

COOLMAN and Me

by

Rüdiger Bertram (text)

and

Heribert Schulmeyer (comic strips)

English sample translation by David Henry Wilson

Chapter 1: Introducing COOLMAN and me

Imagine a street. It runs downhill and is as steep as a ski jump. Right at the bottom there's a little park with a pond which from up here looks as small as a puddle.

Got it?

Good.

Now imagine a yellow wheelie bin. One of those with four tiny rubber wheels down below, full to the brim with unwashed yogurt pots. Can you see it? Can you smell the mouldy pong? Right, now imagine a boy sitting up to his neck in this stinking pile of packaging, panic-stricken, screaming his head off like a mad monkey in a zoo, because this stupid plastic coffin has no brakes and is hurtling faster and faster down the steep hill.

Can you imagine all this?

Great, because now you know who I am. My name's Kai, and I'm the boy in the bin, yelling at the top of his voice as the lorry coming from the right manages to slam on the brakes at the last moment. Meanwhile, the next junction is just ahead.

Up to now, you've had it easy. But it's going to get tougher, because I'm not alone in the bin. Imagine a guy wearing a cape and a black mask and sitting right next to me. He's holding his head high in the wind and actually seems to be enjoying it.

And just to make it a bit more difficult for you, he's got a toy trumpet in his hand and is blowing it as if he was a trumpeter in the cavalry. And he's on his way to rescue a group of peace-loving settlers from a horde of wild Apaches on the warpath.

Comic strip 1.1. (2 strips):

COOLMAN blowing his trumpet. He is sitting next to Kai in the runaway wheelie bin.

COOLMAN: I love it when the wind's blowing through my hair!

KAI: Get me out of here!

COOLMAN: What do you want to get out for? This is just the beginning. We're on our way! Charge!

Allow me to introduce my companion. The guy with the trumpet who is ready to chuck his life away answers to the name of COOLMAN. He's been at my side ever since I was four years old. But I'm the only person who can see him. He's invisible to others, and that's a good job too. It's enough that he makes my life into an endless series of extra-catastrophic catastrophes. And so of course – surprise, surprise – it's entirely thanks to COOLMAN that I'm sitting in this stinking bin racing towards my untimely end.

In fact the day started off OK. An OK Kai day is one that passes without some major disaster – in other words, one in which COOLMAN plays as little part as possible. Disaster and COOLMAN mean more or less the same thing.

So the morning was good. The sun was shining, I hadn't made a fool of myself at school, and even COOLMAN kept quiet and stayed in the background. He doesn't like school any more than I do. But that's just about the only thing we have in common.

There are three reasons why COOLMAN doesn't like school:

- 1) He can't do maths.
- 2) He can't write.
- 3) I haven't got time for him during lessons.

There are three reasons why I don't like school:

- 1) It starts too early.
- 2) It goes on too long.
- 3) I don't know many people, because we've only just moved here.

Comic strip 1.2. (2 strips):

COOLMAN and Kai in the runaway wheelie bin.

COOLMAN: Liar! The *only* person you know here is me.

KAI: I do know other people.

COOLMAN: Who?

KAI: Mrs Maier.

COOLMAN: She's your teacher! She doesn't count. And another thing – I *can* do maths.

KAI: What's 4 x 5?

COOLMAN: 45.

OK, COOLMAN's right. About people I mean, not about 45. I don't really know anybody here, because if I did, I wouldn't be sitting in this stupid wheelie bin. If I'd known the two kids who were sitting on the bench outside the school, I'd have kept my mouth shut when they tripped me. I'd just have got up and not said a word. Apart from maybe: 'My apologies for falling over your feet.'

Comic strip 1.3. (1 strip):

COOLMAN helps Kai to his feet.

COOLMAN: Tell them that when they grow up, you'll let them wash your Ferrari.

KAI: I'm not ready to die!

COOLMAN: Tell them! Tell them!

That's my big mistake. I keep taking COOLMAN's advice.

'When you grow up,' I said, 'I'll let you wash my Porsche.' I thought the Ferrari was a bit over the top.

I didn't know that those two were the worst bullies in the entire school. They were a very dangerous duo, and UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES should anyone ever give them any lip.

To cut a long story short, they grabbed hold of me, shoved me headfirst into the yellow wheelie bin, and pushed me down the road. That was bad enough, but was not exactly the end of the world. The end of the world was the fact that our school is right at the very top of the hill which I am now descending at breakneck speed in my yellow plastic carriage.

I've managed to survive the first red traffic light. But straight ahead is the next one, and that's also red. With the sort of luck I have, I can hardly expect a succession of green lights. All the same, it's the last one. After that comes the park, and if I can get that far, I might have a slight chance of crawling out of the bin alive. Anyway, I slowly manage to work out how I can steer it. If I throw myself from one corner to the other, my yellow Rolls Rubbish also makes a sort of sideways leap. That suddenly becomes extremely important, because I've got to overtake a little car that's stopped at the red light. With an inch to spare, I scrape past the rear bumper and go racing by. When I'm level with the steering wheel, I realize who the car belongs to. Sitting at the wheel is Mrs Maier, my teacher. She look at me wide-eyed, as if she's just been overtaken by an elephant on roller skates.

Comic strip 1.4. (1 strip)

Kai and COOLMAN in the runaway wheelie bin.

COOLMAN: You've got to greet her! Where are your manners? Be a good boy now and say hi!

But there's no chance of that because I've gone past her in a flash. There's just about time for me to wave to her. Mrs Maier waves back, but I suspect that's nothing more than a polite reflex action. Then she's already way behind me, and I've got to focus on surviving the last crossroads.

The front right wheel is coming loose. Hardly surprising, since these things are only meant to be wheeled to the dustcart and back. They're totally unsuitable for Formula 1, and in any case there's nowhere for me to make a pit stop and change the tyre.

In spite of the wheel problem, I carry on throwing myself against the sides of the bin in order to avoid the cars coming from left and right. COOLMAN tries to clear the way by blowing his trumpet – as if anyone could hear him. The only person who can hear the trumpet is me, and in any case what COOLMAN calls music is not exactly designed to relieve the tension. On the contrary, he very rarely manages to hit the right note, and when he does it's purely by accident.

Comic strip 1.5. (1 strip):

COOLMAN and Kai in the wheelie bin.

COOLMAN: Nonsense! I've trumpeted for kings!

KAI: What kings?

COOLMAN: King of clubs, king of spades, king of diamonds...

COOLMAN's jokes are terrible, but at the moment I couldn't care less about his jokes. We've got through the last crossroads and I'm still alive. Three cheers! I'M STILL ALIVE !

There's not much that can go wrong now. The park is just ahead, and with a bit of luck we'll roll onto the grass and gradually come to a halt.

And in fact when the bin goes into the park, it slows right down. I turn round and look back up the steep road leading to my new school. There are still a few cars parked right in the middle of the junctions, with flabbergasted drivers wondering what the heck it was that had just gone zooming past them. I wouldn't be surprised if the hotlines for UFO sightings didn't get deluged with calls for the next few hours.

The wheelie bin is now rolling gently over the grass towards the pond. The water is covered with a thick, foul-smelling skin of slime, because the ducks are even more on top of one another here than chickens on a poultry farm.

CRACK! The noise comes from the broken front right wheel, which has just gone into a rabbit hole and has finally said goodbye to the rest of us. As a result, the bin keels over to one side, like in slow motion, and everything inside it – which means me and the filthy yoghurt pots – is tipped straight out into the mucky green water of the pond.

Comic strip 1.6. (1 strip):

Kai and COOLMAN are sitting in the pond, with lots of ducks swimming among the empty yoghurt pots..

COOLMAN: In this heat, the only thing to do is go bathing.

KAI: It's a load of shit!

COOLMAN: It's not shit. It's lemon and lime. I love lemon and lime!

'You boy, what do you think you're doing? Are you out of your mind?'

An elderly gentleman wearing a check cap on his head and carrying a bag of duck food in his hand is standing at the side of the pond. He points his walking stick at the yoghurt pots floating in the pond. 'Clear up that mess, boy. And do it now!'

I just nod, because he doesn't look the sort of elderly gentleman who wants to talk about who's innocent and who's guilty. Fortunately, the water only comes up to my knees. I wade through the muck and collect all the plastic pots that are bobbing up and down among the ducks in the lemon and lime.

The old man doesn't say a word, whereas COOLMAN just keeps babbling away without a pause, telling me how he once filtered all the salt out of the Atlantic, till the sea water tasted as sweet as lemonade. My few yoghurt pots are nothing compared to his wondrous works – so he says.

There's no point in covering my ears or eyes. I've tried it. At least a million times.

COOLMAN never goes away. You can't just switch him off like the TV. At best he'll be on stand-by.

After a quarter of an hour I've finished. All the rubbish has been washed clean and is now back in the bin, which I've managed with a great effort to heave back onto dry land. Then I need another ten minutes to find out where this weird squeaky sound is coming from.

It's only when I've taken all the rubbish out again that I find a fluffy chick that's lost its way in the yellow coffin and can't climb out. The old geezer with the walking stick is standing right next to it and doesn't raise a finger. I reckon in an earlier life he must have been a slave-driver on a cotton plantation. Not that I really believe in reincarnation. But you take COOLMAN – I must have done something wrong in an earlier life to have been punished by having him in this one. I was probably Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, or some other creepy-crawly.

Comic strip, 1.7. (1 strip):

A furious COOLMAN grabs Kai by the collar..

COOLMAN: I'm not a punishment! I'm a reward!

Exhausted, I drag myself over to the lawn and flop down on the dusty grass so that my wet clothes can dry in the sun.

'Hey, boy! You're not allowed on the lawn! Get yourself off it, now!' yells the reincarnated slave-driver, and points to a tiny patch of grass which is not much bigger than a handkerchief. 'Over there you can lie on the grass!'

Wearily I pick myself up and follow the direction of his outstretched walking stick.

Peace at last. I lie on my back, blinking in the sunlight. Even COOLMAN, lying next to me, keeps his mouth closed, and is enjoying the warmth of the sun. When he shuts up, he's not really that bad. COOLMAN does have his good sides.

COOLMAN's good sides:

- 1) I'm never alone.
- 2)
- 3)

I might think of something later for sides 2) and 3). But until I get some new friends here, at least I've got COOLMAN to talk to. That's better than nothing.

Comic strip 1.8. (1 strip):

Kai and COOLMAN, lying on their backs in the grass.

KAI: It's true, isn't it? You're always there for me.

COOLMAN doesn't answer. He's snoring.

Well, most of the time anyway.

After five minutes, a thick black cloud covers the sun. A moment later it starts bucketing down. The rain's beating a drumroll on me. But it doesn't matter, because I'm soaked to the skin anyway. Besides, there's a positive angle to this downpour: I won't have to dream up some excuse to give my parents for why I've come home looking like a drowned rat.

Chapter 2: Home Sweet Home

When I get home, it's still pouring. We've been living in this little house for a month now. In the front garden there's a swing left by the previous owners, and it's a real eyesore. But even more of an eyesore is the pottery my mum has put next to it. She hopes that some passer-by or the other might buy something. But who would want to buy a hideous lump of clay called 'All hope ends here', which costs 'only £150'? Nobody but a would-be suicide would buy something like that, because they might like the name and they wouldn't need their money any more.

Comic strip 2.1. (1 strip):

1ST picture: COOLMAN and Kai standing side by side. COOLMAN holds one of the clay pots out in front of him (like Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull). It looks like a portrait of COOLMAN.

COOLMAN: I like it.

KAI: What?

2nd picture:

COOLMAN: It looks so sensitive and intelligent.

My parents moved because they got new jobs in this town. They're both actors in the theatre. They've got a five-year contract, which is almost for ever compared to the one-off engagements they'd been getting before. We've moved so often that I could write a guidebook about the deadliest dumps and the filthiest school lavatories in the country.

When I open the door, I hear my mother and father in the kitchen. They're cooking and at the same time rehearsing their parts for the premiere tonight. They've got the title roles in *Romeo and Juliet*. Can you imagine it, Romeo and Juliet! And they're both as old as Methuselah. Over 30. Well over 30!

Comicstrip 2.2. (2 strips):

1ST picture: COOLMAN next to Kai. He has a dagger in his hand and is wearing a Romeo costume.

COOLMAN: I'd be a fantastic Romeo.

2nd picture:

KAI: You'd have to kiss Juliet.

3rd picture: COOLMAN chucks away his hat and dagger.

4TH picture: COOLMAN running away screaming.:

COOLMAN: Aaaargh!

COOLMAN has never actually kissed a girl. Nor have I.

I try to sneak into my room without them seeing me. As I creep past the kitchen door, I can see them necking at the sink. They're always doing that, even when they're not rehearsing for a play. My parents still love each other like crazy even after twenty years, and that's even more of an eyesore than the swing and the junk in the front garden. They're always holding hands and pecking at each other, as if they were teenagers in love for the first time. Most of my old schoolmates in the hundreds of classes I've attended were luckier than me. Their parents were divorced. So in the summer they'd go on two holidays, and on their birthdays they'd get two lots of presents. And the best thing about it is they can have a great time playing their mum off against their dad, because each one hates the other's guts.

Comic strip 2.3. (2 strips):

1ST picture: Kai standing in front of COOLMAN, who is sitting in an armchair reading the paper.

KAI: Dad, can I have a new games console?

COOLMAN: You must be joking.

2nd picture: Kai standing in front of COOLMAN, who is now wearing a wig and is standing in front of the fireplace.

KAI: Mum, Dad says he won't buy me a games console. He needs the money for his new girlfriend.

COOLMAN: Oh, the absolute cad! Of course you can have one, darling.

That doesn't work with my parents. They always agree. Always.

Even now. They've just stopped nuzzling each other for a moment, because they've seen me dripping in the hall.

'Get changed at once! You'll catch your death of cold!' they wail in unison. It's really very impressive the way they manage to say exactly the same words at exactly the same time. My father comes rushing towards me, and straight away starts rubbing me down with kitchen towels. My mother puts her hand to her heart, because she fears for my life. Both of them have this tendency to overdramatize – I suppose it's because they work in the theatre.

It's only when he's used up all the tissues that my father finally stops rubbing me. Then he goes to the kitchen cupboard to get some more. I seize my chance, and disappear.

'Don't forget to put on your long underpants. Did you hear, sweetheart?' my mum calls out after me.

I only just manage to hear it, because there's a thumping bass coming out of the room of my big sister Anti. Her name's actually Antigone. My parents named her after some old Greek woman in some old Greek play. But my sister started abbreviating her name when she was just three, so since then she's been called Anti, which somehow suits her better. When I was born, my parents decided to make sure no-one could abbreviate my name. So they called me Kai.

With every thumping note from Anti's room, the door bulges out to the rhythm of the music, because she's got her CD player on so loud. It looks almost as if the room is breathing. Inside, she's painted all the walls black. That's always the first thing she does when we move. Anti never wears anything but black, and she even polishes her nails black, and as for her hair...yeah, three guesses...she's dyed it black. When she stands in front of one of the walls, she's perfectly camouflaged. You can't even see her pale face, because she lets her long black hair hang down over it like a curtain. I can't even remember what colour her eyes are.

Comic strip 2.4. (3 strips):

1ST picture: COOLMAN standing at a blackboard which is covered with squiggly lines. He has a pointer in his hand.

COOLMAN: To work it out, you need a plan.

*2ND picture: Balloon with the words **Plan A: Use modern technology.***

Kai is holding a hair dryer which is blowing his sister's hair off her face.

*2ND picture : Balloon with the words **Plan B: Use scare tactics.***

Kai pulls a terrifying face. His sister's hair stands on end.

*4TH picture: Balloon with the words **Plan C: Use the force of gravity.***

Kai stands on the edge of a cliff, holding someone over the edge by their feet.

5TH picture: We see Anti hanging upside down, so that her hair falls downwards.

COOLMAN's brilliant Plans A, B and C are completely unnecessary. In our family, everybody's got blue eyes. And so it's pretty certain that Anti's eyes are the same colour, even if we can't see them.

I go into my room and take off my wet clothes. The walls of my room aren't black but white. And I don't have any posters of footballers or bands on the wall either. I hate posters. I can't sing, and I'm no good at football. So I'll never be a star. And I don't need anyone hanging on my wall to keep reminding me of that fact. I take a few dry clothes out of the wardrobe and make myself comfortable on my bed. Time to take stock. I do that every day before supper. First the good things.

Comic strip 2.5. (1 strip):

1ST picture: COOLMAN puts up his hand, as if he's in class.

COOLMAN: I know, I know!

KAI: What do you know?

COOLMAN: The good things.

2ND picture:

COOLMAN: The wheelie bin race was good. And the lemon and lime in the pond. That was superb!

It's all very simple. Everything COOLMAN regards as good automatically goes on my list of the bad things that happened during the day. So I start with the bad things.

What things got on my nerves today?

- 1) COOLMAN
- 2) COOLMAN
- 3) COOLMAN
- 4) COOLMAN
- 5) COOLMAN
- 6) The bastards that put me in the wheelie bin
- 7) COOLMAN
- 8) The stuff that was in the wheelie bin
- 9) COOLMAN
- 10) The drive in the wheelie bin
- 11) COOLMAN
- 12) The end of the drive in the wheelie bin
- 13) COOLMAN
- 14) The old man at the pond
- 15) COOLMAN
- 16) My lovey-dovey parents

And so on and so forth.

I stop at point 25). Actually today's list isn't particularly long. But as usual, COOLMAN takes the top five places, plus several others.

'Antigone! Kai, darling! Suppertime!' shouts my mum before I can even start on the good things of the day.

I go into the kitchen, where my mum's waiting for me. My dad's in the hall, switching off the fuse for Anti's room. That's the only way to get my sister out of her black cave. She wouldn't hear him calling her anyway above the pounding bass. A moment later she shuffles into the kitchen and as usual flops down onto her chair opposite me without saying a word.

Anti bends her head low over the bowl of steaming soup. She's very clever at that, because her long black hair is like a sort of shower curtain, protecting her bowl from

prying eyes and yet never actually falling into the soup. It looks almost as if she's inhaling her food. The fact is, she just never feels like talking to us.

'Here are your tickets for this evening, children,' says mum, and pushes two tickets for the premiere across the table.

'You'll be sitting very near the front,' adds dad, 'so you'll get a perfect view of the most enchanting Juliet of all times.' Then he leans across the table to give mum a kiss.

'Romeo isn't bad either,' coos mum, returning the kiss.

From behind Anti's hairy curtain comes a loud groan, and me too, I feel like puking.

Comic strip 2.6. (1 strip):

1ST picture: COOLMAN has a round glass helmet on his head.

KAI: What's that supposed to be?

2ND picture:

COOLMAN: It's my anti-smooching helmet.

'What was that, Kai?' asks dad.

'Me? What? Nothing,' I answer quickly.

My parents haven't got a clue that COOLMAN even exists.

Wait! That's not quite true.

When I was five, I did tell them about COOLMAN. They just laughed and thought it was rather sweet. Three years later, when he was still accompanying me wherever I went, they stopped thinking it was so funny. Mum rang her sister straight away. Aunt Tina sees a psychiatrist three times a week. She's convinced she's the illegitimate daughter of the American President, which of course is a load of rubbish because she's nearly forty, and she's not in the least bit brown but just as white as mum. Mum says Aunt Tina has a slight problem or two. Dad says Aunt Tina's totally bonkers. I think dad's right. Anyway, when mum asked Aunt Tina for her shrink's telephone number, I stopped telling my parents about COOLMAN. Since then they've believed the problem's solved.

Comic strip 2.7. (2 strips):

1ST picture: COOLMAN sitting on a chair. He has a notepad and pen in his hand. Kai is lying on a sofa.

COOLMAN: What's the problem? Have you got a problem? I can help you. Tell me what's on your mind.

KAI: It's the guy in the cape who's stalking me.

COOLMAN: That's perfectly normal.

2ND picture: COOLMAN is now lying on the sofa, and Kai is on the chair, holding the pad.

COOLMAN: I'm also being stalked. There's this kid named Kai...

'Your mother and I both want to tell you something,' says dad, as he starts clearing the table. 'If tonight's premiere is a success, we'd like to go off on a romantic weekend together. Just mum and me, like Romeo and Juliet. You Don't mind, do you? I mean, you're both old enough now.'

Anti's hairy curtain begins to do a little wobble. I know my sister. Even if I can't see her eyes, I know exactly what's going through her head. A parent-free weekend is pretty close to her idea of Paradise. She'll invite all her friends over and have a massive party. They'll smoke, drink loads of booze, and wreck the whole place. There'll be total chaos. I know this for a fact, and there's absolutely nothing I can do, except...

'Mum, can't I go with you? Dad, please, please, let me go with you!' I plead, and slide forward on my chair to make myself seem smaller.

'But you're my big grown-up son, Kai. You'll manage,' answers mum, giving me an encouraging pat on the head.

Dad looks at his watch and says, 'Time we were going, or we'll be late, and they can hardly start without us. We'll see you at the theatre.'

Mum gives me a kiss. Then they grab their coats and off they go.

We hear the front door shut.

'Woe betide you if you sneak on me, you little toad,' Anti's voice hisses from behind her hair. 'But if you behave yourself, you can invite a few of your friends to my party. Provided they leave their buckets and spades at home.'

Anti's known me just as long as I've known her, and of course she also knows that I know what she's thinking. This party is going to hit me like an avalanche. You see the snow whooshing towards you, but all the same you've got no chance to get out of the way. Then the snow is on you, and that's that – everything goes dark.

Comic strip 2.8. (2 strips):

1ST picture:

COOLMAN: Party? Did I hear someone say party? Cool!

2ND picture: COOLMAN takes both Kai's hands and dances with him. There are paper streamers hanging over his shoulders.

COOLMAN: We'll dance and have a great time.

3RD picture:

KAI: And afterwards we'll have to rebuild the house.

4TH picture: COOLMAN has a bricklayer's trowel in his hand and is rebuilding a wall.

COOLMAN: It was worth it!