

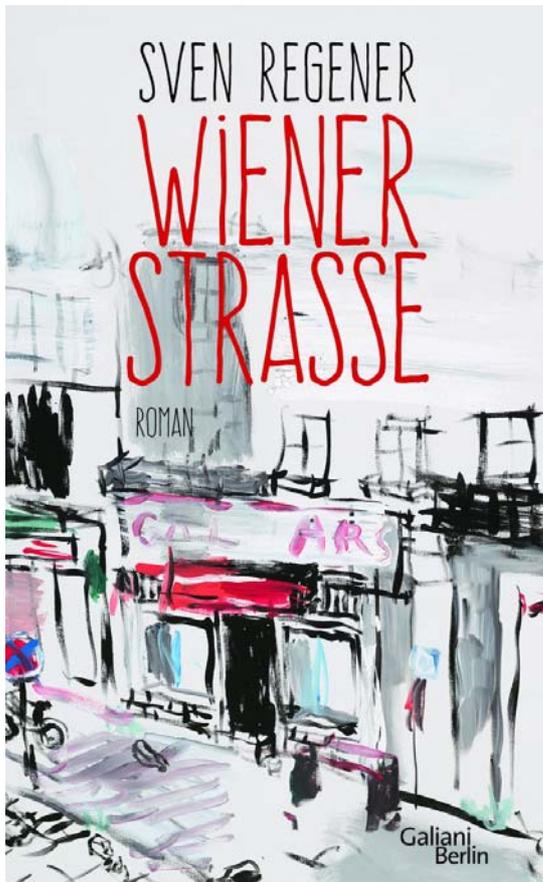
Sample Translation (pp. 7-27)

# **WIENER STRASSE**

by **Sven Regener**

Translated by Katy Derbyshire

© 2017, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG



Verlag Galiani Berlin  
Publication: September 2017 (Hardcover)  
304 pages  
ISBN: 978-3-86971-136-2

Foreign rights with: Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch GmbH & Co. KG  
Iris Brandt [ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de](mailto:ibrandt@kiwi-verlag.de)  
Aleksandra Erakovic [aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de](mailto:aerakovic@kiwi-verlag.de)

The door fell shut and it was pitch dark. Erwin put down the toolbox he'd brought along for the losers, because that's what they were, losers, and thought again, how on earth did I get into this, he'd been asking himself that rhetorically all day, usually in his mind and sometimes out loud, but neither Karl Schmidt nor Frank Lehmann, who was clearly Karl Schmidt's new best buddy, nor H.R. and certainly not his daft niece Chrissie, had felt remotely responsible for or otherwise capable of answering the question in any way; he tried to hope they were only holding back because of their guilty consciences but he didn't kid himself, they were just too dumb, they'd probably assumed he meant something else entirely, West Berlin itself or the borough of Kreuzberg or the gastronomy business or the brand new 1980s, the stupid bloody DIY store, or maybe the whole of stupid bloody Neukölln, because the DIY store was on the Neukölln side of the border along the middle of the Hasenheide road, while all along of course it had been their company he'd meant, the company of those losers they were and always would be, when he kept on exclaiming 'How on earth did I get into this?!' – most recently in the DIY store when they were at the till with two trolleys full of DIY crap and it turned out he was the only one with any money on him or at least euro-cheques, and he'd started all over again with his 'How on earth did I get into this?!' and not even then had they understood he meant them and their whole punk-freak-deadhead stupidity, but how were they supposed to understand something like that in the first place, the whole question was pointless really, there was no way of changing the fact that he'd got into it now and it was nothing new anyway, his whole life had gone that way, he'd always got into something or other and by the time he started asking himself that same rhetorical question it was always way too late, like on this occasion, now that Erwin had sorted out a rent contract for the losers, a rent contract in his name because no one would ever have given the losers a rent contract for a flat, and so he was in on it, and so one thing led to another when all he'd wanted was to move into the loft with Helga, who was pregnant – another thing where he sometimes wondered how it had happened – just the two of them in peace and quiet or the three of them later, the baby would be coming, there was no way to do anything about that now, anyway move in together, and he wasn't sure of course if that bore any relation to peace and quiet, anyway all he'd wanted was for the blockhead who'd lived there before and painted all the walls and all the light switches and pipes and

skirting boards and who knew what else black, matte black so that absolutely no light was reflected from anywhere to anywhere, for him to stop threatening to call the police about Erwin's bar or more precisely the noise level emanating from it and move out instead so that somehow at last there'd be peace in his life, at least on that front, and the idea had turned out to be expensive but good, a classic case of two birds with one stone because he could get rid of the losers who were still all living at his place, which was only partly his own fault, in the case of H. R. and Karl Schmidt, he had to put that down to himself and his bloody tightfistedness, something he suffered from but couldn't do anything about, whereas he asked himself justifiably when it came to the other two, Chrissie and Frank Lehmann, Freddie's little brother, why they were suddenly also – never mind, the idea had been a good one because he could evacuate the losers straight into the new flat and get rid of them without major drama, that was how he'd planned it, and then maybe a bit of peace and quiet, but up to now the opposite had been the case, it wasn't enough that he'd got them a flat, oh no, they needed his toolbox and his car as well to buy all the DIY crap to do the place up and transport it, wallpaper, wallpaper table, wallpaper paste, buckets, sponges, wire brushes, varnish, paintbrushes, rollers and of course buckets and buckets of white paint, and then they needed his money on top of that to pay for it all and then they needed his body to help them lug it up the stairs and now it was pitch dark, now the door was shut and there was nothing to see, and that seemed to him – Erwin Kächele, the successful Kreuzberg gastronome, as he sometimes called himself in jest – to symbolize better than anything else how things looked for him and inside him.

'Turn the light on, dude,' he called out into the dark.

'I can't find any light switches,' said Karl Schmidt, and Erwin heard him patting at the wall with the palm of his hand.

'Then look for them, dude!'

'I just told you, I can't find any. Get the flashlight out of your toolbox!'

'What makes you think I've got a flashlight in there?'

'I know your toolbox inside out!'

'Yeah, because you're always taking things out and not putting them back in again.'

'The flashlight's still in there though!'

Erwin sighed and rummaged carefully through his toolbox until he felt a flashlight. He switched it on but the walls all around him barely cast anything of its light back.

‘It’s useless, the walls are black so it’s useless,’ he said.

‘And the light switches too?’

‘Of course they are. This isn’t my kind of place!’ Erwin felt panic rising; he was suddenly scared to move a muscle. ‘It’s totally creepy, open the door!’

‘Where is it?’

‘It was just there, you just shut it, you dummy!’

Erwin was afraid of the dark, always had been, and this wasn’t just any old dark, it was the diabolical dark of an empty flat previously occupied by a psychopathic Satanist and small-time blackmailer. He aimed the flashlight in the direction where he suspected Karl and lo and behold, his chubby self-satisfied face shone out of the darkness like a full moon high in the firmament. That calmed him slightly.

‘I didn’t shut it, it must have shut itself,’ said Karl. ‘Stop dazzling me like that.’

‘You’re the only thing I can shine the flashlight at,’ said Erwin, keeping the beam on Karl, who screwed up his eyes and shielded them with his hands. ‘Everything else swallows up the light!’

‘What kind of stupid reason is that to half-blind someone?!’

‘It’s good enough for me, dude, I haven’t got a problem with that reason!’

Someone knocked at the door. Erwin hoped it was Frank Lehmann and Chrissie and not the neighbour with the mile-a-minute mouth, whose name, as Erwin recalled, was Marko, ‘with a k because I’m from the East!’ – whatever that was supposed to mean – that guy was all he needed right now.

At least the knock at the door reminded him of where the door was, and he shone the light toward it. A neon-painted door handle shone back.

‘There!’ Erwin yelled encouragingly. ‘There’s the door handle. Open up, that’s the door out of here.’

‘What does that handle look like, totally radioactive?!’

‘Just open it!’

‘I dunno... it looks kinda... contaminated.’

‘If the door handle’s radioactive it won’t be the only contaminated thing in here, you great big lump. Open it up!’

‘You open it, you stupid old...’ said Karl and fell silent.

The radioactive door handle was moving.

\*

H.R. was standing by the garden forks in the DIY store. He picked one of them out. It looked dangerous, the wooden shaft thick and heavy, the four-pronged fork itself varnished green but for the steel-coloured points, which he tested for sharpness. He was certain a fork like this would come in handy one day and he wondered whether it made more sense to buy it right now, seeing as they were in the car, or to come back later when he knew what he wanted to use it for, and just as he was thinking about what it might be that made a person yearn for a garden fork like this one – that was how he formulated it in his mind, he did that sometimes, chewing over stilted phrases thoroughly in his mind because it kind of turned him on or at least inspired him – so just as he was holding the fork in the DIY store, lost in thought, feeling its prongs and enjoying the phrase, a voice came from behind him:

‘C’n I ‘elp you or d’you just wanna cop a good feel of ev’ryfink?’

H.R. spun on his heels and saw a DIY store assistant in red-and-white checked dungarees, which reminded H.R. of Red Riding Hood’s cake-and-wine basket, which he always imagined to be covered in exactly that cloth, the exact same red-and-white checks as the dungarees serving as uniform for the Everything-Fresh Berliners who earned their daily bread in this DIY store, or in fact earned their daily *Schrippen*, because the Everything-Fresh Berliners – as he’d called them since the ‘Everything Fresh!’ stickers produced by the Berlin meat trade and handed out for free at butcher’s counters all over town had found their way onto the back of West Berlin’s cars, a process of collective

insanity comparable only with the sudden and unstoppable triumph of the additional brake lights mounted behind the rear windows, which had recently begun transforming Berlin's nights into an orgy of sparkling red light displays – the Everything-Fresh Berliners, he assessed mentally at that moment, would never use any other term for bread rolls but the local one.

'I need a chainsaw,' he said.

'Tha's not a chainsaw, tha's a garden fork, mate!'

'Just because I want a chainsaw doesn't mean I'm not allowed to hold a garden fork, there's absolutely no correlation, my good sir!' said H.R., who had vowed to himself on entering the DIY store not to let the Everything-Fresh Berliners provoke him, something which had been happening too often recently, but was not to be right here and now; it was all difficult enough already, H. R. thought, moving house and all the attendant hassle, the whole thing with Klaus, he was in a constant state of alarm and barely had time to sort things through.

'Chainsaws are two aisles along,' said the DIY store man, switching uncertainly to perfectly normal German. 'There are the chainsaws, two aisles along.'

'Very good, and if you could be so kind as to bring one over for me,' said H.R., not interrupting his manual probing of the garden fork prongs. He knew perfectly well that he mustn't let things slide now, most of all he mustn't go over to the chainsaws now before he was done with the garden forks, garden forks, garden forks, that phrase got better and better the longer he shunted it to and fro in his mind, I've got a garden fork for you here, it'll garden fork you, Gabi, he thought, it would turn into a poem if only he could remember it. That was his principle in life: ideas you forgot, ideas you'd have to write down weren't worth the bother.

The man in the red-and-white checked dungarees inserted both his thumbs behind the straps of those very dungarees and pushed them forwards before saying, 'Wha's all vis? M'I 'earin' fings? Am I your fairy godmother or something?'

'Or somefink!' said H. R.

'What or somefink?'

'Either talk like a Berliner or don't talk like a Berliner, but don't mix the two of them up all the time,' said H.R. 'Either "Wha's all vis" and "M'I 'earin' fings" and then "M'I" and "or somefink" or not at all! Otherwise it drives me round the bend!'

'Wha's all vis, wha's all vis? M'I your slave? M'I s'posed to fetch 'n' carry yer chainsaws or somefink?'

H.R. raised the fork and pointed it at the man. 'I THOUGHT YOU WANTED TO HELP!! THAT'S WHAT YOU SAID: C'N I 'ELP! THAT'S WHAT YOU SAID: C'N I 'ELP! EXACTLY LIKE THAT: C'N I 'ELP! OR DIDN'T YOU?!' came erupting out of him.

'Yes, I did, but...'

'I THOUGHT YOU WANTED TO HELP!!'

'Now wait a minute...'

H.R. tightened his grip on the garden fork slightly, held it slightly higher and pushed it slightly further forward. 'THE ONE TIME I HAVE A REQUEST, AND WHAT HAPPENS? ABSOLUTELY NOTHING! LESS THAN ABSOLUTELY NOTHING! STUPID REMARKS AND THAT'S IT! I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF ALL THIS, I CAN'T TAKE IT ANY MORE, I DON'T WANT ANY OF THIS, I DON'T CARE ABOUT ANYTHING ANY MORE, I'M NOT PUTTING UP WITH THIS ANY MORE, YOU'LL SEE WHAT...'

'40, 53 or 62 cubic?'

'Cubic what?'

'Cubic centimetres. Cylinder capacity. For the chainsaw. I have to know that and then I'll bring you one: 40, 53 or 62?'

'Go ahead and bring all three,' said H.R., calming down. 'I'll choose one.'

\*

Erwin squeaked involuntarily as the door handle moved. He'd been doing this squeaking often recently. 'You sound like a puppy,' Helga would always say and it wasn't clear to Erwin whether she thought it was cute or pitiful; since she'd been pregnant Erwin had lost the ability to see through Helga, especially when the word baby came into play. The door opened and Frank Lehmann came in, clutching a wrench.

'Dude, can't you knock?'

'Erwin,' said Karl, 'pull yourself together! He *did* knock. Hello Frankie!'

'Frank,' said Frank Lehmann, and pressed a black-painted light switch next to the door without looking. A bare light bulb hanging by a wire from the hall ceiling lit up. 'Only ever a nice short Frank. Never Frankie.' He lugged two buckets of paint across the threshold. Chrissie pushed him in from behind, a roll of wallpaper over her shoulder.

'Phew,' she said, 'can someone take this off me?'

'Just put it down!' said Erwin.

Chrissie dropped the wallpaper and looked around. 'This is gonna be a lot of work.

Where's H.R.? He was with us a minute ago.'

'Was he even in the car?' asked Erwin.

'Why are you asking?' Karl said. 'You were there. You were driving, Erwin!'

Erwin lost his temper. 'Exactly, and I haven't got eyes in the back of my head, all I know is that Chrissie was sitting next to me and dropped the cigarette lighter, nice hole in the car seat, thanks for that, Chrissie, and that you all smoked in the car even though I told you Helga...'

'So where is H.R.?' Chrissie interrupted.

Erwin raised his hands. 'Don't ask *me*, Chrissie. Ask the others. Was he on the back seat?'

'I suppose not,' said Karl. 'Now you mention it... On the way there he was on the back seat but not on the way back.'

Frank Lehmann carried more stuff into the flat; he seemed to have piled up quite a lot of stuff in the stairwell, probably emptied the car already – all the better, thought Erwin, then I can just take the car keys off him and that's that.

'Hey, Frankie,' said Karl, 'H.R. wasn't in the back with us, was he?'

'Frank, please! We left him behind at the DIY store, I was a bit surprised when we just drove off without him.'

'Why didn't you say anything, dude?!'

'I'm new round here, I thought you'd arranged it like that.'

\*

H.R. decided to get the garden fork right away, seeing as it had already paid dividends; it was already tied to him, the two of them had experienced something together, so he couldn't possibly put it back. He tested its weight in his hand as the DIY store assistant came around the corner with a large cardboard box and put it down in front of him.

'Ere, boss, tha's the best one, I don' even needta bring the ovver ones ova, mate!' His Berlin accent was getting stronger again but now with an odd lilt, a gentler gait to it.

'Why not?'

'Whatcha wan' wivv vem little ones?! No use ta anyone. If ya gonna saw, saw big, tha's what I say, this one ere's got 63 cubic and 4.8 kW, it'll saw anything ya want.'

'Anyfink,' H.R. corrected him mildly. 'Anyfink! What do I have to watch out for?'

'Always keep the chain nice 'n' oiled. And issa two-stroker, ya gotta fill it wivv mix, 1:25, tha's the fing!'

'Can I buy that here?'

'Nah mate, we're not a filling station, mate.'

'I'll take it!'

'Nice choice. If ya gonna saw, saw big! Bit pricey, mind.'

'That doesn't matter!'

'Ah right, in vat case...' The DIY store assistant scratched his head. 'If ya gonna spend, spend big, mate!'

\*

There was one thing Erwin had to admit about Frank Lehmann: he was a hard worker. He lugged all the crap up to the flat on his own while Chrissie and Karl were still pointlessly debating the issue of where H.R. was likely to be and what he was likely to be doing and whether they ought to be glad he hadn't come with them or ought to be annoyed or even worried, they talked and talked and talked, but Frank Lehmann was cut from different, more hardworking cloth and he used his brain as well – the minute he was done he reached into his pocket, pulled out the car keys and held them out to Erwin, and that touched Erwin, he spotted talent when he saw it and he said, 'Thanks, dude,' which annoyed him right away, no need to exaggerate, he thought, no need to thank the guy for

my own car keys.

'No need to thank me, I should be thanking you,' said Frank Lehmann, and now Erwin started to find the guy spooky.

The even spookier thing was that Marko turned up behind him, the neighbour.

'And now?' asked Chrissie.

'What, now?'

'What do we do now?!'

'You can decide that for yourselves,' said Erwin. 'I'm just the guy you pay your rent to at the end of the month.'

'Knock knock,' said Marko the neighbour.

'I'll be off,' said Erwin. As he passed Marko he heard him take a deep breath and Erwin caught his first sentences from the corridor: 'Need any help? Oh boy, what a state! And you're living here now? All of you or what? Or not? It is all of you, right, I remember now, I live on my own, I do, used to share a place but...'

Karl Schmidt called out, 'Hold on Erwin, wait a minute!' and Erwin picked up his pace. On the run, he thought. On the run from my own life. Down on Wiener Strasse, he dashed into the jeweller's next to Café Einfall, where he hoped he could stand around inconspicuously until Karl Schmidt, probably only wanting to borrow more money from him, had disappeared into the café.

\*

There was no queue at Cash Desk 3 at the DIY store, so H.R. went there and the DIY store assistant came after him with the chainsaw, only the chainsaw cardboard box was too wide for the conveyor belt at the cash desk, so H.R.'s new friend stood with him and the two of them waited for the cashier to start work, but she had other things to do, her till was open and she was rolling coins in paper and then stowing the rolls in the compartment where the twenty-mark notes went. H.R. watched with some curiosity and wondered why she was doing it. The DIY store assistant got jittery.

'Frau Behrens,' he said in a voice both whining and begging at the same time, 'would you mind?'

'M workin', Herr Müller,' said the cashier. 'Ya c'n see vat much.'

'You're working at the cash desk, my good woman,' said H.R. 'That is of course an important and responsible activity. But is it really necessary to weigh down the twenty-mark notes with rolls of coins? What will you do when you happen to need one of the twenty-mark notes? You'll have to take all the coins out again or fiddle the note out from under them, and that's going to be tricky! Or have you got so many ten-mark notes that you've written off the twenty-mark notes for today?'

'Who's this character?' the cashier addressed the DIY store assistant, who was making some kind of strange hand signals.

'E's just a customer,' said the DIY store assistant. 'E just wants to buy something.'

'Right,' said the DIY store cashier. 'I c'n see vat much. But I'm busy 'ere, 'e'll 'ave to wait a bit.'

H.R. raised his garden fork and took a deep breath.

\*

Marko was unfazed by Erwin's and Karl's sudden departures. 'Flat sharing was crap after a while, you know,' he launched off again with aplomb, 'who does the washing up and all that, and it was always two against one, three people sharing is really shit, let me tell you...' – and as he was getting warmed up he set up the wallpaper table as routinely as a sleepwalker, as Frank Lehmann observed with great fascination, words spilling out of his mouth all the while – '...I mean, there's four of you and then you've got a girl and all, that's kinda like three of you with extra bonus points, I guess, I wouldn't go for that, it's bound to be really tricky, I wouldn't touch it with a bargepole, I wouldn't, I mean with...'

'I'm off, it's too creepy here,' Chrissie said, and promptly left. Now Frank was alone with the neighbour, who winked at him and called out to Chrissie's retreating back a quick 'Didn't mean it like that, sorry love!' before picking up where he'd left off, 'Where was I, oh right, anyway wouldn't touch it with a bargepole, or with a monkey wrench like you've got for opening the doors there. And the whole lot of you work downstairs in the bar, or what? No? You don't? And the girl doesn't either?'

Frank shook his head. Marko had hit upon a touchy subject. Frank didn't have much money left and he needed a job. And he'd really like one in the bar; he'd helped out

behind the counter just the other day because Karl had to take Klaus to hospital for a cut that H.R. had inflicted on Klaus by throwing a heavy ashtray. Frank had enjoyed working behind the bar but nothing had come of it.

‘No, there aren’t any jobs going there right now,’ he said.

Marko filled an empty bucket with water, opened a packet of wallpaper paste, scattered it in and looked around.

‘What shall I use to stir it, that pole there, you can clean it later when you want to use it for the roller, anyway I reckon I know how this all came up, tell me if I’m wrong, so the guy with the rent contract, that Kächele, I know him kind of, even if he doesn’t know me, anyway he owns the bar so it’s obvious you’re only gonna get stress from the people who live upstairs from a bar, I wouldn’t wanna swap for the stress you get, I’d just rent the place as well, rent it myself, but live here, no way, no one wants to actually live here, no need to go into it, you know as well as I do, do you want it all woodchip?’

Marko had already plonked a roll of woodchip wallpaper on the wallpaper table, fished the cutter accurately out of the pile of stuff and slit open the stickers holding the roll together. ‘Woodchip’s a good choice in this case, I reckon, that’ll cover the black up best, otherwise you can...’

\*

**‘IS THIS THE WAY CUSTOMERS ARE TREATED HERE? IS THIS THE SERVICE SOCIETY EVERYONE’S ALWAYS TALKING ABOUT??!!’**

H.R. held the garden fork at chest height and regretted only one thing: that he didn’t have the axe in the other hand that he’d been meaning to buy, they’d had a few lovely axes right next to the garden forks and he’d have liked to go back again but it was too late for that now, that would have messed up his whole performance.

**‘I CAN’T TAKE IT ANY MORE. I DON’T WANT TO DEAL WITH THIS ANY MORE!’** he yelled, shaking the garden fork.

The DIY store assistant intervened: ‘Just deal with this customer quickly’ he said to the cashier and winked at her with both eyes. ‘It’s better that way. I did the same.’

**‘AND DID IT DO YOU ANY HARM? YOU TELL ME: DID IT DO YOU ANY**

HARM?!'

'Nah, boss, everyfink's fresh!'

'Just like I'm saying. So I'll take this,' H.R. raised the garden fork and turned to the cashier, 'and this chainsaw over here!'

She was entirely unimpressed. 'Shall I call the p'lice?' she asked her colleague. 'It'll go real quick. They'll be 'ere in a jiffy!'

'No,' said the DIY store assistant, now desperate. 'Just ring up the man's bill. Just do it. He's only got two things!'

'I'm callin' the p'lice!'

'S'not worth it!' the DIY store assistant switched idioms. 'Leave it out. Whatcha wan' the p'lice for, how long ya think they'll take to get here, he's got a garden fork! A garden fork!'

'E's not got nuffink. Vat fork's ours. E's gotta pay for it, till ven it's ours.'

\*

It was slightly dim and very warm in the jeweller's; Erwin undid his jacket as he stepped inside. The idiots' flat, as he'd now started calling it in his mind, was as cold as cheese of course, all it had was coal stoves that no one had lit for years, but here at the jeweller's it was nice and warm, probably because of the old biddies who probably made up most of the trade, the place had something inescapably outmoded about it. When Erwin closed the door it jangled a second time in that delightful old-fashioned way; there was a bell affixed to the top that was hit by a metal arm when it opened and closed, Erwin liked that, it reminded him of his childhood. A tall, thin man with a tired face came to the front. He had a magnifying glass attached to his forehead by a headband, like a third eye.

'You probably just want to look around,' he said.

'Er...' said Erwin, not knowing what to reply.

'You just want to have a look, I assume.'

'Yes, er... – have a little look at the watches.'

'And you probably want something cheap.'

'Right, er, no...'

'And quartz of course, that's what everyone wants these days, don't they?'

'I haven't actually...'

'That's all the rage, it's always quartz, quartz, quartz...'

'No, I mean...'

'Mechanical and reliable and good isn't good enough these days, everything has to be electronic now!'

'That's...'

'Sure, we have them too, Seiko quartz watches, do you want to see them? That's what everyone's always talking about. We've got them too now. You can hardly repair them properly though!'

'I'll come back another time,' said Erwin and made like a banana.

\*

'I tell you what though, I'd love to work in that bar, much better than taxi driving, I reckon, anything's better than taxi driving...' Marko talked and talked but he worked as well, he'd already cut plenty of wallpaper strips – 'three metres forty, I remember that, was the same in my place, ceilings are the same height, easy to remember, that kind of thing!' – and now he was applying the paste – 'always get 'em nice and wet and then leave 'em for a bit, 'cause then they stretch out a bit and then you can stick them, always do two or three ahead and then...' – and so it went merrily on, with him veering back to his favourite topic of conversation, the bar and how he'd like to work there – '...anything, anything's better than taxi driving, and pubs, that's something I know about, you've seen as much, now you have to stick this down up here...' – Marko climbed onto the ladder with a folded, pasted length of wallpaper – 'I mean there's no point painting over it when it's black, all you can do is paper over it and then...'

\*

At the DIY store, a moment of reflection occurred. H.R. and the cashier looked each other in the eye in silence. In the end H.R. got bored and said, 'I don't like the direction this conversation is taking!'

'Neither do I,' said the DIY store assistant.

'Me neivver,' H.R. corrected him.

'I know, boss. Same 'ere!'

The cashier eyed the two of them and shook her head. 'Maybe you two sh'd get 'itched,' she said. 'Ya seem to be bosom buddies.'

'Fine by me, but first I'd like to pay for these items,' said H.R.

'Don'tchou freaten me.'

'I didn't threaten you. But if you don't ring up my bill now,' said H.R., vowing not to forget any of this – he could use everything that was happening and being said here, he could tell, it was all worth its weight in gold – 'then I'm afraid I'll have to insist on you calling the police, because then I'll have to press charges.'

'I see, I see,' said the cashier. 'Press charges fa wha'? Can' wait to 'ear vis!'

'You can learn a lot from your colleague here,' H.R. said to the DIY store assistant.

'Including in terms of language.' And to the DIY store cashier, he said: 'Obstruction in accordance with section 1 of the road traffic regulations, theft of my time and refusal to release a garden fork – it's all perfectly logical!' He smiled at the woman. He was having fun now.

\*

It was getting dark on Wiener Strasse, but above all it was wet and the autumn leaves the now bald trees had dropped on the pavements concealed treacherous dog shit. Erwin, intending to dash unobserved past Café Einfall to his car, stepped in a turd and almost slipped, just managing to hold himself up by a motorbike parked on the pavement outside Café Einfall that swayed so menacingly that he envisioned pictures of himself lying on his back underneath a tipped-up motorbike, his legs trapped and his arms windmilling, his head resting on the turd, and he screamed out in shock and there was Karl Schmidt outside Café Einfall calling out:

'Oh boy, Erwin, what are you up to?!'

'What does it look like, dude? I'm holding onto a motorbike so I don't land on a turd, you nerd.'

Karl was promptly joined by Chrissie. 'Uncle Erwin, shall I help you?' Then she was by his side, supporting him. 'Don't hold onto the motorbike – if it falls over it'll squash you,' she said.

‘What am I supposed to do then? Fall in the shit?’

‘It’d be a start,’ said Karl Schmidt. ‘Why should you have it any better than us, Erwin? Take a look in there!’ He gestured over his shoulder into the bar with one thumb. ‘It’s in a terrible state, it’s the pits. That Frauke woman was just here, the one who does the cleaning, she’s not doing it any more, she said, she’s had it up to here.’

Erwin didn’t care about anything now. He leaned on Chrissie, who was making like Florence Nightingale: ‘Come on, Uncle Erwin, let’s go inside and have a sit down.’

‘No way,’ said Karl. ‘You’re not coming in here with dog shit on your shoe, Erwin, honest, I don’t have to explain that to you.’

‘It’s my bar!’

‘But it’s my shift. It’s a bad enough mess in here as it is.’

‘I just have to go to the toilets, then I can brush it off.’

‘In your socks, though! That’ll be fun. The toilets are the worst!’

[END OF SAMPLE]