

Bruno Preisendörfer: *Fifty Blues***1**

A clown was grinning at him. He looked him steadily in the eyes and composed his face in a mocking smile. The clown's eyes were as blue as the planet on which he had been living for approximately 50 years. The planet rotated, tumbled through eternity, revolved on its own axis, rotated around the sun, looked blue and had white patches at the poles, even now.

If the dear Lord looked carefully, he recognised the outlines of continents, mountain ranges, the great rivers, deserts. If he looked more carefully still he could even make out the Great Wall of China. He had never thought that one day human beings would build such a wall to protect themselves from other human beings. The wall was so broad and so long, that the dear Lord could see it from space, if he screwed up his eyes a little. The dear Lord was already fairly old, approximately 50 billion years. When the dinosaurs became extinct 50 or 60 million years ago, the dear Lord had been approximately 49.95 billion years old, and already a little long-sighted. The further away a thing was, the better he could make it out. What was right in front of his nose was only a blur. This was the solution of the theodicy problem. That's what theologians call the question: How, given all the evil in the world, can a benevolent creator be justified? The theologians were too little concerned with the fact, that the dear Lord was approximately 50 billion years old and by now a little long-sighted. That's why he could recognise the Great Wall of China on earth. The distance was great enough. The dear Lord had

forgotten that the Great Wall of China had been of no use to its builders. The nomad peoples against whom it had been raised forced their way into the country anyway. The human beings had forgotten it, too. It was already too long ago. The distance was too great. Now they went walking on the wall and pressed the buttons on their cameras and film cameras like crazy. They were preserving the memory said the human beings.

The clown grinned.

God's creatures had built other things as well, which could be seen from space. Pyramids. Dams. Skyscrapers. The pyramids had not been any use to the people who had them built either. Their corpses, wrapped in strips of cloth, lay around in stone chambers, above which their subjects had had to pile stone upon stone. They had not risen again nevertheless. It was all the same to the dear Lord. Most human beings on the other hand found it only just. Before death all are equal, they said. They put it somewhat imprecisely. What they meant was: After death all are equal. They would not have been able to bear it if only the owners of pyramids or skyscrapers had been immortal: Anyone who at the age of 50 hasn't got a pyramid or a skyscraper yet, or something of the kind, stays dead after he has died. The dear Lord only allows those to rise again who have made it. Human beings just didn't want to imagine anything like that. But that's exactly how it would have been. If anyone at all could have risen again, then the people with the pyramids or the skyscrapers or with other splendid things that could be seen from out in space.

It was all the same to the dear Lord. It had also been all the same to him that the dinosaurs died out 50 or 60 million years ago, when he himself had been approximately 49.95 million years old. The human beings

believed that a giant comet had fallen to earth, into the ocean, causing a great flood, in which many creatures and many dinosaurs drowned. The remaining dinosaurs gradually perished because of the climate change which the comet had triggered. This theory was just as mistaken as the human beings' view of life after death. The dinosaurs had simply died of feebleness. They didn't reproduce any more. The male dinosaurs were always thinking of only one thing: eating, eating, eating. The female dinosaurs too. It was a vicious circle. They were so heavy and clumsy, that they weren't interested in sex any more. They didn't like it when the earth moved during love-making. So they preferred eating. And became even heavier and clumsier. And so they died out. A vicious circle. It was all the same to the dear Lord.

He couldn't make out any more of the earth than the astronaut in the space station squeezing his breakfast out of the tube into his mouth, while at the same time looking out of the window and thinking of his wife and daughter who were living down there somewhere. His wife was driving around in a jeep on the blue ball and selling houses. His little girl was cycling around on a tricycle on the blue ball and spoiling the freshly sown front lawn because the Mexican maid wasn't paying attention. That would have annoyed the astronaut if he had been able to see it. But he could only make out pyramids and skyscrapers, and the Great Wall of China. The fifteen foot fence between the United States and Mexico wasn't visible from space. But it was all the same to him.

He imagined how his little girl on the tricycle, which had thick plastic wheels, was scarring the lawn. It was all the same to the maid. Her mind was on her little son in Mexico, for her he was as far away as if she was living on another planet.

The astronaut's lawn was likewise all the same to the dear Lord. He was thinking about what he could do next, after the dinosaurs and the human beings. Adam and Eve had set out from an African valley 50 or 60 thousand years ago in order to spread out across the whole earth and to subjugate it.

The dear Lord held a remote control in his hand and reflected. He was able to zap through all the ages, through the past, the present and the future. He could watch the pyramids being built. A worker who hadn't been paying attention just then slipped between two stripped tree trunks laid one behind the other, across which a huge stone block was being pulled. The man screamed as his leg was crushed. The overseers beside the rollers drove on the workers pulling the ropes with blows from their whips. Gradually the man was drawn between the trunks and pulped. The dear Lord was able to watch that. Just like everything else that had already happened and would still happen. For example, how the astronaut, who was just squeezing his tube breakfast into his mouth while at the same time thinking about his daughter on the blue potato below, would die on the return flight to this blue potato. He would suffocate. There was something wrong with the shuttle. It would arrive down below in one piece with suffocated astronauts on board. The dear Lord would have been able to watch what was in store for the astronauts, if he had wanted to. Past. Future. No problem. The dear Lord could also stop what was happening for a moment. The human beings called it the present, when the dear Lord halted what was happening. He did it all the time. At any rate that's what it felt like to the human beings. Now the dear Lord was considering whether he should put the remote control aside and

create something new. I've become a real couch potato, he thought, after 50 billion years it's high time to start from the beginning again.

You're crazy, said the clown, and looked him straight in the eye with a mocking laugh, but in the course of things, he added self-ironically, everything will become clear.

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Then the clown stopped smiling. He said: You think too much. That was true. That had always been his problem. Too many ideas. Too much significance. Far too many stories. When it came to stories, he was like a Nile explorer. Further and further upstream, always looking for the sources. People came to him at his practice, lay down on his couch and said everything that was going through their heads. Those were the rules. It just bubbled up. Crystalline springs splashed, little brooks babbled over mossy stones down to the valley and merged into rivers, which had riverside promenades and meandered through charming landscapes. In the villas on such promenades lived his patients. Most of them held shares in something splendid that could be seen from space. If one day inadvertently there should be a resurrection after all – they would be there. They had always been among the first and would be among the first this time, too. Their souls would rise up to heaven and point down at the pyramids or skyscrapers or dams or other splendid things, which had belonged to them during their lifetimes and would still belong to them after the resurrection

Such people came to his practice when they were sad and didn't know why. They lay down on his couch and began to tell their stories, stories like straight regulated rivers – until the dams burst, sooner with some, later with others and they gave in to their fantasies. Their fantasies were no crystalline springs or silvery brooks or regulated rivers, they were muddy streams, which surged forward, carrying along dead wood and dead animals, gurgling and slurping. Everyone has a Nile in his head. In these great rivers there were hippos and crocodiles. Almost all the stories

were about hippos and crocodiles in muddy rivers. The stories which were about why the dinosaurs had died out he called hippopotamus stories. They emerged in the area between navel and knee. Hippos are pigs. They appear monstrous, but are fundamentally harmless, and when they yawn they even look a little ridiculous with the gaps between their teeth.

Trembling with shame, one of his clients, Hans Breuning, related that once a week he went to see a lady in black PVC who gave his backside a good belting. Those were hippo stories. Breuning came to him for sessions because he wanted to be cured. He hinted that the business was getting too expensive: The girl is even more expensive than you are, he said, although I come to you three times a week. And suddenly one saw for a moment the scaly back of a crocodile under the surface of the water.

The crocodile stories were much more interesting than the hippopotamus stories. They dealt with what one had to be, have and do, in order to come into the possession of pyramids, skyscrapers and other splendid things, which could be seen from space. They emerged in the area between crown and teeth. The crocodile stories were about greed, the greed of the oral cavity and the greed of the cranial cavity.

On the wall in his study there hung nicely behind glass the sensory homunculus of Wilder Penfield, a schematic and seemingly grotesquely distorted picture of the right side of the body, corresponding to its representation on the left side of the cerebral cortex. The throat, the tongue and in particular the lips commanded a huge area. Measured against this continent the territory between navel and knee was a mere province.

The clown said: Too many stories, too much significance, too many ideas. Even when he was fifteen he had been thinking too much. He read books about dinosaurs and didn't believe that they had died out. He proposed the theory that they had retreated to a region of the earth that remained unexplored. Once he was grown up he would organise an expedition and look for them.

You are grown up now, said the clown.

He had read books about the pyramids and doubted that the pharaohs still lay intact in their graves as they had four or five thousand years before. Their mummies had surely gone mouldy long ago. When one's young the sense of justice is particularly pronounced and he thought it quite right, that the mummies of the pharaohs had gone mouldy.

When he was young he had also read books about the Great Wall of China. That's why he knew it could be seen from space. That had convinced him immediately. The scouts from distant planets who on their way through the universe flew heedlessly past earth in their spaceships could see it. But it was all the same to them.

Now he was approaching fifty. Sometimes, for example on a day like today, he felt like the dear Lord with his 50 billion years. He was longsighted too. When he read books he held them away from him with outstretched arms, as if they disgusted him. As a boy he had once read a whole dictionary from A ("the first letter of the alphabet") to zzz ("*interj* used as a visual representation of sleep or snoring"). Fortunately it was a one volume dictionary. He still had the dictionary, but didn't read it any

more. It was far too heavy to hold out in front of him with outstretched arms.

Yesterday he had celebrated his 49th birthday, which was really the first day of his fiftieth year. But that was something he hadn't thought of yesterday. He had drunk to the day with his wife and said: Well, I'm still in my forties. Which wasn't true. When he thought about it, he had to admit that yesterday he had entered his 50th year and was now heading for 60. It was all the same to the dear Lord.

It wasn't all the same to the clown. He asked: How can one turn 50? Haven't a clue. Presumably it just happens. One comes into the world, crawls about a bit, learns to walk, learns to say >Mummy< and >Daddy< grows out of nappies, kills the father, marries the mother. It takes an eternity until one's five, and two further eternities until one's fifteen. Then suddenly one's fifty. Time puts its finger to your temples and colours them grey.

One can tell a man with experience of life by the fact that he can shave eyes shut without cutting himself. He looked the clown in the eye and with the razor drew the foam from his face. The clown puffed up his cheeks to smooth out the furrows which slanted down from his nostrils, right and left, in two symmetrical arcs. He drew white trails of snow from the cheeks, from the chin, from the throat of the face in the mirror. He was particularly careful at the adam's apple. The skin there looked like that of a dead, plucked chicken. He stretched the skin of the dead, plucked chicken with two fingers of his left hand and with the razor in his right hand scraped off the foam. The clown had disappeared. He was looking someone in the eye whom he knew from photographs. People

said it was his face. Quite possible. Mainly it was his mother's face, around the mouth a bit of his father. All in all it was the face of his American grandfather on his mother's side. Almost 40 years ago, a communion candle in his hand, in his smart boy's suit, he had stood beside his grandfather and waited for the little bird to pop out, as the photographer childishly said. The little bird had popped out and had preserved the memory. If the dear Lord had spooled back and then pressed the pause button on the remote, a freeze frame would have appeared, that showed a man in his early sixties and beside him a ten year-old boy, who next to his grandfather looked like a second draft. Now the ten year-old boy was himself heading for 60 and looking ever more like the first draft. His mother was no longer alive. He had loved her and mourned her for a long time after her terrible death. Nevertheless he was filled with unease at the thought that she could still be alive and watch as time with inexorable patience pulled the mask of resemblance with his grandfather over his face, how a son was gradually transformed into the father of the mother.

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A small ruby appeared on the adam's apple. So his blood was still red, red and thick as on the first day. A good sign. This morning he would not have been surprised if it had been old rose and watery. And yet his experience of life did not even seem sufficient for him to avoid cutting himself while shaving with his eyes open. Another good sign. Even if it was bad for the white shirt collar, under which he would knot a tie, as soon as he was dressed. He always saw his clients in suit and tie. One of his training analysts had worn jumpers and trainers, horrible. If one was going to stick one's hand in people's innards, symbolically speaking, one should be careful to keep to a degree of formality in appearance at least. The tie helped him not to laugh in the thin-lipped face of this man Breuning, who poured out his heart to a psychoanalyst because getting his backside belted was getting too expensive.

Out of habit he also wore a tie on the patient-free Thursday. The Thursday had become his favourite day, devoted entirely to his studies, as he liked to say to patients whom he had to put off, when they begged for additional sessions. Only with one client had he been willing to make an exception.

He tore off a little bit of toilet paper and stuck it on his adam's apple. That's what he had done since puberty. The dear Lord to whom it was all the same had not spared him an intense pimple phase. In those days his attempts at shaving led to blood baths. He pressed little scraps of paper onto the wounds, so that the blood clotted more quickly. He thought he looked as if he had been nibbled by rats. Nevertheless the fluff had to go.

The pimples had to go too, but he couldn't do much about them. The fluff of immaturity could at least be cut off. His mother kissed his pimpled forehead to console him, and he squirmed in disgust, disgust at himself, his pimples, his fluff, his fifteen year-old half manhood. Sensitively his mother stopped kissing him and he squirmed in shame, shame at himself, because he couldn't stop thinking about whether she just didn't want to humiliate him with her caress or whether she didn't love him any more. He almost couldn't bear being in the square yard of skin that enclosed him, and he waited outwardly stubborn and inwardly trembling to grow out of it at last. Perhaps 50 isn't such a bad age at all.

He switched on the electric toothbrush. It ran for exactly two and a half minutes and then stopped automatically. Brushing teeth twice a day makes five minutes, makes thirty five minutes a week, makes a good thirty hours in a year. From the beginning of his fortieth year to the beginning of his fiftieth year he had spent 300 hours brushing his teeth, twelve and a half days. Before these twelve and a half days, distributed over ten years, he had given up his post in an addiction clinic and set up as a psychoanalyst. It had been a high-class addiction clinic, full of people well-known from film, radio and TV: cocaine-sniffing talkshow hosts looking for a second chance, cocaine-sniffing football trainers, cocaine-sniffing artists, cocaine-sniffing writers. The cocaine-sniffing writers were the worst of all. Writers are always the worst of all. That was the white section as the clinic slang called it. The golden section was the drinkers. Not least the women drinkers. He had seen old ladies trying to bribe young male nurses with four figure sums to get at alcohol. He had seen a woman in the prime of life, a smart fifty year-old, not yet wasted by her drinking, who had escaped from the clinic in her dressing gown. She was picked up early in the morning at a petrol station. She was sitting

happily on the ground leaning against a petrol pump, around her the scattered army of little empty bottles of fig vodka. He had seen an almost skeletal ex-model, who was drinking the flesh off her bones with whisky in her villa, while her husband held out his bare bottom to ladies in black PVC.

That was how he had ended up with Breuning. He had treated his wife for three years after she was discharged from the clinic. He had been unable to prevent her suicide. Now it was the husband's turn. He had certain feelings when this man entered his consulting room and could not split off these feelings. That was unprofessional. With the help of a supervising analyst he was struggling to free himself from these feelings. He didn't have them because of the silly hippo story, but because of the crocodiles in the muddy river. They were eating each other up out of greed. Perhaps the dear Lord could make out the contours of Würmsee lake from space. Breuning's property was by the shores of the lake, between the villas in their grounds of other company directors and owners and nouveaux riches and families which had been wealthy for generations. Sometimes he philosophised about it while he was on the couch, if he still had to get into a flow, before he got round to talking about the lady in black PVC. When Breuning was philosophising on the couch, while he sat silently behind him in a wing chair, the crocodiles were almost physically present, seemed to be crawling unhurriedly across the carpet on their stubby legs.

Most people are ashamed of their hippos and proud of their crocodiles. If everything were not all the same to the dear Lord, it would really have to be the other way round. What is the area between navel and knee

compared to that between teeth and crown? Most people are ashamed of the wrong things.

Perhaps the hate he felt for the man was because he had failed to prevent the wife of this man taking her life, first slowly with the gold from the bottle and then abruptly with a cocktail of pills. She had come to him five times a week, including Thursdays, for three years. But the 50 minutes care every weekday had not been enough. They had been enough to prevent her starting to drink again, but not enough to help her to start her life again. She didn't even get to the age of thirty. She had been a poor broken little doll. She had said once: As a child I was an angel with black corkscrew curls and as a girl the fairest in all the land, with lips red as blood, skin white as snow, hair black as ebony, quite a paragon of beauty. But then someone poisoned Snow White and that someone is myself. From his chair behind the head of the couch he could see her stiffen, become completely motionless, lie there as if dead in a coffin. After a while she put her hand to her mouth and began to chew her fingernails which were bitten down to the nailbeds. In the silence he heard only the chewing sound and could not do anything, he simply could not do anything.

It was his greatest professional failure that he had not been able to save Snow White. Perhaps it was also his greatest failure as a human being. But to look at it like that was unprofessional. Now he sat in his wing chair three times a week behind her husband's head, listened to him philosophising, thought he could see crocodiles crawling through the room and hated him. Perhaps he should break off the treatment?

He tapped his forehead with his index finger, tugged the scrap of paper from his adam's apple and with a white towel dried the face of the man, who in the mirror above the wash basin looked as if he was in the prime of life. I must do something. One's fiftieth year is the right one in which to start from the beginning again. I could throw out my Würmsee clients and treat people without pyramids at public health insurance rates. He tapped himself on the forehead again and said to the man in the mirror: Are you St. Francis of Assisi? Don't you have any crocodiles to feed? And had not Sigmund Freud already complained: "Compelled to earn our living from our work as doctors, we are not in a position to also devote our efforts to those without means." Well, there you go.

4

A cushion had slipped from the couch. He bent down and picked it up. After he had arranged it properly he struck it with the side of his hand. Now it lay there with pricked ears, waiting for Hans Breuning to come tomorrow, take it between his fists and crush it while talking about the lady in black PVC. Other clients too would maltreat the cushions. Some pressed them to their chests when they groaned, some to their eyes when they wept. Some, like Breuning, seemed to want to rip them to shreds in their fists. They lay down on the couch, squeezed the cushions until the feathers inside were crushed to powder, and talked, talked, talked.

As he walked he adjusted his tie, which had slipped to the side when he picked up the cushion, and sat down behind his wonderful desk, which stood in the middle of the room about three yards from the couch. It was a rounded art nouveau desk with inlays in the doors in front of the drawers, delicate, exquisitely worked inlays, representing stylised crane-like birds, the wings curved lines, sensitive and full of strength. On the left side of the desk top lay a mobile phone with the lid up, the display still dark. On the right on a pedestal was a life-size bakelite model of the human brain. It could be taken apart. The individual parts were good to touch. Smooth and cool. At the front of the desk, towards the couch, were the seven deadly sins in a row: Superbia – pride, Avaritia – greed, Invidia – envy, Ira – wrath, Luxuria – extravagance, Gula – gluttony, Acedia – sloth. Each of the ivory figures was as big as his thumb. The patients could only see them from behind, when they came in, before they lay down on the couch and stared at the ceiling or the inside of their eyelids. To him they were amulets against the complaints of the psyche,

which rose from the couch. Protective magic against spirits and ghosts, against an excess of symbols, against all this boundless desire to signify. Breuning had once jokingly called them the seven dwarves and then, after a long pause, added, in the last years of her life his wife had thought of herself as Snow White, the poor thing. Perhaps what had happened after that had been for the best after all.

(Translated by Martin Chalmers)