

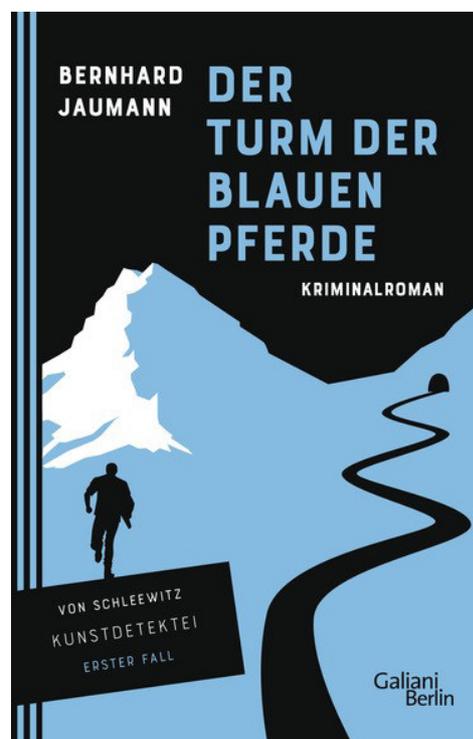
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The Tower of Blue Horses by Bernhard Jaumann

Crime novel

Translated by John Reddick

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Ludwig Raithmaier wouldn't have minded being someone else rather than who he actually was - but he wasn't sure whether he would have been any good as a werewolf.

‘What exactly *are* werewolves?’ he asked. Xaver had only told him what he had heard on the radio: that the werewolves would help them to achieve the great Final Victory; that between them they and the Führer's wonder weapons would turn the tables on their enemies. The Führer may have died a hero's death on the battlefield, but the German *Volk* would never perish: they would barricade themselves into their impregnable Alpine fortress and resist each and every onslaught until the Americans and Russians had completely wiped each other out.

Xaver stared at the gaping black hole of the railway tunnel some one hundred metres ahead of them, and said, ‘Werewolves are men who turn into ravaging wolves in the depths of the night.’

It wasn't night yet, and even though the sun had already disappeared behind the mountains the light was fading only slowly. Ludwig gazed up at the mountain peaks, where jagged clouds were racing eastwards as if heading for somewhere in particular. Bedraggled patches of snow were dimly visible on the blue-tinged northern slopes. Down below, scarcely perceptible ripples ran across the tops of the darkened trees, whereas up here the tops of the nearby spruces were bent right over by the force of the wind. Their weather sides

were festooned with moss. The ballast beneath the railway track was rank with weeds.

‘Werewolves strike at night behind the enemy’s lines, but in the daytime they look completely harmless’, said Xaver.

He and Ludwig had been behind enemy lines themselves since the day before, when the Yanks and the French had come marching into Berchtesgaden without encountering much resistance.

Bristling with contempt, Xaver had recounted how his mother had stuffed the torn-out pages of *Mein Kampf* into the parlour stove, while his father had dangled a white bed-sheet from the window. Xaver had donned his Hitler Youth uniform at that point and run off, in defiance of strict orders to stay put. As for Ludwig, no one had paid the least attention to him: he was merely a lodger at the Hubers’ farm, and if he wasn’t there it simply meant that there was one less person to share their watery soup.

‘*We* are werewolves,’ said Xaver, ‘and we’re going to defend the German people to the very last.’

By now the Yanks had probably already reached the Berghof, the Führer’s retreat at Obersalzberg, but they still hadn’t discovered the train in this tunnel here. It had been standing inside the mountain for several weeks now, protected from aerial bombardment and guarded around the clock by members of the SS - until yesterday, that is, when the SS personnel had suddenly melted away. All that remained was the train itself. Eight trucks, sent there – so the rumour-mongers claimed – by order of Reichsmarschall Göring himself. No one knew what was in them, though Xaver thought they probably contained the Führer’s wonder weapons for defending his alpine

fortress. The SS wouldn't have hidden the train away just for fun!

‘But surely the SS wouldn't just abandon their wonder weapons?’ objected Ludwig.

‘They're filthy traitors, they deserve to be strung up’, Xaver had replied, and then gone on to remind him of the werewolf slogan on the radio: ‘Hatred is our prayer, revenge our war-cry’. They were to show no mercy; weakness was treachery; the great Final Victory was at hand; unyielding resistance, iron will, wonder weapons, werewolves. Words that were meant to be converted into deeds. Then Xaver had said ‘If we had those wonder weapons ...’.

Ludwig had nodded, as he didn't know what else a werewolf was supposed to do. They had commandeered a crowbar and a couple of torches from the workshop belonging to Xaver's father and had been lurking for several hours now at the edge of the forest keeping watch on the tunnel. They were almost certain that there was no one still in there. *Almost* certain. Xaver stood up, ready to go, but Ludwig grabbed his arm and held him back. ‘Wait a bit longer!’ he muttered, putting a finger to his lips. There was no babble of voices, no roaring of artillery shells, no rattle of rifle fire. There wasn't even any birdsong, just the rustling of the spruce trees in the wind: a kind of undulating hum that could send you mad if you paid too much attention to it. And perhaps it wasn't the wind at all but Ludwig's blood pounding relentlessly in his ear and whispering secrets to him in some alien language. As he watched, twilight gradually spread over the trees, like a web being slowly spun by invisible spiders; this was the gloom in which ravaging wolves were born. Ludwig pulled his jacket more tightly around his meagre chest.

‘Right, let’s go and take a look!’ Xaver grabbed hold of the crowbar, stepped out from the safety of the trees, and set off alongside the railway track. Ludwig padded along behind him. He was neither a coward nor a traitor, and his faith in their Final Victory remained undiminished: his goose pimples were simply due to the cold. Or was he in the process of morphing into another kind of creature? Would his skin start sprouting wolf’s fur as soon as he entered the darkness of the tunnel? Ludwig tried to imagine what such a transformation would feel like. Would there be a sense of tugging and tearing as his muscles swelled and his feet developed claws? Would there be a growling sound in his throat, and in his head bloodlust in place of rational thought? Ludwig wondered whether he would still know that he was really a human being once he had turned into a werewolf.

As they reached the tunnel entrance the wind immediately ceased, and in its place a stream of musty air seemed to come wafting towards them from the darkness within. It smelt like the fur of drowned kittens. They both stopped. Xaver switched his torch on and shone it at the curved roof. A drip of water fell through the beam of light. Ludwig didn’t hear it splash to the ground. ‘Is anyone there?’, he called in a strangled voice.

‘I’m telling you: they’ve gone, all of them!’ Xaver hissed.

And gone they were. There was nothing in there but the railway track, vanishing into the darkness, water dripping from the tunnel roof, and, up above, a towering mountain that could crush and bury you so utterly that you couldn’t be restored to light and life even on the Day of Judgement – if there really was such a thing as a Day of Judgement; if the priest wasn’t just talking rubbish; if everyone wasn’t talking rubbish. Ludwig switched his torch on.

The pool of light traced the sweep of the rails. Ludwig followed Xaver, staying a few paces behind him. German boys know no fear. Weakness is treachery. Werewolves give their all for the Final Victory. And even if the entire world were to fall apart, it would be no worse inside the mountain than anywhere else.

Fifty metres into the tunnel they saw the first truck. It was a windowless cattle truck. Scrawled in chalk on the side were numbers and groups of letters, all quite meaningless to Ludwig. Perhaps they were secret codes relating to the wonder weapons? Ludwig began to sense that something wasn't right. In fact nothing at all seemed right. The whole set-up was wrong; not a single thing was as it should be.

‘There you are: not a soul to be seen!’ said Xaver, rather more loudly than was necessary. He tried opening the sliding door of the truck, but it was locked.

‘Shine your torch over here!’ Xaver inserted the crowbar, heaved on it with much grinding of teeth, then threw his entire weight against it. There was a groaning, cracking, splintering sound as if the whole edifice of the world were splitting asunder, and the door burst open. The crowbar tumbled to the ground. Xaver bent down, picked it up, and waved it about much as Brunnhuber did with his cane at school.

‘Just watch me!’ he said with a grin. ‘This is what a werewolf looks like. The Yanks will laugh on the other side of their faces now!’ He clambered into the truck. Ludwig followed him. In the light from their torches they saw packing cases, and large crates fashioned out of plywood. Within seconds Xaver had prised one of the crates open. Inside was something measuring well over a

metre, wrapped in packing paper. Xaver stripped a bit of the wrapping away, then, seeing a second layer, poked at it with the crowbar. Scraps of paper floated down to the ground. ‘Bloody hell!’ said Xaver, turning round, ‘It’s just a painting!’

‘What?! A painting?!’ Ludwig exclaimed, coming nearer.

‘Yes, a bloody painting’, hissed Xaver. He laid his torch on the floor, directed the beam of light at one of the smaller packing cases, and set to work with the crowbar again. Ludwig took a look at the canvas visible through the tear in the packing paper. A glowing golden yellow colour met his eye in the light from his torch. It was edged at the top by a kind of rainbow, the colours of which appeared to dissolve in ethereal light. The sweep of the rainbow gave way to a series of vigorous blue brush strokes. Red and white shadows slanted off towards the upper right-hand corner, and staring out into the void from within a roughly executed diamond shape was an eye. It was the head of a horse. Someone had painted a blue horse.

Blue? Ludwig had once seen a dapple-grey horse whose coat had had a blueish tinge; and when viewed in sunlight from a particular angle a freshly groomed black horse could appear to have a touch of blue mixed in with the black. But this was a completely different sort of blue – a far more intense, far deeper colour.

Like cornflowers perhaps? No, that wasn’t it. This blue was more metallic, more mysterious; it was somehow alien, as though not of this world.

The crowbar could be heard thudding into timber somewhere in the truck. Xaver was cursing and swearing.

Ludwig ripped the packing paper open with a downward sweep of his hand:

another horse's head, and then another. The heads and hindquarters of four blue horses crowded into and onto one another as though they were but a single entity, a creature at once strong and aloof. Stylised and yet full of life; stark in outline yet animated by softly swirling curves that seemed to pulsate with energy. The horses had piled themselves into a tower of sheer concentrated life, deep blue life that was completely sufficient unto itself, thrusting all other colours to the margins. Ludwig followed the horses' gaze to the left-hand side of the painting, where yellow, green, red, violet, white and brown battled with each other in frantic confusion. Mountains after an earthquake, perhaps? A city with bombs raining down on it? Flames seemed to be leaping up from the bottom of the picture, and...

‘Well damn me,’ exclaimed Xaver from somewhere in the depths of the truck, ‘there's a Madonna in this one!’

... to the right was a bank of reddish mist. It detracted in no way from the effect of horses looming up out of it. Maybe they weren't even horses at all, but something else. Humans in a different form, for instance. Like werewolves, but by a contrary process: perhaps after a night of fitful wandering there were people who metamorphosed at dawn into blue horses? Ludwig wished they would turn their heads and look at him. He wouldn't have been surprised if they had begun to talk. But of course that didn't happen. Such a thing was just as impossible as ... as... a tower of blue horses. And at that very moment Ludwig sensed that life was just beginning. *His* life. He suddenly felt quite certain that the vague suspicions that had recently begun to pervade him were indeed true, and that the outside world that was now falling apart all around him had been nothing but lies and idiocy. They

could shout as much as they liked on the radio about victory or defeat – it didn't matter to him. And it likewise didn't matter to him whether or not the Yanks were going to line the Nazis up against the wall. He gazed at the grainy blue above the nostrils of the nearest horse and felt as if he had just been born anew. Right here, in an underground cattle truck, face to face with a painting he didn't entirely comprehend. One thing he did understand, however. The blue horses were telling him that his picture of the world had been utterly wrong. There was meaning here. There was truth. A truth concealed beyond the visible surface of the world, and of a hue that no one could ever have divined. This would be his great task: to go in search of it.

‘Come on, let's go and take a look at the next truck’, Xaver said. ‘The wonder weapons have to be *somewhere*.’

‘No’, said Ludwig.

‘What do you mean, “No”?’

‘Just look for yourself – it's plain as day that there are no wonder weapons here. There's probably no such thing.’

‘Are you crazy? The Führer ...’.

‘The Führer's dead, the war is lost.’

‘Pack it in, Ludwig - that's high treason!’

‘A new age is taking shape right now. There won't be any werewolves in it, there'll just be...’

‘*What* will there be?’

‘Blue horses.’ Ludwig pointed at the painting by his side.

Xaver came over, glanced at the picture, and shook his head. ‘Decadent, that is. Ugly and ridiculous. Just shut your mouth and come with me! We'll grab

the wonder weapons and...’

‘No!’

‘This is your last chance. You know what happens to traitors. Don’t force me to do it...!’ Xaver’s fist tightened around the crowbar. Ludwig wasn’t afraid any more. He just sniggered when Xaver fastened his other fist around the crowbar too and raised it ready to strike. Werewolves – what rubbish! If Xaver couldn’t see the truth, then he was doomed along with this whole present age – he wouldn’t be able to fight his way out of it. And anyway, he wouldn’t do it. They were friends, he and Xaver. At least they had been up to now.

‘Go on then, hit me!’ Ludwig said in a mocking voice, shining his torch straight in Xaver’s face. Xaver’s pupils narrowed, and he turned his head slightly to one side. His mouth twitched at the corners. The crowbar trembled above his head. At its rounded end gaped a large V-shaped slot.

‘Wonder weapons’ and ‘high treason’: Ludwig realised in a flash that Xaver was indeed going to strike – out of disappointment, helpless rage, a dawning awareness of how blind he had been. But not at him...

‘No!’ screamed Ludwig. ‘That picture’s mine!’, and lashing out with all his strength he smashed his torch against Xaver’s temple.

There was the sound of breaking glass, the light went out, Xaver emitted a dull, almost animal sound, and the crowbar clattered onto the wooden floor. In the light of the other torch, which had been positioned at the further end of the truck to illuminate a motley of packing cases, Ludwig saw Xaver go reeling into the painting. Leaning heavily against it, his body strangely

contorted, he seemed to be trying to grab hold of the blue mane of the second horse with his right hand. Slowly straightening, his fingers slid down over the head, neck and chest of the frontmost horse - almost as though he were trying to embrace it.

‘Xaver?’

No reply, no moaning sounds, no sign of any movement. Ludwig didn’t need to bend down to check: he already knew that Xaver was dead. He had killed him. He looked at the painting and noticed a dark blue crescent moon on the chest of the nearest horse. He had had no choice: he had simply been saving the life of the blue horses – *his* blue horses.

Lake Starnberg

Summer 2017

The view from the terrace of the villa was impressive. In the distance was a shimmering succession of Alpine peaks, and down below on Lake Starnberg countless white sailing boats were darting about in all directions. Klara Ivanovic tried to persuade herself that this apparently aimless to-ing and fro-ing conveyed a secret meaning of some kind. A pattern could perhaps be divined in the wakes left by the boats in the glittering water - cyphers conveying a special message, be it only to those who knew how to interpret them.

Egon Schwarzer, the villa’s owner, had offered them the seats that afforded the finest view of the lake – perhaps out of sheer politeness, but perhaps also

because it was in his very nature to parade his possessions: *my villa, my grounds, my panorama*. ‘All very soundly put together’, Rupert had remarked during the journey from their office in Munich. This was meant quite literally, for Egon Schwarzer had made his fortune with screws – screws of every possible type: flat-head, round-head, countersunk, square-head, torx, slot-head. He had sold his business at some point and with his extremely deep pockets had switched to buying art. He now boasted the most important private collection of Classic Modernist art in Germany – if not in all Europe.

‘What a truly beautiful set-up you have here!’ said Rupert. As it was Rupert’s job to look after their customers, Klara gave a friendly smile and ventured no comment. ‘Truth’ and ‘beauty’ were splendid concepts, but unfortunately they went together much less often than one might suppose. Klara glanced down at the lake. The flaw in idyllic postcard views was that their beauty was flawless. For there was always a flaw somewhere. To find it, you just had to insinuate yourself into the idyll.

‘Von Schleewitz - Art Investigation Bureau’: Schwarzer read out the wording on Rupert’s business card as if he didn’t exactly know who it was he was proposing to engage. ‘Old aristocracy?’ he asked, pushing his sunglasses back over his eyes, ‘From out in the east somewhere?’

‘Silesia’, replied Rupert, ‘but we weren’t there very long, only a couple of centuries. Until 1945.’

‘Ah yes, the Russians’, said Schwarzer.

‘It was a long time ago’, said Rupert.

‘You know of course that they went in for a lot of plundering back then, including art?’

‘Are you wanting us to find you the Amber Room?’ Rupert laughed, but then switched at once to a business-like tone of voice. ‘We aren’t treasure hunters. Our bureau specialises in provenance issues. We work on behalf of lawyers whose clients are making restitution claims in respect of looted art, but we are also more than happy to undertake research work to do with uncovering fakes, but...’

‘Come with me!’ said Schwarzer, abruptly standing up. Without looking back at his guests he headed for the open terrace door.

The living room was flooded with light from a pair of French windows, their glazing bars casting hard-edged shadows on the parquet floor. It was a large room, but only sparsely furnished: a bureau, a small side table topped by a mirror, a sofa, and a few chairs that didn’t look as if anyone had ever sat on them. All the pieces exhibited an elegant simplicity and cleanness of style, and were perfectly matched with each other. *Wiener Werkstätte*, thought Klara, and – given Schwarzer’s fortune – probably originals made in the early 1900s. The same was true of the pictures – most of them small in size – that hung on the walls. The one there on the left was unmistakably a Kandinsky. Next to it hung two Gabriele Münter landscapes, both of them typical of her bold style in both form and colouration, and an expressive female nude that might have been a Jawlensky.

Schwarzer headed straight for an easel at the back of the room. He waited until Rupert and Klara had joined him, removed his sun-glasses, hooking them onto the open neck of his shirt, and then – with a gesture the studied casualness of which made it look pretentious – pulled the covering from the painting on the easel.

‘But that’s...’ exclaimed Rupert -

‘ - Franz Marc, *The Tower of Blue Horses*’, said Schwarzer. ‘Missing since the end of the war. I bought it last Tuesday. For three million. An absolute bargain – if it’s genuine. In your opinion, *is* it genuine?’

‘I...’. For a moment even Rupert seemed to have been struck dumb. ‘I’m not the expert in that domain. It’s my colleague here, Frau Ivanovic, who deals with such questions.’

Klara gazed fixedly at the painting. *The Tower of Blue Horses*, an icon of Classic Modernism, must have been reproduced countless thousands of times in books, in calendars, and on postcards. The blue horses hung in insurance offices and in the kitchens of old-age pensioners, they were blazoned on porcelain vases and vied with Justin Bieber posters in the bedrooms of teenage girls. There could be no doubt that Marc’s painting had caught the popular imagination. And in consequence – as Klara’s father would say – its significance as part of an authentic artistic impulse bent on forging new experiences was lost. It was interesting only as a relic of history!

It seemed scarcely imaginable today that in 1913 it had met with scorn and even a sense of outrage amongst the vast majority of the public. But this shift was simply because the revolution that had taken off at that time had been completely successful. The painters who founded *Die Brücke* and *Der blaue Reiter* had achieved exactly what the painters of today aspired to, namely to radically change the way the world was perceived. The bitter irony of this triumph was clear: the more that people became accustomed to blue horses and abstract compositions, the more the revolution lost its impetus – to the point where its painted cries of protest ended up as decorative adornments on

people's walls. And yet there was something special about this picture sitting here on its easel – an air of mystery that had not been completely destroyed by its countless reproductions.

‘Do you think it's genuine, Frau Ivanovic?’, Schwarzer asked.

Oh my God, thought Klara – this was like asking a food scientist standing several metres away from an egg to say whether or not it was infected with salmonella. ‘That's a question for experts’, she declared. ‘Without a detailed examination...’

‘I've already called in Baumgartner, but I would be very interested in *your* opinion. Don't worry, I won't tie you down to it. What matters to me is the immediate, instinctive impression the picture makes on you.’

Klara looked at the painting, straining to get a feel for the particular style of the brush strokes. If it was a fake, it was a very good one. It *could* be a fake, that was certainly possible. Even before Beltracchi it was well known that gifted fakers were capable of making fools of the entire art world over periods of many years. Her ‘immediate impression’? – good Lord! Nothing could be more deceptive. The fact was that *The Tower of Blue Horses* had been missing for seventy years, and its apparently miraculous re-appearance should invite *more* scepticism than usual, rather than less.

Schwarzer was beginning to lose patience. ‘According to Baumgartner it *is* the original painting. He's 99% certain – and he invariably includes a 1% margin for error, as his Terms and Conditions more or less make clear.’

Dr Anian Baumgartner – editor of the catalogue raisonnée and author of countless essays – was without question the leading authority on Franz Marc. And Schwarzer would have been pretty stupid to have put three million on the

table without securing cast-iron reassurances from an expert.

‘None the less’, said Schwarzer, ‘I would like to have a complete provenance. It is of course common knowledge that the painting was confiscated by the Nazis, and commandeered by Goering himself in 1937. But where has it been during the period between 1945 and now? Can you find that out for me?’

‘Certainly easier than digging up half Europe in search of the Amber Room!’ said Rupert. ‘With regard to the legal side of things, however, I do have to point out that the Washington Declaration means that art works looted by the Nazis...’

‘...must be restored to their original owners through official government agencies.’ Schwarzer gave a dismissive wave of his hand. ‘I’m not a government agency, that’s true, but I know where my responsibilities lie. The National Gallery in Berlin bought *The Tower of Blue Horses* in 1919. They’re the rightful owners, and it goes without saying that I shall return the picture to them. I just don’t want to make a fool of myself by handing it over amidst great jubilation, only to discover that it’s actually a fake.’

‘Fair enough’, said Rupert, ‘in that case, please fill us in! Who offered you the picture?’

Every now and again there were reports in the papers of a van Gogh being found after a hundred years in an attic somewhere, or a canvas bought for five euros in a flea market turning out to be an overpainted Rembrandt – but Schwarzer’s story was even more incredible. He had attended a lecture in the Franz Marc Museum in Kochel and was about to drive home again when he noticed a small delivery van standing next to his Mercedes in the car park, with a man waiting beside it. He was about thirty years old, one seventy-five

in height, blond-haired, stocky, clothed in jeans and a t-shirt. Addressing Schwarzer by name in a strong Bavarian accent, he had invited him to take a look in the back of the van - and there, lying on the floor, was *The Tower of Blue Horses*. Assuming it to be a *Candid Camera*-type stunt, Schwarzer looked around to see where the film crew might be hiding. Unperturbed, the man offered to sell him the painting for three million euros.

‘In used, small-denomination notes, presumably?’ Schwarzer had replied, half-amused, half-irritated.

The man nodded. ‘And no questions!’

‘Listen, Herr...’

‘Beilhart. Josef Beilhart.’

‘...I really don’t have time for this sort of nonsense, Herr Beilhart, so good day to you!’

It only occurred to Schwarzer when he had arrived back at home that he might have made a mistake. However improbable it was, there was a slender chance that the picture might be genuine after all – in which case he would have passed up a unique opportunity to rescue a priceless national treasure long believed lost. He had briefly considered bringing in the police – but what if this man Beilhart turned out to be just a harmless prankster? Tracking the man down by himself struck Schwarzer as out of the question. He hadn’t even made a note of his car number-plate.

But that had proved to be unnecessary. Beilhart had phoned him a couple of days later and asked him whether he had the money ready – as if it were already a done deal. It was at this point, according to Schwarzer, that he sensed that there might be something in it after all. It was instinct, he said,

and he trusted his instinct. During the phone call he had used every trick in the book to try to extract more information from Beilhart, but without success. On one crucial matter, however, he had remained firm, and after much toing and froing Beilhart had finally agreed to his demand that an expert be brought in.

The appraisal had taken place last Tuesday in true cloak-and-dagger fashion. Having meanwhile grown more and more confident about the situation, Schwarzer had loaded a suitcase full of banknotes into his car and picked up Baumgartner, the Franz Marc expert. They zigzagged for hours through the Lower Alps, mostly on extremely narrow by-roads, and always in accordance with instructions received via mobile phone from Beilhart, who was presumably making sure that the police were not involved. His instructions led them ultimately to an inn deep in the countryside. After they had waited in a side room for a quarter of an hour or so, Beilhart arrived with the painting and casually propped it up against the wood-panelled wall as if it were a chalk board announcing the Specialities of the Day.

Baumgartner had taken his time. Armed with a magnifying glass he had studied the brush strokes and the crazing of the uppermost paint layer. He also examined the back of the canvas with particular care. He then took Schwarzer to one side and whispered his finding into his ear. Schwarzer didn't hesitate for a moment. At worst he had thrown away a few million: so what? He handed over the suitcase full of money. Beilhart transferred the cash into two Aldi shopping bags, making no attempt to count it. Then, wishing Schwarzer much joy with the painting, he departed.

‘And now here it is’, said Schwarzer by way of conclusion. ‘Your task is to

find out where it has been for the last seventy years.’

To Klara’s surprise, Rupert accepted the job on the spot. He simply checked on a few details, negotiated a daily fee plus a €30,000 success fee, and signed a confidentiality clause that Schwarzer had drawn up in advance. Klara could see that Rupert was in a hurry to leave the villa. Only when the electronic gates had finally closed behind their car did she ask him whether he really believed Schwarzer’s story.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Someone accosts you in a car park, allows you a brief glimpse of a painting, and two weeks later you set off on a mad dash through the countryside with three million in cash in order to buy it?!’

‘It isn’t just any old painting.’

‘No,’ retorted Klara, ‘and that’s why it’s unlikely to be lying around in the back of a delivery van or in some remote country inn.’

‘We’ll check the whole thing out.’

‘If this Beilhart man had found the painting in an attic somewhere he wouldn’t have needed to be so secretive about it. So he’s either come by it illegally, or he’s flogged Schwarzer a fake. Would *you* have gone along with it if criminals had told you to turn up somewhere or other carrying three million in a suitcase? Without any back-up?’

‘No risk, no reward. I wouldn’t have let such an opportunity slip out of my fingers any more than Schwarzer did.’ Rupert was doing at least 60 in a 30 zone, braking sharply only when there was a speed-bump. ‘What intrigues me rather more is the question as to why a type like Schwarzer doesn’t try to ferret out such a picture himself.’

‘The whole thing stinks to high heaven, for goodness’ sake. Beilhart is a crook, and the picture’s a fake – no matter what Baumgartner says.’

‘Idiot!’ Rupert started tailgating a large saloon that was trundling along in front of them. At 38 Rupert might have counted as an adult in the eyes of the law, but sometimes he still seemed like a small boy racing around in the undergrowth in search of adventure. Despite his earlier assertion to the contrary, he would indeed have gone hunting for the Amber Room if even the slightest hint of it had come his way.

‘We shouldn’t touch it with a bargepole, we should call in the police instead’, Klara declared.

Rupert gave a blast on the horn, veered out, and overtook the saloon.

‘Is that really necessary?’ asked Klara. ‘There’s a 30 speed limit.’

‘You know what your problem is, Klara? You’re so calm and collected, so revoltingly sensible. *The Tower of Blue Horses*: just think about it! For the first time in your life something really exciting crosses your path, and you turn your back on it and shout for the police. Just go for it for once!’

‘Thanks for the advice!’ retorted Klara - but Rupert’s thoughts were already elsewhere.

“‘National treasure” – how funny!’ he said, accelerating away. ‘The nuts and bolts king of Lake Starnberg is at last discovering a soft spot for the community a large!’

Rupert drove Klara out to Haidhausen. There were no vacant spaces in her street so he double-parked and turned the hazard lights on. As usual, he asked

whether he should come up with her, but instead of responding to his now ritual come-on with her customary smile, she reminded him that unfortunately she was ‘revoltingly sensible’. It came out rather more harshly than she meant it to.

‘Fair enough,’ said Rupert, spreading his arms out, ‘in that case I’ll take back the “sensible”!’

Klara blew him a kiss and opened the door into the apartment block. It was distinctly cooler in the stairwell – almost as if she were in a mountain gorge or a vast cavern deep under ground. Whatever the season, Klara had always enjoyed the generous proportions of the space, the broad, well-trodden wooden stairs and the banister with its rounded handrail, but only in this particularly hot summer had it become apparent that the Belle Epoque architect of the building hadn’t just wasted space: the stairwell in a modern building would long since have become uncomfortably hot. The temperature within her flat was quite tolerable, too. Even so, at that particular moment Klara couldn’t imagine anything more pleasant than washing off the sweat and heat of the day. But first: give the polygonum on the balcony a quick watering! And ring her father. She let the phone ring several times, but there was no answer. Perhaps he was sitting outside and couldn’t hear the phone? Or Agnieszka might be accompanying him on a walk through the village.

Klara chose all the same not to have a completely cold shower, instead adjusting the temperature control to the point where an agreeably shivery sensation began to come over her. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of the water cascading down her body. ‘So calm and collected, so revoltingly sensible’, that’s how Rupert had described her. No reason to get upset about

that. That's just the way he was. His words shouldn't be taken literally. But she was still astounded that he had accepted Schwarzer's story so uncritically. No, that wasn't the right way to put it. Rupert certainly did think the man capable of indulging in half-truths and machinations of one sort or another. But he seemed quite certain nevertheless that he had been face to face with the original *Tower of Blue Horses*. As if the painting had chosen none other than him to celebrate its reappearance after a period of seventy years. Klara turned the water off and wrapped herself in a towel.

Rupert was the ardent enthusiast, while the role of Doubting Thomas fell to her. Miracles did perhaps happen sometimes – but rarely in the world of art. Extremely rarely, in fact. Klara turned her computer on and read everything she could find on the internet about *The Tower of Blue Horses*.

Franz Marc had painted the picture at the beginning of 1913 in Sindelsdorf. It was exhibited publicly for the first time that same year in Herwarth Walden's 'First German Autumn Salon'. Following Marc's death on the battlefield in 1916 his widow Maria had inherited the painting, and in 1919 sold it for 20,000 reichsmarks to the National Gallery in Berlin. It remained on display there in the Crown Prince's Palace until 1937, when the Nazis condemned Marc as an 'undesirable artist' and confiscated all the paintings by him then in the possession of the National Gallery. *The Tower of Blue Horses* and four other works by Marc were included in the infamous Munich exhibition of 'Degenerate Art', but were taken down after just one day following protests by the German Officers' Alliance. These worthy gentlemen didn't want the works of a soldier who had died fighting at Verdun to be exhibited alongside those of Jews and communists. Hermann Goering promptly seized the picture

and had it sent to Berlin. It was sighted twice more after the Second World War, but then disappeared without trace.

Needless to say, this had created ideal conditions for the production of fakes. Nothing fitted the bill better than a painting that had been missing for a sufficiently long period, but might possibly have survived all the same; a painting the appearance of which was well known, but which offered plenty of scope for a credible ‘re-creation’ given the unreliable colouration of early photographs. Hadn’t Beltracchi also taken his inspiration from works that had been reproduced or described in old catalogues? And what was the man actually doing now that he had served his time?

Klara googled him and found a TV series entitled ‘The Master Faker’. In each episode Beltracchi painted the portrait of a celebrity in the style of a different artist – Ferdinand Hodler, for instance, or Otto Dix. Klara watched a few clips on YouTube. Beltracchi made great play of his painterly skills and his aura of infamy, while his sitters tried to prove themselves his equal, at any rate in their verbal exchanges. None of this had anything whatsoever to do with art. It was just a mildly entertaining piece of theatre, the sole virtue of which lay in the fact that it made no pretence at being authentic. The faker knew perfectly well that the only thing about him of any interest to people was his ability to imitate the style of a genuine artist. His essence lay exclusively in his ability to become someone else. And as the various celebrities were only too happy to deliver themselves up to his ministrations, the same thing applied equally to them. This became particularly evident when they viewed the finished product. It was difficult to decide which was the bigger fake – the portrait, or the person pontificating about it.

Klara shut the computer down. The wet patches that her feet had left on the floorboards hadn't yet fully disappeared. Going into her bedroom she chose something light to wear, then opened a bottle of verdicchio, poured herself a glass, and put the bottle back in the fridge. She opened the balcony door, but didn't go out. She might just as well stay in the kitchen for the final few minutes before the evening sun disappeared behind the houses opposite. She could hear the voices of children playing in the courtyard below, and tried without success to work out from the scraps of conversation that drifted up to her whether they were playing catch, or hide and seek, or some other game she was familiar with. For a moment or two she was tempted to take a look, but decided it wasn't worth the bother. She sipped her wine.

‘Calm and collected’ and ‘revoltingly sensible’, Rupert had said. Why couldn't Klara get the words out of her head? Was she really like that? And if so: what was wrong with it? True, she did make every effort to keep a tight grip on her life. But that had nothing to do with conventionality, with saving for a mortgage or taking out loads of superfluous insurance policies. She simply needed to feel sufficiently in control of things, and also – she thought – of herself. Normally Rupert was in fact highly appreciative of her ability to think analytically and to see both sides in a discussion. Perhaps she should explain to him sometime that a certain detachment was indispensable to such an approach?

Detachment, dispassionateness, never allowing herself to be drawn into something to the point where she could no longer get out of it again: she had had to fight hard to achieve this approach to life. And in any case she had had no real alternative in the bohemian world of her artist family – into which she

had probably only managed to get born because her parents had been too stoned to take the necessary precautions. Not that she had been forced to conform; on the contrary, no one had enjoyed as much freedom since Pippi Longstocking. If she had chosen to run away for a few days when she was eleven or twelve, her parents would probably not even have noticed: they were too preoccupied with themselves and their own goings-on – and also of course with their determination to make each other’s life as hellish as possible. In this enterprise they unhesitatingly exploited anyone prepared to serve as an ally in their constant marital warfare, such as fellow artists, obscure friends, or the freeloaders who liked to land themselves on the family for weeks at a time. Klara, too, was routinely manoeuvred into position by one parent as a weapon against the other, as if she were just a dull grey piece of battlefield artillery. Heavens, how she had suffered! What wouldn’t she have given to enjoy even a single family outing worthy of the name – a trip to some lake, say, where they could go for a walk, enjoy an ice cream, and talk to each other without constant poisonous carping. Someone like Rupert couldn’t even begin to imagine what bliss that would have been.

‘Revoltingly sensible’: what did he actually mean by that? Her refusal to be taken in by every bit of nonsense that came their way? Her insistence on remaining suspicious when suspicion was the order of the day? Or was it rather that she lacked spontaneity? Lacked any willingness to depart drastically and without pausing for thought from normal procedure? Just go for it, he had told her. It was certainly true that she had chosen a straightforward and unspectacular path, at any rate once she had escaped the chaos of her childhood. After school she had become a dutiful student,

completed her degree, and worked for an art magazine – first as a trainee and then as an ongoing freelance – until Rupert had poached her. No one had forced her to take that path: she had decided on it herself, and it had been exactly the right choice. She enjoyed her job, and the fact that in carrying it out she was by and large free to exercise her own discretion. How could anyone expect her to kick over the traces, let herself be swept over the Niagara Falls in a barrel, or run naked across the pitch in a packed football stadium?

People who hankered for adrenaline-fired exploits of that sort were deceiving themselves without even knowing it. Compared to them even someone like Beltracchi had a modicum of authenticity about him. Was his claim really true that dozens of his fakes were still hanging in reputable galleries being marvelled at day after day by their patrons? Or was he just out to inflate his own reputation? Klara went back to the fridge and retrieved the bottle of verdicchio.

While it was possible to unmask fake paintings provided one investigated them carefully enough, there were no generally accepted methods for putting fake lives to the test, and it was doubly difficult to perform a self-test to check whether one's own life was genuine, whether we really are who we suppose we are. Klara downed her wine and poured herself some more. For God's sake – she should be saying 'I', not 'one' or 'we': 'Am *I* leading an authentic life?' Yes, yes, she was. She was pretty content with herself, not to say positively happy. It was just that right now it didn't altogether feel that way. Perhaps it was because of the wine or some other random factor. Anyway, she said to herself, you're leading the life you want to lead. I am exactly what I

want to be. Nothing could be more authentic than that. Could it?

Or was she deluding herself? Perhaps in choosing to be all ‘calm and collected’ she had simply shut herself off from her pounding, screaming essence. She recalled her sense of utter horror when she first beheld Caravaggio’s *Judith Beheading Holofernes* in Rom. The immediacy of the decapitation scene had both deeply disturbed and fascinated her at one and the same time. She had later come to understand that Caravaggio was just an extreme example of what chiefly interested her in all painters of real significance: their new and shocking perspective on the world, their willingness to break taboos, their dedication to the absolute. Only now did she suddenly ask herself whether perhaps for her the entire history of art wasn’t simply a substitute for the life that she dared not lead.

Outside, dusk had descended on the courtyard. The children had disappeared. Klara went out and sat on the balcony. The chair was still hot from the heat of the day.

[...]

Berchtesgaden Region

2 January 1948

Trudi's cheeks were flushed, and her blonde plaits stuck out from her bobble hat as though frozen solid. As she panted her way up the slope, little white clouds of vapour took shape in the ice-cold air. Perhaps they had climbed too quickly, but Ludwig simply couldn't stop himself hurrying along. He had been too excited over the fact that she had come with him. Now at last he could dare to tell her his secret.

‘Look how beautiful it is!’ he said, pointing at the valley down below. The trail of their footsteps formed a zigzag on the right-hand flank of the slope, but everywhere else the blanket of white glittered unbroken in the sun. The half-metre of snow that covered the Almwise had turned its jagged rock formations into gently rounded hillocks like giant feather pillows that someone had plumped up and dotted here and there. The forest further down lay white and silent. Fresh snow had settled on the branches in serried ranks, and heavy though this adornment must have been the pines seemed to flaunt it with pride. In the valley far below the last swirls of mist were melting away in the sunlight. It wasn't difficult to imagine the scattered farmsteads as random splotches on an empty canvas, and the paths, fences and streams as lines that someone had aimlessly scrawled on it – only for a picture to suddenly emerge beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

‘Ludwig,’ Trudi ventured, ‘I have to be home by noon.’

‘We’re already there’, replied Ludwig, trudging towards a snow-laden alpine hut tucked against the hillside. He had originally hidden his picture behind all the junk in Birner’s shed, and had only taken it up the mountain after the old man’s death back in November had brought the risk that his heirs might clear the place out. No one would be coming up here until the summer brought fresh activity to these upper slopes, and by then he would have thought of a secure new hiding place. Ludwig opened the door of the hut. ‘Wait here, and shut your eyes!’

Groping his way through the semi-darkness to the sleeping area at the back, he pulled the picture out from beneath a layer of damp bedding and took off the tarpaulin he had used to protect it. Carrying it carefully back through the door into the bright sunshine, he cleared the wooden bench of its covering of snow and set the picture down on it. ‘You can look now!’

Trudi opened her eyes.

‘I’ve never shown it to anyone before’, Ludwig said. ‘You’re the first and only person. I... I know you’re two years older than me – but I don’t care. I don’t have anything either, except for the picture. Not for now, at least – though I do have a good pair of hands and I’m capable of hard work. And anyway, I don’t think it’s all that important to be rich. You just need someone who feels the same way as you do, and...’

‘Those horses are blue!’ exclaimed Trudi.

‘Yes, they are’, replied Ludwig, ‘but take a really careful look! There’s a lot more to see. There’s life and love and mystery and... Don’t you think it’s beautiful?’

‘Well, yes...’, said Trudi.

Ludwig waited. There had to be more than ‘Well, yes’. ‘Well, yes’ just wasn’t enough. Trudi could surely see what he could see – what he had sensed right from his very first glimpse of the picture? Who, if not Trudi?

‘Ludwig,’ said Trudi, ‘Clive told me on New Year’s Eve that he has to go back to America in three months’ time. He asked me if I wanted to go with him. To Florida. It’s by the sea, and it’s summer all year round.’

The four blue horses were looking to their left, down into the valley. Was Ludwig imagining it, or had they just shaken their heads? ‘And you?’ he asked, ‘What did you say?’

‘Clive’s a very nice boy.’

How could he have been so mistaken, wondered Ludwig. Why had he shown her his picture at all, for heaven’s sake? He gazed at the rainbow, the crescent moon and the stars, at these creatures and their blue innocence. It wasn’t the fault of his picture: it was pure, it was perfect. But perhaps it spoke only of the *idea* of creation, and had nothing to do with everyday life. The snow still glittered in the sun as though nothing had happened, but beneath it lay filth, sheer filth. ‘I’m staying up here for a while’, Ludwig told Trudi without looking in her direction. ‘You can find your own way down. Just retrace our footsteps.’

‘Ludwig!’

‘And another thing: If you ever tell anyone what you’ve seen up here, then... I’ll kill you, I swear it.’

[...]