

Ulsie
by Inguna Cepīte

translated by Margita Gailits
edited by Vija Kostoff

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ULSIE

Ulsie pushes her potty closer to the small white tile stove. Otherwise her bottom will freeze to it and she won't be able to pull it off and will have to walk around for the rest of her life with a potty stuck to her behind – that's what Oma, her grandma, keeps telling her. But that's how it is only in the winter. Although in the summer also the potty feels cool – probably because it's made of faience. What white faience is Ulsie doesn't know yet. But she'll find out.

If truth be told Ulsie doesn't live all the time at her Oma's. Not because here a potty may freeze to her bottom. Not because the walls in places are covered with mould. Wet fungus, Oma calls it. And also not because of the house, which in fact is just an old stable with a clay floor, despite the fact that this small building is located in Riga's centre. Some time in the future, after many years, a writers' house will be erected here. But that will be when Ulsie no longer needs a potty.

No, Ulsie lives in the outskirts of the city, not far from a forest and Bābelītes Lake. Because her parents live there. In a totally ordinary khruschevene. In a totally ordinary two-room flat. The flat, in Ulsie's opinion is grand – there are even two wardrobes in it, in which Ulsie sometimes hides. Or when her parents aren't at home, she performs a major makeover there. One of the wardrobes even has a mirror –when Ulsie is alone, she tries on Mama's shoes in front of it. Mostly the silvery golden brocade ones with the horrendously high spike heels and pointed toes. Probably the shoes were sent by Grandpa from America. Usually no one talks aloud about that America, but Ulsie has heard of it nonetheless. She's heard also that Grandpa was an officer in the Latvian army. Ulsie thinks she knows what an officer is, because she's seen films about the war. At the neighbours'. Really quite dreadful films. The grownups always think they have these great secrets of which children know nothing. Ulsie is convinced that she knows many such great secrets, but let them just try to learn Ulsie's secrets – not a chance!

Ulsie has quite a lot of secrets right here in the flat – less so in the kitchen, more so in the adjoining rooms and the wardrobes in the corridor, even though Ulsie often spends much time in the kitchen, usually when something interesting is happening there – when, from the meat-grinder holes crawl out red worm-coloured sausages or, during important holidays, when in a glass jar steel forks turn until the jar is full of whipped cream. Sometimes Ulsie is permitted to turn the handle that whips the steel forks but the cream forms so slowly that usually Mama or Oma finish the whipping.

Ulsie has been told that this really is not her parents' flat. It apparently is Ziemelīte's flat and Ziemelīte had seemingly adored Ulsie.

“Ziemelīte always worried about Ulsie so. She made us iron her diapers from both sides. She used to say that we spend too much time on our music and what about the poor child then ...” Ulsie's Mama tells Oma.

Ulsie believes it, although she really doesn't quite remember. She knows that Ziemelīte had been old and very, very sick – cancer of the blood, so Oma had once said to Mama. To Ulsie such a beast sounds quite horrifying. The single thing that Ulsie remembers most from Ziemelīte's time are the beautiful yellow little balls – yellow is Ulsie's favourite colour. It turned out badly with the little balls. They rolled away along the corridor floor and when Ulsie had gathered them up, she swallowed some. But Ulsie doesn't remember what happened afterwards. She doesn't even remember the hospital. Later her parents told the neighbours that Ulsie was saved from clinical death. That Ulsie really doesn't believe. Ulsie in fact doesn't think about death. Maybe only about Snow White's death, after she ate the apple. But it doesn't matter – Ulsie also doesn't really understand even that.

Although to both Mama and Papa the khruschevene wardrobes don't seem as big as they seem to Ulsie, they continue to be happy that Ziemelīte had taken Papa in. Papa is from Gulbene, and after he finished studying to be a conductor, he didn't have any place to live in Riga. Ulsie thinks that while Papa was studying he probably lived at the conductors' school. Ziemelīte, although quite old, had sung in a kind of old folks revolutionary choir, which Papa conducted. Quite an odd choir it was. Ulsie knows, because her Papa had taken her along for the rehearsals. All the old aunties and uncles had given Ulsie candies, usually rock candies or toffees. Some of them also gave her sugar cubes. It seemed to Ulsie that those revolutionaries very much liked her Papa and they also liked Ulsie.

Ulsie even remembers some songs that they sang – they always repeated the same ones: ‘*Ar kaujas saucieniem uz lūpām*’ – ‘With calls to war on their lips’ and ‘*Uz cīņu mosties, darba ļaudis*’ – ‘Arise ye workers from your slumbers’. Papa said the song was called ‘The International’. There were some others, also in foreign languages, this and that, which Ulsie doesn't remember, but she knows how to hum the tune for nearly all the songs. Ulsie remembers hearing that in that choir there were the true-believer revolutionaries – and also the false ones – some who weren't so real probably. That Ulsie doesn't understand. One can't understand everything – there are some things that the grown-ups talk

about, which according to Ulsie, they themselves don't understand. Because they don't know how to explain them to Ulsie.

Now there's another choir in front of which both Mama and Papa wave their arms about, and although Ulsie is still quite little, her parents take her along to its many rehearsals in Riga's old town. There in the hall, when the aunties sing – much younger aunties than those revolutionaries – Ulsie often crawls under the rows of empty auditorium seats – in at one end, out at the other, then onto the next row, until she arrives at the first one, where some aunties look and smile at her, but Mama probably doesn't see her because she's standing with her back turned to Ulsie, continuing to wave her arms. Then Ulsie sits down in the first row of the auditorium and she is the public. That's what Mama once said: "Sit quietly and listen, now you're our public."

Ulsie knows how to be the public almost from the moment of her birth. When some uncle has composed a song, immediately afterward he comes to their house to play it, sometimes even to sing it. Then he asks Ulsie's parents if the song works, or is there something that needs to be changed. Mama later says that these are the composers. She explained this to Ulsie when she was a little older and had already heard quite a few songs. Maybe almost all that exist in this world. When Ulsie was very, very little, an uncle was given the task of putting her on a potty. So, while on the potty, at that time it was a green metal potty in a

flat in the Jugla neighbourhood, Ulsie listened to the composer's new song.: 'A-a-a A-a-a, kru-u-kru-u-kr-u-u.' At the end of the song a girl waits and waits, and ... by the road a lovely old and dear bird-cherry bursts into silvery blossoms'.

Yes, Ulsie has quite a notable song-listening experience. But here, during the long rehearsal, it's not easy to sit without fidgeting.

"This one is about you." An auntie, who just made the others sing odd *lalalalalas* and the yet more odd *miamiamiamis*, sits down beside Ulsie.

She maybe thinks that the song that everyone is learning is about Ulsie. Ulsie glances at her Papa in front of the choir and listens to the words: *man pašam(i) trīs māsiņas dzelteniem(i) matiņiem(i), dzelteniem(i) matiņiem(i), zilajām(i) actiņām(i), zilājām(i) actiņām(i), sārtajiem(i) vaidziņiem(i)* – I've got three sisters, three sisters have I, with golden hair, golden hair, blue, blue eyes, blue their eyes, and rosiest of cheeks ... It could be that the song is about her. But Ulsie is not quite convinced. Even though the colour of the hair and eyes match. But Ulsie hasn't any sisters. Nor any brothers. Ulsie is alone.

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OMA

Ulsie is lucky. She has the grandest Oma in the world. Not only Ulsie but also everyone else always lovingly calls her dear Oma. Ulsie's Oma is not like her Gulbene grandma, in whose barn there's a milking cow and a goat and in the fall a garden full of red Oscars – gladiolas named after her grandfather.

Ulsie's dear Oma is a true city oma. On her hair on occasion there's a net. Sometimes Oma pins up her not too plentiful hair with a big metal clip. In the evenings Ulsie herself tries on the clip. Everyone loves Ulsie's Oma. Surely because she is so loving and helpful with everyone. A neighbour once said – “The whole world seems like her own family to your Oma.” That's probably the way it is. Ulsie's Oma considers also all of Ulsie's playmates like her own grandchildren. It's the same thing with the closest as well as totally distant relatives. Oma has given up the driest and best room in her modest home on Michurin Street to Ulsie's Papa's sister Ināra, her husband and children, who were born there. And Papa is not her son, only her son-in-law, and besides, one must admit, sometimes Oma and Papa really argue.

Oma also once really quarrelled with Ināra's husband. It was right on the wedding day of Ulsie's godmother Ināra and Vilmārs. During the wedding Ulsie kept crawling into the bride's lap. Because it was the lap after all of her dear godmother – wearing such a beautiful dress besides. The groom became angry:

“Get that child away! They'll think she's yours and part of your dowry!”

Then Oma got angry. She probably said something truly horrendous to Vilmārs, The newly-wed husband calmed down, but Ulsie, to be sure, scurried to the other end of the table.

“Oma has had a really tough time.” Mama once told a friend of hers

Oma's husband, Mama's father Rūdolfs, was that officer of course. Not to be shot, he had to leave his homeland and abandon his wife and daughter. He probably went to Germany. But no, for a long time now he's been in America. The real hard times started after grandpa's leaving. When Ulsie's Mama was born, Oma and Grandpa were still living in the Daugavgrīva town's fortress. Ulsie too would have liked to be born in a fortress. But that just probably happens to princesses in fairy tales about knights. And with Mama too. From those fortress times Ulsie's Mama is afraid of dead people, because one night Oma had been called to help

wash a dead auntie and Oma had brought along Mama, who was still quite little, on a sled. Mama had been so frightened that today she doesn't remember anything that makes sense about that dead auntie, but her fear of corpses has remained. That was one of the reasons why Mama hadn't studied to become a doctor, although she had wanted to be one. But maybe she didn't want that so badly after all?

Later Grandpa, Oma and Mama lived in an enormous flat in the centre of Riga, on Sporta Street. In a beautiful flat, which Mama to this day often recalls fondly. When the Russians invaded, a Soviet officer had thrown Oma and Mama out on the street. Just simply entered the flat, said that he liked it there, and gave them only a couple of hours to move out. Oma is nobody's fool. She had their beautiful furniture carried into the courtyard and – with a flick of a match burnt the whole lot to the ground, because she couldn't bear the injustice of it and didn't want to leave her furniture for a person like that. Mama had said to a friend that for this Oma could have been sent to the white bears. To the bears? That once again Ulsie doesn't understand. Grown-up jokes again. During the German times Oma had hidden some neighbours – a Jewish family. Ulsie wonders why you would hide some grownups. Was it the usual children's hide-and-seek? Probably all of this Ulsie didn't need to know at all, because Mama had talked to her woman friend in whispers. They didn't notice that Ulsie was once again sitting in the wardrobe close by and eavesdropping, because just before that she had been playing at hiding on her own. Ulsie had also heard that afterward they had had almost nothing to eat, and Mama had come down with a dreadful disease – tuberculosis – and Oma had left Mama in some maid's room at the flat of a girlfriend from the French Lycee, who had helped Mama in her studies, but Oma herself had left the city.

“ ... for the countryside. She helped by sending me cream and ... otherwise I wouldn't have ...” at that point Mama had probably moved further away from the wardrobe, and Ulsie heard no more.

Oma doesn't have only her daughter Ausma, my Mama. She also has Ints, Mama's little brother, who is more than ten years younger than Mama. During the war Oma had found him as a baby in the snow – it turns out his mother was being driven off to somewhere. To prison or to Siberia – that Ulsie really doesn't know. And Ints' mama had then laid him down on the ground in the hope that some good person would find him. Of course Ulsie's dear Oma is such a very, very good person, and probably because of this she was precisely the one who spotted the baby, took him into her home and raised him like her own son. Ints was a wonderfully nice and handsome boy – so loving, with chocolate-coloured

eyes, and dark, wavy hair. But Ulsie's Mama has blond hair and bluish grey eyes. But not all brothers and sisters can look alike. That Ulsie understands.

Now Ints has grown up. He is Ulsie's dear Intuncle and he works in a film studio, where movies are made. Ulsie remembers Ints, but quite foggily from the time when he got married to raven-haired Kaira. From their wedding, which took place in Kaira's mama's flat. And the flat was located in an old two-story house – right in the hospital where Ulsie was born. Right in the middle of Riga. There, now, after his wedding, lives Ints. It seems funny to Ulsie that people live in a hospital. Not being there to be treated.

Ulsie, although still little, often accompanies Oma to her work. Ulsie has heard that Oma has finished business school. Ulsie doesn't know what this school is. At one time Oma had worked as a bookkeeper for the most renowned lady in Latvia – Mrs. Benjamins, who had published a journal and had been a millionairess.

“Was that lady really the very, very richest? She probably had a ton of dresses. How many, really?” Ulsie wants to know everything. Just so there isn't any doubt.

“Yes, so she did,” Oma replies very briefly and doesn't tell what Ulsie wants to know.

That lady gave a set of dishes to Oma on her wedding day. Ulsie has seen that service – it's light cream-coloured with brownish flower clusters. Big and small plates, and there are also all kinds of dishes unfamiliar to her, for example a bowl with a lid and handles for soup – Mama calls it a tureen. Probably the rich lady had known that Oma is such a good cook.

Oma had also worked elsewhere on accounts. Now Oma is working at the hospital, in an incredibly deep cellar. It's not the same hospital where Intuncle works. Oma's hospital is opposite a park, but, if you stand at the entrance, in the distance, at the end of the street, you can see the big city railway station.

In that deep cellar there are huge metal half-barrels – like elephants – just their legs are thin. In the big barrels Oma places several smaller containers into which she folds gauze and sheets, and some other things. Then Oma closes the lid of the big elephant, turns on the taps at its side and looks on as the elephant gets hot. That is shown by the small arrows in a round clock, or at least it looks very much like a clock. In addition Oma adds something to the water. She says it makes the water much

cleaner so that with it one can operate on people. But Ulsie doesn't think that one can operate anything with water.

“Ulsie, don't you know what an operation is? You just about live at my hospital.”

Of course, Ulsie knows. Oma has explained it to her after all. Ulsie also saw an operation in a film once, but she knows that you don't operate with water. It makes her sad that Oma probably considers her a dummy.

“You're just pulling my leg. People operate with knives and needles.”

Oma also cleans those knives in some way. When Oma takes out from the huge metal elephants the smaller containers, she attaches notes to all of them. The notes are written on something like bits of leather, which Ulsie finds very interesting.

“The notes are needed to indicate when everything is as clean as can be and for which doctor each container is intended. Very much like the address on a letter,” Oma explains.

Ulsie is always very happy when Oma visits their flat. She then cooks something tasty for her. Mama too makes tasty things but she has very much work with her choirs. Sometimes she and Papa leave for several days with their choirs. Oma knows that Ulsie particularly enjoys her baked *piragi* and caraway buns. Well, she also likes the ones baked by Mama, but Oma's *piragi* are special.

But Ulsie is considered to be a picky eater at home. A fusspot – Ulsie has also heard this word. In the past, Mama and Oma had been worried thinking that Ulsie might have worms. Even took her to a doctor. The doctor assured them not to worry about worms. Ulsie would eat more after a while. Oma somehow manages to find food that also Ulsie likes. She doesn't always bake just *piragi*. Ulsie does understand that Oma tries hard. There are many foods she can't eat no matter what. For example, herring. Also onions. And, of course pumpkin soup. And milk soups with skin on top. Particularly revolting also is sour cream. Ulsie was still quite little when she managed to get her hands on a jar of sour cream. She ate it at a single go, and then it began. It wasn't the usual sick to her stomach feeling. Oma said that Ulsie had had her fill of sour cream for the rest of her life. Ulsie doesn't know what Oma meant, but her stomach turns if someone adds sour cream to their borscht or anything else. Well, if a very

tiny bit is added to a salad – that doesn't bother her. But just the very tiniest of tiny bits. Ulsie also doesn't particularly like meat. Maybe sometimes. If someone in the house decides to boil up some *pelmeni* – those meat stuffed dumplings. Ulsie just eats the dough part. That's tasty. As for stuffed pancakes Oma says these are *komm morgen wieders*, which Oma explains means 'come again tomorrow' in German. Ulsie does eat the meat in them but she still likes the pancakes themselves better.

On the other hand, Ulsie really likes chanterelle sauce. This can only be eaten in the summer, in the mushroom season. In the winter Ulsie regularly visits the larder to fish from a glass jar the cranberries floating there. Ulsie pours them into a cup, sprinkles some sugar on them and wolfs them down. Those cranberries are simply heavenly! Ulsie is totally convinced about that.

To be honest though, quite often the only food in the house is potatoes. That suits Ulsie just fine because she really likes fried potatoes. And during the winter almost always cranberries swim in the glass jar. But in the spring one can go out in the courtyard and snack on slightly dusty sorrel. If looking after Ulsie has been entrusted to Oma, Ulsie is allowed to do so.

If truth be told, Oma understands that Ulsie is capable of looking after herself. And that's not because Oma is uninterested in what Ulsie is doing or that she's too involved with other things like talking to other people. Of course Oma always finds something to do. Although Ulsie's Oma is not so young any more, she still is learning and is interested in everything. She goes to theatres and to concerts. She usually finds interesting people to talk to. And precisely because her dear Oma is so smart and wise, she often lets Ulsie look after herself. Ulsie is convinced of it.

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Jāņuncle of Baltezers

Ulsie's year is divided into Riga's time and Baltezers' time, and the Baltezers' time is much more fun. Baltezers is a village located by the Baltezers Lakes – the Small and the Big one joined by a canal. Ulsie has been told that when she was very, very little, she together with her Mama and Papa had lived in the seaside resort of Jūrmala. Probably in the part called Dzintari. But Ulsie doesn't remember that.

Now Oma has found a room in Jāņuncle's house. Jāņuncle is no relative of Ulsie nor of Oma's, therefore he's not a real uncle, but he treats Ulsie very nicely. Each morning he heads out to fish and already around breakfast time at their door in a small pail swims a freshly-caught fish. Oma particularly is happy about this. Ulsie's relationship with fish is quite wary, but Jāņuncle nonetheless seems very nice to Ulsie. Oma says that the two of them are only lodgers here, but they feel as if they're with family. What lodgers means Ulsie doesn't know, but that it's just as nice here as it is in Mama's and Papa's home – this she knows. Ulsie already told Mama this when she came home during a weekend.

“It's good that Ulsie will have a real, not a city, summer.” Mama had said.

Ulsie agrees.

In comparison to the Riga five-storey house, where Ulsie with her Mama and Papa live on the second floor, Jāņuncle's house is much smaller. It has only one floor. The same as Oma's small house in Riga. But Jāņuncle's house is lovelier than Oma's house, and here there's a large yard. Although it's not the garden that interests Ulsie the most. The lake and the canal are what Ulsie is interested in above everything. She can run there fast as can be if she goes out by the back gate of the house. On the other side of the canal there's a dock for boats. From there Oma and Ulsie have taken the boat to the Riga suburb of Jugla. For a visit to her parents, so that she won't forget during the summer how the Riga flat and Mama and Papa look. That's at least what Oma had said. Ulsie thinks that the grownups had some kind of business to settle in Riga. She just wasn't told what.

Ulsie would like every one of her friends to experience that boat ride along Lake Baltezers. At the start the boat is moored facing Small Baltezers, then it turns in the direction of Big Baltezers and sails under the canal bridge. At such moments Ulsie always thinks that cars are passing above them on the bridge with drivers not knowing that below them on the boat are Oma and other passengers. Ulsie looks on as the boat sails along the small canal past Jāņuncle's house. Then it slides into

Big Baltezers, which really is very big – it's been named very accurately. Then her boat passes many islands – all of six islands. The captain of the boat or some other important boatman points them out for Oma and Ulsie. Of course, from a distance. Then the boat, on whose open deck Ulsie has remained throughout the voyage courageously freezing, according to Oma, although in reality she hasn't been a bit cold, the boat sails into a second longer canal. Several stops are made during which people board the boat. And soon after it approaches Jugla Lake.

“Ulsie, come on down finally, come into the cabin. You've had goose bumps the whole time. And how did you get your dress wet? You'll get sick right in the middle of summer.” Oma continues to nag Ulsie, although other times she hasn't chided her to such a degree.

The boat's last stop or the terminal, as Oma calls it, is not far from the streetcar terminal. If they're too lazy to go on foot, Oma and Ulsie get into the streetcar and ride for two stops to Tirzas Street.

Also people come to visit them in Baltezers by the same boat. For some unknown reason they always arrive by the big gate. The big gate is on the side where the highway is, where cars and buses drive. Also the bus by which Oma brought Ulsie. But Ulsie isn't allowed to go out on her own by the big gate. Just together with grownups. Through the small gate leading to the lake she is allowed to go, and for Ulsie this second gate is the most important one. Like Jāņuncle's house it is located at the top of the hill. From there across the canal one can see the Baltezers church. It's quite an odd building and there's nothing like it around Ulsie's Riga flat. Ulsie has decided to persuade Oma to go with her to look the church over close up. One day when Ulsie has the time. Now there's no time. Ulsie stands at the lake gate.

If Ulsie wants to get to the canal and the lakeside, she can take the stairs down, but she can also roll down the hill. It's true that this isn't all that pleasant, because there are many prickly fir cones on the hill. And Oma for some unknown reason notices when Ulsie has rolled down and not climbed down the steps. She says because of the dress and Ulsie's eyes. Ulsie doesn't understand how that's possible, but Oma knows somehow. Well she really doesn't like that rolling too much. But the lakeside or canal side she likes very, very much. Ulsie never knows if she should play in the sand by Lake Baltezers or by the canal, because Jāņuncle's house is in a place where the two meet.

When Ulsie with Oma's help builds sandcastles, she decorates them with velvet leaves. Oma gave them that name. Probably because these leaves that grow by the lake have a soft, silvery and downy back side. Almost as soft as Mama's black skirt, which she wears for concerts

when she has to conduct a choir. This too Ulsie likes to touch and stroke. It seems as if the skirt is like a small kitten. Or a mouse. No, the mouse could be the velvet leaf, because it's the same greyish silvery colour. These leaves look grand and altogether beautiful on Ulsie's sand creations.

"Is it pretty?" Ulsie also wants to hear Oma's evaluation of her erected sandcastles.

"They're lovely. Very beautiful." Oma's appreciation warms Ulsie's heart.

Ulsie doesn't only build sandcastles. She continually slinks into the water. Oma says that the minute her back is turned, Ulsie again is in the water. Ulsie doesn't understand why that's bad. Nowhere is it as good as being in the water. Especially on sunny days. But also any other days. Ulsie isn't bothered by clouds of any sort. Once when Ulsie very rashly jumped into the canal, Oma had had enough:

"If you drown, you'll get a spanking," she warned. "Come straight out!"

That sounded terrible. And Ulsie wouldn't want any kind of a spanking. But would Oma really do that? That day, although the sky was dark grey and overcast, Oma even let her wade into the water once more. Ulsie understands that Oma is a very good person. Only when it really is raining hard does Oma make Ulsie stay inside.

One day when there were very large clouds in the sky Oma decided to go to the graveyard. It was located behind the odd church. Ulsie and Oma passed the church and saw that it had no windows. Ulsie thought that perhaps no one had lived in the church for a very long time. Oma explained that people don't live in a church, they just go there for special occasions. Oma probably knows.

Soon they arrived at the graveyard. Ulsie hadn't ever really seen graves, but she understands that there are dead people in them. Oma agrees with Ulsie that there are many dead in the graveyard and some of them Oma had known earlier when they still were alive. Oma has brought them flowers. Ulsie has no fear of anything here. Generally, Ulsie is not a fearful child. Her courage doesn't particularly please Mama. Very often in instances when Ulsie wants to do something which, according to Mama, she absolutely shouldn't, Mama says: "Are you really not afraid? What's to be done with a daredevil like that!?" Ulsie doesn't think she's a daredevil. Let Mama think that. But about those dead people – even

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though the trip with Oma to the graveyard isn't any sort of madcap adventure of Ulsie's – dead people don't scare Ulsie if they just stay in their many graves.

But Ulsie likes the lake better, especially that time when Jāņonkuls took her and Oma for a ride in his boat. That time no one could reach them, not even Mama and Papa, although they had arrived from Riga right then for a visit. Ulsie would like so much to have a boat, but probably there's nowhere to keep a boat in the city. If a boat were moored in Ulsie's room she could both play and sleep in it. Ulsie has only seen boats on the lake. Nowhere else. At least she doesn't remember anywhere else. It seems to Ulsie that she doesn't want to ever leave Baltezers. Oma says that in the autumn they'll have to return to Riga. Ulsie doesn't think about that yet. Probably they'll have to go. But until then is a long time yet – that's at least what Ulsie thinks.