. Nobody's still asleep at that hour – I'm surprised you were still asleep. I've been up since seven.'

Her tone was so triumphant that Herr Lehmann, who considered himself a thoroughly equable person whose temperament had settled over the years like the sediment in some fine old vintage burgundy, felt sufficiently provoked to deliver a sharp riposte.

'Why?' he demanded.

'I was just about to hang up, but then I thought, no, he can't have gone out already, seeing as how he always works so late.'

'Exactly, mother, exactly,' said Herr Lehmann, firmly resolved not to let her get away with what was, in his experience, a typically maternal attempt to sidestep. 'But that wasn't the question, mother.'

'Question? What question?' she retorted irritably.

'*Why*, mother? That's what I asked you. *Why* have you been up since seven?'

'What nonsense! I always get up then.'

'Yes, but why?' Herr Lehmann persisted.

'What do you mean, why?'

'Mother!' Herr Lehmann had gained the upper hand. She's listening to me, he thought happily. She's reacting instead of acting – she's on the defensive now. Don't let her off the hook, follow up your advantage, bring the subject to a satisfactory conclusion, settle it once and for all, get things straight, et cetera . . . Unfortunately, he'd rather lost the thread.

'What do I mean?' he asked, annoyed with himself. 'Why? That's obvious . . . I mean . . . Surely I can ask why, it's a perfectly reasonable question . . .'

'You're talking rubbish, Frank,' she said sternly. 'And speak a bit more clearly, I can hardly understand you.'

‘Come off it!’ snapped Herr Lehmann, who was now feeling decidedly ill-tempered and totally aware of his wretched situation. It’s humiliating, he thought, for someone who’s nearly thirty years old – someone who’s had only three and a half hours’ sleep preceded by a brush with a canine killer and two dumb policemen, someone with a throbbing head and a dry mouth – to be insulted by a member of his family, let alone by his own mother, the one person in the world who’s supposed to be wholly in sympathy with every act committed by the fruit of her womb. Celebrated examples flashed through his mind: mothers of serial killers who declared that they loved their sons above all else and blamed themselves for everything – who rose at dawn every morning and went to the prison to bring their depraved offspring home-cooked meals and/or supplies of heroin. That brought him back to the point at issue.

‘Now listen, mother,’ he said, resuming his counterattack. ‘My question was this: Why—’

‘You’re very indistinct. Have you got something in your mouth?’

‘Yes,’ Herr Lehmann said spitefully, ‘*a tongue!*’ If you want plain speaking, mother, he thought, you can have it. ‘*Is that better?*’

‘No need to shout, I’m not deaf. All I ask is that you speak a little more clearly or at least refrain from eating while we’re talking. It really isn’t good manners.’

‘Don’t change the subject, mother.’ Herr Lehmann spoke with exaggerated clarity, which wasn’t easy in view of his dehydrated condition. Dehydration is a major cause of hangovers, he told himself, but so is lack of electrolytes. ‘Why do you get up at seven, that was the question. You’re a housewife, and besides, today is Sunday. You don’t have anything to do all day, or at least, nothing you couldn’t do later than seven o’clock, so why, if I may make so bold – why, in the name of all that’s holy – do you get up at seven

purely in order to terrorise me with a phone call whose main purpose is to inform me that you've been awake for three hours? Why, mother, why?'

'Well . . .' The voice on the line sounded rather nettled and very far from defeated. 'Why not?'

That, thought Herr Lehmann, is remarkable. She's tough, you've got to hand it to her. It must be one of the traits I inherited from her, thought Herr Lehmann, who had always felt that tenacity – instilled by long experience of life without a regular income – was one of his most salient characteristics.

'Why not? *Why not?* Because it's not good manners.' Herr Lehmann went for broke. He noticed with relief that his wonted eloquence was returning, courtesy of adrenalin and self-discipline. 'If you yourself say it's bad manners to speak with one's mouth full, mother, even when a person hasn't asked to be called but has been wrested from his slumbers by the phone ringing umpteen times and robbed of his well-deserved sleep – a sleep earned by the sweat of his brow, I might add – if you call *that* bad manners, how in God's name can you assume that it's acceptable to wake someone who slaves the whole goddamned night for a hard-earned crust, if I may put it that way? How can you think it's good manners to let the phone ring umpteen times, when it must be obvious that the person is either out or fast asleep? Not to mention the fact that, if you simply say "Why not?" when asked why you get up at seven, the same thing naturally applies in reverse. If you're surprised that I should still be asleep at ten and ask me why, I myself could just as easily answer "Why not?" – *if* that's an answer at all, and not a wholly impermissible way of dodging the issue!'

There, thought Herr Lehmann, it had to be said sometime. On the other hand, now that he had woken up a bit and been able to let off steam at some considerable length, he felt rather sorry to have given his mother such a dressing-down. He wasn't sure if it had really been necessary. It really

wasn't right to speak to one's mother like that, he thought. After all, he loved his mother. He owed her the gift of life, that was undeniable, and it certainly wasn't her fault for not being too bright. She's just an ordinary woman, thought Herr Lehmann, although the expression 'ordinary woman' had an unpleasant ring. It's not a good expression, 'ordinary woman', he thought – it smacks of middle-class snobbery.

'Ernst, won't you speak to him? He sounds so odd.'

'What is it now, mother?'

A defensive murmur issued from the depths of his parents' distant living room.

'I'm the one that always has to call him,' Herr Lehmann heard his mother saying, 'but it was *your* idea . . .'

'What now, mother? What's wrong? Would you sooner have a quiet word with the old man and call me back later?' Herr Lehmann played another trump card. 'Think of your phone bill.'

But his mother wasn't listening. Herr Lehmann, who was only wearing his underpants, having always gone to bed in his underpants ever since a former girlfriend had told him it was unhygienic to sleep in the buff, and that constantly boiling his dirty sheets – a chore he'd never asked her to perform – was environmentally polluting in the extreme, now made the most of the time his mother was engaged in fighting a battle that had probably been in progress for thirty years. Straining both telephone cables to their fullest extent, the straight but forever entangled one and the one that was spiral by nature, he made his way into the kitchen, where he drank several glasses of tap water and put a kettle on for coffee.

'Hello? Hello?' he called into the mouthpiece while lighting the gas stove with difficulty. 'I'm still here,' he added as he deposited two spoonfuls of coffee in a mug, although he was actually enjoying this breather in spite of the awkward angle at which he was compelled to hold his head in order to remain on the ball.

'You always say we should call him, but I always have to do it.'

Murmur, murmur. '... didn't.'

'That's the limit! Who was it that ...'

'How can I help it if ...'

'I never said ... I only said someone should let him know . . .'

'What do you mean, someone? Who's going to tell him, if not me?'

'Tell me what?' Herr Lehmann interjected into the ether. He couldn't stand coffee machines. He believed, in any case, that filters were one of the greatest mistakes in the history of coffee-making, and that coffee with boiling water poured straight on to it was far healthier, if only because the suspended particles retained by a filter helped to spread the effect of the caffeine over a longer period, thereby precluding any form of adverse effect on the circulation. He poured himself a mug of what he now, since the demise of his old coffee machine, euphemistically referred to as 'cowboy coffee'.

'*Tell me what?*' he yelled into the mouthpiece, less in anger than in a straightforward desire to cut this nonsense short. '*Hello, hello mother, hello mother, hello mother, hello mother . . .*'

At that moment someone hammered on the wall. Although he had long ceased to care what the neighbours thought of him because he regarded them all as antisocial idiots, especially when they indulged their predilection for flash-frying and smoked out the stairwell, and sometimes even his apartment, with cheap fat, Herr Lehmann was nonetheless annoyed by this. It's that stupid bitch with the dreadlocks, he thought, conscious of the misunderstandings that might arise if that woman, of all people, overheard him calling loudly and incessantly for his mother.

'What do you want, Frank?' demanded the selfsame mother.

'You called *me*, mother, or had you forgotten? I've been standing around here, listening to you quarrelling.'

'We aren't quarrelling, what makes you think we're quarrelling, a quarrel is something quite—'

'Think of your phone bill,' Herr Lehmann warned a second time. 'And now, please tell me what you want. Please, mother,' he demeaned himself by adding, 'what was it you wanted?'

'Well, can't a mother call her son occasionally for no special—'

'Yes, mother,' he broke in soothingly, 'yes, of course.'

'I really don't have to explain my reasons for calling my own—'

'No, mother, it's all right,' said Herr Lehmann, at pains to defuse a situation which could, he knew, escalate to an infinite extent. Anything was possible, even tears.

'We're coming to Berlin!'

Herr Lehmann wasn't prepared for that. It was a hard blow – so hard that it reduced him to silence. They're coming to Berlin, they're coming to Berlin, he told himself, quite unable to conceive of such an eventuality.

'Frank? Are you still there?'

'Yes, mother. Why are you coming to Berlin?'

'But Frank, we've always wanted to.'

'That's news to me, mother,' Herr Lehmann said testily. 'I've never, in all the years I've been living here, detected any sign of your wanting to come to Berlin.'

'But of course, we've often talked about it.'

'No, mother,' said Herr Lehmann, 'you never did. What you always said was, you *didn't* want to come to Berlin because you felt uneasy about the GDR and travelling through the Eastern Bloc, et cetera, and you didn't want to be humiliated by the frontier guards and all that crap.'

'But Frank, honestly, things aren't anywhere near as bad these days. Don't make such a fuss.'

'Me, make a fuss? What do you mean, don't make a fuss?'