

## THE BRATWURST DETECTIVES AND THE SECRET OF THE WHEELIE CASE

### 1.

## A persistent piece of paper

“Well if you ask me, old Radek is off his rocker. I mean, who wears wellies in mid-summer?! And what about that beard! It wouldn’t surprise me if he had a whole menagerie of little creatures crawling around in there. Yuck!” That’s what Leo said every time we caught sight of the strange old man.

Everyone knows that, besides being my best buddy, Leo is also the world’s biggest know-all. Yet I had to admit he had a point. Anyone who goes around in wellington boots in thirty-degree heat must surely have a screw loose. And it wasn’t just the wellies and bushy beard. There was also the business of the wheelie case. No one knew what was inside the funny suitcase Radek towed along behind him wherever he went. The weirdest thing of all, though, was the noise from his basement flat. A perfectly normal kind of noise, really, but then... well... I don’t know... there was definitely something weird about it.

To be honest, it wasn’t just that we thought Radek was a bit bonkers; we were also a little afraid of him. That is until last summer, when we discovered the truth about him.

I could spill the beans here and now, but then you would miss out on the whole story. And as stories go, it’s a pretty crazy one, as well as being quite peculiar. As peculiar, in fact, as Radek himself. So here goes!

It all started the day I had to go over to Dad's workshop and back three times in a row. If it weren't for me being such a scatterbrain, I wouldn't have gone back and forth three times between our flat and the workshop, and we wouldn't have found out the truth about Radek. But as I said, I'm a scatterbrain, which is why this story happened in the first place. It all started when our telephone rang. I picked up.

"Clemens, do you think you could just bring me the chisel?" came the crackle of Dad's voice through the receiver. "It should be somewhere near the cooker."

"Sure!" I called. And in no time I had grabbed the tool and was heading off at top speed down the stairs.

That mini conversation won't mean much to you until I explain that my dad is a teacher at the cabinet-making school in our neighbourhood. Every lunchtime he brings a couple of apprentices home with him and they prepare lunch together. "The boys and girls don't learn it at home anymore, so I may as well teach them that too while I'm at it," he always says.

And when Dad can't find the cooking utensils he needs, he just uses tools from his toolbelt instead. So he might end up slicing tomatoes with a putty knife or stirring the sauce with a file. The apprentices are often in stitches behind his back, but they don't say anything, because he is their teacher and because they really like him.

So I sped down the stairs like greased lightning. When I arrived on the ground floor, I noticed something sticking out from under the door to Radek's basement flat. Something white with dark markings. Hm..., I thought. I didn't think anything else after that.

Having several thoughts in a row isn't exactly my speciality. I hurried straight over to the workshop.

"I said the chisel, not the hand saw!" Dad exclaimed, and shot me a worried look. "You really do have a memory like a sieve, Clemens!"

He's right, there's no denying it. There is no one else in the world with a memory as leaky as mine. I did an about-turn and headed back to the flat, grabbed the other tool, went back downstairs, and that's when I caught sight of the white thing with black markings under Radek's basement door again. It looks like the corner of a sheet of paper, I thought. With an odd kind of pattern on it. Hm... Then I carried on running. As I said, I don't tend to dwell on things.

"Whatever's the matter with you, boy? That's a vice!" Dad exclaimed when I arrived back and presented him with the tool.

Grubel and Oberholzer, the other master cabinet-makers who worked there, raised their heads and frowned in our direction.

"You know what a chisel is!" Dad whispered in my ear. "You ought to, being the son of our city's best master cabinet-maker this side of the river!"

Of course I know what it is. I also know that Dad has twice been crowned the national single-handed speed-planing champion. But I'm still a scatterbrain. I can't help it. So I had to make the trip all over again.

As I ran down the stairs with the next tool, the stupid piece of paper caught my eye for the third time. So what? I thought. Why should I care what Radek has sticking out under his door? But in that split second as I was about to turn away, a big gust of wind blew the door open and the sheet of paper landed right at my feet. Shoo, I

thought, I don't want you, you stupid piece of paper! Another gust of wind swept it up and plastered it against my shin. Help! At that very moment the funny noise sounded from Radek's basement. With trembling knees I stumbled back up the stairs and closed the door of the flat behind me.

The whole of the building we live in is owned by Radek. From the top of the chimney to the bottom of the steps leading down to the street. But it is the basement that is his most of all, since that is where he lives. A bit unusual, I know, but that's the way he wanted it. My parents don't have a problem with it, and nor do the people living in the other flats (Professor Peeters next door to us, and ginger-haired Mrs. Grun downstairs). They already knew about the arrangement when they moved in. Other than that, Radek has always done things the proper way. He says hello, though it is hard to make out what he is saying behind his bushy beard, and if there is a problem with the heating or a water tap, he'll call a plumber straight away. In fact, he's the perfect landlord. It wouldn't bother anyone in the building if he was just a tiny bit odd. After all, my parents are fairly weird themselves, and I won't even start on Professor Peeters. But Radek is more than a tiny bit odd. First there is his left eye, which always seems to be angled skywards when it is supposed to be looking elsewhere. Then, of course, there is the matter of the wellies and the wheelie case. But the main thing is the noise that comes from his basement!

But let's get back to the story. So I was standing by our flat door, my heart pounding like crazy, when I suddenly noticed I was holding the piece of paper in my hand. To be on the safe side I turned the key in the lock, then I knelt down and laid the piece of

paper out flat on the floor. Just at that moment, the telephone rang. I answered it.

“Where’s my chisel got to, for goodness’ sake?”

Oh. My dad. I had completely forgotten about him.

“Er... I’m still looking for it,” I said. “But I’m sure I’ll find it soon. I’m getting warmer.”

“Warmer sounds good, Clemens – it ought to be somewhere near the cooker,” came the voice from the handset. “It somehow slipped out of my pocket while I was cooking...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, Dad,” I said, rolling my eyes.

I put the phone down, hid the sheet of paper behind my bookcase and looked around for Dad’s chisel. As I raced past Radek’s basement flat downstairs with the tool in my hand, I kept my eyes firmly shut. I didn’t want to see whether his door was still open.

“My precious chisel!” my father exclaimed as I arrived at the workshop, and covered the thing in kisses. Amazingly, I had finally brought the right tool!

Back at the flat, I was about to slide the piece of paper out from behind my bookcase when I heard a clatter in the hall, and Mum’s face appeared in the doorway of my room: “Hello there, Clemi, I’m back! Ooh, I see you’re tidying your bookcase! Well I won’t disturb you then.”

I swallowed, my throat dry.

Mum pulled off her smart boots and tossed them down the corridor in a high loop. “Ah, that’s better! Oh yes, Clemens, didn’t you want to show me your talk on that polar explorer, Amundsen?”

No, I didn’t want to, I thought to myself. But if I really had to...

She lifted her left leg high in the air and spread her hands. I watched her. Mum does her tai chi exercises every day after work. “It helps me re-centre,” she always says. The posture with the raised leg and hands apart is called “Golden Rooster Stands On One Leg.” To me, it looked more like a drunken stork at a wedding dance.

Next she stretched out both arms and waved them around in the air, before taking three deep breaths in and out. Then she said: “By the way, Clemens, have you written the birthday card for Auntie Ilse yet?”

No way! I thought. It’s Auntie Ilse’s birthday again so soon?

Basically Mum kept me busy with one thing and another, and before long it was dinner time, and after that I had to do the stupid arithmetic homework I had been putting off all week, and pack my school bag for the next day, and by then there was no time left for anything else – not even to look at Radek’s piece of paper that was still behind my bookcase.

2.

## Secret service in wellies

The next day, at morning break, when I told Leo about what had happened, he replied quick as a flash: “Radek works for the secret service, I knew it!”

“What kind of secret service?” I asked.

“No one knows. It wouldn’t be secret if they did, would it?” he snapped.

“But Radek doesn’t look like the kind of person who would work for the secret service. I mean, just think of his wellies.”

“You haven’t got a clue, have you Clemi! All the best spies go around in wellies.”

Aha, I thought. First he reckons Radek is crazy, then he thinks he’s a spy. What am I supposed to make of that?

Leo is and always has been a know-all. On the other hand, he knows things that I can’t even begin to imagine. Information flows into him from somewhere or other and then it all comes bubbling back out of his mouth. As for me, I’d managed yet again to forget the name of the polar explorer I was meant to be giving a talk on next week. Something like Almdusen, I thought. Or was it AmuselN? Or Amsundeln?

I may have a memory like a sieve, whereas Leo is a junior Einstein, but we’re best friends all the same. We always have been. Ever since nursery class, we have been an inseparable pair never seen apart, and if one of us is ever ill, the other pretends to be ill

too as a mark of friendship. If Leo wasn't so incredibly smart and I wasn't so forgetful, you might think we were twins.

"We'll have to tail Radek," Leo murmured in my ear, as the bell rang for the end of break and all the other pupils ran back into the school building.

"But if he works for the secret service, he's bound to notice straight away," I replied.

"Don't worry. We'll just do the same as we always do."

"What, stand about in the street randomly chatting?"

"Precisely!"

"Well that's not exactly hard."

"That's what I mean!"

As we were dawdling up the steps to the school building, our teacher poked her head out of the classroom window and chirped: "May I ask the esteemed gentlemen Leo and Clemens to make their way post-haste, by which I mean without delay, to the rooms of our humble educational establishment? The rest of us have been waiting for quite some time."

Mrs. Muller-Moller always talks like that when she is annoyed. You only understand half the words, but you still know exactly what she means. So Leo and I made our way post-haste into the humble educational establishment.

The lesson was spent discussing the play we would be putting on. It is a longstanding tradition at our school that Class Four performs a play at the end of each school year. Mrs. Muller-Moller had come up with something a bit different for us. We would be turning a novel into a stage play, and the novel was *Emil and the Detectives*.

I am sure you know Erich Kästner's story about Emil and the detectives. For anyone who has forgotten, here's a quick recap: Emil Tischbein is on the train on his way to visit relatives in Berlin when he has his money stolen. On arrival in Berlin, he goes in hot pursuit of the suspected thief, helped by Gustav, who gathers all his friends together. Soon there is a whole gang of children on the trail of the evil criminal, including Emil's cousin Pony Hütchen.

Definitely the best detective story in the world, if you ask me. Mrs. Muller-Moller may talk in fancy language, but she still knows a good book when she sees one.

Of course all the boys wanted to play Gustav, and all the girls Pony Hütchen. Which meant we had a problem, as we couldn't have ten Gustavs and ten Pony Hütchens on stage at once.

Another problem was that there were not enough female roles in **Erich** Kästner's book. Mrs. Muller-Moller solved it by inventing five new girl characters for the play who weren't in the book. Somehow or other it was obvious from the start who would get to play Pony Hütchen: Babsi. She is the best actress in our class and is always re-enacting her favourite TV show in the playground. She does it so loudly that everyone has no choice but to watch her. I, and others too, I expect, would like to be able to do something different and have a bit of peace at break-time once in a while, but Babsi doesn't care in the least.

We started by reading a few pages of the novel together. The parts would be allocated later. To be honest, I wasn't particularly looking forward to it. I already knew perfectly well what part I would get. But I'm going to keep that a secret for the time being.