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CHAPTER 1, IN WHICH MARIO REALISES HIS KITCHEN IS TOO NOISY

Midlife or quarterlife – nowadays every last idiot is just looking for an excuse to lie back on the couch, make like some deep Hermann Hesse type and give a thorough report on their torturous feelings of emptiness. They're like a load of psycho headless chickens: one lot reckons all that eternal drug-popping is a dead end after all; another lot fantasises about exhilarating clubbing experiences, goes out for a packet of fags and never comes back. Some of them get panic attacks because they've made it to the suburban owner-occupied with the Volvo, wife and kids, while the next lot flips out because that semi-detached seems to have disappeared off the horizon after the New Economy crisis and the oil price rises. And the his 'n' hers lifestyle magazines, which always know best, caress their readership's collective souls with exclusive cover stories on the 'new lack of orientation': *Life has become a hurdle race without the hurdles. How high should I jump? How high is good enough?*

Actually, the whole life crisis mania might well have passed Mario by entirely. Anyone who has survived the past 15 years living on cheque fraud and dodgy goods off the back of a lorry should be immune to competitive thinking. Mario was one of those people who, at some point, decide not to bother jumping at all – no matter how high the hurdles. Why dream of extortionately priced dream holidays on exclusive Caribbean islands if you're only going to run into all those halfwits from back home anyway? Why scrape together start-up capital for shares if your hard-earned money's only going to go down the drain in price crashes and stock market slumps? Why put all that effort and ambition into being able to lean back and put your feet up in later life when you can have it all now? – minus the stomach ulcer, boring meetings and 'I am just so motivated' hypocrisy. So instead of work, work, work: a life of low-key flat-sharing, a spot of shoplifting here and there and the certainty that, between punk rock adolescence and days spent lounging around in the park, you've experienced pretty much everything an average life has to offer on the threshold of the 21st century.

But Mario wasn't your typical dropout – he wasn't one of those guys who hang around pedestrian zones sporting stripy pyjama bottoms and wormy dreads, chucking coloured balls up in the air to the sound of Medieval lyres and thinking they're the world's greatest freaks. Mario had always had his finger on the pulse. Escaped from mum's chaos aged 15 to get in on the sex, drugs 'n' revolution ticket in West Berlin, he'd experimented with various forms of existence over the years (dog-on-a-string-owner at Kottbusser Tor, antifascist collective, open *ménage à cinq*). But after traumatic experiences with shared toilets, six-hour meetings and

department-store studded belts for 19.99, he'd decided to get a bit more structure into his life – crossing the Atlantic in a sailing boat, running an illegal drum 'n' bass club, finishing school at adult education classes and moving in with a significant other (although the stupid cow had turned out to be an undercover police officer six months later).

Mario really had no reason to grumble about his life being unfulfilled. The fact that he still got into a crisis had less to do with unanswered questions about the meaning of life or a sudden outbreak of careerism. It was more what you'd call a biological phenomenon, a minor but pretty unpleasant drawback to getting older. Never mind how loudly you join in the chorus of 'You're only as old as you feel', the fact remains: you get more sensitive to noise after your 30th birthday. Or Germans do, anyway. They get oversensitive, yearn for moments of silence and can't stand the constant background noise.

The story started on a perfectly normal, muggy June afternoon. In the kitchen of the shared flat at number 73, Adalbert Strasse, the Romanian neighbours were peacefully using the kitchen to deep-fry aubergines, Mario's flatmate Piet was doing back muscle exercises on the windowsill and Didi was feeding his dog, when Mario emitted a sudden shout:

'That's enough!'

His desperation would probably have gone unnoticed behind the blaring Kusturica gipsy trombones Piet always turned on when the Romanians were there (a classic case of external identity allocation). But Mario underlined his pronouncement with action: he crossed the room, pulled the plug on the radio, turned off the gas ring and poured himself a glass of orange juice from the fridge. The others remained motionless. Hypnotised, they watched Mario drink his juice, as if in slow motion. Antonescu was the first to come back down to earth. He gave the aubergines a worried look. They weren't done yet.

'Why did you turn the cooker off?' asked Piet.

'And the ra-radio?' added Didi, who had stuttered at the slightest provocation ever since he started school.

'I can't stand it', Mario asserted.

'What can't you stand?'

'The noise.'

'N-noise? Wh-what noise?'

'You don't understand.'

It really wasn't all that easy to understand. Mario hadn't developed a sudden aversion to Romanians, he didn't want the flat to himself, and he wasn't worried about the food being

eaten or the washing up getting done (Antonescu always did it anyway). But that was exactly the level that Vassili brought the conversation down to when he got home half an hour later.

‘You’re an affluent chauvinist!’ Mario’s flatmate commented with contempt.

‘Why am I an affluent chauvinist?’ Mario didn’t know what to think.

‘You’re defending your privileges.’

‘Privileges? It’s got nothing to do with privileges. I’m 32 years old!’

Vassili, Piet and Didi gave Mario an irritated look.

‘I mean, you get more sensitive to noise.’

‘Oh right, people from the Balkans always make too much noise, or what?’ Vassili had it easy. He could just go and visit his parents in the Black Forest any time it got too hectic for him at the flat. But Mario – where was he to go? To mum? To her chaotic pottery? For a spot of relaxation?

‘Balkans, Balkans... It’s nothing to do with the Balkans, it’s about noise! They should rent their own place. There are four empty flats in this building. Going cheap. Or they could squat them...’

‘Ha haa!’ Vassili smirked.

It made Mario sick when he got derisive.

‘They’re illegal themselves. They can’t *do* anything illegal.’

He might have been putting it in a slightly complicated way, but Vassili wasn’t wrong. If anyone had got a bum deal in the whole Berlin’s-getting-at-least-as-sophisticated-as-Paris-or-even-cooler game, it was the Romanians. After swimming across the Oder-Neisse line near Zittau on a freezing winter’s night – Antonescu had almost drowned (the man came from a family of Carpathian shepherds, and his only childhood contact with water had been in feeding troughs) – the three of them had snuck past the border guards and vigilantes towards the land of milk and honey, had escaped being turned in by nosy old ladies on the slow train to Cottbus, and thus made it to Berlin, where they were generously allowed to put the finishing touches to all sorts of government buildings, thanks to a recommendation from an old pal from Banat. The pay wasn’t all that bad at 3.50 an hour – there were a good few Ukrainians who’d do the job for less – or at least it wouldn’t have been all that bad if they’d been paid. The thing was, the contractor, some public alibi organisation, had outsourced the contract to a firm specialising in passing on contracts to sub-contractors, who in turn worked in close cooperation with a couple of highly flexible small enterprises. By these means, the actual job – fitting the electrics in a government office block – had been passed on from one

company concentrating on its core competences to the next, before finally ending up with a harmless tracky-bottoms-wearing electrician, not cut out for fraud on a grand scale. Horst Patzky was one of those now rare ‘West Berlin originals’ who have spent every weekday evening over the past 35 years in their rubber-plant-adorned locals, discussing football, the latest video cameras and the reforms the government ought to be making, and who think *Bild* is a newspaper. The man would no doubt have come to a bad end if he hadn’t added a further, officially nonexistent link to the mysterious value-creation chain. After some initial wavering, the West Berlin master electrician hired all kinds of temporary workers, who were in a position to offer fairly sophisticated work for low wages. The fact that Popescu and Ganea, with their PhDs in art history and musicology, were actually his intellectual superiors in every respect, and that Antonescu had developed into an all-round technician on the collective sheep farm ‘Happy Banatland’ in the mid-eighties, wasn’t all too much of a hindrance – particularly as conversations between the boss and his hired hands were limited to simple exchanges of words: *Excuse, I may smoke? That goes over there. Toilet, where please?*

With the aid of this Romanian branch of Manpower, Patzky’s Elektro-Solutions had provided a number of useful services during the construction of the chancellery complex near Potsdamer Platz – a building strangely resembling a washing machine – generating a claim to a not inconsiderable sum of money. But the problem was that, in times of cyberspace, shareholder value and call-a-pizza, you may well earn money, but you don’t necessarily actually receive it. Or the other way round: you can mysteriously receive it, without having actually done anything to earn it. The fact was that somewhere beyond the final frontier of outsourcing, where no man has ever gone before, a link had broken out of the chain of calls for tender and skipped off to the Maldives with the cash, leaving Patzky faced with an all-out liquidity shortage. At least that’s what he said. Holding back the Romanians’ pay – ‘Polacks, but good workers all right’ – might not exactly be fair play, but: ‘The competition’s not getting any easier, you know. The global economy’s bugged!’ And so it turned out that the three friends, who had met in 1990 in a Bucharest biscuit factory shortly before it was closed down, were suddenly broker than they’d ever been in Romania.

‘As long as they haven’t been paid, they’ll be cooking here,’ Vassili explained. ‘We’re not throwing out anyone who’s illegal.’

Mario pulled a face. It was true. They really hadn’t ever thrown anyone out. Apart from those musicians from Frankfurt Piet had met at the bus stop a couple of months ago. But they really had behaved like pigs. Puked in the hall, and didn’t go shopping once all week. And they were on full pay!

‘But it’s too noisy.’ Vassili wasn’t the only one who could be stubborn; Mario could too. ‘We’ll just have to get the money so the Romanians can rent their own flat.’

Piet interrupted his exercises. Good timing really: you need twelve seconds’ break after every 15 contractions. ‘I’m not bloody made of money.’

But that wasn’t exactly what Mario had been thinking.

‘No, I mean we’ll get their money for them.’

‘What?’

‘The money their boss doesn’t want to pay.’

It didn’t take Mario long to win his flatmates over. Piet found Antonescu, Ganea and Popescu’s presence anything but unpleasant – ‘OK, their cooking’s a bit greasy, but it’s always fresh!’ – but he saw the Robin Hood idea as a challenge. And Didi had always agreed to everything Mario suggested anyway, ever since he’d stuck up for him at primary school against Michaela Kowalski, the arrogant cow. Vassili was the only one to put up any resistance.

‘Why should they rent a place? There’s a kitchen they can use here.’

‘It’d be more comfortable for the Romanians as well.’

‘More comfortable? It’s bloody dangerous.’

‘It’d be practical.’

‘I mean, do we know what kind of guy their boss is? Builders are big guys, you know. D’you know what kind of muscles you get putting up scaffolding?’

‘Mainly extensors,’ Piet interjected.

‘And anyway, the building trade is run like the mafia.’

‘Well, what shall we do?’ Mario was losing patience. ‘Do these guys need us or not?’

‘Yeah, but...’

‘It’s class war! That’s what you’re always on about.’

‘Yeah, but individualised. I mean, if we do it as individuals it’s not class war, it’s...’

‘B-but you always have t-to...’ Didi put the finishing touches to the argument, ‘st-start with yourself.’

Less than half an hour later, they were standing on the southbound train to Rudow between commuters, 14-year-olds with no home to go to and Hello-my-name-is-Stefan-I’m-HIV-positive. Apart from Vassili, who was always a bit negative – capitalism, the greenhouse

effect and the whole failure of the radical left – all the flatmates were acting as if they'd been debt collectors all their lives.

The relaxed mood improved even more when the master electrician Horst Patzky, described by Antonescu as 'not all that tall', turned out to be a five-foot-six chubby dwarf of a man.

'Whadyawant?' Patzky grunted, but he stood stock still once he noticed Didi's dog. The mutt, a Great Dane the size of a small cow, stood almost eye-to-eye with the master electrician.

'Scuse me.' Mario, wasting no time on complicated introduction rituals, strode past Patzky, eyeing up the value of the midi stereo and record collection – presumably rather low due to the proliferation of Status Quo and Chris Deburgh – and sank down onto the fake leather sofa in the middle of the room. Piet turned to the quietly bleating Playstation in the corner next to the bathroom door: bikini blondes in the hands of fanatical turban-wearers armed to the teeth.

'Oh, Jesus, level 1. That's, like, slow motion.'

Didi followed his Great Dane towards the kitchen, leaving only Vassili standing nervously by the doorway.

'It's about our kitchen problem.' Mario folded his hands solemnly. 'Well, actually it's *my* problem. We, I mean our flat, always has visitors. That's what it's like when you share a flat really. But lately the situation has... how can I put it...'

Patzky was obviously a bit slow on the uptake. He listened to Mario's words in silence.

'Sometimes I just have no energy. And everything seems so... ' Mario contemplated the view out of the window. 'I can't quite think of the right word.'

Gradually, Patzky showed signs of a reaction. His face turned lobster-red. 'What's that got to do with me?' Good question. 'And get your mitts off my computer!' It wasn't a Playstation? It was a proper computer? 'I'm calling the police!'

'Police?' Vassili screeched slightly hysterically.

'Bloody p-pigs', Didi pronounced in an objective tone, grabbing the portable phone and throwing it swiftly through the open window into the front garden. It landed next to a garden gnome holding a lantern.

'You know, it's true what they say,' Mario continued regardless. 'Once you're over 30, you can't take so much. Your... what's it called again...'

‘Stress intolerance...’ Vasilli made a noticeably more confident impression now the telephone was outside with the gnome.

‘Yeah, exactly, your stress intolerance is reduced.’

‘Increased!’

‘Increased?’

Vassili nodded.

‘Right. It increases. The noise... starts to get on your nerves. And that’s why’, Mario sat up straight, ‘we want... I mean, I want the Romanians to rent their own place.’

‘Eh?’

‘The Ro-Romanians’, Didi repeated.

‘They can’t cook at our place for ever,’ Mario added.

Patzky still didn’t get it, so Didi tried to sum it all up again in simple terms:

‘They haven’t g-got any assets, they’ve only go-got their wages... And if they do-
don’t even get that...’

‘Exactly! Where do they go then? Our kitchen. And then they hang around there. All day! Would you want Romanians in your kitchen all day long?’

‘Mario, it’s not important that they’re Romanians...’ Vassili started in.

‘Romanians’, Patzky aped.

‘OK, it doesn’t matter,’ Mario finished. ‘Anyway, we want, I mean the Romanians want their money! By next Friday!’

That could well have been the end of Mario’s crisis. Antonescu & co were still spending their free time at 73 Adalbert Strasse, but the prospect of imminent change made Mario more tolerant. Life in the flat went back to normal: sunbathing on the roof, exercises on the windowsill. They probably would have just taken Patzky’s money and never wasted another thought on the building trade, if Mario’s mother hadn’t come to visit that weekend.

Mum! The ex-Maoist, ex-art teacher, ex-dropout, returned from Gomera to her grandparents’ house in Solingen after various failed relationships, ashram visits and career reorientations, had always showed great understanding for her son’s way of life. When Mario left Remscheid at the tender age of 15 because you could only declare war on the system properly in West Berlin, she gave him the phone numbers of several lawyers she knew for his address book. His radical phase ended in 1987 after squatting a mangy strip of West Berlin’s borderland belonging to East German territory, where friendly policemen handed out coffee, cigarettes and asylum applications – luckily, they were all allowed to leave the country again.

She responded to his 20th-birthday declaration, to the effect that he would now forget any further effort in the face of the nationalist mania and feel free to devote his energy to drugs, with a moving-house postcard from Valle Gran Rey. All the moaning about 68-generation parents who'd ruined all the fun of shopping with their anti-authoritarian upbringing had never impressed Mario. It only got so many column inches in poor-quality news magazines because former choirboys turned obese journos wanted to distract attention from their traumatic experiences on Father Cornelius's lap, laying it on thick with all that talk of commune concentration camps.

So Mario really had no cause to complain about his mum. Even the rather abrupt transitions between her significant others – Dieter (card-carrying Marxist-Leninist), Michele (real name Horst-Michael), Ibrahim (Kuwaiti eco-vintner) and Tamira (faith healer) – had never turned out too traumatic. If there was anyone for Mario to thank that he didn't have to waste a thought on career progress at the age of 32, it was his mother, who had laid a solid foundation for her son's personal value structure from an early age.

Unfortunately, things looked slightly different when it came to Mario's big brother Wolfgang, who was eight years older and the offspring of mum's lousy first marriage. You could have a great conversation with him on Russian constructivism, Fassbinder's subversive potential or Noise music. But as soon as conversation turned to less exotic subjects, you got the impression that the old stork must have got muddled up somewhere along the line. Whereas Mario and his mother's mythical world seemed to be made up of equal portions of Easy Rider, Pippi Longstocking and Che Guevara, Wolfgang was the epitome of the modern businessman: an unrelenting, decadent scrooge.

Wolfgang's CV was anything but boring. He spent a few years as a performance artist, the most enduring memory of which was hundreds of buckets of mud, paint and pig's blood tipped over his face. Wolfgang then decided to turn to more solid matters in the mid-1980s. He embarked on a lightning career as a project developer, a.k.a. property shark, and was so expert at detecting synergies between his projects and private life that his work and family life underwent an extremely successful merger. In less than a decade, Wolfgang had been through four marriages with the accompanying natural and social paternities, and built up an impressive empire of letterbox companies allocated to his various wives. He maintained the management himself – a construction that ensured the never-resting swarm of creditors lost all track of who owned what.

Wolfgang's life story would have made perfect material for a TV artist-goes-multimillionaire report, if only mum's upbringing ('Let a hundred flowers bloom') hadn't

meant that Wolfgang's ethical standards and actual behaviour were miles apart. Despite unconvincing lies to himself ('My tenants love me', 'I'm reconstructing a clapped-out city', 'We're earning next to nothing out of it'), Wolfgang's psycho-tectonics had gradually gone so off the rails that he was constantly plagued by his conscience: towards members of the family, business partners, underpaid builders, ex-wives, inner city residents and, of course, the masses in the Third World. To reconstruct his inner peace, Wolfgang had started making his mark as a patron of the arts. Undeterred by the reserved mood on the property market, he pumped funds from the roof-terrace universe into the world of the avant-garde, collecting a swarm of wannabe unconventional trustafarians in his wake, who showered their benefactor with something akin to admiration for his generous project grants. On some level, Wolfgang must have been aware of the prostitution-like character of these relationships, because at every family get-together he announced his intention of radically shaking up his life in five years at the most.

'I'll sell the bloody property, buy myself a piece of land down south and grow tomatoes and paint again.'

'Paint or pour paint over your head?'

'Pouring paint over your head is art too, you know.'

'What about pouring paint over tomatoes?'

So a fun evening was always on the cards when Mario got together with the rest of his family for dinner. Mum recounted the latest U-turns in her personal philosophy, Wolfgang tried to enhance his self-esteem by expatiating in the most flowery language on twelve-tone music, Dadaist sound poems and total abstraction; a virtual world where there were no tenants; and Mario sat quietly tipping back the 50-euro Chianti that his big brother kindly donated on this kind of occasion.

On this particular evening, they had agreed to meet up at an Arabian restaurant. Mum was of the opinion that you had to take a private stand against anti-Islamism in times of rampant ideology of the clash of the civilisations. The restaurant, however, didn't look all that Islamic.

As usual, Wolfgang's greeting was slightly tense.

'Mario! ... Why don't you ever call me? ...I'm building social housing right now, by the way.'

'Hi, mum.'

'So people can live on a budget... You know, it's good residential space, but affordable... for families... from the lower classes...'

‘How are you, mum?’

‘Lots of people think the state’s already abolished it... social housing... It’s coming to an end, the programme. But it hasn’t been abolished yet! ...Everyone should have an affordable and good home... You have to think of the socially disadvantaged.’

‘That one!’ Mum was heading for a table at the back of the restaurant.

Mario shuffled along behind her. If mum wanted to sit next to the toilets, they’d sit next to the toilets. But it wasn’t that simple. Nothing was really simple in this family.

‘Hello, waiter!’ Wolfgang crowed across the restaurant. ‘Is it a no smoking area at the back?’

‘Sorry?’

‘I’ve given up! Anyway I need a signal! I’ll just see if I’ve got a signal, mum... Waiter, have you got O-Two? ... This is my homezone, you know. Look, mum, it’s very handy! More than half a mile from home and still in my homezone.’

‘You can have a table by the window if you want.’

‘Can you see the belly dancers from there?’ Mario’s mother enquired.

‘No, mum, it’s too draughty by the window. This is a good place... I’ve got a signal here. We’ll sit here.’

‘But we can’t see the belly dancers properly.’

‘Why not? I can see everything.’

‘But later, when it’s crowded, we might not be able to see.’

‘Mum, do you know how many Arabian restaurants there are in Berlin? Hundreds! Why should this one get crowded, of all places?’ Wolfgang reached for the menu and eyed the prices. ‘Oh, là là... I didn’t realise halibut was on the list of endangered species.’

‘Scuse me,’ mum turned to the waiter. ‘Have you got vegetarian couscous?’

‘Mario, order whatever you like, it’s on me... Goodness me! The lamb’s expensive!’

The evening continued in this entertaining vein until Wolfgang went to the toilet half an hour later, and Mario took advantage of his brother’s absence to get chatting to his mum.

‘Oh boy, what’s he on...?’ Mario commented.

‘Why?’ Mario’s mother refreshed her lipstick. Cherry red! At the last family get-together, she’d announced that cherry red was a colour for CEO concubines.

‘He’s running round like a complete cokehead.’

‘Well,’ mum put down her hand mirror. ‘He does run a company.’

‘A company?’ Mario turned up his nose. ‘A money-making empire, more like, that sucks the blood from the veins of us tenants.’

‘He restores buildings. That’s not money-making.’

Mario looked at his mother in disbelief. First the lipstick and now this. ‘Have you got a new boyfriend or something?’

‘What?’

‘A CEO? Are you going out with a CEO?’

‘What gives you that idea?’

‘You’re saying such funny things.’

It was a significant moment – a bit like someone telling you everything was just a misunderstanding after a 32-year relationship.

‘You know, Mario...’ Now mum was even putting on blue eye shadow. Last time she’d said not even CEO concubines used blue eye shadow. ‘Things aren’t as easy as they used to be. I’m pretty grateful there’s at least one person in the family I don’t have to worry about. A bit of financial security doesn’t do any harm when you get older.’

Older?

‘Older?’

‘32 isn’t really young any more. I had two children by the time *I* was 32.’

The conversation lasted less than 90 seconds, but it was enough to push Mario off the edge into an abyss, into that unfounded where-is-my-life-supposed-to-be-going psychosis that gets a grip on whole generations. Mario paid no attention to the evening’s further events – Wolfgang’s return from the toilet, dessert, hip-swinging housewives masquerading as Arabian beauties. Instead, his mother’s comment echoed hazily in his ears: A bit of financial security doesn’t do any harm when you get older. At 32!

In fact it was, of course, a phrase that all mothers utter to encourage their children to work hard and procreate. With most professional park-loungers it would have gone in one ear and out the other. But things were different for Mario. Until that evening, he’d imagined he and his mother thought the same way. He’d been convinced mum shared his attitude of taking what comes, whatever it is. And now this! A failed art teacher, who’d gone along with every last crap from the long marches through the institutions via new wave esotericism to ecological farming, was suddenly talking like an insurance salesman. Mario felt as if someone had pulled the rug out from under him.

We all know what it’s like. Once you’re on your last legs, you react to even the most harmless remarks like a pubescent 14-year-old plagued by self-doubt. Your flatmate remarks that the coffee’s not very hot and you start dismantling the machine, the filter and the plug. A friend

asks you where you got that jumper from, nobody's worn that look for years now, and you knuckle down that evening to pare down your wardrobe. You're at the traffic lights on your mountain bike and some cocky Gran Canaria Johnny looks down at you from his cabriolet, and you're suddenly seized by a feeling of being a total and utter loser.

Of course, Mario didn't suddenly want to live like Wolfgang after the failed family get-together – or like all his old classmates now working towards their big break as advertising designers, whose main topics of conversation were the crisis in the media sector and their latest holidays. But, for the first time in his life, he could hear his biological clock ticking. Well, not exactly ticking. His bloody biological clock was hammering away like a Soviet rocket launcher. His insecurity was escalating into a full-blown personal crisis, faster than the kebab shops on Kottbusser Damm open up and go bust again.

The final blow came the next morning during a spot of shopping in *Mondo Gastronomico*. The deli was a historical monument. In the early nineties, a tough underground squad had declared war on the yuppie culture spreading across the neighbourhood, attacking a number of decadent foodie temples, including *Mondo Gastronomico*. The odd hand grenade was lobbed into the odd posh restaurant, the media called for a strong hand, and the Tuscany faction radiated a doomsday mood: 'You can't even drink a cappuccino in peace any more.' But after a short winter of proletarian counter-attacks, the whole thing died down again surprisingly quickly. By April, nobody was talking about sushi bars as the spearhead of underhand gentrification strategies any more. Quite the opposite – many an old street-fighter came to rather like the delis, and so the press turned its attention back to more common expressions of rabble-rousing youth violence: football, muggings, the army. Only Mario stayed true to the ideals of the class struggle in the years to come. Without making a song and dance of it, he continued the war against the criminal delicatessen merchants with a strategy of pinprick attacks. That morning, as ever, he concealed various Italian delicacies up the sleeve of his bomber jacket, while the highly motivated but unsuspecting students behind the till didn't notice the slightest thing. The problems only started when Mario extracted a packet of air-cured Parma ham from his jacket outside the shop. A girl – late twenties, black hair, too much make-up, obviously one of those over-assimilated immigrant kids – planted herself in front of him.

'I saw that! I don't believe it! That's a private business! Do you know how long a shopkeeper has to work to make a bit of money? The poor guy's on his feet all day, and then some lazy Kreuzberg student comes along...'

‘Hey!’ Mario prided himself on his tolerance, big-time. Everyone had the right to freedom of expression. But this was going too far. ‘I’m not a student. And we live in Mitte, anyway.’

Only 50 yards from the border to the borough of Kreuzberg, but still.

‘You stole that ham! You took it away from those people.’

Mario shuffled up Mariannen Strasse, while the over-assimilated bint kept banging on at him. ‘They should rob your flat! No, rubbish! Bet there’s nothing in it. You should have to work off your debt. And then apologise to every single person! Every one of the business people you’ve robbed.’

‘Phhh!’ Mario grinned – she was obviously stark raving mad; it was hilarious.

‘I mean, you’re a grown man. At least 34. You could be earning your keep, couldn’t you? Like everyone else does. Why don’t you?’

Now that wasn’t so hilarious. 34? No one had ever thought he was 34 before.

‘What, I don’t earn money, or what?’

‘Anyone can see that!’

‘And how, if I may ask?’

‘From how you look.’

‘Ha ha!’ Mario forced a tortured laugh.

‘What d’you do then, eh? How d’you earn your money?’

‘I, er... I...’

‘You’re on the dole, right?’

‘You don’t get dole any more. It’s called ALG II now.’

He couldn’t believe it: they’d left him in peace for 32 years, and then they all came along with this career advice crap at the same time. But Mario wasn’t having any of it.

Without turning around, he headed off – up Adalbert Strasse.