

Unsettled Accounts

Inger-Maria Mahlke: Rechnung offen, © 2013 Bloomsbury Verlag GmbH; pp. 7-21

Unsettled Accounts**(Rechnung offen)****Inger-Maria Mahlke****Berlin Verlag****Novel, 272pp****Translated by Romy Fursland for *New Books in German*****Friday 29th August**

The cyclist smacked on the windscreen with the flat of his hand. Theresa heard herself breathing, leaning forward still – her chest, an inch away from the steering wheel, hadn't moved since she'd slammed her foot on the brake. For a moment she saw the palm of his hand pressed white against the glass, the reddish lines and creases in the skin. She started the engine again, didn't turn around; she didn't want to know whether Claas was still standing on the pavement outside the practice, whether he could even see the junction from there. The cyclist had had the right of way.

She'd left without saying a word. Turned her back on the two cabinets that took up the whole length of the consulting room, and on Claas and the police officer. Didn't look back when Claas called after her, "You've got to give me a lift." She'd walked on, the soles of her ballerina pumps squeaking on the laminate flooring, setting each foot down audibly, listening with satisfaction to the muffled stamping as it echoed off the walls of the corridor. The glass front door had banged against the wall; she'd kicked it open, fist clenched around the car keys in her handbag.

She pulled out onto the crossroads and turned off towards the ring road.

She'd been sure he had stopped. She hadn't found any more 'while you were out' cards in the letterbox after work. Hadn't had to Hoover any more white specks of polystyrene out of the living room carpet when Claas had arrived home before her. "What was in there?" No more daily papers from Reutlingen or Dresden, scrunched up

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and then smoothed out, lying in the waste paper bin. "In where?" No more bubble-wrap in the recycling. "In the parcel." No more silver teapots in the cupboard where she kept old plant pots. Fountain pens in amongst black socks. "It was going for a song."

The burglars had opened up the cabinets with a crowbar – the officer pointed out the parallel scratches in the wood. The upper hinges had been wrenched off and the doors were hanging loose, leaving triangular gaps through which she could see inside. Files, she'd thought, that must be where Claas kept patients' files.

For a while she'd tried to get home before him, collected the parcels from the neighbours, hidden them in the wardrobe behind her evening dresses. It took him two weeks to ask. "Just stop," she'd said.

A row of identical white hands, outstretched, the fingers gracefully extended, in the first triangle – beautifully cast in porcelain, the fingertips lightly touching a golden ball. The figures stood directly one behind the other, as if poised not on the shelf of a wooden cabinet in a psychotherapy practice but in the Olympic Stadium of 1936.

She'd taken the parcels from their hiding place, lined them up on the dining room table.

"Cross my heart and hope to die." Claas had laid his right hand on his breast pocket.

"Don't be childish," she'd replied. "Just stop buying things."

With latex-gloved hands the officer had pushed the door further to one side, the corner tracing a dark streak across the carpet. Elephants had appeared, grey, white and brown, tusks and trunks all pointing in the same direction, as if waiting for a signal from a circus trainer telling them to stand up on their hind legs. Theresa counted seven identical cockatoos, each with a twig in its beak. Through the other triangle all she could see was horses. Claas pointed to a small dog playing with a frog.

"A one-off piece." He looked at her as if expecting her to laugh, or at least smile.

"What's that?" The policeman had addressed them both.

"No idea," Theresa had replied and turned away.

"Porcelain," she heard Claas say.

She'd looked in the rear view mirror before driving away. Claas was holding open the glass door to the reception – he'd checked it for damage, examined the wall behind where the door handle had hit it.

She didn't need to rush, she didn't have any lectures. In less than forty-eight hours you'll be on the plane, she thought, as she turned onto the ring road. Claas had started collecting as a child, little wind-up steel cars. She'd had to sit on her hands while he explained to her the different vehicle types, their respective merits and demerits. They'd been sitting in a café at Winterfeldtplatz having breakfast, just after they'd first met; on the other side of the fogged-up window pane dawn was breaking. She'd slid her hands under her thighs to stop herself running them through the hair above his forehead, brown strands between her splayed fingers. The condensation had run down the glass and formed little puddles under the radiator. Claas had stared fixedly at the tabletop, absorbed, explaining to her how the wind-up mechanism worked, how he'd oiled the wheels, his system for keeping them in order. What the wooden box he'd kept them in looked like.

"And where are the cars now?" Theresa had pushed her fingers in between his, the backs of her hands striped red and white with the imprint of her corduroys.

"Gone. He smashed them up with a hammer. Took the box down to the cellar to his workbench. One car at a time, bang, bang, bang." With every 'bang' Claas had brought his hand down hard on the table, the discarded cutlery clinking on the plates. His lips drawn up over his gums, his teeth exposed. "My darling mother was of the opinion that I was lazy." The 'darling mother' didn't ring true, his voice bitter.

The ring road was empty this late in the morning. Theresa watched the needle of the speedometer creep steadily round the dial. Every semester she gave one lecture and one seminar on comparative law. The lecture was a joke: the aim of the session, according to the lecture programme, was to enhance the students' foreign language skills rather than their legal knowledge. One of her colleagues, who did the introduction to English law, projected his lecture notes on the wall and read them out just for the pronunciation.

The exit for Hohenzollerndamm – she could keep driving, in a circle, along the ring road, once round, that would have to do. She took the exit. A psychologist counts for nothing among lawyers. Theresa waited for the calm that always set in when she saw the leafy treetops of the gardens and parks between the houses. Dahlem, home. This was what she'd gone to university for. She'd wanted to be able to think, undisturbed,

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surrounded by fresh green, by white walls that showed no sign of flaking paint. In the yellow rubble and red dust of her childhood, where the sun sucked the colour out of everything in a matter of hours, green had meant affluence. Plants grew where there was water, and there was water only where people poured it, out of buckets, watering cans and hoses. When she was exhausted she would picture moss, lots of moss. She pictured it soft, not wiry. Damp, yes, a bit, but in a good way, in a way that dries out straightaway when you've been lying on the moss long enough and you get up again and go back into the sun. Because there on the moss you're in the shade, but you can feel the sun behind it so you never get too cold.

*

Ebba lay on her back, gazing at the sweat in the valleys of her torso – she dipped an index finger in the pool next to her hip bone, drew a glistening streak uphill towards her belly button. With her left hand she pressed the rubber button with the green receiver symbol and waited till she heard the muted announcement, you have one new message, before holding the phone to her ear. She put it down again when she heard Theresa's voice, laid it on the mattress by her head, the anthracite-coloured plastic wet with sweat.

“The practice has been broken into – Tula rang, said they took the flatscreen from the reception and the one in Claas's office.” The tips of Ebba's toes nudged the sheet in front of the window a little way to the side – she had to shut her eyes against the blazing chink of light. It was going to be an awful day. “We're going to drive over there now and talk to the police.” The doorbell rang shrilly; Ebba instinctively put her hand over the phone, as if Theresa could have heard the sound. “Claas has to go to Frankfurt, I'm driving him to the station afterwards.” Theresa paused. Ebba looked down at herself, at the black fluff stuck to the skin between her toes. There was another ring on the doorbell, longer this time. “And I wanted to wish you the best of luck for your exams. Always read the question twice through, then you'll be fine.” Theresa inhaled deeply; the floor creaked in the stairwell as if someone was shifting their weight from one foot to another. “And let us know how it goes.” You have no more messages.

Ebba had stopped going in after the work experience placement. Claas and Theresa had found it for her: three months at the Wunderbar Kindergarten, standing around shivering every afternoon in the petting zoo. The sheep had stood there in the mud, the dung and the urine, huddled together in one corner, their legs and the matted wool on their stomachs stained brown. She'd watched the animals nibble feed pellets from the children's palms, smearing the skin with saliva and chewed greens. Dina had stamped through the puddles in her wellingtons, sending out little bow waves around the uppers, stopped right in front of Ebba and laughed. Then she'd jumped on the spot, bringing both feet down at once. The water was cold, it soaked through the fabric of her jeans, icy cold against her thighs, seeping into her socks. Dina had kept laughing, shouting "Fat Ebba!" Ebba herself had been surprised by how forcefully her palms had landed on the front of Dina's pink jacket. Pushing her back, shoving her away. Dina had fallen over backwards into the puddle, brown water slopping over her legs – the puddle was ankle-deep at least. The back of Dina's head hit the ground: not hard, but the fact that her hat got soaked through, her hair dripping wet, was enough.

In the first week Ebba had intervened when the other children said you're not allowed to play, you're not allowed to touch anything, go away. She'd sat down with her, played Animal Memory. Said, "Stop that," when one of the boys had pushed Dina. "Fat Ebba," they'd shouted, first the boy and then Dina, beaming delightedly.

She'd been suspended. 'An incident', the kindergarten teacher had called it.

* * *

Too early, he was much too early. Elsa Stremel was standing in the hallway when the doorbell rang. She'd just had a shower, been to the toilet – the smell was unmistakable. She'd opened the window and sprayed air freshener, but that wasn't going to be enough. He usually came in the afternoons: yesterday evening she'd covered the doughnuts with clingfilm and put the plate in the fridge, yesterday she'd waited for him, and now he was much too early.

He was her grandson. Not her real grandson of course, not her flesh and blood – he was a conman. He had a lovely smile, showing pink gums and clean teeth: he didn't

smoke, he said. A sort of Felix Krupp – no, Krull.¹

She'd found him standing outside the door one day, the door to her flat, not the one to the building. It was early afternoon. Elsa had just finished in the kitchen and planned to have a lie down – she'd paused, her fingers already on the handle of the living room door. Erika, she'd thought, immediately afterwards telling herself what a silly old thing she was. He'd bowed, just a little, inclining his head.

“Good afternoon, are you Frau Streml?” He hadn't waited for her reply. “You don't know me...”

“I don't want to buy anything.” She'd made to shut the door, reaching for the chain.

“But, Frau Streml, I'm your grandson.” The sentence pressed forward, stepped onto the doormat, carefully wiped its feet and slunk past her into the flat.

“You're mistaken. I have no children.” She'd shaken her head. He was wearing a shirt, a proper one, with a button-facing at the front and a collar, and a V-neck jumper over the top. He'd extended his hand: it hung in the air, hung over the threshold, his fingernails cut short, slim white half-moons, his skin very smooth. He had grey eyes. Hers were brown – like cough drops, Erika had always said.

“Come closer,” said Elsa finally. He didn't move – she heard his voice, couldn't make out any words – she was still holding onto the edge of the door. He couldn't come any closer. “What's your name?” she asked and stepped aside.

“Nicolai,” he looked irritated, “your grandson. Your grandson, Frau Streml,” he added after a moment in a more deferential tone, giving another slight bow. He played his part well. Elsa had taken another step backwards; he smelt of shaving soap. He usually came twice a week, in the afternoons. Not always on the same day, which made it difficult to be prepared. Yesterday she'd waited for him, and in the evening she'd poured the tea – he didn't drink coffee – down the sink.

The bell shrilled again. Elsa stared at the door, listening to the noises on the other side: he sounded impatient. There were three knocks on the door in quick succession.

“I'm coming,” she called, breathless suddenly, “just a moment.”

Something must have happened, the chain was still fastened, someone had had an

¹ Alfried Felix Krupp was a German industrialist and Nazi war criminal. Felix Krull is the protagonist of Thomas Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull, Confidence Man*.

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accident, the key was in the lock on her side. Elsa turned it, turned once, turned twice and pulled open the door.

It wasn't him at all. It was a stranger, with grey hair and a blue peaked cap hooked over his wrist. She tried to suck in the air without the man noticing, without her nostrils flaring.

"Morning," he said, and Elsa was sure he must smell it just as she did, the smell of a just-used toilet, thinly veiled with lavender. "I've come to read the radiator meters." The man looked past her into the hallway.

True, she'd cleared a space round all the radiators: last night she'd pushed the telephone table aside and it had slipped out of her grasp. The mug with the pens in had tipped over, she'd had to kneel down to pick them up.

Elsa drew in another lungful of air.

"Would you be able to come back later?"

The man shook his head, moved past her, pointed to the door at the end of the hallway.

"That the living room?"

She nodded. Went into the kitchen and opened the window, opened it wide. There were shrubs with white berries growing in the backyard – as a child she'd called them landmines. A row of bins, yellow, blue, black and brown, stood along the dividing wall between the yard and the car park behind. Elsa could hear the man in the living room. It sounded like he was tightening a screw. Rusty strands of barbed wire ran along the top of the wall and there were crows sitting on it, their beaks gaping thirstily; the car park was empty, a row of low garages, the doors painted grey. She heard footsteps in the hallway. He was going into the bedroom – the bathroom would be next. She quickly opened the fridge door and took out the plate.

"Wait," she called. The man turned. "Come into the kitchen a moment?"

Elsa motioned towards the doughnuts. Big blotches of icing were missing; the holes looked like islands in a sticky sea.

"They're ruined." She'd forgotten to put the clingfilm in the bin – it lay beside the plate, smeared with white. "The icing got stuck."

He finished the doughnut in a few bites, looking out of the window. Plum jam oozed

onto his thumb.

“May I?” The man pointed to the sink, washed his hands, dried them on a teatowel.

“Is it much?” asked Elsa as he made to leave the room.

* * *

The blanket crackles, tiny sparks in the blue creases – you fold it in half, lining up the seams. Forming a rectangle, the length of your body when you lie on your side, knees drawn up to your chin, a pillow over your face. Pale blotches have formed around the stitching, and bits of the artificial leather have come off where the sofa back meets the seat. Tufts of wadding are poking through: crumbs get caught in them. You cover them up with the rectangle, sweep your hair back from your face with both hands – you’d meant to wash it but you set the alarm to snooze – and tie it up in a ponytail.

Now you just need to screw up the slip of paper with the list on and throw it away, into the almost empty bin. You took the rest downstairs last night. An animal ran away when you switched on the light in the yard. A small animal: it jumped off the lid of the dustbin, you heard it land. You walked slowly towards the bins, taking care not to make a sound, not to tread on the bits of broken glass – why, you asked yourself.

The clean crockery is piled up on the draining board, ominously high; you put half of it away in the cupboard, slide the stack of waste paper a little way under the bench with your foot, listen out for any sound from the hallway. Lucas is asleep, you’ll go and wake him up when the doorbell rings, you’re still standing by the table, the slip of paper in your hand, just sit still and wait, you think, and stay standing.

Lucas is very neat. He tidies up every evening before he goes to bed. He went to the fruit and veg stalls to ask if they had any fruit crates, and carried the crates home under his arms, his thighs white from the pressure. Listened to *The Three Investigators*, the same CD over and over again, the CD player on repeat, and sorted out his toys, slowly and carefully. One crate for the big cars, one for the little ones, one for the Playmobil, one for the Lego, one for the aeroplanes and helicopters. He labelled each crate in felt-tip, lined one with plastic bags – that was for the toys with small parts, to stop anything falling out. He stuffs his clean clothes into the drawers without folding them, but he always puts trousers with trousers, jumpers with jumpers, socks in matching pairs: he

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refuses to go to school with odd socks. He arranges his worksheets by subject in piles on his desk. You only ever go into the room to air out the smell of sleep in the mornings; you're pleased whenever you see a used glass, a crumpled tissue on the floor. Lucas never forgets anything. Not parents' evening, not Christmas crafts day; he sellotapes the invitations to the wall above his bed, brings them to you on the appropriate day. When you don't turn up, he goes quiet.

One morning you paused at the window; it was white and misty outside. You pulled the crates off their shelves. "What have you done, Mama?" he shouted when he got home from school. You upended them. Listened with satisfaction to the hard sounds of the Lego bricks, the plastic monster body parts (Buy-yon-ickels, he calls them, striving to pronounce each individual vowel correctly) and the Playmobil as they clattered to the floor. The cars fell with a tinny clang, the big ones sounded hollower. You scuffed your feet through the toys, the way you used to as a child in autumn leaves, you swept the piles together, mixed them into each other, and finally you spread a layer of picture books across the top.

The radiator. You forgot the radiator. You go closer, kneel on the kitchen floor: dried brown splashes – coffee – and at the bottom, where the metal ribs merge, grey half-moons of dust. If you wipe it off you'll have to sweep the floor again, you think, a cigarette, you think, but they'll be able to smell it. Calm down, it's only the meter-reader, and throw away the list for God's sake.

You go and stand by the window, open it wide, blow the smoke outside. You look down at the avenue: the benches are still empty, the trunks of the sycamore trees dappled olive yellow, as if they're wearing camouflage, the higher branches smooth and grey. The breeze blows the smoke back inside the kitchen and you waft it with your hand, trying to disperse it. It drifts around your fingers in graceful coils.

*

Lucas held an arm out in front of him, squeezed one eye shut and measured. The band of sunlight on the blind was as wide as his forearm, from wrist to elbow, the light turned the clown faces pale and see-through. She hadn't woken him; she was already up, he could hear her in the hallway, talking to someone. Lucas stood up and tugged on the

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blind cord, he had to wind the last bit round by hand. Footsteps in the hallway, in the kitchen.

He took a pair of socks from the drawer – she didn't hear him coming, reached for the pack of cigarettes on the kitchen table. A man in a blue boiler suit was kneeling in front of the radiator. The lighter flared, she coughed, hocked up phlegm. He walked past her.

"You're so mean." Lucas stamped his foot, the kitchen floor hard beneath his heel. The man looked round, eyeing the Spiderman vest, the socks in his hand.

"Go and get dressed," she said.

He dropped onto a chair. "You didn't wake me up." Leant forward and quickly pulled a sock over his foot, over the dark outlines of the toenails. She looked at the calendar hanging on the wall and counted the crosses in the squares, her eyes wandering to the square he had circled in red felt-tip – her lips moved.

"It's the 29th today, 29th of August. Friday," said the man by the radiator.

She straightened up, folded her arms.

"See?" She spoke the word as if she would have liked to add a gloating "Haha."

"School starts next week, I'm not completely nuts."

"You can still wake me up though."

Lucas watched as the man removed the tube, held it up to the light, wrote something down and took a new tube out of his bag to put in its place. The tubes were made of glass, filled with lime-green liquid, as if they were radioactive or toxic or something. He would have liked to hold it, was too afraid to ask. He was hungry.

"Can I have some Frosties?"

"The milk's all gone."

She was about to turn her back on him, then looked over at the man and had second thoughts.

"I'll go out and get some in a minute," she said, more gently this time.

* * *

Claas didn't have a rolling suitcase, he had a shoulder bag, black, with BREE in brown stitching on the side – all the others had rolling suitcases. He'd bought the bag when

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he'd gone on a tennis trip with the men from the C team, everyone had had a bag like that back then. Don't start doubting yourself. Dark grey suits, light blue shirts, Claas lifted a hand, waving it in front of the motion sensor by the door of the buffet car – it slid silently open. There were seats and tables fitted on either side of the compartment and a counter in the middle: he went towards it. Most of the seats were taken, diagonally striped ties, lots of the men drinking beer, cloudy glasses of Weizen on the tables in front of them. They'd stuck out their feet, encased in brown leather shoes (pointed, but not too pointed) into the aisle – Claas had to be careful not to tread on them. They weren't wearing tie pins or glasses but they did have wedding rings on, and the ones sitting alone wore earplugs.

He didn't look them in the eye, turned away every time one of them glanced at him, afraid the other man might stop. Might stand still, look closer – fireworks in the synapses of the occipital lobes – and recognise him.