

# BERLIN BLUES

SVEN REGENER

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his **arms** for a **while** with one leg **draped** across him. All that now lit the room was the TV's flickering **glow**. Herr Lehmann was **already dozing** off when he suddenly noticed she was weep-  
**ing**.

'Hey, what's the matter?' he asked tenderly.

'You're a wonderful **person**, Frank,' she said between **two** sobs. 'Really you are. A **wonderful** lover too, **honestly**. But . . .' She **sniffed** and sat up.

'But what?'

'Somehow . . . I don't **know** why, but I feel it's bound to go **wrong**. I think you're expecting a bit too much, maybe.'

'I wasn't even expecting something to eat. Looked at **from** that angle—'

'Maybe we **should** try it, the **two** of us,' she said. 'But would it work?'

'Sure it **would**,' said Herr Lehmann. '**Why** wouldn't it?'

'Because you're so different. **And** because you don't save potatoes.'

'That doesn't matter' he said.

'**Yes**, it does!' she shouted, punching him. 'It does!'

'**Oh** shit,' he said, and woke up. A news broadcast on the TV was **featuring** **demonstrations** of some **kind**. Katrin lay on her back beside him, **snoring** gently.

**That's** all **right**, then, he thought, and **fell** asleep again.

## 10 THE KUDAMM

SOME WEEKS LATER, when Herr **Lehmann** got to Wittenbergplatz, where he **maintained** that the **Kurfürstendamm** began, **although** at **that** point it was still called **Tauenzienstrasse**, his **spirits** were at a low ebb. He was on the way to **see** his parents, who were waiting for him at **their** **Kudamm** hotel. It **didn't** matter too much that he was **rather** hung-over and had **slept** **very** little; that was a normal problem. No, what **mattered** was **that** he had been compelled to **leave** Katrin **asleep** in bed, and that had hit him **hard** because he **didn't** see her as often as he **would** have **wished** and was invited to spend the **night** **with** her less often still, and he'd have **liked** to spend the morning with her as well. 'Pity,' she'd said when he told her he had to go out early to **visit** his **parents** in the **K u h**. 'We **might** have been able to do **something** **together** in the morning,' she'd added, but not with any real regret. Herr **Lehmann**, who regretted it **very** much, had – not for the **first** time – pricked up his ears at **this**, and he **would** **gladly** have spent the trip **from** Görlitzer Bahnhof subway station to **Wittenbergplatz** subway station debating what on **earth** he could do to **transform** Katrin and **himself** into genuine lovers and not just **participants** in a casual **affair**, which **was** **what** they'd really been for some weeks. It **was** as if **nothing** at all had **happened** between **them**, which Herr **Lehmann**

found almost worse. After all, he'd briefly reflected in the subway train from Görlitzer Bahnhof to Wittenbergplatz, who likes to starve with a well-stocked refrigerator within reach? But he promptly discarded that metaphor. It's an unromantic way of looking it, he told himself, and was forced to concentrate once more on other matters.

Because everything was going wrong on other fronts as well. He hadn't had time to buy a subway ticket because the train was pulling in just as he got to Görlitzer Bahnhof, which meant that he'd been compelled to travel without one, and that he thoroughly disliked. He was always unlucky on such occasions and already had one minor conviction for evading payment, but he'd had to board the train at once, it being essential for him to get there on time, not because his parents would have minded his being late, as they naturally would have, but because he was always on time. He hated being late, he hated it even more than travelling illegally, and he hated it even more when other people were late, not that it really mattered to him. What mattered was to be punctual himself, and he always was. So he'd had to board the train at once, even though it was early – too early, strictly speaking, because he'd got to Görlitzer Bahnhof just before ten and his parents weren't expecting him until eleven. That gave him plenty of time to get to the Kudamm, even by way of Line No. 1, which in his opinion was a rotten line, unbearably slow and crowded with psychopaths and nutters who jostled him even more unpleasantly than usual today, of all days, when he not only had a hangover but was bound for the Kudamm, of all places. Travelling without a ticket made him nervous. He'd promised himself never, never again to be humiliated by those intolerably loquacious men in ill-fitting uniforms who periodically blocked the station exits or threaded their way through jam-packed subway trains travelling at a snail's pace, checking tickets,

and if he hadn't cherished an even greater loathing for Berlin's equally loquacious, tabloid-reading, topographically ignorant and inefficient cab drivers, he would happily have spared himself the tribulations of the subway system by taking a cab.

When he finally reached Wittenbergplatz and, thus, what he considered to be the mouth of the Kurfürstendamm, he got out and emerged as quickly as possible from the subterranean crush into the open air, be it only the air of Wittenbergplatz. This was where the horrors of the Kudamm began, and where you could already obtain a one-mark bus ticket that would take you along that thoroughfare. He crossed the street and joined the queue at the bus stop, which was, as usual, thronged with the kind of people who were always – for reasons that surpassed his comprehension – attracted to the Kudamm in droves on Saturdays.

A bus came along at once. It was pretty full, and he dreaded the prospect of travelling in such a crowded vehicle, but it never came to that because, just as he was about to get in, the driver waved him away with a peremptory gesture and shut the door. Looking at the nearest clock, Herr Lehmann saw that it was twenty past ten. There's still time, he thought, and settled down to wait for the next bus. He had to get to the Kudamm-Schlüterstrasse intersection. It's not that far, he told himself, at a pinch I could walk it, and he found that thought very comforting. He knew precisely where he had to go, fortunately, having checked the location of his parents' hotel with the aid of the Yellow Pages and a street map. He had also phoned the hotel for safety's sake, because one never knew, and the Kudamm was as long as it was unattractive. Then the next bus came along and he climbed aboard, but the driver refused to accept his twenty-mark note.

'You'll get nothing from me for that,' said the driver. I don't have to give change for twenty marks.'

'It's **perfectly** good money,' said Herr Lehmann. 'Twenty Bundesbank marks.'

'I don't have to give change for it.'

'Who says?'

'The public transport regulations. All right, either produce some small change or get **off**.'

'But the public transport regulations also state that, if you **can't** give me change, you must give me a receipt for the balance, which I can cash at the depot,' said Herr Lehmann, who had once **whiled** away a bout of acute boredom at Möckernbrücke subway station by reading the Berlin public transport regulations **from** beginning to end.

'I don't have time for that,' said the driver. 'It's small change or nothing.'

'You're **violating** your **own** public transport regulations,' said Herr Lehmann.

The bus driver turned off the engine and folded his arms. 'I've got time. If you don't get off at once I'll **call** the police.'

'But you just said you didn't have time. So what happens now?'

'Off, or I'll **call** the police.'

Complaints began to issue **from** the interior of the bus. 'Get rid of the **silly** bugger!' and 'We haven't got all day!'

This is pointless, thought Herr Lehmann, there's no defence against stupidity. Besides, it **occurred** to him just in time that his ban on using public transport was still in force, so it **wouldn't**, however **legally** impeccable his case, be wise to fight it to a **finish**.

'Shall I tell you what you are?' he called when he was outside.

'No,' said the driver. He shut the door and **drove** off.

'You're a monumental asshole!' Herr Lehmann shouted over the hiss of the pneumatic door, but it didn't achieve much.

He **might** have **known** it. Even now he wasn't in the Kudamm proper, just in Wittenbergplatz, and the **shit** had already **started** to **hit** the fan. He toyed with the idea of **changing** some money somewhere, or of **taking** the No. 3 subway train to Uhlandstrasse, but he promptly **dismissed** it. There was something terribly wrong with Berlin's public transport system. It was **five** minutes before half **past** ten. If I **walk** fast, he told **himself**, I can still get to the hotel in time. A good thing I was so **early**, he thought, and **set** off. He'd really been **hoping** to relax on the way to **see** his parents, if not **thereafter**. He'd pictured **himself** arriving at the hotel **too** **early**, taking in a coffee somewhere **nearby**, and then, on the **stroke** of **eleven**, **strolling** **casually** into the hotel's breakfast room, where his parents would be **eagerly** awaiting him, because he was just as **averse** to **being** **early** and **knew** when to slow down.

But he also knew when to put on **speed**, so he **hurried** **down** Tauenzienstrasse. It was **difficult**, if not **fundamentally** **impossible**, to proceed **any** **faster** than the rest of **humanity**, who **seemed** to have gathered in Tauenzienstrasse **en masse** for the **purpose** of **exasperating** him with their **sluggish** rate of **progress**. He **broke** out in a **sweat** and **swore** under his **breath** as he skipped to and fro between his fellow **mortals**, **evaded** obstructive **groups** of **strolling**, **rubbernecking**, **chattering** tourists who **always** **walked** seven **abreast** at least, **swerved** around old ladies in **fur** **coats**, and blundered into **huge**, **unpredictable** **gaggles** of youngsters who **abruptly** **halted** or **changed** **direction** just as he endeavoured to **overtake** them. There were a lot of **these** youngsters, and Herr Lehmann noticed despite his haste that most of them were wearing identical **tracksuits** **emblazoned** on the back with the words 'German Gymnastics Festival - Berlin 1989', a **circumstance** that **did** **nothing** to **improve** his mood. If their **gymnastics** are **any-** **thing** like the way they **walk**, he thought grimly, the **German**

Gymnastics Festival may as well shut up shop right now. They'll all fall off the asymmetric bars, they couldn't even play leapfrog, they're all on the pill, they're all on dope, but the wrong kind, thought Herr Lehmann. By the time he got to Breitscheidplatz, his nerves were in shreds.

I can't go on like this, he thought, I'll have to take a bus or there'll be mass murder. He found a kiosk, bought some cigarettes, and paused to smoke one. This not only provided him with some small change but enabled him, while smoking with far more aplomb than he'd displayed when he started four weeks ago at Katrin's place, to think of her in peace and of how good it was with her in spite of everything – or could be, at least. He had kissed her before leaving, and she'd given a contented little grunt in her sleep, which had heartened him. A coffee would go down well now, he thought, but he couldn't see any realistic possibility of getting one quickly. It was twenty-five to eleven when he stubbed out his cigarette and stationed himself at the bus stop in Breitscheidplatz. This time the boarding operation went smoothly and he got his Kudamm ticket.

'But it's only valid as far as Adenauerplatz,' the driver couldn't resist calling after him.

'Yes, yes,' Herr Lehmann said grumpily, refusing to be provoked although he felt like adding that it was a goddamned public rip-off because the Kudamm extended well beyond Adenauerplatz, so why was the damned thing called a Kudamm ticket or whatever? – but by this time he didn't care. The lower deck was chock-full, so he went upstairs, where he had to walk along at a crouch in search of a non-existent empty seat, and where he also felt sick because the bus had moved off and was lurching around. Aware that standing on the upper deck was prohibited, Herr Lehmann made his way to the stairs at the rear, but other passengers were already occupying them, so he was compelled to maintain his

crouching stance until the bus stopped at Joachimsthaler Strasse and he could at last descend the stairs. Promptly sluiced out on to the pavement by exiting passengers who shoved him in the back, he waited until they'd all got off and then got in again.

'You there,' came a voice from the loudspeaker, 'board the bus at the front.' Herr Lehmann couldn't take it in.

'I'm not moving till you get off,' the voice announced. 'Board the bus at the front.'

By now past caring, Herr Lehmann got off and made his way to the front. When he showed the driver his Kudamm ticket, the man shook his head.

'It's only valid for one journey,' he said.

'But I just bought it from you.'

'That's your story.'

'But I only got out for a moment to make way for the others. I was here on board the bus. I only just bought this ticket from you.'

'Anyone could say that. One mark.'

Herr Lehmann had had enough. Time to play a different tune, he thought grimly. Time to clear the decks and make a clean sweep, fun's over. He smiled at the driver and deposited his ticket on the little cash desk.

'There you are, my good man,' he said.

'What is it now?'

'Well,' Herr Lehmann said amiably, 'I don't have any further use for your nice ticket, if you'd kindly dispose of it. A new one will cost me another mark, correct?'

The driver nodded. 'One mark.'

'Here are two, my good man,' said Herr Lehmann, putting a two-mark coin beside the old ticket. Take them and have a nice day. No,' he went on, raising his hand, 'I don't want any more of your tickets, thanks all the same.'

So saying, Herr Lehmann got off the bus. He turned and waved to the driver. 'You've more than earned the two marks,' he called genially. 'You're a brilliant strategist. Now drive on, you don't have all day.'

The driver stared at the money and at Herr Lehmann in turn, groping for words. This delighted Herr Lehmann, who made a gesture of dismissal. 'Chop-chop,' he called. He left the man and his bus standing there and walked on in a better mood.

The battle wasn't lost yet, but time was getting short. The clock across the way said twenty to eleven. Herr Lehmann crossed Joachimsthaler Strasse, firmly resolved not to allow his better mood to be spoiled by the sight of the Café Kranzler, which to him symbolised all that made the Kurfürstendamm so intolerable. He strode swiftly along the extreme outer edge of the pavement, where dogshit proliferated and no one else cared to tread, and made for his destination past hotels and motor show-rooms, steak houses and cafés, souvenir stalls and kitsch shops, thimblerriggers and three-card tricksten. His victory over the bus driver had bred a sense of euphoria. More than that, he felt confident of making it to his parents' hotel not only punctually but even, perhaps, with a minute or two in hand. This isn't such a bad day after all, he reflected, and he devoted the time to thinking a bit more positively about Katrin and recalling what she looked like in the nude.

Then he saw the dog. Somewhere between Knesebeckstrasse and Bleibtreustrasse, the door of a jeweller's opened and the dog came tumbling out on to the pavement, yowling, presumably because someone had kicked it. Although Herr Lehmann didn't actually see this, the animal's hindquarters slewed round in a funny way as it landed among the old ladies window-shopping outside. No sooner had the dog scrambled to its feet than it looked Herr Lehmann in the eye. Why me, he thought, coming

to a stop, why me? Undeniably the same dog he'd encountered in Lausitzer Platz, it propelled its fat, sausage-shaped form in his direction. Herr Lehmann prepared to call for help – there may be some cops around, he thought, they're always patrolling the area because of the thimblerriggers and so on – but the dog was already at his side. It sat down and looked at him.

'Not again,' he said softly, 'not again.'

But the dog didn't growl, it just looked at him placidly with its head on one side – a posture which in any other dog would have made a cute, friendly impression.

'Out of luck today, huh?' said Herr Lehmann.

The dog cocked its head at a different angle and emitted a whimpering sound.

'Well,' said Herr Lehmann, 'got to press on. I'm in a hurry.'

He slowly walked off. The dog did absolutely nothing. After a few steps he turned to look. It was simply sitting there, staring at him.

'Sorry,' he called, 'I'm in a hurry.' A look at the nearest clock told him it was eight minutes to eleven, so he knew he could still make it.