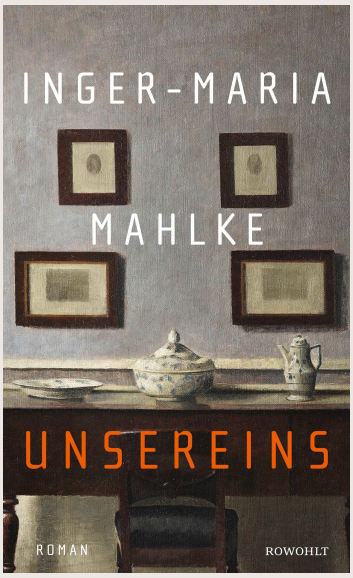
Inger-Maria Mahlke

THE LIKE OF US

Unsereins

- The latest novel by the award-winning author Inger-Maria Mahlke.
- A captivating multi-generational family epic exploring identity, belonging, gender, class, power dynamics, and love relationships.
- Her novel *Archipel* was awarded the German Book Prize in 2018, with 140,000 copies sold in Germany and rights sold to 7 countries.
- English sample translation available.



November 2023 · 496 pages

Are you familiar with Buddenbrooks?
A family from Lübeck, rich in children, conservative, loyal to the emperor: the Lindhorsts. In 1890, Marthe is born in the spacious patrician house on Königstraße amidst her older brothers whose freedoms will not be hers. And yet, it is a life with brilliant prospects. Until a bestselling novel, written by the son of a deceased acquaintance, makes it clear to the respectable Lindhorsts that even after two generations, they are still seen as "the Jews" in their environment. *Unsereins* is the novel of a city and its society, its citizens and wage earners, the craftsmen, and above all, its women. Whether a maid, housewife, seamstress, or writer, whether manic-depressive like Marthe's mother, or vulnerable like Marthe herself, who struggles with her own and others' expectations.
Inger-Maria Mahlke tells a story of identity and belonging, of gender and class, of power dynamics and love relationships – of everything that shaped and held together not only Lübeck, the former "smallest state of the German Empire".

Growing up in Lübeck and Tenerife, **Inger-Maria Mahlke** studied law at the Free University of Berlin, where she worked in the criminology department. She won the 2009 edition of Berlin's Open Mike event as well as the 2010 Klaus Michael Kühne Prize for her debut novel *Silberfischchen*. On submitting an excerpt from her novel *Rechnung offen* for the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, she won the Ernst Willner Prize. In 2014 she received the Karl Arnold Prize of the North Rhine-Westphalian Academy of Sciences and the Arts. *Wie ihr wollt* was shortlisted for the German Book Prize, which she received in 2018 for the novel *Archipel.*

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

Inger-Maria Mahlke

THE LIKE OF US

English sample translation by Rachael McGill

1

Rain, but still no snow, in the smallest state in the German Empire. The second week of January and only steel-grey clouds moving thick and swift towards the west. If this were a film, the first shot would be filmed using a drone, from the perspective of a raindrop: we'd view the earth beneath us through one side of the drop, squashed flat by air resistance. Propelled by the wind into a steeply-angled fall, our camera/drop would at first pick out only the muddy greenish-brown of East Elbia and a band of the cloud-grey Baltic Sea. Then a river would appear in the frame – the Trave – followed by a second, smaller river – the Wakenitz – and just at the place where the two might flow into each other if things ran in straight lines, we'd see a hill rising up, both rivers flowing around it. On this hill, a patch, mostly of medieval brick-red, and at this distance barely the size of a fingernail. This is the smallest state in the German Empire, and the country's oldest republic. Though neither definition is strictly correct, as Isenhagen will explain.

The tracks of the Büchen railway begin to emerge; a slim, black dash running diagonally across the picture, difficult to distinguish amongst all the green, bisecting the now fist-sized state and disappearing in the direction of Hamburg-Altona. Now it looks a little as if someone has thrown a stone into a duckweed-choked pond, as the ramparts encircling the old fortification appear like concentrically-spreading waves. None of this is likely to impress if you're a raindrop that's previously descended on Munich, or Hamburg, or Berlin; you might even succumb to the misconception that all you're hurtling towards is a large-ish, but not

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

particularly large, northern German city. Soon rows of dark roofs, gardens, paths and streets become visible; the copper roofs of the churches rising up amongst them are tarnished with turquoise. The points of the church weathercocks are needle-sharp, but our camera/drop makes it past them unscathed.

It's a Monday morning, just after nine, and the market square is patterned with carts and stalls, the goods safely stowed beneath tarpaulins stained green by seaweed. Those pale yellow, bustling dots are the straw hats of the fishwives; the larger, darker ones, looping around at a more leisurely pace, are the umbrellas of the ladies doing their shopping.

A gust of wind whips us over the gable of the town hall next to the market. That black oblong thing coming towards us down Breite Straße is the two-pointed hat of Isenhagen, the council clerk, hurrying to his post a few minutes late, as he does every Monday, Wednesday and Friday in winter. By the time he reaches the entrance to the town hall, we're already above the fire station opposite, then we're zipping along Königstraße. Ida Stuermann regards us with horror, snatches up the feather mattress she laid over the windowsill to air half an hour before and forgot about, and disappears inside the first floor flat at number 5. A last flurry of wind pushes us down the street towards 'the institution', as the town's oldest grammar school is known. Shortly before impact, the shot fades out.

About three and a half metres below the drip that's now trickling slowly down the roof tiles, and separated from it by a few millimetres of zinc, a five hundred year old beam, a layer of wooden boards and a coating of plaster, sits Georg. He's the newest, youngest and probably most reluctant chronicler of this state, and he's contemplating the words he's just written:

Dear Mother,
I am in urgent need, please read these lines carefully!
And don't show them straight to Grandfather again

He's not sure whether to delete the last sentence. The tone seems wrong, not serious enough.

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

But how serious would it look to have a crossing out in the very second line? Also, it's no mean feat to draw a neat, straight line of that length while squeezed inside a toilet bowl with your knees drawn up. The toilet bowl's clean, just a little dusty, not even encrusted with limescale, and the water's turned off, but still. The writing pad rests on Georg's compressed thighs, and when he reaches the ends of the lines as he writes, he has to tuck his elbow in to avoid bumping the mop handles that lean against the tiles beside him. They could easily slip and hit the wooden partition between this cubicle and the next.

The second floor toilets – the only water closets in the institution – have come to be called *the sixth form toilets*, because this is the floor where the oldest pupils have their rooms and where the younger pupils fear to tread. Eight wooden cubicles, four on each side of the room. The last cubicle on the right, under the window that's always propped open, remains locked. The caretaker uses it to store cleaning materials, as Georg discovered a few weeks back. Above the door handle is a sign saying *occupied*.

Georg had slipped in the puddle of water on the tiles in front of the washbasins while trying to escape two third years, and had fled in the only direction that promised protection. He'd squeezed through the gap under the cubicle door, sure they would discover him, *vanishing into thin air* or *into the locked cubicle* being the only two possibilities. The third years had pounded on the door, causing the wooden partition to vibrate and rattle its hinges. Georg had made himself as small as he could. Suddenly silence descended. Then noises returned again – frantic shouts, shoes hastily seeking a foothold on wet tiles – then silence again, followed by a splashing sound from the direction of the urinals.

Since then, Georg has been coming here regularly: during most break times, and on days like today, when Master Lose has his 'leg trouble' in the first two periods and tells the class to get on with some exercises and be as quiet as if they were outside the gates of Sedan. Although Lose leaves the door open to the yawning silence of the corridor, his footsteps have barely faded away towards the cloister when the first East Elbian turns in his chair, spit and paper projectile ready-prepared in his hand.

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

The trick is to reach the toilets before the older pupils do. Georg is out of his seat the second the bell rings for break. If he has homework to copy up, he has his exercise books to hand. He never goes via the ground floor corridor, where the third years will be streaming out of their classrooms, but takes the front stairs to the second floor and uses the corridor up there instead. Georg's calves are tingling. He straightens up slowly, flexes his knees, keeping an eye on the mop handles. Once they clattered down while a sixth former called Tietjens was washing his hands just outside. Fortunately, Tietjens rushed from the bathroom: the next day he was telling everyone about the rat the size of a beaver that had shot out at him from the caretaker's cupboard. It's still twelve minutes till the end of second period. Georg has to be in the corridor before the break bell rings; if he misses his moment, he'll have to wait until the last sixth former has left the toilet again. The letter. Georg returns to his huddled position...*And don't show them straight to Grandfather again*.

We may be asking ourselves what Georg finds so difficult about writing this letter. The answer is that it's not just any letter: it must be perfect in every way, impossible for his mother to oppose. It must be different from all the letters Georg writes at the downstairs dining table in Pastor Leonhard's house every Saturday after lunch, along with Pastor Leonhard's other boarders. Anyone without their own writing paper is given a sheet and envelope by Pastor Leonhard's wife, whom everyone secretly calls Pastry, and must promise to bring her replacements for both before Monday. Whoever finishes their letter – and no one should finish before the clock in the parlour has struck three – must put their unsealed envelope on the table in the hallway, for the maid to take to the post office later. Pastry skims through the letters before sealing them; only, she says, to check for spelling errors.

I'll go under, he could write, *if you don't come and get me, I'll go under.*

That's stupid, he writes instead. Now he can throw the page away.

Not that this is his first attempt. In November he wrote a secret letter during homework time, took it with him in his pocket on an evening walk, fell asleep imagining packing his suitcase as soon as he woke up.

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

At breakfast the next morning, despite the constant distraction of ‘Now eat something!’ from Pastry, he couldn’t stop himself from glancing repeatedly into the hallway, from waiting for the bell to ring and make everyone jump. Breathless with haste, that's how he’d imagined Mother: she’d have walked all the way from the station so as not to have to wait for a carriage. Stray strands of brown hair would’ve crept out from under her cap. She’d instruct Pastry tersely to get Georg ready to leave. When breakfast was over, he’d searched assiduously for the gloves that were actually in his coat pocket. Finally he’d decided his mother must be collecting him from school. He imagined the sharp words she’d use to request that Master Lose remove her son’s name from the register.

On the way home, Georg was sure Mother would be waiting for him at the Pastor’s house. He washed his hands three times before eating, until his eyes and nose were no longer red and he could take a breath again without it getting caught in his throat, without his chest contracting so he could inhale only in small gasps. That evening, Georg’s grandfather telephoned from Berlin. The phone was in the pharmacy beside the Puppenbrücke. When one of the pharmacist's sons sent word, Pastry insisted on accompanying Georg over there. ‘Something must have happened,’ she kept repeating as she walked beside him. ‘Something must have happened.’ ‘Is mother coming to get me, or should I travel alone? I’ll need money for the ticket.’ Georg tried not to look at Pastry, who stood next to him, arms folded across her chest. ‘Slow down, slow down.’ His grandfather's voice was soft, the ‘o’s drawn out, the laughter that followed soft and warm. Like cushioned upholstery, with no corners or sharp edges Georg could push against. Soft and warm, Grandfather brushed Georg’s objections aside. ‘All boys write letters like that. Things will change,’ he repeated several times. The way he said it suggested he’d said it before, often, presumably to Mother.

Would Georg like to move lodgings, perhaps go and board with one of the masters?

‘No.’

‘What is it that's so bad?’

Georg hadn't known how to describe it, in just a few words, over the phone, into that

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

inexorable, warm, upholstered silence. He was sure his grandfather was smiling as he sat behind the desk in his study, telephone receiver in hand. As he spoke, he'd probably winked at Mother, sitting opposite him in one of the small armchairs that were arranged in a semicircle.

Georg had already spent many nights asking himself what it was that was so bad. He'd found dozens of answers, but none that didn't sound ridiculous when he imagined the words inside that Berlin study wallpapered with silver herons. What was so bad was both very complicated and very simple. In the complicated version, the institution was home to several confusingly- interconnected and overlapping hierarchies, and various consequences arose from this. In the simple version, Georg was at the bottom of every one of these hierarchies, which rendered everything else irrelevant.

'The food,' he'd eventually replied.

There was a sharp intake of breath from Pastry beside him. He'd forgotten she was there.

'You must consider your mother's feelings, too,' his grandfather had said before hanging up.

Back in Berlin for Christmas, Georg had tried to talk to his mother. 'But you liked it so much there in the autumn,' she'd said.

In October, when he'd spent a week there with Mother for the entrance exam, the yawning silence of the corridors had seemed peaceful. Rays of sunlight streamed through the high windows of the cloister; it was like the Knights Templar and the Holy Grail. The large, pale grey flagstones in the ground floor hallway had rounded edges and depressions at their centres. Where they hadn't been worn away by countless feet, the remnants of letters could be seen. For someone who'd read *The Count of Monte Cristo* and was half way through the third volume of *Sagas of Prehistory*, the temptation to get down on all floors to investigate these stones was overwhelming. If he hadn't feared Mother would spin round, grab him by the hand and drag him away so he didn't dawdle and make a bad impression, Georg would've crouched down immediately to take a look.

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

Afterwards, back at his grandparents' house in Berlin, he'd imagined how he would decipher the stones and reveal their secret – because of course they would hold a secret. He'd do it alone at first, then together with his desk-mate, who'd be called Ben and would become his great friend. Perhaps they'd gather a crowd of *like-minded people* around them, as they said in books. Georg wasn't certain about the last part.

When he actually got to the institution, Georg had discovered two things. The first was that the flagstones had already been deciphered, by Dr Herbert (History, Latin and Ancient Greek), who liked to tell you at length about the essays he'd published in the Historical Society Yearbook. If you asked him about the stones, you got a torrent of names, dates and ecclesiastical offices, and there was actually still a letter from someone about the cloister garden in the school archives. Sooner or later, though, Dr Herbert made you translate something from Latin, and if you made a mistake, he slapped you on the upper arm with the flat of his hand. The second thing was that, if Georg ever had got down on all fours in the corridor, the result would've been a jamboree of arse-kickings.

He knows they're just stupid. *Backward*, his mother says, *provincial*. Most of the time he knows that. He knows it in the mornings, when he crosses the Puppenbrücke with Pastor Leonhard's other boarders on the way to school, and sees the island of the Old Town lying before them. To the left is the railway station, with its waiting area that would fit at least five times into that of the Lehrter Station in Berlin. If you cross the single railway track and look back, the station is little more than a tunnel with a platform. To the right is the timber yard and the small crane that has more in common with the toy one Georg unwrapped years ago for Christmas from paper with pine branches printed on it than with those that tower above Berlin's Humboldt docks.

Towers are a general feature here. The two pinnacles of the Holsten Gate, towards which the Puppenbrücke leads, are not level, but sag inwards, and despite the dense rows of chimneys behind them, industriously belching smoke; despite the churches that loom up on either side of the gate – St. Petri, St. Jakobi, St. Marien, Georg can't tell them apart –; despite

the brawny warehouses that line the banks of the Trave – with names like Whale, Oak and Elephant, that Georg has never noticed –; despite all of this, in the mornings, seen from the Puppenbrücke (which gets its silly name from the ridiculous figures positioned along it), the city looks pathetic. Provincial. But the minute the two shop signs opposite the institution come into view – one saying *Southern Fruits*, the other saying *Cigars* – everything feels different. And by the time Georg has passed through the wrought-iron gate into the front courtyard, the institution has become everything and the rest of the world no longer exists.

2

Not five hundred metres from the institution's sixth form toilets, Isenhagen is drying his two-pointed hat in the council workers' common room. His cat vomited, he'd explained, to excuse his tardiness. His colleague Böger had given a sympathetic nod. Isenhagen's cat is often sick. Böger is prepared to be indulgent because Isenhagen is the only staff member who volunteers for the end of day rubbish round, which involves incinerating the contents of the council wastebaskets in the basement furnace. Not that it makes much difference if Isenhagen arrives at the town hall on time. His main duty for today is the procurement of a 1.75 by 1.75 metre piece of velvet that is more pine green than olive and definitely not mud green.
'Chamomile. Mix it in with the food,' advises Böger on his way out of the common room. Isenhagen nods and makes no reply, because he does not in fact have a cat. There are two reasons for his lateness: Mrs Suhl's eyes and Mrs Helm's plant. More on those later.

Council clerk Johann Gotthard Isenhagen is one of those institutions found in all cities that everyone is aware of, but no one really knows. If a survey about Isenhagen were to be conducted in the smallest state in the German Empire, the following would emerge: Almost one hundred percent of respondents are aware of the existence of Isenhagen. If asked to characterise him using only two adjectives, they would offer *meticulous* and *correct.* If asked for a brief description of his appearance, more than ninety per cent would answer: *black two-*

pointed hat, red coat, yellow waistcoat. Challenged that that is in fact the council uniform, all respondents would change their response to *don't know*. Half would call him *young*, the rest would say he's approaching retirement.

Although everyone says they've seen Isenhagen without the two-pointed hat – he removes it and bows his head every time the senators process past him in pairs into the council chamber – there's disagreement about whether or not he's bald. Even Miss Neesen, who receives a visit from him every second Friday at Widow Knoop's establishment in Weberstraße, would only be able to contribute the information that he first likes a bit of French and then *the way dogs do it*, preferences he shares with most of her clients. Hair on his head? A shrug. He's slim, he's clean, there's no fluff in his belly button.

Werner, the barber at the Hartengrube, could correctly name the colour of the hair (*dark blond*) and the cut (*short*), and could add: *side parting on the left, no sideburns, no beard, a couple of dabs of Macassar oil to finish*. But he doesn't know that the customer who appears every six weeks on a Saturday morning, the minute he's opened up, gives a quick nod, then sits down silently in the chair, is Isenhagen. For Werner, this customer is simply the one who prevents him from drinking the warm coffee he always carries over carefully from his flat in an enamel mug, to drink during the usually quiet first half hour of the working day. Isenhagen is called Isenhagen, as his mother and grandmother were; the rest is somewhat nebulous. The last Mr Isenhagen known to the inhabitants of the smallest state arrived in the city at the beginning of the century, during the French occupation, as *Administrateur des Départements des Bouches de l'Elbe,* and died soon afterwards.

In any case, at the annual commemoration of the battle of Sedan, when Isenhagen wears the flag of the smallest state and his colleague Böger that of the German empire, no one would ever imagine that the silent tears in the corners of Isenhagen's eyes were prompted by anything other than emotion at the victory over France. And no one suspects the truth: that council clerk Johann Gotthard Isenhagen is a man of excesses.

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

His greatest excess is the concealment of his smaller excesses from the eyes of the world. The world is represented in this case by a pair of red-veined eyes that once, thirty-seven years ago, were likened to cornflowers. These eyes belong to Isenhagen's housekeeper, Mrs Suhl.

Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning in winter, Isenhagen first brings the coal shovel and ash bucket from the living room into the vestibule, followed by those from the narrow room at the end of the hall that was once his mother's bedroom. After making sure the dirty laundry in the basket is arranged in such a way that the trickier stains are not visible until later, when it's being sorted in the semi-darkness of Mrs Suhl's basement, Isenhagen dons his two-pointed hat and takes his red uniform coat from its hanger. He turns the key in the lock of the double door to the living room and slides it into his right coat pocket, then the one in the lock of the smaller door at the end of the corridor, which goes into his left coat pocket. Before he hands over the rest of the flat to Mrs Suhl, who arrives half an hour after he's left, he pushes down both door handles once again and gives them a wiggle, just to check they're locked. Only then does he pull the front door of the flat closed behind him.

Mrs Suhl could only say with absolute certainty what is *not* in the room at the end of the corridor: an oak veneer bedroom set consisting of a narrow bed, a single-doored wardrobe and a petite bedside table. Isenhagen gave those to her eight years ago, a few weeks after the old lady passed away, God rest her soul. Mr Suhl collected them with his handcart one Sunday. The following Monday morning, the two doors were locked for the first time. They were still locked on the Wednesday.

Mrs Suhl was not aware of having done anything wrong, and would not tolerate any insinuation that she had. Which is why she went to the house half an hour earlier on the Friday. She met Isenhagen in his yellow waistcoat, still without his two-pointed hat, coat or boots. He looked strange, as if he were only half there. He took a large stride in his stockinged feet from the living room into the vestibule, pulling the door closed behind him.

'Anything wrong?'

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

‘No?’ Isenhagen sounded astonished. ‘Maybe a little less starch on the shirt collars?’
Then why, she demanded, were those doors locked?
After a pause, Isenhagen answered, ‘For my *plaisir*,’
At least that was what the word sounded like that Mrs Suhl took home to Mr Suhl, after Isenhagen had assured her he would pay her the same, even with two less rooms to clean. When she brought the word out again for Mrs Helms, the following Monday on the stairs up to Isenhagen's flat, she did so behind her hand, Mr Suhl's translation having been, *something naughty*. Thus everything was arranged for the best for all parties, for Mrs Suhl's *plaisirs* include:

1. Remembering, at night, while Mr Suhl snores beside her, what the fingers of Otto, the receptionist, had done inside her underwear when she was employed in the laundry of the Hotel Kaiser next to Braunschweiger Station and still had cornflower eyes.
2. Betting on horses.
3. Guessing what lies behind the closed doors of Isenhagen's flat.
4. Red berry pudding.

‘A girl, of course!’ were the words that began all of Mrs Suhl's theories about Isenhagen's locked doors, followed by, ‘Still waters…’, etc.

When, after a week, there was nothing left to clean around thresholds, doors or door frames, Mrs Suhl no longer bothered taking the cleaning rag with her when she knelt on the floor by the living room door, pressing first her right and then her left ear to the wood, undecided which one heard better. And though she held her breath, neither ear ever heard a thing. Not a giggle, not a laugh, not a shifting of weight – the horsehair sofa and the legs of the armchair both made noises as soon as you leant forward – not a creak of the floorboards, not a tiptoe of bare feet or a slinking of socks, not the tock of a glass being set down on a table, not the flutter of book pages being turned. Not a cough, a sneeze or a sniff.

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

‘Not even a breath,’ Mrs Suhl said aloud, as she pulled herself up by the door frame, suddenly alarmed. What other explanation was there? Only one kind of girl remained in a room for weeks without stirring.

‘A dead girl!’ She spoke the words in a whisper, and not until she’d slammed the door to Isenhagen's flat behind her and was pulling on her coat in the stairwell. She’d left her hat on the kitchen table, but she didn’t go back inside.

‘How long? A week? That would stink!’ was Mr Suhl’s contribution, when he came home that evening from the docks. And though he was probably right, Mrs Suhl slept badly that night. Before she left for work on Monday morning, she took the carving knife from the kitchen drawer, wrapped the blade in her best tea towel and put it in her pocket. The weight of it pulled her coat lapels apart, and it banged against her hip with every step.

No matter how much air she inhaled – her nostrils flaring, their mucous membranes slowly drying out – in the hallway, in the porch, outside the living room, at the keyhole, and finally on her knees, sniffing the gap beneath the door, all she smelled was dust, stale coal smoke, the – not unpleasant – aroma of Isenhagen, and a faint residue of lavender from the old lady, God rest her soul.

‘What if he took the body away in the night?’

‘Then why would he keep on locking the door?’ asked Mrs Helms, who she’d met in the stairwell on her way to market. Isenhagen had left the shopping money in its usual place on the kitchen table, between Mrs Suhl’s hat and the basket of dirty laundry. Whenever Mrs Suhl leaned forward over the apple crate, the herring barrel or one of the market carts, the carving knife in her pocket struck against them with a metallic clang. When she came to pay, she discovered its tip had pierced the fabric of her coat.

Mrs Schröder was waiting for her outside Isenhagen's front door with the news that she hadn’t heard any disturbances on the stairs at night, at least nothing that sounded like a body being removed.

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

Similar objections were raised to Elsbeth Suhl's next hypothesis: 'A young man, then!' Mrs Helms added softly, 'Besides, there's nothing you can do about it if that's the way you were born.' Or perhaps she only thought it.

Next under consideration were possible pets and reasons for keeping them secret. A parrot? Under a cloth? Because of concerns about appearing eccentric? Guinea pigs? For a few days, while her favoured assumption was 'a snake', Mrs Suhl crept around the flat on tiptoe.

When she began to suspect him of artistic ambitions, Elsbeth Suhl investigated whether anyone had recently bumped into Isenhagen in the vicinity of the Lüttgendorff Art School on the Pferdemarkt. He became a forger, a smuggler, a fence and whatever you call those people who photograph naked women, his suspected pursuits varying according to which offences *Die Blätter*, the city's only daily newspaper, was reporting on at the time (by now the fishwives knew to save the page with the police reports on it to wrap Mrs Suhl's shopping).

Gambling, cards, roulette? 'Wouldn't he need some guests for those?' asked Mrs Schröder.

By mid-January 1890, Elsbeth Suhl had moved on to religion. Isenhagen had converted, was her new thesis, out of grief over the death of his mother, God bless her soul.

But to which God: Catholic, Muslim, Jewish or the one with the cows? Mrs Suhl wasn't sure, but on this Monday, at around nine o'clock, as she climbs the stairs to Isenhagen's flat, she's firmly convinced that behind the living room door is a metre-high oil painting of the Pope, rosaries, wafers and whatever other paraphernalia you need for papism.

The truth, of course, is quite different. The list of Isenhagen's *plaisirs* is as follows:

1. First a bit of French and then *the way dogs do it*.
2. Napoleon, but only the III.
3. Wax paintings.

3a. All combinations of 2 and 3.

4. Collecting large and small cruelties.

5. Listening to Mrs Schröder, who lives above him, and Mrs Helms, who lives below him, meeting on the stairs to discuss Mrs Suhl's theories about the contents of his locked rooms.

6. (this one is new) Mrs Helms' plant.

The larger locked room, the living room, is reserved for *plaisirs* 2 and 3. The smaller room is given over entirely to *plaisir* 4: Isenhagen uses it as storage for everything he's able to secrete away from the town hall. It's his unauthorised state archive.

He only locks the living room to distract Mrs Suhl from the smaller room. And maybe a little because he fears for the sublime details of his wax paintings in the face of her resolute dusting.

Still too damp to take out into the rain again, Isenhagen thinks, though he's been rubbing his two-pointed hat dry for some time now. He could set off hatless to buy the piece of velvet; the only shop selling it is barely a hundred metres away, in Breite Straße: *J.H. Ehlers & Sons en détail and en gros since 1796*. At present, fortunately, only one of the town's councillors is in the cloth trade. Acquisitions using state funds are a delicate matter in the smallest state in the German Empire, *en détail* and *en gros*.

Amongst the immovable dates in the calendar of Isenhagen's service, along with the Sedan commemoration and the emperor's birthday, is at least one council meeting with the agenda item *Privy ratios and waste collection*. Despite the countless classified advertisements by porcelain manufacturers in the papers, the contents of the waste buckets and chamber pots in the smallest state are still collected in carts by gardeners, who use the waste for fertiliser and pay rent for it per street. Two dozen houses at most are currently connected to the sewage system, in return for an annual fee.

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

Last year, the Water Closet Committee tabled 4762 letters of complaint; detailed descriptions of the spilling of buckets and the splashing of carpets, furniture, skirts and curtains. Due to the weather – the rain liquefies the contents of the waste containers, meaning the gardeners' carts leave stinking tracks in their wake – the meeting is not only taking place unusually early this year, but Senator Steinbrück has requested the provision of visual aids in the form of two jars of Wakenitz water.

Böger had asked whether one wouldn't be enough: Isenhagen could carry one ten-litre jar on a tray into the meeting; Böger feared accidents with two.

No, because the water samples were to come from different places; one from near the sluices and one from outside the city.

What's the difference?

That's just it; there won't be one, Senator Steinbrück had replied, and left.

Böger and Isenhagen have discussed the presentation at length and decided on a library trolley, which Isenhagen will wheel into the council chamber on a signal. To give the appropriate formality to the proceedings, the trolley is to be covered with a length of velvet.

Like pretty much everything else here, the job of council clerk has seen better days. No longer required to be swashbuckling horsemen or experienced executioners, adept at handling the envoys of the English Crown, employees are currently expected to demonstrate skill in waving imperial flags, stamina for running errands and mastery of a musical instrument suitable for marching bands. The latter fortunately only became compulsory after Isenhagen took up post. Everything from *delivering letters for the senators* to *pulling up their trousers for them* would be Isenhagen's answer if anyone asked him to outline his duties. Fortunately, no one does.

Instead of setting out for the shop, Isenhagen sits down at the common room table and begins to leaf through the first volume of *Flora Prussica*, which he borrowed yesterday from the municipal gardener's office. The subtitle promises *illustrations of every plant found in Prussia to this date,* this date being 1859.

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

Isenhagen scrutinises the plates sceptically. He's in search of the other cause of his lateness: *plaisir* no. 6, Mrs Helms' plant. This is a development he himself would dismiss as idiotic if anyone were ask him about it, which fortunately no one does.

Isenhagen's kitchen window looks out on to the back yards. He picked up a habit from his mother, very French for the smallest state in the German Empire, of drinking coffee with warm milk in the mornings. He usually sits on one of the kitchen chairs by the window, which Mrs Suhl pushes back under the table three times a week, and watches the white smoke spiralling up from the chimneys of the cottages opposite. The blotches of pale grey lichen on their roofs look like seagull shit; the slates on the windward side are coated with moss. He often sees the cat lurking around the spot where the walls of the courtyard form a T. For the last couple of years, it's been the same cat, white with black spots at the root of its tail and between its ears. It shoots away over the cottage roofs as soon as Isenhagen opens the rusty latch of his window.

If he puts both hands on the windowsill and leans out to look straight down the wall of the building, Isenhagen can see about one square metre of Mrs Helms' flat through the sparkling clean window panes of her ground floor flat. He's been looking in with growing admiration for several weeks now.

At first he noticed only that the withered fern that had occupied the wooden plant stand had been replaced by something else; something resembling a brown, barky stump. When he saw a speck of bright green at the end of the stump, he initially thought it must be light reflecting from the window. But in the weeks that followed, the speck of green grew into feathery, leafy stalks, a bit like carrot weed, that trailed down from the plant in a way Isenhagen found strangely touching. On windy days, the stalks swayed gently in the draught that slipped between the window panes and the frame.

Isenhagen has now acquired the habit of checking regularly on the plant. Since last Wednesday, when he spotted five new purple-coloured specks, which he suspects to be buds, he's also been leaning out of the window in the evenings, and in particular at weekends,

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

because this is when he can also see Mrs Helms' hands shifting the plant stand so it always sits in a patch of sun. All he can make out are her reddened fingers, narrow wrists, one or two centimetres of pale skin and the fabric of a cuff, always in one or other shade of blue. If anyone were to accuse Isenhagen of stalking his neighbour, he would of course vehemently reject the notion.

The separate panes of the ground floor windows remind him of the glass peep-boxes they set up a couple of years ago in one of the town hall vaults for the congress of the Society of German Naturalists. In the dim warmth, lizards and newts bathed in artificial pools, scuttling quickly into their foliage if Isenhagen tapped on the glass. He'd enjoyed spending his break times with them.

After examining a few pages of *Flora Prussica*, Isenhagen is not confident he'll be able to identify the feathery green stems. None of the plants depicted look familiar. He's got to plate 10 (*gladiolus palustris*) when one of the clerks wordlessly dumps a stack of post on the table beside him. He gets as far as plate 46 (*myosotis versicolor*) before he closes the book.

As he tucks the post under his arm, a sheet of paper floats to the floor. Even as he bends to retrieve it, Isenhagen knows what it will be. That Heine poem again. A poem that does not appear in any of the nine volumes of the green edition on the bookshelf in Isenhagen's living room: he's checked through every one.

OVERHEARD

Oh wise Jekef, how much
Did that brave Christian from you garnish,
The husband of your little daughter
Who was already somewhat tarnished?

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

Sixty thousand marks you paid?
Or at seventy your hand was forced?
That's not too much for Christian flesh -
Your little daughter was so coarse.

A good twenty years ago, one of the senators had brought the poem back from a trip to Hamburg and drastically improved the literary education of the senate; doubled it, you could say, because all of them then learned a few lines of Heine to add to the two or three lines of Keitel they already regularly inserted into their speeches. Ever since, senators can be heard hissing 'Oh wise Jekef' at each other, usually in passing, usually between their teeth, always when they've just suffered a defeat and blame one of the Lindhorsts.

Isenhagen can't tell whether the sheet of paper came from a correspondence folder or was in amongst the sewer designs. It makes no difference, because he doesn't replace it: he folds it twice, with care, and slips it into the inside pocket of his uniform jacket.

He already has a whole collection of these in his small locked room at home.

3

Ida pauses. The bedrooms are done, the stoves swept and fired up, the toilet buckets fetched. The lady of the house is resting after her breakfast; at half past eleven the doctor will come to check on her belly. Since the boys left for school, though, Ida's noticed that the floor in the gallery creaks with every step. And whenever she sweeps the gallery, she also has to sweep immediately below it, because no matter how carefully she draws the broom from the edge of the floor to the middle, something always sneaks through the balustrade and trickles down. Ida can already feel the ten o'clock bells of St. Jakobi in her limbs. In a few minutes, they'll be making the glassware in the dining room sideboard chink. For now, it's still quiet, apart from the rain, which the wind hurls against the gallery windows in squalls. The clouds are as

uniformly grey as if someone had hung a wrung-out mop over the roofs to dry.

The census of 1870 has Stuermann, Ida still living at *19 Dankwartsgrube, 1st floor*. *Number of rooms of solid construction: 5, of which heated: 4, with windows facing the street: 2, with windows facing the garden: 2. without windows: 1.*

Members of the household: 1. Stuermann, Karl Heinrich, Protestant, merchant, office: Wakenitzmauer. 2. Stuermann, Johanna Henriette Luise, Protestant, wife. 3. Stuermann, Ida, Protestant, daughter.

Other persons living in the household: 1. Weber, Mina – maid. 2. Struck, Anna – maid.

The census of 1880 lists *Stuermann, Johanna Henriette Luise, merchant's widow,* and *Stuermann, Ida, daughter,* at the address *4 Kleiner Schrangen. Number of rooms of solid construction: 3, of which heatable: 2, with windows facing the street: 3, with windows facing the garden: –. Other persons living in the household: Struck, Anna – maid.*

Between those dates is a badly-secured load of iron bars, which slipped during loading and didn't come to a stop until it was two centimetres behind the *os frontalis* of the merchant who was passing at the time. At least that's how his widow tells it. In any case, the merchant was found in the morning in the lower part of Alfstraße, by the docks, with his skull crushed in.

By 1882, the number of other persons living in the household has been reduced to zero, because Anna has moved to the old people's home. One year after that, the Stuermann household is dissolved and *Stuermann, Johanna Henriette Luise, merchant's widow*, appears in the burial register, in *Burgtor Cemetery, aisle III, plot 4c*.

In January 1890, *Stuermann, Ida – maid* is on the first floor of the household at 9 Königstraße, Dr. Lindhorst – *23 rooms, 18 heatable* – trying to come to terms with the fact that she will have to go and fetch the broom and dustpan from downstairs.

'The first thing I see in the morning, before I'm really awake, is the earthenware jug with the blue flowers on it', Old Anna had told Ida. The jug belonged to the house in the countryside in Güstrow where Old Anna grew up. It stood on the windowsill overnight, so the

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

milk in it wouldn't sour; in the morning the milk was boiled for breakfast. The first thing Ida sees in the morning, before she's really awake, is Old Anna. The evening before she was moved into the old people's home, they'd sat together in the kitchen. 'You need to find something for yourself now,' Old Anna had said. 'There's no reason you couldn't be a lady's companion or a housekeeper,'

At last Ida's feet begin to move, creaking towards the stairs. She takes care on the steps, in case the noise prompts Hupmann, the office manager, to fling the office door open and stand in it yelling 'Quiet!' The downstairs rooms facing the street are where the law firm operates.

As Ida begins to sweep, the small bell above the vestibule door rings. Too early for the post. Ida glances over the bannisters. Presumably it's Helms, or one of the other servants. Ida is rarely required to say, 'Madam is not receiving today'. Most visitors just silently flick their card into the box that sits on top of the turned pedestal by the staircase. But it's the eldest son who comes up the steps, home from school early. 'Head again?' asks Ida.'Throat.' Erasmus points at his neck. His cheeks are flushed, it's true he doesn't look like someone with a headache. At the foot of the stairs to the second floor, he turns round. 'Tea would help. 'Ida nods.

Erasmus had his first seizure shortly after Ida took up the position at the Lindhorsts. One Sunday afternoon, there was suddenly a boy in the hallway, saying that Erasmus was lying in the Hundestraße, dying. The family was out and the cook ordered Ida to come with her. Erasmus was sitting with his back against a house wall, his long, stork-like legs stretched across the pavement. He was no older than ten, still in short trousers. His dark, curly head rested in his hands, the hands covering his ears. Next to him on the dusty pavement was a round, damp patch. Vomit, Ida guessed from the sour smell that hit her nostrils as she knelt down beside him.

He told them he'd seen a brightly shining wreath with sharp spikes on it. The cook crossed herself. Then he vomited on Ida's shoes.

English sample translation by Rachael McGill

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

The attacks usually last for two days. Dr. Reiter prescribes migraine powder, which doesn't work, and freshly cut slices of lemon on the forehead and temples, which make the bedsheets sticky. If the medicine doesn't work, there was nothing wrong in the first place, is the master's view.

On Monday mornings the cook, like all cooks, is at the market; Ida will have to prepare the tea herself. She'd like to leave the broom and dustpan in the gallery, so she doesn't have to go back down for them again once she's brought the kettle up. But if she does that, the lady's bedroom door will surely open, and there'll be shouting about Ida leaving things lying around again.

The rain is getting louder. Not that Ida minds. The last few weeks have been the longest period without window-cleaning since she's been in post. There's been no frost, not even at night, no sign of her breath when she sits up in bed in the morning. No thin layer of ice on the water in her washing jug, that she has to press down on with reddening knuckles. Last winter, half of her days began that way. The largest room in the servants' quarters in the eaves, through which the chimney breast runs, belongs to the cook. At least Ida's room is not a windowless wooden cubbyhole, built into a corner of the large merchant's hall, as it would be in most old homes.

Erasmus is in bed reading when Ida knocks with the tea; he points silently at the bedside table. There are six sons in total, and there's Alma. The second eldest son, Cord, is sixteen, strawberry blond, like the lady. 'Don't tell on me, dearest Ida,' he whispers when she catches him at night, during her fire rounds, on his way to sneak out of the house. And then he smiles, and when Cord smiles, he shines. So you realise too late that you've just said 'What nonsense!' while giggling like a silly goose. Frieder, the next oldest, is called *Dicker* by everyone. He gives Ida the least work; mostly he just sits around and paints. The messiest is Robert, who breaks, loses, scatters and dirties everything, with the exception of his violin, on which he practices the same piece for hours. Brown-haired, eleven years old. Since the operation last year, one of his ears protrudes less than the other. 'The good ear', the lady calls

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

it. When setting the table, Ida has to make sure to position the boy so ‘the good ear’ faces the room. The fifth boy, Werner, is nine, blond, wears glasses and squeals about dead insects in the lampshade, lint, and limescale in the carafe. Then there's Jost, the late arrival. After Alma's birth, the lady had been in the sanatorium for a while.

And now another straggler is on the way. People have been running their mouths off about it, says the cook.

On the way down to the kitchen, all is as it should be. But as Ida comes back up the stairs with the dustpan and broom, she hears the lady’s voice. And just as she comes level with her bedroom door, it swings open.

Ida gives a curtsy. It's usually easy to get along with the lady, because she doesn't bother much about the household. But when she does bother, everyone wishes she wouldn't. Marie Lindhorst is no longer in her nightdress and dressing gown, but has put on a pale blue house dress, and for a moment it seems she might walk straight past Ida and disappear into the red living room. But she stops, one hand on her bulging belly.

‘This needs to be waxed.’ She points at the floor. ‘Or at least polished. The conservatory, too. And the hall. The parquet’s so dull it looks like a peasant's parlour.’ Her face is pinched and sunken: she looks more ill than pregnant.

Instead of nodding, curtsying again, and silently continuing to sweep – the lady usually forgets her own instructions anyway – Ida hears herself asking ‘Now?’ with something that sounds a little like indignation in her voice.

‘Na-tu-ral-ly!’ Every syllable is enunciated separately.

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

4

Friedrich Lindhorst stands at the window of the conservatory and listens. Behind him, in the office, an industrious silence. Before him, in the garden, a rain-soaked silence. The birds have all disappeared; there's not even a raven digging up a walnut somewhere. Just the wet green of the lawn and the steady tap-tap of raindrops, so familiar it's almost soundless, filtered out of his awareness.

Above him, on the first floor: a pregnant silence. This will be the last pregnancy. And Lindhorst has an inkling that the silence will remain, even once the belly's gone. The boys and Alma are at school, the youngest has gone out with the nanny. At his back, the reassuringly empty suite of rooms in this wing of the house stands between him and everyone else.

When he sits down at his desk, all of the silences merge into a generalised monotony. It makes no difference whether he's reading the agenda on the dark green desk pad in front of him, for Wednesday's toilet bucket meeting, or preparing his lecture: the silence makes it hard to stay seated. Not one second longer, he thinks, and yet it's only a little later that he becomes aware that he really has stood up, pushed back his chair and stumbled into the filing room next door, where he stands in semi-darkness between the floor-to-ceiling shelves. He's avoided the cone of light that falls through the circular window above the connecting door to the study, fearing nonsensically that it will cause him to be seen.

As if aware of its destination before he is, his right hand has pressed down the handle to the small store room. He stands there, surrounded by cleaning equipment and the wobbly chairs and cracked lampshades that Hupmann has stashed there. He wonders what it would be like to go back, sit down again, perhaps close the file, put the lecture aside, do something else.

Instead, on hearing a thud on the stairs, he slips quickly and quietly into the hallway and turns left into the wing, walks through the reception room, into the ballroom, past the piano. He stops only when he reaches the landscape room, where he stands in front of the

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

window, at the furthest point from the desk. If it wasn't raining outside, he'd open the French window, go on to the terrace, down the steps, over the gravel path, past the stable, past the toilets, through the gate, out on to Langen Lohberg and down to the Wakenitz. Not *into the Wakenitz*, just to the Wakenitz; and there he might be all right.

In the rose bed, he can see branches that have just been pruned poking out from a pile of foliage, their delicate, scarred edges well-buried. If it doesn't freeze soon, they'll sprout. He realises he hasn't closed the door to the wing behind him. From the hallway, he could be observed, standing here at just after half past ten on a Monday morning, staring into the garden for no apparent reason. Forty-three years old. The father of seven – or rather six and three quarters, as there are still a few weeks to go yet – sons. And if it turns out to to be a second daughter, he'll have no objection. It's five years since he bought this house. It's so large he can feel it all around him: its thick walls, the volume of space they enclose, the solidity with which they do it.

Outside the window, the bare branches of the walnut tree in the rain. The same as last year. And the year before that, and next year, and the year after that. Summers they'll be up on Mount Rigi. And at some point 'the black pencil' will show itself.

At noon there's a meeting of the sales representatives of the nurseries. In the next few hours, representatives of the food processing plants, the metal rolling mill and the packaging factory will inevitably want to see him too. The Senate session on Wednesday will be about sewage again. The demand is for all households to be connected to the sewers. Unfortunately, the oldest industry in the smallest state is the production of canned food, the competitiveness of which depends on the purchase price of vegetables, which in turn depends on the cost of fertiliser.

'We sell shit all over Europe, in the form of peas, beans, asparagus and carrots,' one of the managers explained to him before the first shit-session he was required to attend. Since then, Friedrich has forbidden the cook from using tinned food. He later overheard her objecting that fresh vegetables grow in just the same way. The buckets are taken care of by the

servants, and the tax revenues make up for those lost in the Baltic sea trade.

A few weeks ago, Friedrich was appointed for the second time to the chair of the Citizens' Committee, which negotiates with the Senate on behalf of the citizens. The constitution states that the post can be declined if offered a third time. Marie would certainly be in favour of that.

It's actually a great love story, his and Marie's; people were enchanted by the romance, cheered secretly for the merchant's son and the poet's daughter. Even now, almost twenty years later, if Friedrich ever strays into the female half of a tea party, he can cause the clicking of knitting needles on sofas all around him to pause simply by alluding to that night in '71: a summer festival, when the garden still belonged to the Bohms, at which he and Marie had pledged their troth while not particularly well-concealed by two round box-tree hedges. The only point on which agreement was reached during the afternoon parlour conversations that followed was the fact that the beauty and spirit of the bride (and her father's numerous aristocratic admirers) almost compensated for the paucity of her assets.

But all beauty that is gazed on for a long time can become something you know is present rather than something you actually see (plus, the invitations from the aristocratic Keitel admirers to hunting excursions and afternoon teas are extended to Marie and the children alone – not that Friedrich minds this, he tells himself). Sometimes, when Marie walks on his arm through a theatre foyer, Friedrich is surprised at the way the glances linger: on her dark eyes, her fine little nose, her slender neck above the swell of her décolleté.

The Bohm box trees made way years ago for this rain-soaked rose bed. It was his father's wish that Friedrich buy the Bohm house. His parents had lived there as renters, after his father sold their family home to the municipal insurance company: he would've bought it himself if he hadn't had to divide his fortune equally between his children. A senator's house, he called it.

Swish, swish, swish; soft and distant. It reaches Friedrich's awareness only gradually: swish, swish, swish; the strokes of a broom, someone sweeping. All at once he's aware of the

open French door at his back, as if Hupmann were standing there wanting a signature, or one of the maids were gawping silently at him. Swish, swish, from the gallery upstairs.

Friedrich Lindhorst turns round with a jolt. There's no one in the hallway. Still, he starts to move again; the regular tock-tock of his shoes on the floorboards has a calming effect. Through the ballroom, past the piano. On the stand, as always, sits the music for the folk song *Verlassen, verlassen, verlassen*. As if Marie didn't know it by heart.

In the hallway, he hesitates briefly, then decides on his route: through the antechamber. The sweeping in the gallery stops abruptly, and he thinks he hears Marie's voice. His steps quicken as if by themselves. He remembers when the days felt too short, when it seemed he never had enough hours to spend with his wife. He'd wanted to lie on the sofa with her for eternity, a glass of schnapps on the side table at which they took turns to sip, their legs intertwined, his cheek against her forehead, his left arm slung around her, in his right hand the book from which he read to her. Shakespeare, Goethe, Lessing, Heyse. They'd both secretly visited the *Grautoff* bookshop to surprise the other with a new book. He remembers being quietly astonished that such happiness could exist. Unease crept into him slowly, not all at once: Marie began to feel heavy on his chest, his arm started to go to sleep. At first, she corrected him with a laugh when he read something wrongly because his mind was elsewhere, or jiggled, as she called it, because he wanted to get up. The reproaches came later. They'd agreed at some point on an evening reading hour, and it's remained unchanged over all these years. The longest sixty minutes of the day. Every evening, now, when he gets up, she sobs, 'Stay!' As soon as he's gone, she calls Erasmus to complain to him. The night before Friedrich's first election to the Citizens' Committee, the boy had knocked on the door of the study. Mama had cramps. Reproach in his gaze.

It's not as if the work on the Citizens' Committee will ever lead anywhere anyway. Friedrich's brother Achim sits on the senate, and the constitution of the smallest state doesn't allow more than one member of a family to do so. After Achim, the next in line is Heinrich, and from Heinrich there's nothing to inherit: he's the president of the chamber of commerce,

and Friedrich Lindhorst is no businessman. All paths in the smallest state of the German empire are closed off to him. None of this is new, and none of it has bothered him until now.

He's always viewed himself as the administrator of an estate and the preserver of the Keitel legacy. He only has to take eleven steps from the door of his house in a southerly direction down Königstraße before he sees the toe of his father-in-law's left shoe; a few more steps and a bent knee comes into view, followed by the elbow above it. The poet crouches at the corner, cast in bronze, 3.70 metres tall, weighing 1.27 tonnes. He sits wide-legged on a tree stump, gazing across the square that has borne his name since last autumn. Overall, Friedrich finds the design quite pleasing. Even the dying angel at the foot of the brick pedestal, which no one really knows the meaning of. Every time he crosses Koberg square, he can't help imagining the old man's outrage, had anyone ever dared to suggest he take a seat on a tree stump.

Only the prelude, that was how Friedrich had seen the commemorative events of the autumn. A high point, yes, but a beginning rather than an end. The Cotta publishing house had rejected the idea of a jubilee edition, though, saying they still had plenty of copies of the *Complete Works* in stock. The same response came to the idea of a special volume of unpublished letters and fragments. Friedrich's correspondence with the circle of aristocratic friends and admirers has shrunk in recent months to a few occasional cards.

Before the poet's death, Keitel's affairs had consumed Friedrich's mornings and, on days when he had to go to court, his evenings as well. He'd found the work an honour, even if he would rather have left some of the enquiries about the quality of guest house rooms, footstools or hair oils to Hupmann and the clerks. It was an unspoken expression of trust. The poet let Friedrich take care of everything; at most there'd be an absent-minded 'Is it done?' from time to time. A great mind is averse to pettiness, as he put it. Friedrich had written the sentence down somewhere, when he was collecting quotations for a volume of aphorisms. He opens the office door. Hupmann flinches. The clerks take up position next to their desks.

'You have a client,' says Hupmann.

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

When Friedrich reaches for his pocket watch to confirm that it's not yet twelve, that the nursery representatives have arrived too early, the office manager shakes his head. ‘Pusselt.’ he whispers. ‘I've shown him into your study. The waiting room isn't heated yet.’

‘What does he want?’

Pusselt & Sons is one of the up-and-coming trading houses in the smallest state: iron ore from Russia and Sweden. It’s been represented by Dr. Vanheeren for decades. There have been no rumours of a rift.

Hupmann hunches his shoulders. ‘Apparently his valet handed his card in this morning to announce him.’ He passes the card to Friedrich. ‘It was in the bowl in the hall; we didn't notice it until now.’

Will be in your office at noon, it says. Not a request. No w*ould that be convenient?* According to Heinrich, Pusselt has his eye on the presidency of the Chamber of Commerce.

There’s a thumping on the stairs. Friedrich wheels round. Werner and Robert, the two middle ones, he assumes. But when he opens the door to set them straight, it's the maid who comes down the stairs, carrying a broom.

‘I thought the boys would be home already.’

The girl stops on the steps. ‘Only the eldest.’

‘Erasmus? Why?’

‘Sore throat.’ She falters a little.

The anger comes so suddenly, it takes Friedrich by surprise. He almost pushes past Ida up the stairs. Just in time, he remembers Pusselt. ‘Quiet! I have clients.’

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

5

Just the bristles of the broom sliding across the parquet floor of the conservatory and her own inhales and exhales, a whistle in her right nostril. The rest of the house is holding its breath. While Ida was dragging the cast-iron brush plate across the parquet floor of the ballroom for the second time, she'd heard a yell from the second floor. Shortly afterwards, they'd both thundered down the stairs; father followed by son. The noise easily drowned out the dragging of the sofa's claw feet as Ida pulled it aside. The master slammed the door of the office behind him, while Erasmus flung open the door to the vestibule so violently it banged against the wall. Ida prepared herself to sweep up broken panes of etched glass, but miraculously, they stayed intact.

Now the house is back to holding its breath. Because Ida is occupied with polishing, the cook is serving at table. The lady takes her meal upstairs. Ida leans heavily on the broomstick so the bristles on the underside of the brush plate press evenly against the floor. On the top of the plate is a relief of the body of an animal with a rounded gleaming belly. Ida had at first thought it was a rat. 'An elephant!' the cook had explained, to indicate that 'the more weight you put into the polishing, the more beautifully the wood will shine.' Only when the chairs, the armchairs, the tables, the shelves, the white porcelain bodies of the vases, the lime green lampshades and the consoles on which they sit are all reflected perfectly in the floor, will the lady consider the job done.

The ballroom is used for dinners and parties. The conservatory is where the lady receives guests in the afternoons. Since Ida has been with the Lindhorsts, there have only been two dinners, and even before she became pregnant, Marie Lindhorst rarely received visitors.

Suddenly, Ida's left elbow buckles and her arm gives way. There's no jolt of pain or sensation of injury; the arm just stops working. Ida flails with the other arm to try to keep her balance, in vain. She tips slowly forwards, then to the side, hitting her shoulder and hip on the floor as she lands. Now she feels pain. When she examines herself that evening, she'll find

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

that the skin above her hip bone and on her upper arm is violet.

Ida rolls on to her back. She pictures the damp stains her sweat-soaked blouse will leave on the wood. Her feet kick the coffee table on which the lady has placed mementos of her father, which she dusts herself. ‘A creep,’ the cook has said of Keitel; ‘Everyone constantly at his beck and call, but he was never satisfied. In the end there were always tears.’

Ida pushes herself with her heels across the parquet floor, coming to rest a small distance away, between the white lacquered feet of the silk sofa and the grand piano. She lies there, breathing deeply, feeling the smooth hardness of the floor. Her sternum and a few vertebrae click as the air inflates her lungs and makes her chest rise and fall. A sensation of peace spreads through her; it seems she’s never felt so comfortable. She turns her face towards the window. Maybe she's mistaken, but she thinks it's getting brighter. The clouds are less grey, the music stand casts a barely discernible shadow on the wall.

When Ida told her mother Old Anna would be moving to the Holy Ghost Hospital, Johanna Stuermann was sitting on the bench at the kitchen table that served as Anna's bed at night, eating her second breakfast. Old Anna stood at the cooker, her back, the white X of her pinafore straps, turned to them, rubbing at the black stains on the cutlery with sandpaper so they wouldn't bloom into rust. Ida’s mother at first appeared not to hear what she’d said, then suddenly got to her feet. ‘To the Holy Ghost Hospital? Ungrateful piece of work! We’ve shared everything with her; she eats what we eat!’ That's just it, Ida had thought, listening to the steady scratch of the sandpaper. It passed over the cutlery without a breaking its rhythm, without a fraction of a second's pause. Ida had wondered whether Anna was losing her hearing.

Her mother had refused to speak to Anna again, until her sadness at losing one of the last remaining witnesses of her better years won over and she relented. What followed had, for Ida, been even more tedious:

‘Remember our house?’

‘I cleaned it often enough.’

Rowohlt Verlag

Inger-Maria Mahlke

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

‘Five rooms...’

‘Exactly.’

‘And my salon, all Renaissance style...You know the hotel in Berlin, when we were with the emperor?’

‘You didn't take me there.’

‘Well it looked exactly the same as that. I can still see the console by the front door, the marble slab.’

Old Anna held up her left index finger. ‘Cost me this finger nail.’

‘How we had it good,’ said the merchant's widow. ‘How we had it good.’

Ida will have to change her clothes when she's finished the polishing, put on a clean blouse, even after the sweat on this one has dried. She can already hear her landlady, see her flared nostrils: ‘You stink! Go and wash yourself!’

‘What are you doing?’

Ida's head whips round. The youngest, Jost, is standing in the doorway, shoulder propped against the frame, one leg bent, toe on the floor, the heel waggling unsteadily back and forth. He looks as if he’s been standing there a while.‘I'm just seeing whether the ceiling needs cleaning.’ Ida straightens up, hopes the boy won’t go and fetch someone. But he stares dutifully up at the painting of dark blue caskets edged with gold.

‘You have to make friends with them when they’re young’, Old Anna had told her. Ida had nodded, thinking of the countless biscuits she’d been slipped, spoons of dough she’d licked; scraps of her childhood that were never shared with her mother. Old Anna had got her place in the old people's home thanks to the intercession of a gentleman whose wet nurse she’d been decades ago. But how exactly do you make friends with a five-year-old?

‘Cuckoo,’ Ida says tentatively.

The little one shakes his head silently and pushes himself off the door frame. She hears his footsteps going down the corridor.

‘Old Ida was strange today,’ he will say at dinner.