Sample Translation

Der Mann, der durch das Jahrhundert fiel (The Man who fell through the Century) by Moritz Rinke

novel

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Prologue: the end

His childhood — and this was a fact the Brüning Building Company no longer made any attempt to disguise — would fall apart at some point, sooner rather than later, and break into two quite separate pieces.

The west wing — the part in which he had grown up with his mother and her overpowering love, with his grandfather, the sculptor, commonly known as the Rodin of the north, and with his grandmother, who baked North German butter cakes every day — would sag down and sink into the Teufelsmoor Fen. At the same time, however, the east wing, where the rest of the family had lived, would rise into the air, whereupon the entire house would split down the middle and snap in two. The east wing would then collapse back into the mud, and presumably that part of the Kück family would sooner or later be swallowed up too, with its freckle-faced Johans, its blue-eyed Hinrichs, its milk-cows and murderers, its schnapps, and beautiful Marie, the peasant-girl model with straw-blonde hair who to this very day still figures like a ghost in the portait of an old Worpswede burgher.

‘Shear failure’, Paul whispered to himself.

‘Shear failure’: that was the technical term wheeled out by Brünings, the local building company, to explain such catastrophes. It wasn’t the first time that this sort of shear failure had happened up here in the north, in the boggy, lowland meadows on the edge of the Teufelsmoor Fen where no one had ever lived in the old days except peat farmers, travelling the waterways in brown-sailed boats.

Paul put a chair on the marshy ground and tried to breathe calmly as he sat gazing at the cracked, slanting walls and the west wing canted like the hull of a sinking ship. He heard a cow in the distance, then another close-to that seemed to be answering the first.

He could feel the very chair he was sitting on sinking into the ground, and pulled his

little black notebook out of his trouser pocket. ‘Paul Wendland’ was inscribed on the first page along with his mobile number. His name was really ‘Wendland-Kück’, but he only ever called himself Paul Wendland because no one in the world at large could make sense of ‘Kück’ anyway. He chose a fresh page, immediately after ‘Halmer Project’. He wrote all his projects down in his notebook, and also his own personal action-plans as well as his problems and their potential solutions. Ever since his childhood he had used his notes, lists and equations to combat the chaos that prevailed in the Kück family and life in general.

Current problems:

1. Shear failure
2. The dead figures in the garden (Marie cast in bronze!!!)
3. The last of the Kücks is in a coma and is going to die. (Poor Nullkück!)
4. How can I go on denying that the man in the fields and in the night club was my father? (I can now cross out Wendland as well. From now on my only name is Paul.)

Paul tugged his shoes out of the fen that was once again hissing and snarling like a strange voracious animal protecting its kill. Below the heading about his father he wrote

5. Wet, boggy feet *again*. The story of my life: wet, boggy feet.

Then he ran off with his bag into the fields that stretched away to the west before melting into the distant clouds.

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Part Two: In the Artists' Colony

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Arrival in the Fen (Nullkück and Grandfather's house)

By the following morning Paul was right there in the fen. Nullkück had already shown him the plaster marks that he had been daubing on the outside walls for years to check the level. Over the last four months the house had sunk almost five centimetres.

Paul immediately rang Brüning, the building company, but was told that Jan Brüning was having his lunch.

'Oh my God', mumbled Nullkück, stamping around in his wellingtons in the boggy ground that thanks to all the heavy rain no longer had the slightest hope of drying out.

'All because of climate change, that's for sure', said Paul, giving a pat on the shoulder to Nullkück who was raising his fists towards the heavens and struggling, so it seemed, to make a profound utterance of some sort: perhaps about this house that both had grown up in, and in which Nullkück still lived; perhaps by way of welcoming Paul, who hadn't been back here for ages — though there didn't yet seem sufficient familiarity between them on this first morning of their reacquaintance. In the end he bellowed 'Bloody climate!', at the same time brandishing his fist in the air while also furiously stamping his foot into the soft ground, as though there were some entity between heaven and earth that should let him continue his life in this house.

Paul had never grasped precisely how he was related to Nullkück. In the old days he had mostly called him 'Uncle', partly because Nullkück had always seemed so close

to him, and partly because the terminology was far too complicated when it came to one's grandfather's brother's son. On top of that, there were all sorts of rumours that Nullkück had been adopted and was in truth the illegitimate son of Mackensen, the founder of the colony, and that his mother, Hilde, wasn't his mother at all, she being allegedly barren. At any rate, Nullkück was a touch feeble-minded, a 'clodpoll' or 'blockhead', as Paul's grandfather termed it. In his view nothing could ever come of such a man, what's more he should never even have been there in the first place, and so he called him 'Nullkück' — which amounted to saying that he wasn't a Kück at all.

Even as a child, Paul had been surprised that this relative with the funny name always looked younger than his age. Perhaps it was because of his childlike nature, or his beautiful, soft-glowing, somewhat oversized blue eyes that never stopped moving; perhaps it was because of his still luxuriant head of blond hair — which, like Prince Ironheart, he cut himself. He wore corduroy trousers, alternately dark blue and dark brown, held up by the same grey braces that Hilde had given him in 1955, together with one of his five ancient but hardy linen shirts, all of them a milky grey from countless washes. And as taciturnity wasn't uncommon in these parts, his handicap was only apparent when he tried to say something and just kept repeating the same words over and over again. A great sadness would then be apparent in his eyes, his words and sentences lurked there like a yearning, like thoughts trapped beneath the ice.

As a child Paul had loved Nullkück. He was some twenty years older, but you could play games with him, and he was the only person who really listened to Paul. They also went out on the tractor together. Using the Hanomag R16 belonging to Farmer Gerken next door, Nullkück would turn hay, spread manure and harvest swedes, all the while driving the young women in the fields completely crazy by racing towards them at full tilt in order to throw them his love letters.

> Dear Berta.
> I have been watching you for a long time from afar while you work in the potato field. Your hair flutters in the wind like a coat of golden silk. Unfortunately I haven't got time to stop, for winter is approaching and I must dash from place to place.

Nullkück went on delivering such letters with the tractor well into the 70s — many, many letters, delivered to almost all the local farm girls in a variety of fields, invariably signed ‘Nullkück’. As a child Paul could readily put himself in the shoes of the girls concerned. He considered the name ‘Nullkück’ totally unsuitable for love letters and for a while tried to think of an alternative, but the family and the whole farming community were long since used to it by then, and Nullkück himself didn’t want another name either: that’s what he was called, and that was that.

He had learnt to read and write at special school, where he was the best in his class. He enjoyed writing, and if he made a mistake he used erasing fluid — ‘Ink death’, made by Pelikan — which Hilde gave him every year on his birthday. Only when he wanted to speak did he become slow. As a rule he could only produce one or two words at a time, even though he had complete sentences and entire speeches ready in his head.

Perhaps that was the reason why the house on Teufelsmoor Bank was one of the first to be fitted with a modem by Deutsche Telekom. From that moment on Nullkück spent the entire day sending emails, though presumably not to Berta and the others, for all the farm girls in the area that he had showered with love letters from his tractor were either old, dead or not connected to the internet.

Nullkück lived on in the enormous house as the last remaining Kück. Paul’s mother had always imagined presenting the property to the artists’ colony as a local museum or studio building, or letting it out for a while at a hefty rent, but potential tenants were invariably put off once they were informed that a somewhat mentally deficient man called ‘Nullkück’ would have to retain his room in the rear portion of the house.

Paul’s mother had never been able to bring herself to put him in a home. This may have been because such an act wouldn’t even have served to salve her conscience, for Nullkück didn’t need any help, he was perfectly capable of looking after himself. He made himself buckwheat pancakes three times a day, and his disability benefit was quite sufficient. Part of it went to Paul, his mother had seen to that, since the house was hers by inheritance and Nullkück lived in it completely rent-free. On the other hand he did do small repair jobs, kept the rooms in a reasonable state, and did

the dusting. He removed the rampant moss that proliferated on the external walls, and he kept an eye on the plaster marks in order to check the house's rate of subsidence and pass on the information to its owner in Lanzarote. He dealt with the leaves in the garden, scythed the grass, tackled the mole hills, and took care of Paul Kück's large bronze sculptures.

Nullkück was thus a kind of squatter-cum-caretaker. He looked after things, but at the same time this 'clodpoll' with his buckwheat pancake pan held sway over the entire house, with the result that the rightful owner and her son simply had to wait until Nullkück no longer existed.

The five brothers of Paul's mother were unable or unwilling to enforce their claims as heirs. They were either dead or mad, or else no longer wanted anything to do with the house. One of the brothers, an inmate of the Lübeck lunatic asylum, had even formally renounced his inheritance, as if a curse lay on the house.

In former days Johanna Kück, her parents and her brothers had inhabited the west wing of the house, which was unquestionably the more attractive one with its large hall from which one could see so far across the fields that the cows seemed to wander off into the sky. The hall — where meals were eaten — gave access to the living room complete with its tiled stove, which Paul Kück had had built into the dividing wall so that it heated the hall as well. The living room also housed the gigantic solid oak clothes cupboard that he had fashioned with his own hands, but during the construction of which he had either got his measurements wrong or had fallen prey to delusions of grandeur, for by the time he'd finished all the Kücks in the entire world could have hung their clothes in it.

There had been a time when this house was inhabited solely by Kücks with their oval faces, large ears, freckles, blue eyes and shocks of blond hair. Paul Kück's two brothers, whom he had allowed to come and live in the house, inhabited the huge hall of the east wing, which had been left pretty much in its original condition. They were called Johan and Hinrich Kück, and each of them had five cows who also lived in the hall, and whom they had brought with them from nearby Tarmstedt Fen, where the Kücks originally hailed from. Paul Kück had been the only one of the brothers not to have to go off to the war, having been categorised as an 'irreplaceable artist' and therefore 'indispensable'. His wife Greta also hailed from Tarmstedt Fen, like the

brothers and Hilde, Hinrich's wife. Only the beautiful Marie was from Worpswede; Johan had met her behind the Zion Church at the 1934 Harvest Festival.

In all, the Kück brothers and their wives produced thirteen children on Teufelsmoor Fen, all of them boys except for Johanna — to the despair of Hilde, who remained relentlessly barren. Children came cascading into the world all around her, the other Kück women were garnering Mother's Crosses left, right and centre, she alone went without — until out of rage and bitterness she hacked at one of her breasts with a carving knife.

'I'd completely forgotten about all the people standing around out here!' Paul said as Nullkück took him on a tour of the garden as though he were a guest, just as his grandfather used to do whenever visitors came and were shown round the famous garden full of human figures.

They were standing at that particular moment in front of Luther, the 'great reformer' — as Paul's grandfather had carefully informed him when he was still a young child. The Great Reformer was in particular danger of sinking into the marsh, as his grandfather's artistic aim had been to capture in bronze not only Luther's soul and inner secrets, but also his physical bulk and precise dimensions. Luther was a colossus, weighing over 100 kilos for sure, a mountain of bronze wearing a flat hat and a contented expression.

Opposite Luther, on the other side of the ancient oak tree, was Rembrandt, 95 kilos, with a broad, slanting hat and a wild mop of hair, 'one of the most famous painters in the world', admired even by the old stalwarts of Worpswede; as a child, Paul had always thought he was Robin Hood.

Nullkück took him over to Napoleon Bonaparte, 'the great commander', as his grandfather had called him — a mere 1 metre 66 tall, but 90 kilos in weight thanks to French cuisine. His mouth curved, graceful, almost feminine; his nose elegantly shaped; his eyes mild and free of defiance. Paul strode on through the garden with Nullkück, wondering how all those wars and battles could ever have existed in such a perfectly proportioned head.

Max Schmeling, 'the master boxer', the heavyweight who had knocked out America's

Brown Bomber: 90 kilos, 1 metre 85, huge bushy eyebrows, left arm outstretched, expression resolute.

They took a turn around Otto von Bismarck, ‘the great Prussian’, also 90 kilos, a proud 1 metre 90, a German giant in the fens with his honorary general’s uniform and pickelhaube helmet.

Next to him stood Rodin — Rodin with a well-rolled R — ‘my colleague, my other half’, as Paul’s grandfather always used to say; 85 kilos, long coat, godlike beard, eyes that sought the very essence of people and objects. When Paul’s grandfather stood there in front of his Rodin statue and the visitors to his garden talked also about him, about Paul Kück, the Rodin of the north, he came very close to avowing his daughter’s doctrine of reincarnation.

After that came Heinrich Schliemann, who had excavated Troy and discovered Priam’s treasure, then Lübeck’s Thomas Mann, whose pen had spawned the famous Buddenbrooks and from whom Paul’s grandfather would gladly have commissioned an account of the Kücks. Schliemann and Mann looked astonishingly alike with their high foreheads, their hair combed straight back, their moustaches, the hint of a bow tie, their 75 kilos apiece.

Willy Brandt, Rilke, Heinz Rühmann, Paul’s grandmother, Albert Einstein, mad Nietzsche and the red bog-body were the lightest ones.

Willy Brandt, ‘the great social democrat’, had an unusually high forehead and deep creases around his mouth.

‘Look at those kinks in his hair!’ said Paul, remembering how he had watched his grandfather working on Willy Brandt and had told him at some point about an unusual feature he had noticed: on the top of his head was a tuft of hair that jutted down over his forehead like a tongue of land, and around its edges were these curious kinks.

Rilke looked like an emaciated goat, thought Paul.

Albert Einstein, ‘the genius’, may have dreamed up a complex theory, but he had the nose of a clown and wild hair — which was accurately depicted by comparison with Rembrandt.

Heinz Rühmann raised his eyebrows in a roguish sort of way and looked like an oversized child. He was wearing his bronze top hat at a crooked angle as though he had no intention of ever growing up.

Red Franz was naked and extremely thin, and pretty well everything was instantly recognisable: head, nose, moustache, torso; Paul's grandfather had even cast his seventeen-hundred-year-old pubic hair in bronze, for Red Franz had allegedly been discovered in the marsh with well-preserved red pubic hair.

Nietzsche looked like a madman. He had an elongated face that ended in a strange quiff, eyebrows like bushes and the beard of a walrus, all that was missing were the tusks. On his plinth were the words 'God is dead'. But it was completely unclear to Paul why his grandfather had bothered with Nietzsche at all, considering that he had never been interested in nihilism, and that Nietzsche didn't hail from North Germany. Perhaps you simply had to have Nietzsche in your garden if you were an artist, or perhaps his grandfather had just needed a major philosopher — everything else was there, after all: politics, sport, religion, art, science, theatre, literature, archaeology; music had been a closed book to him, though, and Beethoven, Bach and Richard Wagner had all been ignored. Only Ringo Starr, 'the great pop star', stood in his garden, sculpted as a birthday present for his daughter: hair cascading over his forehead (the 'mop top' style), long pointed nose, curved mouth — manlier than the Great Commander's, however. He was wearing a Burberry-type coat together with a tie and along with Heinz Rühmann was the most charming object in the garden. Paul's grandfather had been deeply impressed back then when his daughter told him that Ringo Starr had had to take to the sewers to escape the attentions of women in England.

They were now standing in front of Paul's grandmother. In her hand was something hinting at a tray of butter cakes, on her face an expression that seemed to Paul far too serious.

'My grandmother looks like Margaret Thatcher holding a cake dish. Don't you think so? Like the Iron Lady of England! Yet she's my Granny. I'd have made her gentler and smilier', remarked Paul. After all, this was the only sculpture in the whole garden that he was really in a position to judge.

His grandmother, like Nullkück, was a denizen of ordinary-mortal time, and such

people differed from the devotees of creative-spirit time in their ability to smile; the creative-spirit people never smiled at all.

‘See, even Bismarck’s got a friendlier look on his face. But then perhaps nothing’s more difficult than recognising the true nature of your own wife.’

Nullkück nodded in agreement, while Paul tried to imagine his grandparents as lovers. He couldn’t remember them ever touching or hugging each other, let alone kissing. He couldn’t even recall any such displays of tenderness from his parents. As a child he had existed, somehow or other, but there had no longer been any evidence of *why* he had come into existence in the first place.

‘There’s the fiery woman!’ exclaimed Paul, spotting the statue of Marie. In the old days she had stood on the fringes, away from the garden, but now she was right in the middle of all the great men and, as ever, unarguably the most beautiful thing in the entire place.

In real life — so the story went — Marie had been taken away by the gestapo a few months before the end of the war after her husband had gone off to the front and she had badmouthed the nazis around the village and handed her two Mother’s Crosses back to the local gauleiter — indeed she allegedly hit him over the head with the silver one.

‘Marie was a fiery woman’, his grandfather whispered when Paul accompanied him on his walk through the garden to her statue to take her a bunch of birthday flowers, as he did every year.

‘The only communist in our family’, he remarked, laying the roses at the foot of her plinth. Marie was the only one of his women who stood on a plinth.

‘A connumist’ echoed Paul, stumbling over the consonants and picking up the can of milk that their neighbour Farmer Renken left with Marie every day.

‘I had to turn her into a bronze so that she didn’t burn up. If you let yourself in for something that you then can’t escape from, even love can destroy you’, his grandfather added quietly, before posing his favourite question: ‘Why are my sculptures hollow?’

‘So there’s room for people’s souls and their secrets, for their strengths and their

weaknesses.'

Paul had answered the same question many times before, and he simply repeated the words used by his grandfather, who spoke of his sculptures as though they were real people and intimately known to him. Needless to say, he had never personally met the Great Reformer, the Great Commander, the Great Prussian — but he knew them in his own special way. Especially the great Rodin: after all, he was more or less Rodin himself. And Willy Brandt, 'the great Chancellor', who had paid him a visit in 1973 and even stayed for afternoon coffee and cakes.

Paul's grandfather enjoyed perambulating through the garden and circling round his statue-people, putting his hand on their shoulder or saying a quick hello. He lived with all of them, with their souls held safe within the hollow bronze, with their flaws and their strengths. He was only ever interested in people with secrets and flaws — without which, so he believed, their great deeds could never have come about.

Paul noticed how his grandfather sometimes looked across at Marie when he was sitting in the garden with his family. He seemed at such moments to be elsewhere in spirit and full of tranquillity, and his eyes were gentle, whereas normally they were searching, restless, penetrating. When he looked across at Marie, his eyes opened up like a pair of double doors. Paul imagined going through them and wandering on beyond his grandfather's eyes into a long, rich, well-lived life peopled by fiery women, communist lovers, secrets, poets' wives with famous cooking pots, coffee barons and, finally, even presidents who visited Grandfather in his garden and ate butter cake.

Greta did not like the statue of Marie. She detested it. Marie must be moved further way, she would hiss, right out of the garden. Under no circumstances was the statue to stand anywhere near her or anywhere in the vicinity of the garden's great personalities.

'What on earth is the point of putting her next to Luther?' she asked when her husband had moved the Marie statue away from her and Rilke, but close to the Great Reformer.

'Put her next to your bog body, for goodness' sake! What possible reason could there be for that peasant woman to stand next to Luther or Heinrich Schliemann? I

don’t want her there!’

Paul’s grandfather had to move Marie four times altogether before his wife finally left him in peace. In the end Marie stood at the edge of the garden and Greta stood bracketed between her poet of the falling leaves, Rilke, and her hero Heinz Rühmann, star of *The Punch Bowl.*

Why his grandfather had given a plinth to Marie but not to his wife was a mystery to Paul.

‘What about all these ropes, then?’ asked Paul. ‘Were they your idea?’

Nullkück nodded and appeared to be taking a particular interest in Paul’s astonished gaze.

Throughout the entire garden ropes had been strung up between the statues and the ancient oak tree to try to prevent the great men from sinking into the ground. At some earlier point Nullkück, with the help of local farmers, had put paving slabs underneath them, but the slabs had gradually sunk into the ground, so he had gone over to using mooring ropes to hold the statues up.

Thus for instance he had tied a rope around Luther’s waist, led the other end to the ancient oak tree, and fastened it high up on the trunk. When the oak started to bend slightly in the direction of the heavy statue of Luther he devoted considerable effort to shifting other statues into new positions, with the result that the statue of Rembrandt cancelled out the tree’s tilt towards Luther and pulled it back into the vertical. When Napoleon yanked the tree in yet another direction, his opposite number Max Schmeling tugged it back again. Nullkück applied the same principle in the case of Marie and Paul’s grandmother, moving Marie from the edge of the garden to the middle — thereby defying the dead grandmother’s wishes, but seeing no alternative. The two women now had to work in harmony with each other. They were roped to the ancient oak tree on opposite sides in order to maintain a due equilibrium and stabilise one another’s position in the fen — Greta Kück with her half-intimated tray of butter cakes, Marie as ever one of the most artful, vivid and accomplished works that Paul’s grandfather had ever created.

Otto von Bismarck, Auguste Rodin, Albert Einstein, Rilke, Ringo Starr, Red Franz,

Heinz Rühmann and Heinrich Schliemann, not to mention Thomas Mann from Lübeck, also had mooring ropes fastened around neck or chest and were thus kept up by the ancient oak or alternatively were supporting each other. It was an impressive sight — all those historical figures linked together by means of ropes and an oak tree: the Great Commander head to head with the Great Boxing Champion, the Great Painter opposite the Great Reformer, Troy twinned with Lübeck and the Buddenbrooks, the genius who dreamt up the theory of relativity facing Red Franz with his 1,700-year-old pubic hair, and in addition Willy Brandt with madman Nietzsche, Marie with Paul's grandmother — all of them attached by taut mooring ropes to an oak tree which was under considerable yet not excessive strain, for Nullkück's system was sheer perfection.

'What a brilliant invention!' exclaimed Paul with an appreciative nod while Nullkück, half embarrassed and half proud of himself, checked the tension on the ropes.

Paul's mobile rang.

'Why haven't you been answering?' Christina asked him.

'I've got loads to do', he explained. 'I was going to send you some flowers, that's nicer than texting. So how was your first day?'

'Fantastic. I'm working on jumping genes now. They're segments of DNA in the genome, they were discovered in Indian maize. When are you coming down to see me?'

'Why are you shouting like that?' Paul replied.

'I'm on the Rambla with some colleagues', she said, just as loudly as before, and Paul would have liked to ask her why she was already out with colleagues when she'd only been down there for two days.

'Felipe is suggesting that I write my thesis on jumping genes in sac fungi!'

'Interesting. And who's Felipe?' She sounded so happy, so full of zest, thought Paul. 'What's up? Weren't you going to do research on our horse chestnut?' He wondered whether he shouldn't ask her why she'd written 'LG', an abbreviation suggesting sudden coolness on her part.

'Felipe is Dr Sanchez's assistant and he thinks it's completely out of sync with current thinking!'

‘What on earth are you talking about! *What’s* out of sync with current thinking?’ Paul was getting really cross.

‘Horse chestnuts!’ yelled Christina, then started trying to make her new thesis topic a bit clearer: ‘The idea is that I should look instead at jumping genes that jump from a sac fungus to a mould fungus then code themselves into a stable state by means of their own proteins even though they’re in the genome of a different fungus.’

Paul wanted to say something personal, but he couldn’t possibly bawl it out at the top of his voice just so that Christina could hear it amid the bustle of Barcelona’s Rambla.

‘Are you still there?’

‘Yes’, said Paul.

‘Felipe has inserted sugar beet genes into the genome of flies. He wants to do his advanced doctorate on transgenic flies, and he’s suggesting it might be a good idea if we...’

‘Listen, I’m at home in the Teufelsmoor right now and I’ve got to concentrate on the Kücks and my own patch, let’s talk about your bloody flies some other time!’

There was no reply from Christina. Not a peep. All Paul could hear was the hum of Barcelona.

‘I take back the “bloody flies” bit, obviously’, Paul said in an attempt to apologise. ‘I thought it was all very interesting. You must tell me in more detail sometime how those genes of yours do their jumping, but *I’m* facing some major problems here as well, and you might have thought to ask me where I am right now. My inheritance is sinking into the fen. We’ve got to work out a rescue plan right now. I’ll be in touch. — Okay?’

He’d left a slight pause before saying goodbye, but she didn’t follow up with any questions. Compared to her important new problems in Barcelona, mused Paul, he and his troubles in the fen presumably didn’t count for much. ‘When are you coming down?’ — So he was supposed to drop everything just like that, was he, and simply fit in with her plans and her new fixation on genes?!

Nullkück had caught parts of the conversation and was gazing wide-eyed at Paul. It

was presumably the first time he had a heard a couple talking to each other since the death of Paul's grandparents.

'That was my girlfriend', said Paul. 'She knows all about you as well, I've told her the whole story.'

He loosened the knot in his tie, which he had deliberately put on for this journey back home. It was his only tie, a dark blue one that he didn't need to knot as he had left it tied ever since the funeral of his grandmother — his other grandmother, the Wendland one. He loosened the knot as if he were slowly being suffocated by Christina's new life — or by his old life in this land of his fathers.

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4

Ohlrogge in the Don Camillo Club (I)

Peter Ohlrogge only used to visit the brothel in Worpswede when it was raining. He would then don his cape with its huge hood, clamber onto his bicycle, and ride from Viehland, just beyond the Worpswede boundary, to Weyerberg Hill. Once there, he would lock his bicycle to a tree, remove the pump as well just to be on the safe side, and then, shrouded in his dark green cape — which made him look like a very large frog — run down the other side of the hill to the brothel that lay just beyond Barkenhoff. Barkenhoff had originally been farm buildings belonging to the drink-addled widow of a local farmer, but then Heinrich Vogeler, Ohlrogge's hero, came along and turned the cowsheds and pigsties into a gracious villa with a gleaming white flight of steps, a terrace in the grand style, and, in a gable room, the poet Rilke as a long-term guest.

Once again, then, it was raining cats and dogs in Worpswede, and Ohlrogge had as usual interpreted this as a divine sign that he should spend the evening with the

whores. He ran down the eastern slope of Weyerberg Hill in his frog suit, noticed that lights were burning in Barkenhoff, and quietly crept closer. Through the window he could see a young artist in a white shirt concentrating hard on his work, and he could hear Russian music that was getting ever faster and more animated.

Ohlrogge had so often walked through Barkenhoff in the past, he had sat on the terrace like all those famous artists and imagined that he could become a new Heinrich Vogeler, a major artist, a successful utopian, a fairy-tale king, an ideal human being. And didn't he even look a bit like Vogeler with his pale face, his pointed nose, his slightly sad mouth, his far-seeing eyes? Ohlrogge had conjured up so much in his dreams: work, fulfilment, fame, power to change the world, to be the leader of the new generation, and on top of all that a young woman with whom he could sit on a grand and gleaming terrace, a young woman positively destined to share his life!

Martha, the brothel's bartender, opened the door. She took Ohlrogge's bicycle pump off him, pulled his cape up over his head, put it on a hanger, and hung it up outside under the eaves for the water to drain off. Then fetching a towel from the toilet next to the front door she set about Ohlrogge's grey, curly hair, which despite his cape showed numerous wet patches. 'Right, in you come then', she said. 'The Parkinson's lot are here again.'

'What, this early?' Ohlrogge asked in astonishment: the club had opened at eight, and it was still only five past.

The Parkinson's lot usually visited the club as a group. Sometimes there were as many as ten of them, and on such occasions they would promptly commandeer the entire team of girls without any preliminaries whatever. They came from the Neurological Hospital in Osterholz, where patients were given a drug that produced a particular neurotransmitter in their brain serving to combat the shaking, stiffness and slowing-down of movements characteristic of the disease. The fiendish thing was that, although the drug was indeed effective against the disease and easily penetrated the brain's natural defences, it also had extreme side effects in the form of grossly excessive patterns of behaviour: compulsive gambling, compulsive shopping, above all a greatly intensified compulsion to go in search of erotic excitement and sex. Ohlrogge had once got into conversation at the bar with one of

the patients: following his very first dose of the drug he had been incapable of controlling his urges and had promptly lost his wife. He had gone out looking for ever more thrills, first among his own circle of acquaintances, then among strangers in the street and on school playgrounds. In the end he had become a regular at all the brothels and sex shops in Lower Saxony. Other, milder methods, along with alternative remedies derived from belladonna, henbane, celandine, iron, tin and lead, had all proved ineffective, and hadn't worked any better for the Osterholz group either. In the end it was a question of opting either for mobility combined with compulsive urges that condemned you to utter isolation, or for trembling paralysis and immobility combined with senses that were alert and decidedly more healthy.

Ohlrogge sat at the bar and waited for women from Eastern Europe and Latin America. He delved into his pocket and asked Martha for hot water: Ohlrogge drank almost nothing except fennel tea in order to combat his frequent bouts of constipation. He usually took a couple of sachets with him, stuffed into a jacket pocket beneath his bicycle cape, and if he was proposing to spend the entire evening at the Don Camillo Club he would sometimes stick some dried fruit in there as well, such as apricots, plums or figs.

It was already nearly nine. Martha fiddled about with the remote to turn on the porn film which — provided everything was in working order — could be followed on a tiny screen suspended above the bar: a cleaning woman arrives at a man's house, does a little bit of cleaning, then does other things instead. The same film was shown every night unless the system had broken down. Ohlrogge dipped a sachet of fennel into his cup of hot water and waited for the Parkinson's lot to finish — but as he did so he fell into contemplation of his own maladies: the momentous events of his past. Were some people so addicted to their past that it was just like a drug?

Summer 1967, just after he had been dumped (The duel)

He simply turns up, uninvited, at one of Paul Kück's garden parties bringing his two Napoleon Le Page muzzle-loading pistols with him, one for a right-handed and one

for a left-handed user: 45-calibre, precision-made lead balls, the whole lot in a black carrying case. The last challenge to a duel in Worpswede had occurred in 1895, when the young painter Otto Ubbelohde drew a charcoal caricature of Fritz Mackensen, the founder of the colony. Mackensen had hung out his neatly brushed Bavarian officer's uniform to air in the morning sunshine and already prepared the duelling ground on Weyerberg Hill when the duel was forbidden by the Bremen Officers' Court of Honour, from whom Mackensen had requested the necessary permission.

Peter Ohlrogge doesn't have permission in the summer of 1967 either — and where could he have got it from anyway? There he stands in the Kücks' fenland garden, gazing at the new boyfriend sitting next to Johanna at the table with his arm around her as though to the manner born. At one point he runs his hand through her hair, pushing it gently backwards to allow him to lean over her face and kiss her slightly parted lips, whilst simultaneously placing his other hand on her lap. It's his right hand, the one he'll shoot with, notes Ohlrogge, and he starts walking towards the table with his heart pounding, raging, screaming, scarred for ever by this ghastly spectacle. He opens the little travelling case and reaches into its black velvet depths to pull out the weapons once treasured by his father: Ohlrogge had inherited them, and had never found the slightest use for them until now. The pistol for right-handers came out first, then the one for left-handers. In both cases the charge is ignited by means of percussion caps when a hammer strikes a so-called piston mounted on the left or right of the barrel. He thrusts the pistol for right-handers into the fingers of Johanna's new boyfriend. He himself will shoot with his left, he being left-handed like all the people he admires — he's checked it out: Mohamed Ali, Mozart, Bob Dylan, Rachmaninov, Caspar David Friedrich, the Maid of Orleans, Picasso.

More staggering than walking because of the tumult in his heart, he positions himself at a distance of 25 paces, a measurement he had gleaned from the description of a traditional duel between the Russian poet Pushkin and a French guards officer.

A few guests from Bremen who didn't know Peter Ohlrogge break off from their conversations in expectation of a happening, a frequent event at the festivities of Worpswede artists. Others who knew him all too well, and who also knew that Johanna was in the first flush of love for someone else, stand there half paralysed, half transported by this moment of intense emotion in which a woman should surely

come to her senses and return to her former love.

‘Shoot!’ he calls out to the other man, adjusting his grip on the butt which isn’t sitting firmly enough in his sweaty palm. ‘Go on, shoot!’ he screams.

The people from Bremen who think they’re witnessing a happening applaud encouragingly, but the new boyfriend simply glances at Johanna in irritation.

‘On yours the hammer strikes the piston on the left hand side so that you can shoot with your right!’ cries Ohlrogge.

‘Is this some kind of art event? Who is he?’ asks the other man, his face pale.

‘My ex’, replies Johanna, staring at her former boyfriend, who now declares that he will count to three and then shoot.

Instead of acquainting himself with a Napoleon Le Page pistol, the new boyfriend asks Johanna why she hasn’t told him anything about an ex-boyfriend. ‘What ex?’ he wants to know.

Ohlrogge has already counted as far as three when it suddenly dawns on him that the other man doesn’t even know who he is! And that so far as Johanna is concerned her old flame simply doesn’t exist any more! It also dawns on him that the other man isn’t responding to his challenge — on the contrary, he is questioning Johanna with provocative calmness as if he didn’t have the slightest expectation of being dead within seconds. Ohlrogge raises his pistol and takes aim.

A shot rings out: first an audible click, then his arm is knocked aside, finally a deafening bang in his ears. He catches sight of Paul Kück slowly lowering his shotgun, but then is aware of nothing but the blood, the hole, the sudden agonising pain, the difficulty of getting his breath.

Ohlrogge leaves the garden and its occupants. His route is marked by a trail of blood that the police follow all the way to his tiny house beyond the edge of the village.

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Ohlrogge in the Don Camillo Club (II)

Peter Ohlrogge sat at the bar waiting for the Parkinson's lot to quit the Don Camillo Club's rooms at long last so that at least one of the whores was freed up again.

'For God's sake, Martha, this just can't be right! Could you go and see what's going on?' he asked, pointing to the clock: it was already ten past eleven.

'There's nothing I can do', replied Martha, fiddling about with the remote control for the video machine. 'Once they've paid, they can go on for as long as they like. But at some point even *they* run out of steam. More hot water?'

'Yes, but perhaps someone should tell the hospital in Osterholz. It may be that for purely medical reasons...'

'We're a discreet club,' she said, interrupting him, 'we don't ring the art school either to let them know who's hanging around in here.' She had seen Ohlrogge at some point in the fields by the river taking a painting class — on watercolour landscapes.

'Fair enough, Martha. It's just that some time soon *I'd* like to have a woman sitting next to me at the bar here.' Ohlrogge now also started playing around with the remote to get the porn film working, but the screen just flickered. He did get a fleeting glimpse of the breasts of the woman who had come to do the cleaning, but that was all.

'It's about time they bought another film. Even when that bloody machine's working, all we ever get is that same old cleaning-woman thing', said Ohlrogge. 'I'm sure there must be some really imaginative films out there.'

He ate one of his figs, stuck another of his fennel tea bags in the cup of hot water, and lapsed once again into contemplation of his past.

Late summer 1967, muck-spreading (Rampage number two)

When Frau Schröter, the gallery owner, rings to ask whether he's been able to start painting again, he still can't fully straighten the arm that had taken the shotgun blast. The wedding is mentioned purely in passing. Frau Schröter is in a rush: the ceremony at the registry office had taken place that morning, and now there's this big wedding reception in the afternoon. She hadn't said whose wedding she was attending, but her sudden pause, her presumably dawning awareness of how indiscreet she had been, hits him like a bolt of lightning. His heart begins to rage and scream, he feels giddy to boot.

He doesn't need to struggle with himself for very long. He has been irritated for days by the stink of the slurry that the Viehland farmers have been spraying onto their fields from dawn till dusk. As though in a trance he runs straight to Wellbrock Farm, where they're all busy eating supper. He climbs up onto the tractor with the slurry tank behind it, a proper muck spreader with a built-in pump arrangement for squirting out the slurry, just like the manual jet pumps or portable fire pumps carried on fire engines.

He drives the tractor to Worpswede, turns onto Teufelsmoor Bank, and only stops once he's right inside Kück's fenland garden.

Johanna's wedding reception is in full swing, and Wellbrock's slurry is a blend of urine, excrement, straw and a little water, known hereabouts as 'thin-shit' or 'thick-piss'. He immediately yanks the hose out of the muck-spreader — he'd seen it done often enough as he sat in his little house for hours at a time watching the farmers fertilise their fields.

Two alternatives are now available to him. The muck-spreader is equipped with a vane wheel that accelerates the flow of slurry to such an extent that it is forced at high pressure against a baffle-head that serves as an automatic distributor squirting a heavy spray of slurry over an area twenty five metres wide. But Ohlrogge opts instead for the manual device incorporating an external pump that diverts the slurry into a hose with a jet nozzle that makes it easier to take selective aim.

The situation is much as it had been in the case of the duel business a few weeks earlier: Johanna's father is standing in front of the statue of Luther towards the back of the garden, staring fixedly at Ohlrogge as if hoping against hope that looks could kill — for this time he doesn't have his shotgun to hand.

Ohlrogge points the nozzle directly at Johanna's father and the assembled wedding guests: at the bride Johanna, the groom Ulrich Westland — sporting an oh-so-conventional mop-top hairstyle, the entire company of their relations, half Worpswede, including Frau Schröter and the historical statues right through from Bismarck to Rilke, Ringo Starr and Schliemann. For some ten seconds he stands there facing the whole gathering, quite motionless, like in that famous scene in *Once upon a Time in the West* with Henry Fonda and Charles Bronson — nothing's missing bar the harmonica. Then — using both hands now — he lets rip, firing off 2,000 litres in the space of two minutes at a pressure of eight pascals. Following that he switches over to the automatic baffle-head distributor system and leaves the reception on foot while the 500 litres still left in the tank are squirted out in a heavy spray over an area twenty five metres wide.

Autumn arrives (On jealousy, humiliation and falling ill)

Two months after the separation and ten days after the manure episode, Ohlrogge receives a letter asking him to collect his pictures from the gallery: its perspective has changed, so the letter claims, and it must now focus its attention on NEWER TRENDS MORE EXPRESSIVE OF THE *ZEITGEIST*. Normally any artist pulling off a stunt as brilliant as Ohlrogge's with the slurry would find doors opening for them on every side and would be touted as the embodiment of the very newest trends — but in Worpswede everyone turns their back on him. In addition, complaints start flooding in to the authorities alleging theft of agricultural machinery, vandalism, damage to and befouling of others' property, and offences against the regulations covering slurry disposal, not to mention various claims for damages, not least from Wellbrock Farm: it had never occurred to Ohlrogge how expensive shit can be in the

hands of lawyers. Three weeks later, while walking through the village, he sees the poster advertising the new exhibition at Frau Schröter's gallery: 'Rabbit-Men in the Age of Fear'. He goes home, waits for it to rain, and puts on his dark-green cape with its enormous hood. He returns to Worpswede and sneaks into the exhibition, sidling past Frau Schröter like a frog.

So there he is then, the celebrated artist who with his aggressive hair-curlers, pugnacious wooden spoons and idiotic mini-blenders represents the 'newer trends' and lustily points an accusing finger at the world, whilst simultaneously worming his way into the artists' colony with consummate finesse. Not only has he insinuated himself into the Kücks' grand villa, bedded the daughter of the house, made her instantly pregnant and even married her, but on top of all that he and his rabbit-men have usurped the very walls graced thus far by the timeless skyscapes of Peter Ohlrogge! In the entrance foyer the *Hamme Clarion*'s review of the exhibition is pinned up next to a few words of welcome from Horst Janssen:

> One inevitably finds oneself being reminded of Goya, of the Spanish painter's *Los Caprichos*, more particularly of the picture 'The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters' — and Ulrich Wendland, too, draws the things that disturb and frighten him, the things he sees in his daydreams. Wendland is the new Goya of our times, and furthermore shows a direct link to that stellar artist Horst Janssen...

Ohlrogge reads no further, and is so hot under the collar that he almost rips off his froggy disguise. What a nerve, comparing Wendland with Goya! What a revolting superlative! 'One inevitably finds oneself being reminded of Goya': *does* one? Who is this 'one'. Is it everybody?! Must we all now be inevitably reminded of 'The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters', or should we scale things down a notch or two? And do we really have to wheel out Horst Janssen as well? Ohlrogge is on the verge of throwing his questions in Frau Schröter's face.

She falls into conversation with a Wendland-admirer so he has to bide his time and instead spits at the 'new Goya of our times'. He spits out of an inner compulsion, out of rage, hatred, contempt and revulsion at a grossly immoderate world that idolises those that happen to be in the limelight and forgets and even discards their once much-loved predecessors, simply chucking them out like a broken bedstead. He

spits as if his life depended on it.

He then rides off on his bicycle to his little house beyond the village and crawls into bed. Over the following weeks he becomes ever more thin, pale and ill.

He writes letters to Johanna, sending them to 5, Teufelsmoor Bank:

> Dear Johanna,
> Why did you make me fall in love with you and then abandon me? Forgive me for doing what I did. I can't sleep at night. I can't paint any more

She doesn't reply.

> Dear Johanna,
> How cruel and mechanical everything seems to me. Have you finally discovered in Herr W. a man who can make himself the centre of everything, like your father? Love can't turn into a competition about who can claim to be more important, and nor should it. Do I have to have myself declared the new J M W Turner? Herr W. and I should both have pulled the trigger, then some higher power would have determined the outcome.

Winter 1967 (The year of separation drags on and on)

It's all a question of the claims for damages arising from Ohlrogge's rampage with the stolen 2,500-litre muck-spreader: ruined dresses, suits, shirts, hats, all of them added to the list of claims. Approximately one hundred irreparably damaged Heinrich Vogeler art nouveau chairs with cane seats and turned armrests in oak. A wedding breakfast by Café Worpswede rendered totally inedible. Wrecked flower arrangements, decorations, wedding presents, record collections, jukeboxes; patisseries from Barnstorf, and a huge wedding cake from Café Knigge in Bremen, smashed to smithereens by the jet of slurry. Wine, champagne and schnapps glasses shot to bits, along with the vicar's spectacles. A pendant given to a Worpswede lady by the poet Gottfried Benn allegedly washed away by the stream of manure and never recovered. Greta's antique Tarmstedt family porcelain, dating

from 1848; it’s a miracle that no claim has been put in for some dent or other supposedly suffered by the sacred Rilke saucepan.

In the meantime Herr W. has also put in claims for damages, not only in respect of the jet of manure, which purportedly threw him against one of the bronzes in the garden, but also in respect of the duel that never actually happened. According to the New Goya, he suffered a ‘serious trauma’, duly certified by a a doctor at a cost of 2,000 marks, not to mention 400 marks in lawyer’s fees and ten hours of hydrotherapy. All of which is as nothing compared to the writ from the bride’s father in respect of the slurry and his demands for specialist cleaning of his historic sculptures and complete decontamination of the ground to eradicate excess nitrates, a process requiring removal of the topsoil, its replacement by six hundred cubic metres of fresh earth, followed by the sowing of approximately 2,500 square metres of new turf, entailing the provision of six weeks’ wages for three men from a professional landscaping company. This claim alone amounts ultimately to 22,770 marks: Ohlrogge’s existence, his entire vital energy, is thus in thrall not only to the compensation claims of half Worpswede, but also — and especially — to the reconstruction of the Kücks’ fenland garden.

The pain of Ohlrogge’s wounded love has festered far beyond his power to control it: not only has it infused the very soil of the garden, but it has also given rise to thirty five separate writs — each one banal and ridiculous when taken on its own, but amounting all together to something of a mortal blow for a man with nothing to fall back on.

How petty, cold and inhumane people become when they hide behind legal jargon and solicitors’ letters, and respond to his pain with claims for cash! Why does no one ask whether a man can properly be held to account for actions driven by trampled feelings and spurned love?

What a palaver this ex-lover of Gottfried Benn’s is making about a pendant! And is she really his lover at all? If so, then he must have two, since one of them — so Ohlrogge seems to remember — was called Ursula, and she decamped to Berlin!

He even contemplates writing to Gottfried Benn himself asking him to declare his hand: who else did you have it off with in Worpswede apart from Ursula? Did you ever have a fling with a Henriette K.? Perhaps Benn would deny ever having had a

relationship with anyone of that name, thereby vastly reducing the value of the pendant in question. But then other bills and claims come pouring in full of mountainous sums and chilling verbiage, with the result that he gives up on his plan of writing the letter, without ever realising that Benn has in fact been dead for ages — and no wonder he doesn't realise, for the plaintiff behaves as if she were the great man's fully current amour.

Instead he starts asking counter-questions rather than simply accepting the claims raised against him. How much of the wedding breakfast had already been started on or already consumed when he opened the slurry valves, and why is he being charged for *all* the pastries? Why is no account being taken of the volume discount he has requested in respect of the dry cleaning? He has negotiated an all-in package, after all, but he can hardly be expected to go around collecting soiled clothes from everyone in Worpswede and then hand them in to the cleaners as a job lot under his own name. He makes relevant enquiries at Stelljes Drinks Company and at Jakobs Coffee in Bremen, and asks the Uphoff and Sons garden centre whether topsoil can be obtained more cheaply. He asks the Wellbrocks why on earth slurry is so insanely expensive, and asks the Land Control Office in Osterholz why he is being penalised for contravening the Slurry Disposal (Seasonal Restrictions) Regulations, seeing that every farmer in Worpswede spreads muck at all times of the day and night throughout the entire year. There are 40,000 cows in Worpswede in 1967, and they produce so much slurry that people don't know what to do with it and sometimes secretly tip it into the local river, the Hamme — but all of a sudden it's become a valuable commodity now that he's put it to some use.

Much the worst are the laundry bills put in by the New Goya's family, along with the summer hats belonging to his lady friends from Munich, all of which are of course made of materials that render them un-dry-cleanable, resulting in claims for replacements and damages — a complete horror story. The Bavarian summer hats provoke a tremendous fuss, and Herr W., the new husband, appears to be encouraging it and indeed to be using the summer hats to finish him off completely.

> Dear Johanna,
> The Wellbrocks are now claiming for a brand new muck spreader! Why aren't you doing anything to help? How am I supposed to pay 22,700 marks? You with your father and his garden and your new in-laws and all the Worpswede

people — are you trying to wipe me out just because I can't kill off my feelings for you? Don't be surprised if I fight back even more bitterly.

She doesn't reply. Every time he opens his post box he hopes it will contain a letter from Johanna. He longs to reconnect with her inner being, her nuttiness, her obsession with India, her playful yet intense passion; childlike — yes, prissy — yes; uncompromising and stern, then gentle and motherly with her clear blue eyes. 'My Prussian princess', he called her. Yes, he thinks, a man's entire happiness can reside in a Prussian princess.

Dear Johanna,
Please ask your father whether he thinks there's any room for manoeuvre in this sorry affair. If specialist cleaning of loads of statues comes into the picture on top of everything else it'll finish me off completely. I'm sitting here surrounded by boxes in a small redbrick house beyond the village, where the Osterholz road bends round to the right. We could make peace here. — Your ever-loving Peter.

PS Are you wearing your hair long again?

No reply.

'That's it!' he says to himself after yet again waiting day after day for an answer, 'I've had enough!' Ohlrogge resolves to hate his beloved Johanna. He hates, and he pays. He scarcely even dares to heat his tiny house. He gives painting lessons, and by 1988 he will gradually be able to settle every single claim against him, amounting in all to 52,900 marks; throughout the years from 1968 to 1988 he will pay a heavy price by giving painting lessons in the fens to talentless tourists. For twenty years — and even longer, much longer — he will stand in the damp flatlands of the River Hamme with all these daubers and housewives, and the marshy ground and the cold will make his gorge rise ever higher. Each month he will gaze at his bank statements, and each month his hatred will grow more intense.

For a while he takes refuge with his parents in Lauenburg, in the southernmost tip of Schleswig-Holstein. His father runs a cobbler's shop down there. Later he extends the premises and starts up a business specialising in orthopaedic footwear, in which Ohlrogge's mother also becomes involved. Ohlrogge asks his father to help him out,

but pretends that he needs the money for a new studio and for investing in the artists' colony. He can't tell his father that his savings will simply melt away, wasted on the Kücks' garden and countless claims for damages from the people of Worpswede.

He sits there in the flat above the shoe shop and closes the white net curtains to hide himself from the prying eyes of neighbours: he doesn't want them asking why the 'great artist' is once again living with his parents in Lauenburg. The people going in and out of his parents' shop strike him as so clumsy and taciturn that he almost starts yearning for Worpswede and Viehland: compared to Lauenburg they seem to him like Italy.

Sometimes his guilty conscience drives him downstairs to lend a hand in the cobbling shop, though polishing the shoes is all he's capable of.

'Don't you need to paint a picture?' his father asks him.

'I'm on holiday', he replies, claiming to find waxing and polishing the shoes restful and relaxing. In truth he is stricken by pangs of anxiety every time he time he lifts a pair of Lauenburg shoes out of the 'Finished' box. There are name tags on all these Lauenburg shoes, so he always knows whose shoes he's cleaning. At one point he notices he's holding shoes belonging to Inge Wichmann, the great love of his youth, and staring at him from the box are other shoes too, all with her name on them: children's shoes, sizes 23 and 34, and a pair of men's shoes, size 44.

After two months of becoming ever more mortified behind his parents' net curtains, he returns once more to the fringes of Worpswede — in a fresh attempt to retrieve his life.

Peter Ohlrogge bounded off his bar stool in the Don Camillo Club. Sylwia, a Polish girl, was coming out of the room in which she had been ensconced with a couple of the Parkinson's lot. She leant on the bar, re-did her lipstick, and gazed vacantly at Ohlrogge's cold fennel tea.

- end of sample -