

## **The New Sorrows of Young W.**

**By Ulrich Plenzdorf**

Translated by Romy Fursland

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### **Notice in the *Berliner Zeitung*, 26 December:**

On the evening of the 24<sup>th</sup> of December, teenager Edgar W. was found seriously injured in a summer house on the Paradise II estate in the borough of Lichtenberg. Following inquiries by the People's Police it has emerged that Edgar W., who had been living unregistered for some time in the condemned property, had been using electric current unsafely while tinkering with machinery.

### **Obituary in the *Berliner Zeitung*, 30 December:**

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of December an accident ended the life of our young colleague, Edgar Wibeau.

He had so many aspirations left to fulfil!

State enterprise WIK Berlin  
Division trade union leader  
Managing director  
Free German Youth

### **Obituaries in the *Frankfurt an der Oder Volkswacht*, 31 December:**

To our great shock and sorrow, the life of our young comrade, Edgar Wibeau, was cut short by a tragic accident. He will not be forgotten.

State enterprise Hydraulik Mittenberg of the District Committee  
Vocational college  
Managing director  
Free German Youth

It was with shock and disbelief that I learned of the death of my beloved son, Edgar Wibeau, in a tragic accident on the 24th December.

Else Wibeau

“When did you last see him?”

“In September. End of September. The night before he left.”

“Did you not think of getting the police to look for him?”

“Look, if anyone’s got the right to blame me for this it’s not you. A man who’d had nothing to do with his son for years apart from the odd postcard!”

“Well, I’m sorry! But didn’t you prefer it that way anyway, what with my lifestyle choices?”

“Oh, typical! Ironic as ever! No – not going to the police was probably the one thing I did right. And even that turned out to be wrong in the end. But to begin with I’d simply had it up to here with him. He’d put me in an impossible situation, at the college and at the factory. You know – the director’s son, the star apprentice, the straight A student, suddenly turning out to be a delinquent! Running away from home! Ditching his apprenticeship! I mean...! And then a little while later he did start to send word, fairly regularly. Not to me, God forbid. To his friend Willi. On tapes. They were odd recordings – such highfalutin stuff. In the end this Willi let me listen to them; even he was starting to find the whole thing a bit strange. At first he wouldn’t tell me where Edgar was – in Berlin, as it turned out. And you couldn’t make head nor tail of what was on those tapes. But at least they did let us know Edgar was well and even that he was working, not just loafing about. Later on there was some mention of a girl, but it didn’t work out. She married someone else. In all the time he was living with *me* he didn’t have anything to do with girls. But still. It wasn’t a matter for the police!”

Whoah, stop right there! Bollocks I didn’t! I had some great times with girls, if you want to know the truth. Starting when I was fourteen. Now I can say it. You used to hear all kinds of stuff, but you never knew anything for definite. So in the end I just wanted to find out for myself, you know? That’s just how I am. Her name was Sylvia. She was about three years older than me. It only took me sixty minutes to talk her round. Which I reckon was pretty good going at that age, specially when you think I didn’t even have my full charm back then, or this distinctive chin. I’m not telling you this to show off, guys, honestly. I just want to make sure no one gets the wrong idea.

A year later Mum enlightened me. She nearly burst a blood vessel trying to explain the whole thing. I'm that much of an idiot I could've pissed myself laughing, but I didn't – I played the innocent as usual. I think that was a bit harsh of me, to tell you the truth.

"What do you mean turned out to be a delinquent?"

"He broke his supervisor's toe."

"His toe?"

"He threw a heavy iron plate on his foot. A baseplate. I was completely gobsmacked, I mean...!"

"What – he just threw it, out of the blue?"

"I wasn't there, but my colleague Flemming, their supervisor, told me what happened. He's an old hand – very experienced, reliable. There he is in the workshop one morning giving out the workpieces, some baseplates that need filing. And the lads are filing away and as he's going round checking the measurements he notices that Willi, the boy next to Edgar, has got a finished plate, only he hasn't filed it himself: it's come off the machine. On the shop floor all the baseplates are done by machine, of course. And the lad's got hold of this plate and now he's showing it off – it's not even a millimetre out, of course. So Flemming says to him: That's come off the machine.

Willi: Off what machine?

The machine on the shop floor, says Flemming.

Willi: Oh, is there a machine there, sir? I wouldn't know. The last time we were on the shop floor was when we first started the apprenticeship, and back then we still thought those things were egg-laying machines.

And that was Edgar's cue – of course they'd had the whole thing worked out beforehand: So, s'pose there is a machine there. Which there could be. It does make you wonder why we have to keep filing these baseplates down by hand. In our third year of training and everything."

I did say that, it's true. But it was just on the spur of the moment. We hadn't worked it all out beforehand. We really hadn't. I knew what Willi and the others were planning, but I wanted to stay out of it. As usual.

“So Flemming says: What did I tell you all when you started here? I told you: Here you have a lump of iron! Once you can make a clock out of it, your training will be complete: then and only then. It’s a sort of motto of his.

And Edgar: But we always knew we didn’t want to be clockmakers. Right from the start.”

I’d been wanting to say that to Flemming for ages. It wasn’t just his stupid motto, it was his whole entire attitude. It was like he was stuck in the Middle Ages: the era of craftsmen. Up till then I’d always bitten my tongue.

“And the next thing you know Edgar went and threw this plate on his foot, so hard that it broke his toe. You could have knocked me down with a feather. I didn’t want to believe it at first.”

All true. Apart from two minor details. First of all I didn’t *throw* the plate. I didn’t need to. Those plates were heavy enough as it was to break a fricking toe or something, just the weight of them. I only needed to drop it. Which I did. And secondly, I didn’t drop it *the next thing you know* – I dropped it after Flemming had fired off one more little comment. He was raving like a loon: You’re the last one I would have expected this from, Wiebau.

That’s when I lost it. That’s when I dropped the plate. Just the sound of it; Edgar Wiebau! It’s Edgar *Wibeau*! Not even a complete dimwit says ‘chatau’ instead of ‘chateau’. I mean, everyone’s got the right to be correctly addressed by their correct name after all. If it doesn’t matter to some people, that’s up to them. But it does matter to me. And this had been going on for years. Mum always just put up with getting called Wiebau. She reckoned people had just got used to it and it wasn’t going to kill her and anyway, everything she’d achieved at the factory had been under the name of Wiebau. So of course then that was it, everyone thought our name *was* Wiebau! What’s so wrong with Wibeau, anyway? If it was Hitler or Himmler or something, maybe. Then you’d really have a problem. But Wibeau? It’s an old Huguenot name, so what? But it was still no reason to dump that fricking plate on old Flemming’s fricking toe. That was pretty heinous. I realised straightaway that no bastard was going to talk about the training anymore, only the plate and the toe. Sometimes I just used to get really hot and dizzy all of a sudden and then I’d do things and not be able to remember them afterwards. That was my Huguenot blood – or maybe my blood pressure was too high. Too high Huguenot blood pressure.

“So you think Edgar was just afraid of the consequences, and that’s why he left?”

“Yes. Why else would he leave?”

I’ll admit it: I wasn’t exactly dying to stick around for the aftermath. “What does Young Comrade Edgar Wiebau (!!) have to say in connection with his behaviour towards Foreman Flemming?” If you want to know the truth, guys, I’d rather’ve chewed off my own arm than spout some pile of bullshit like: I realise that... In future I will... I hereby undertake to... et cetera et cetera! I didn’t agree with self-criticism – in public, I mean. I just find it degrading, somehow. I don’t know if you get me. I think you’ve got to allow people their pride. Same with all that ‘role model’ stuff. Every five minutes some bastard comes along wanting to know if you have a role model and who it is, or you get told to write three essays about it in the space of a week. Maybe I do have one, but I don’t go round yelling it from the rooftops. Once I wrote: my greatest role model is Edgar Wibeau. I want to be like what he’s going to be like. Nothing more. Or rather: I *wanted* to write that. I didn’t do it in the end. Though all that would’ve happened would be them not giving it a grade. No teacher ever had the balls to give me an F or anything.

“Was there anything else, do you remember?”

“You mean an argument, I take it? No, we never argued. Well, he did have a tantrum and throw himself down the stairs once, because I was going somewhere and wouldn’t take him with me. That was when he was five. If *that’s* what you mean. But I suppose I’m still to blame for everything.”

That’s bollocks! No-one’s to blame here except me. For the record: Edgar Wibeau chucked his apprenticeship and ran away from home *because he’d been wanting to do it for a long time*. He muddled through as a painter in Berlin, had his fun, had Charlotte and nearly came up with a great invention, *because he wanted to!*

The fact that I pegged it in the process was a bit of a bummer, obviously. But if it makes anyone feel any better, I didn’t notice much. 380 volts are no joke, guys. It was very quick. And anyway, we don’t really do regrets in the Great Beyond. We here all know what’s in store for us. That we stop existing when you stop thinking about us. My chances are probably pretty slim in that department. I was too young.

“My name is Wibeau.”

“Nice to meet you. Lindner, Willi.”

Alright, Willi?! You were my best mate my whole life, now do me a favour – don’t you start rooting around in your soul or whatever for guilt and such. Pull yourself together.

“I’m told you’ve got some tapes of Edgar’s, that he recorded? Are they available? I mean, could I listen to them? Sometime?”

“Yeah. OK.”

The tapes:

to put it briefly / wilhelm / I have made an acquaintance / who is dear to my heart  
– an angel – and yet I cannot tell you / of the depth of her perfection / nor the  
reasons for it / suffice to say / that she has captivated me / and all my being – end

no / I do not deceive myself – I read in her black eyes a true solicitude for me and  
for my fate – I worship her – all desire is silenced in her presence – end

enough / wilhelm / the bridegroom is here – mercifully I was not there to see her  
welcome him – it would have torn my heart asunder – end

he wishes me well / and I suspect / that this is lotte’s handiwork / for a woman is  
adroit in such matters and of delicate sensibility / when she may keep the peace  
between her two admirers / it is ever to her advantage / though it can seldom be  
accomplished – end

such a night – wilhelm / I may survive anything now – I shall not see her again –  
here I sit and gasp for breath / seek to compose myself / and await the morning /  
and the horses at sunrise

o my friends / why is it that the current of genius so seldom breaks free / so seldom  
floods in / in great torrents to stir your wondering souls / dear friends / there are  
many placid gentlemen who dwell on either bank / whose sheds / and tulip beds  
and cabbage patches would be ruined / they know therefore how to avert the threat  
that looms on the horizon / hampering its course with dams and channels – all this  
/ wilhelm / leaves me mute – I retreat into myself and find a world – end

and it is the fault of all of you / who talked me into taking up the yoke and who extolled at such great length the virtues of activity – activity – I have tendered my resignation – I pray you break the news gently to my mother – end

“Do you understand it?”

“No. Not a word...”

Of course you don't. No-one can, I bet. I got it out of this old book. This Reclam paperback – I don't even know what the hell it was called. The fucking title page ended up down the bog at Willi's place. The whole thing was written in that mental style.

“Sometimes I think – it might be a code?”

“It makes too much sense to be a code. But it doesn't sound like he made it up either.”

“You never knew with Ed. He used to make up all kinds of random stuff. Like whole entire songs - lyrics *and* tune! There was no instrument he couldn't learn to play in about two days. Or like a week, tops. He could make calculators out of cardboard – they still work now. But most of the time we'd just paint.”

“Edgar used to paint? What kind of pictures?”

“A2 size.”

“I mean, what kind of subjects? Or are there any I can look at?”

“Nope. He had them all with him. And 'subjects' isn't really the right word for the stuff we painted. It was all abstract. One was called 'Physics'. Then there was 'Chemistry'. And 'Mathematician's Brain'. Only his mum didn't like it. Wanted Ed to get a 'proper job'. Ed got quite a bit of hassle about it, if you really want to know. But what pissed him off the most was the times he found out that she, his mum I mean, had hidden one of the postcards from his progenitor... I mean, from his father.... I mean, from you. That used to happen every once in a while, and that would really piss him off.”

That's true. That always used to annoy the hell out of me. After all there was still such a thing as privacy of the post, and the cards were clearly addressed to me. To Mr Edgar Wibeau, the fricking Huguenot. Even to a complete dimwit it would've been obvious that I wasn't meant to know anything about my progenitor, the womaniser that was always boozing and sleeping around. The bogeyman of Mittenberg. With his paintings that no-one understood, which of course was always the paintings' fault.

“And you think that's why Edgar ran away?”

“I don't know...but anyway, the reason most people think he went, because of that stuff with Flemming, that's bullshit. And I don't understand what that was all about either. It wasn't like Ed was having a hard time. He came top in every subject without even needing to work that hard. And before the Flemming thing he always used to keep himself well out of trouble. There was a bit of aggro about it sometimes. A lot of the lads used to call him a mummy's boy. Not so he could hear, obviously. Ed might've seen red. Or maybe he would've just ignored it. Like that time with the mini-skirts. The eye candy, I mean the girls in our class, used to all come to work in mini-skirts – they kept showing up in the workshop in them all the time, to give the supervisors something to gawp at. They'd been told about a million times they weren't allowed to. Eventually it pissed us off so much that all of us lads turned up for work one morning in mini-skirts. It was a pretty mental sight. Ed stayed out of it. I guess the whole thing was just too stupid for him.”

Unfortunately I just didn't have anything against short skirts. You haul yourself out of bed in the morning feeling barely fricking human, spot the first woman out the window, and straightaway you start to liven up a bit. And anyway, I reckon people can wear whatever they want – it doesn't bother me. But still that mini-skirt prank was sweet. Kind of thing I might've come up with myself. I only stayed out of it because I didn't want to cause any trouble for Mum. That was my big mistake – I never wanted to cause her any trouble. I was used to trying not to ever cause anyone any trouble, to tell you the truth. Which basically means not allowing yourself to ever do anything fun. That can start to piss you off after a while, you know what I mean? That's the real reason I decided to go AWOL. I'd just had enough of being paraded all over the place as living proof that it is possible to raise a boy *perfectly* well without a father. That was the idea, you see. One day this stupid thought came to me – what if I just snuffed it one day, black pox or something. I mean what would I have done with my life up to then? I just couldn't get that thought out of my head.



“If you ask me, Ed left because he wanted to be a painter. That was the reason. It was just a bit of a bummer that he got turned down by the art school in Berlin.”

“Why was that?”

“Unimaginative, Ed said. No talent. He was pretty pissed off.”

No shit! But it was a true fact that my collected works were worth sweet FA. Why did we always paint abstract the whole time? – Because like an idiot I could never in my life paint anything real, that someone could’ve recognised, a fricking dog or something. The whole painting thing was a fully ridiculous idea of mine, I reckon. But still, it made quite a hilarious scene, me traipsing into this art school and straight into this professor’s room and whacking the whole of my collected works down in front of him, bold as you like.

First of all he asked: How long have you been painting?

Me: Dunno! A long time.

I didn’t even look at him while I said it.

Him: Do you have a job?

Me: Not that I know of. Why should I?

That should’ve been enough to make him chuck me out, guys! But the bloke was tough. He stuck with it!

Him: Is it in any kind of order? Which one comes last, which comes first?

He meant the setup on his table.

Me: The early stuff is on the left.

The early stuff! Shit, guys! I had it down pat! That was a master stroke!

Him: How old are you?

The guy was seriously tough!

I mumbled: Nineteen!

I don’t know if he believed that.

Him: You've got imagination. There's no doubt about that, none whatsoever, and you can draw, too. If you did have a job, I'd say: draftsman.

I started packing up my pictures.

Him: I could be wrong. Leave your pieces here for a few days. They always say two or three pairs of eyes are better than one.

I kept packing up. Steely. More of an unrecognised genius than me never lived.

"But you stayed in Berlin in spite of it?"

"Ed did – I didn't. I couldn't. But I did encourage him to stay. And it was the right thing to do, in theory. After all, there's no better place than Berlin to go to ground and make a name for yourself. I mean, it's not like I told him 'you should stay here' or anything. You wouldn't get anywhere with Ed that way. We used to live in Berlin before Dad got transferred here, and we still owned this summer house there. We couldn't get rid of it – apparently they were going to be building on the land any day. I had the key just in case. The place was still in quite good nick. We went to scope it out and I kept telling him I was anti it. That the roof was kaput. That someone must have thieved the fricking sofa covers. We'd left our old furniture in there like you do with those places. And that the whole thing was due to be knocked down any minute, because of these new builds. Ed got more and more into it. He started unpacking his stuff. Well, I say stuff. All he actually had with him were his pictures, apart from the clothes on his back. His burlap jacket, that he made himself, with copper wire, and his old jeans."

Obviously jeans! Or can any of you imagine a life without jeans? Jeans are the noblest trousers in the world. For jeans I'd happily pass up all that heinous synthetic shit from Jumo that never looks good on anyone. I'd pass up anything for jeans, apart from maybe *that thing*. And apart from music. I'm not talking about some Händelssohn Bacholdy whatever here, guys – I'm talking about real music. I didn't have anything against Bacholdy and that, but I wouldn't say they exactly knocked me out. I'm talking about real jeans, obviously. There's a whole load of tat out there just pretending to be real jeans. Better no trousers at all than that pile of crap. Real jeans, for example, never have a zip at the front. There is one and only one type of real jeans. Anyone who's a real jeans-wearer will know the one I mean. But that's not to say that everyone who wears real jeans is a real jeans-wearer. Most people don't have a clue what the hell they're wearing. It massively killed me every time I saw

some twenty-five-year-old oaf with jeans on, that he'd squeezed over his obese hips and belted up around his waist. Jeans are hip-trousers, and by that I mean trousers that slide off your hips if they're not tight enough, that only stay up by friction. For that you obviously can't have fat hips and definitely not a fat arse, because then they won't even do up. By twenty-five you're already too old to understand that. It's like when someone goes round wearing a Communist badge and then beats his wife at home. The way I see it jeans are an attitude, not just trousers. I actually used to think there wasn't any point getting much older than seventeen or eighteen. After that people just end up getting a job or studying or in the army, and then there's no talking to them anymore. At least I've never known anyone who didn't go that way. I don't know if you get me? People get to that age and keep wearing jeans that just aren't meant for them anymore. It goes back to being noble once someone's retired and wears jeans with braces over a big belly. Then it's noble again. But I never knew anyone that age, apart from Zaremba. Zaremba was noble. He could've worn them if he wanted and it wouldn't've pissed anyone off.

Ed even wanted me to stay there with him. He was like: We'll manage! But that had never been my plan, and anyway I just couldn't do it. Ed could, I couldn't.

So then Ed said: When you get back, just tell Mum I'm alive and leave it at that. That was the last thing I heard him say. Then I came home."

You're alright, you know that, Willi? You're sound. A trouper. You can stay just how you are, I reckon. If I'd had a will, I would've made you my sole heir. Could be I always underestimated you. That was decent, the way you talked me into staying in the shack. But I didn't honestly mean it that you should stay with me. I mean, kind of honestly. We would've had a good time together. But not really truly honestly. When someone's never really been alone in his whole life and he suddenly *does* get the chance to be, maybe he's not always a hundred percent honest. I hope you didn't realise. Please just forget it if you did. Anyway, after you'd gone I found I was in a pretty mental mood. First I just automatically wanted to go and have a kip. This was my moment. It was the moment I first twigged that from now on I could do whatever I felt like. That no-one could stick their oar in anymore. That I didn't even need to wash my hands before eating if I didn't want to. I probably should've eaten something, actually, but I wasn't *that* hungry. So the first thing I did was disperse all my odds and sods around the room as unmethodically as possible. The socks ended up on the table. That was a personal highlight. Then I grabbed the microphone,

whacked the tape recorder on and launched into one of my private broadcasts: Ladies and Gentlemen! Blokes and Blokesses! Upstanding and low-lying citizens! Chill your beans! Ship your little brother and sister off to the cinema! Lock your parents in the dining room! This is your Eddie speaking, Eddie the indestructible...

I launched into my Bluejeans song, the one I'd made up three years before. It got better every year.

Oh, Bluejeans  
White Jeans? - No  
Black Jeans? - No  
Blue Jeans, oh  
Oh, Bluejeans, yeah

Oh, Bluejeans  
Old Jeans? - No  
New Jeans? - No  
Blue Jeans, oh  
Oh, Bluejeans, yeah

Perhaps you can imagine what it sounded like. I used to sing it in this really rich voice - the way *he* sings, you know? Some people reckon he's dead. Bollocks. Satchmo will never die, because jazz will never die. That day I reckon I nailed that song better than ever before. Afterwards I felt like Robinson Crusoe and Satchmo rolled into one. Robinson Satchmo. Like an idiot I plastered my entire collected works all over the wall. That way at least everyone would know, soon as they walked in the door: this is the home of the unrecognised genius Edgar Wibeau. I probably was being a massive idiot! But I tell you what, guys, I was high! I didn't know what I should do first. I basically wanted to go straight into town and scope out Berlin, all the nightlife and stuff and the Huguenot museum. I think I must've already mentioned that I was a Huguenot on my dad's side. I was pretty convinced I was going to find traces of the Wibeau family in Berlin. In my idiotic way I was hoping it would turn out they were aristocrats of some kind. Edgar de Wibeau or something. But then I thought to myself no museum was going to be open at that time. I didn't know where it was, either.

So I had a quick think and figured out that what I really felt like doing was reading, and that till at least the early hours. Then I wanted to have a kip till about midday and then go and see what the buzz was like in Berlin. That was pretty much what I wanted to do every day from then on: sleep till midday and then live till midnight. I never used to feel particularly perky anytime before midday anyway. I'd always been like that. The only problem was, I had no stash. I hope you guys don't think I

mean hash and opium and stuff. I had nothing against hash. I'd never actually done it myself. But I'm that much of an idiot I reckon I would idiotically've done it, if I could've got hold of any from anywhere. Just out of pure curiosity. Me and old Willi once spent six months collecting banana skins and drying them out. That's meant to be as good as hash, pretty much. It had fuck-all effect on me apart from blocking up my whole entire throat with spit. We lay on the carpet, let the tape recorder run and smoked these banana skins. When nothing happened, I started rolling my eyes and grinning like a loon and talking all kinds of shit as if I was properly high. When old Willi saw that he started doing it as well, but I'm pretty sure he was faking it just as much as me. I've never touched banana skins or any of that stuff again since, if you want to know the truth. So what I mean is: I didn't have a stash of stuff to read. Or did you think I'd schlepped a load of books along to Berlin with me? I hadn't even brought my favourite books. I reckoned I didn't want to be schlepping stuff from the past around all over the place. And I basically knew those two books off by heart anyway. My theory about books was this: no one human being can ever read all the books that exist, not even all the really good ones. So I focused on two. And anyway, I reckon every book actually contains nearly *all* books. I don't know if you get me. What I mean is, to write a book you've got to have read a few thousand others. At least I can't see how you'd manage it otherwise. Let's say three thousand. And each one of those was written by someone who'd read three thousand books themselves. No-one knows how many books there are in the world. But by this simple calculation you already get a few billion zillions plus a couple for the road. That's enough, if you ask me. My two favourite books were: Robinson Crusoe. I bet you'll all have a bit of a chuckle about that one. I would've never admitted that in my life. The other was that one by Salinger. I got my claws on it completely by chance. No one knew about it. What I mean is no one had recommended it to me or anything. Good thing too. I would've never even gone near it if they had. My experiences with recommended books were usually massive fails. Like an idiot I used to get these mental notions that every book someone had recommended to me was crap, even when it was good. Even now I still shudder to think I might've never laid eyes on that book. That Salinger guy is pretty noble. The way he goes creeping around New York in the wet and can't go home because he's done a runner from this school that they wanted to chuck him out of anyway – that always used to really get to me. If I'd've known his address I would've written to him and told him to come over and see us. He must've been right around my age. Mittenberg was a bit of a backwater compared to New York, obviously, but he would definitely have been able to chill out for a bit if he came to us. And better still, we would've helped him get rid of his stupid sexual problems. That's probably the only thing I never understood about Salinger. I guess that's easy to say for someone who's never had sexual problems. All I can say to someone who's got those kind of issues is, he should sort himself out

with a girlfriend. It's the only way. I don't mean just any old girl, guys. Never that. But for example when you realise a girl laughs at the same stuff as you. That's always a sure sign. I would've straightaway been able to tell Salinger at least two girls in Mittenberg who would've laughed about the same things as him. And if they didn't straightaway, we could've got them to.

If I'd wanted I could've hit the sack and read the entire book neat. What I mean is: I could read it in my head. That was the method I used at home, on the many occasions when I was trying not to piss off a certain Frau Wibeau. But after all, that wasn't an issue anymore. I started rummaging all around Willi's gaff for something to read. Shit, man! His mum and dad must've suddenly come into money. They'd got the entire old set of furniture from a four-bedroom flat piled up there – the whole shebang. But not one piffling little book, not even a scrap of newspaper. No paper of any kind. Not even in the dump of a kitchen. A fully furnished house, and not a book in sight. Willi's mum and dad must've been super attached to their books. At that moment I started feeling slightly dodgy. The garden was as dark as a pit. I came majorly close to smashing my head in on this old pump and then some trees before I managed to find the bog. All I basically wanted to do was go for a piss, but as usual the word got round my entire intestines. That was always the trouble with me. It was a right pain. My whole life I never managed to keep the two fricking things separate. Whenever I had to take a piss I also had to take a dump, I just couldn't help it. And there was no paper, guys. I was fumbling around like a loon all over the bog. And that's when I got my claws on this famous book I was telling you about, this paperback. It was too dark to see anything. So first of all I sacrificed the cover, then the title page went, and then the pages at the end which in my experience always have the afterword or something on, that no bastard reads anyway. When I got it into the light I could see I'd actually done a pretty precise job. Before I started reading I paused for a moment of silent reflection. I had after all just divested myself of the last remains of Mittenberg. After two pages I chucked the thing across the room. I'm telling you, guys, you just could *not* read that shit. With the best will in the world. Five minutes later I'd got hold of it again. Either I wanted to read till the early hours or not at all. That's just what I was like. Three hours later I'd finished it.

People, I was majorly pissed off! The bloke in the book, this Werther, his name was – he commits suicide at the end. Just gives up the ghost. Puts a bullet through his fricking head because he can't get the woman he wants, and feels mega sorry for himself the whole entire time. If he wasn't so completely deranged he would've been able to see that she was just waiting for him to *do* something, this Charlotte girl. I mean, when I'm on my own with a girl and I know no-one's going to show up within the next half hour or so, I'll try *anything*. I might end up getting a slap, but so

what? Better than a missed opportunity. And anyway, there are slaps only in two out of ten cases. Tops. That's a fact. And this Werther was alone with her millions of times. In that park, for instance. And what does he do? He sits there like a lemon and watches her go and marry someone else. And then he does himself in. The bloke was beyond help.

The woman was the only one I really felt sorry for. She got left with her couch potato husband. Werther should've at least thought of that. And also: suppose there really had been no chance of him ever getting anywhere with her. That was still no reason to get all trigger happy. The guy had a horse! If that'd been me I would've been off into the woods like a shot. They had enough of them back then, woods I mean. And he would've found himself loads of mates, I bet you any money. Thomas Müntzer or someone. It just wasn't real, guys. Pure bullshit. And the style. Hearts and souls and joy and tears all over the place. I can't believe people are actually meant to have spoken like that – even three hundred years ago. The whole thing was made up of loads of letters, from this loon Werther to his mate back home. It was probably meant to seem mega original or spontaneous or realistic or something. The bloke who wrote it should have a read of Salinger. *That's* real, guys!

All I can tell you is you've got to read it, if you can snaffle it from anywhere. If you happen to see it lying around somewhere then just nab the fricking thing and don't give it back! Take it out of the library and never return it. Just tell them you lost it. It'll cost you five Marks, so what? Don't be fooled by the title. It's a bit lame, I agree – maybe it's badly translated – but it doesn't matter. Or you could watch the film. I mean, I'm not actually sure if there is a film of it or not. It was the same with Robinson. I could see everything super clearly right before my eyes, every single image. I don't know if you guys have had that. You see everything as clearly as if you'd seen it in a film, and then it turns out there never actually was a film at all. But if there isn't already a Salinger film then my advice to any director is seriously just make one. There's no way it wouldn't be a hit. Although I don't know if I would've gone to see it myself. I reckon I would've been too worried that my own film might get messed up. I was never really that into films when I was alive anyway. You would've never found me anywhere near a cinema unless Chaplin or something like that was on – one of those hyperactive bowler hat films where the fuzz in their stupid pith helmets get royally fucked over. Or 'To Sir with Love' with Sidney Poitier, I don't know if you know that one. I could've happily watched that one every day. Obviously I'm not talking about those compulsory films we watched for History. We got made to go and see them. It was on the syllabus. I quite liked going, actually. In one hour you could find out what you otherwise would've had to spend about three million years rifling through history books for. I always thought it was a very useful system. I would've liked to talk to one of the blokes that make those kind

of films. I would've told him to keep up the good work. You have to give these people some encouragement, I reckon. They do save you a hell of a lot of time. I did use to know a bloke who worked in films actually – writing the scripts, not directing. I'm pretty sure he didn't use to write those history films though.

When I told him my opinion on the subject he just grinned. I couldn't get him to realise I meant it seriously. I met him one day when they'd packed a load of us off from college to see this film that he'd done the script for. Followed by a conversation with the filmmakers. It wasn't just for anyone who wanted to go, though: only for the best students, the role models. It was a special honour, because the whole show was during lesson time. And of course, first in line was Edgar Wibeau, that intelligent, civilised, disciplined young man. Our star pupil! And all the other star pupils from the other years, two from each.

The film was set in the present. I won't go on about it too much. I would've never gone to see it of my own accord, or if I had it would only've been because my boys the Modern Soul Band had done the music for it. I suppose they must've wanted to get into the film industry. It was about this bloke who'd done time and had now got out and was wanting to start a new life. Up until then he'd been a bit dodgy – politically, I mean – and being in the nick hadn't done much to change that. He'd been done for assault, because he lamped this old veteran who'd pissed him off: something to do with his music being too mental and too loud. Straight after he got out he went into hospital, with jaundice I think – anyway, he wasn't allowed visitors. Not that there was anyone who would've come to visit him. But in the hospital, in the bed across from him, there was this propagandist or whatever it was he was meant to be. He talked like one anyway. When I saw that I knew straightaway what was coming. The propaganda bloke was going to bend the guy's ear until he finally saw the light, and then he was going to fall into line and be miraculously integrated into society. And that's exactly what happened. He joined this fantastic work brigade with a fantastic brigadier, met this fantastic girl, a student, whose parents were against it at first but then ended up being fantastic as well when they realised what a fantastic young man he'd turned out to be, and at the end he was even allowed to go and do military service. I don't know if any of you guys have seen this fantastic film? The only thing that interested me about it other than the music was this brother of the hero's. He dragged him along with him wherever he went, the idea being that the brother was meant to get integrated as well. They spent the entire time looking for this propagandist. It was meant to be super moving or something. The brother let himself be dragged – he even kind of enjoyed all the roaming around, and he was also quite into the fantastic student, and she was into him too – there was one bit where I even thought, he only needs to say the word and he's got her, if he wants. From that moment on I had a much higher opinion of her, anyway. So he



went along with it all, but that didn't mean he got anywhere near being integrated. He wanted to be a clown in the circus, and no-one could talk him out of it. They said he just wanted to loaf around and not learn a proper trade or get a proper job. A proper job... I'd heard that one before, guys! Obviously one of the reasons he wanted to join the circus was so he could see the world, or a bit of it anyway. So what? I totally understood him. I didn't get what was supposed to be so bad about that. Most people want to see the world. Anyone who says they don't is lying. I could never be arsed with it whenever someone started going on about how there was nothing worth ever leaving Mittenberg for. And this brother couldn't be arsed with it all either.

I got more and more interested in the bloke who'd written the film. I was watching him the whole time we were sitting in the staffroom talking about how wonderful we thought the film was and all the stuff we could learn from it. First all the teachers and supervisors told us what we should learn from it, and then we told them what we'd learnt from it. The man didn't say a word the whole time. He seriously looked as if this whole scene with us model pupils was boring the absolute shit out of him. After that the filmmakers got taken on a tour round all our workshops and stuff. Me and old Willi seized the opportunity and flung ourselves at the writer bloke. We latched onto him and stayed at the back with him. I got the impression he was quite grateful to us at first. Then I told him my actual opinion. I told him a film where people are constantly learning stuff and getting reformed the whole entire time is bound to be boring. That a film like that makes everyone see right from the word go what *they* are supposed to learn from it, and that no bastard feels like going to the cinema at night and carrying on learning stuff, after they've been learning all day and they just want to go and enjoy themselves. He said he'd always thought that himself too but he couldn't have done any different. I told him that in that case my advice was just to leave well alone, that it would be better to just make those history films which everyone knows in the first place are not meant to be entertaining. At that point he managed to work his way back over to the other film guys who were having our fantastic training programme explained to them by Flemming. We let him go. I got the feeling, anyway, that he was pretty fucked off about something, that day or just in general. I'm just sorry I didn't have his address. Maybe it was in Berlin. If it had been I would've visited him and then he wouldn't have been able to do a runner like that.

"Is there a Schmidt family in this building?"

"Who is it you're looking for?"

"For Frau Schmidt."

"That's me. You're in luck."

"Yes. My name is Wibeau. Edgar's father."

"How did you find me?"

"It wasn't easy."

"I mean, how did you know about me?"

"From the tapes. Edgar sent some cassette tapes back to Mittenberg, like letters."

"I didn't know anything about that. So there's something about me on these tapes?"

"Not much. Only that your name is Charlotte and that you're married. And that you have black eyes."

Don't stress, Charlie. I didn't tell them anything. Not a word.

"Why Charlotte? My name isn't Charlotte!"

"I don't know. Why are you crying? Please don't cry."

Come on Charlie, don't cry. Leave it out. There's no need to cry about it. I got the name out of that stupid book.

"I'm sorry! Edgar was an idiot. He was a silly, stubborn idiot. He was beyond help. I'm sorry!"

It's true. I was an idiot. Man, was I an idiot. But don't cry. You guys can't even imagine how much of an idiot I was.

“The reason I came to see you was actually because I think you may have a picture that Edgar painted.”

“Edgar couldn’t paint to save his life. It was just another of his ridiculous ideas. Everyone could see it, but he just wouldn’t be told. And when you said it to his face, he’d come out with some nonsense no-one could make head or tail of. Probably not even Edgar himself.”

I always reckoned you were at your best like that, Charlie – when you were in full flow. But it’s not quite true that *everyone could see* I couldn’t paint. I mean, they might’ve seen I couldn’t, but I did an excellent job of pretending I could. That’s one of the mentallest things, guys. It’s not about whether you can do something or not, it’s about how well you can pretend to be able to do it. Then it’s fine. With painting and art and that kind of stuff, at least. A pair of pliers is only good if it plies. But a picture or something? No bastard *really* knows whether it’s good or not.

“It began on the very first day. Our kindergarten had a ‘run’, as we call it, next to the allotments, with a sandpit, a swing and a seesaw. In summer we’d spend the whole day outside whenever we could. It’s all been dug up now. The children used to just hurl themselves into the sandpit, and make a beeline for the bushes – they loved climbing around in there. The bushes were technically attached to the neighbouring plot, but that more or less belonged to us anyway. The fence had fallen down a long time ago and we hadn’t seen anyone on the land for ages. And the whole estate was due for demolition. But suddenly I saw a person come out of the summer house, a guy, looking terribly scruffy and unkempt. I called the children over to me straightaway.”

That was me. I hadn’t really come to life yet. I’d just rolled out of bed and I was like a fricking zombie. I couldn’t even open my eyes. I hauled myself over to the bog and then to the pump. But washing with the pump water just wasn’t happening, guys. Show me a lake or sea and I could’ve dived in head first, but the water coming out of that pump would’ve killed me. I don’t know if you get me. I’d basically just woken up too early. Charlie’s kids had rudely awakened me with their yelling.

“That was Edgar?”

“That was Edgar. I immediately told the children they weren’t allowed to go onto the other plot anymore. But you know what kids are like – five minutes later they were nowhere to be seen, so I called them, and then I saw that they’d gone over there, to Edgar. He was sitting at the back of the house with his painting equipment and they were all stood round behind him, not making a sound.”

That’s true. I was never a massive fan of kids, as it goes. I had nothing against them, but I was never a massive fan. They could get pretty boring after a while, to me anyway – or to men in general. Or has anyone ever heard of a male kindergarten teacher? It was just that it always used to majorly piss me off the way people automatically assumed you were some kind of rampant sex fiend just because you had long hair, or hadn’t ironed creases into your trousers, or didn’t spring out of bed at five am and instantly fling yourself under a stream of cold pump water, or didn’t know what wage bracket you were going to be in by the time you were fifty. So I went and fished out my painting stuff and flopped down at the back of my gaff and started measuring distances all over the place with my pencil the way painters are supposed to do. And five minutes later Charlie’s kids had all gathered round behind me, the entire crew.

“What was he painting?”

“Well – nothing, really. Lines. The children were wondering the same thing.

Edgar said: We’ll see. Maybe a tree?

And the children asked straight off: Why *maybe*? Don’t you know what you’re painting?

Edgar: It all depends what happens to be in here this morning. How can you know that beforehand? A painter has to paint a bit first to get limbered up, you see, or else the tree he’s about to paint will come out all stiff.

They were enjoying themselves. Edgar was good with children, but he couldn’t draw to save his life, that was clear to me straightaway. I have a bit of an interest in that sort of thing.”

Hang on a second, Charlie! They were enjoying themselves, yes, but that gag about the tree came from you. I was sat there thinking: It’s always the way. Every time

you're enjoying yourself, along comes one of these kindergarten teachers and gives you a serious explanation. Then I turned round and looked at you. I was bowled over. I'd underestimated you. You were fully being ironic! I think that was the moment the whole thing began, the whole tug-of-war or whatever the hell it was. Each of us wanted to pull the other one over the line. Charlie wanted to prove to me that I couldn't paint for shit, that I was actually just a big kid and couldn't carry on living like this and therefore needed help from someone. And I wanted to prove to her the exact opposite. That I was an unrecognised genius, that I could carry on living like this no problem and most of all, that I was anything but a kid. Also, I wanted her – right from the start. I wanted to talk her round, either way, but I also wanted *her*. Do you know what I mean?

“You mean he couldn't draw from nature? He couldn't draw things he saw?”

“He couldn't draw full stop. But it was obvious why he made out that he could: people were supposed to think he was an unrecognised genius. Why he was so set on that, though, I could never understand. It was like an obsession with him. I had the idea that we could get him to come to the kindergarten and paint one of the walls. It couldn't hurt: the building was due to be demolished anyway. My boss had nothing against the idea. I thought Edgar would end up skiving off. But he came. It's just – he was so sneaky! I'm sorry, but he really was sneaky! The first thing he did was distribute all the paintbrushes we'd given him amongst the children, and then he let them paint with him – let them paint whatever they wanted. I could see straightaway what was going to happen. Half an hour later we had the most beautiful fresco on the wall, and Edgar hadn't done a stroke – well, barely.”

The whole thing worked out beautifully – I knew it would. I knew there was nothing to worry about. Kids may be boring but they are shit hot at painting. If I ever went to look at pictures, I preferred it to be in a kindergarten than a fricking museum. Plus, kids love to mess up whole entire walls.

The teachers were all over it. They thought it was simply marvellous what their little kiddles had done. I liked it as well, as it happens. Kids really are shit hot at painting. And there was nothing Charlie could do. The others left it to her to serve me lunch. They'd probably noticed I was into Charlie. They'd've had to be blind not to, to be honest. I spent the whole time adoring her. I don't mean giving her adoring looks and stuff, guys. Not that. It wasn't like I had a particularly devastating pair of visual

organs in my fricking Huguenot skull. I had properly piggy little eyes compared to Charlie's dazzlers. But brown. Brown rules, guys, seriously.

Back on my kolkhoz, I had what was maybe the best idea of my *life*. Maybe. It was pretty jokes, anyway. It was epic. I got my claws on that book again, the paperback. Automatically I started reading. I had time, and now I had the *idea*. I dived into the shack, whacked the tape recorder on and dictated to Willi:

(I got it straight out of the book, including the Wilhelm thing) To put it briefly, Wilhelm, I have made an acquaintance who is dear to my heart... An angel... And yet I cannot tell you of the depth of her perfection, nor the reasons for it – suffice to say that she has captivated me, and all my being. End.

That's how I first came up with *the idea*. I stuck the tape straight in the post. It was about time I sent word to Willi anyway. It was just a shame I didn't get to see old Willi keel over. I bet he properly keeled over. I bet he had a proper seizure. Rolled his eyes like a loon and fell off his chair.

“Could I see the mural?”

“I'm afraid not. The building's been torn down. We're in a new build now. I do have one picture by Edgar. But it's nothing much to look at. It's a silhouette. Honestly – he wouldn't be told. It was on the following day: I went round to see him. We wanted to pay him a fee. That was when I thought of asking him to do a picture of me, without help this time. There was no-one else there, just the two of us. And what did he come up with? This silhouette. I mean, anyone can draw one of those, at the end of the day. But when I was there I saw his other pictures. I can't describe them. To me they all just looked totally chaotic. They were probably meant to be abstract. But it was just chaos, honestly. In fact the whole house looked incredibly chaotic. I mean – it wasn't dirty, but it was chaotic and messy like you wouldn't believe.”

You're absolutely right, Charlie. Chaotic and messy and whatever else you can think of. At first I was just bowled over, to tell you the truth, when I saw Charlie standing there in my house. Luckily it was the afternoon and I was already reasonably lively. But the thing with the money I cottoned onto straightaway. Fee, my arse. That was Charlie's own money and what's more, she was using it as an excuse to come and see me. For some reason I was preying on her mind.

I acted modest at first. I said: But what for? I didn't even lift a finger!

And Charlie: Still! Without your guidance it would never have happened.

Then I told her outright: That's your own money. Fee, my arse!

She had an idea: OK. True. But I'll get it back. My boss just has to approve it first. I thought you could use a bit of money.

I did still have some money, but I could've definitely used a bit more. You can always use a bit of cash, guys. But I still didn't take it. I knew what her offering me money was supposed to mean. It was supposed to mean she thought I was a layabout or something. I didn't want to give her the satisfaction. After that she really should have left. Only Charlie wasn't like that. It wasn't her style. She had a least as thick a skull as me. Or head. You should probably say head for a woman.

Also, I kept telling her the whole time that I was massively into her. I mean, I didn't tell her in so many words. I didn't actually say anything at all. But she realised, I reckon.

Translated by Romy Fursland

romy.fursland@googlemail.com