

Ulrike Dietmann

Medicine Horse

Volume 1: Initiation

spiritbooks

All rights reserved. This publication, including all its parts, is protected by copyright. No part of it may be used or reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the publishers and the author.

© 2013 spiritbooks, 73230 Kirchheim/Teck, Germany

Publisher: spiritbooks, www.spiritbooks.de

Author: Ulrike Dietmann

Cover illustration: Kim McElroy, www.spiritofhorse.com

Cover design: Martin Roser

Printing and publisher's service provider: www.tredition.de

Printed in Germany

ISBN: 978-3-944587-00-4

All events and characters in this novel are fictional. Any similarities to actual events or persons living or dead are purely coincidental.

For my Shooting Stars: Martin, Joel, Lea
For Tinnia, the whispering horse
For Gitanes, the mystery



1

“Read *that*”, said Mrs Barzi.

The small red-haired woman with the name that reminded Valerie of warts and witches had simply pulled the book out of her handbag and let it slide into Valerie’s hand like a cold fish. Valerie’s resistance was too weak to say: no. She had met Mrs Barzi several times in the street or, like now, in the baker’s shop. And each time the Wart had greeted her as if they knew one another, but that was not the case. There was a sort of death rattle in her breathing and she looked in general so fragile, that Valerie would not have managed to reject a present from her anyway.

She would have liked to know what kind of book it was, but a thick, blue dust-jacket covered it as if its identity were too dangerous to reveal in Schlattstall, this dump of a place at the end of the world.

Mrs Barzi smiled conspiratorially.

“Looks interesting,” said Valerie and smiled back. Curious the baker’s wife glanced knowingly across her row of Chelsea buns. There was an atmosphere as if they were all part of a secret mission with its epicentre here in Schlattstall of all places: this scattered heap of houses surrounded by three dark, steep slopes which resolutely hid from the eyes of the world everything that happened here. Perhaps, Valerie thought, real conspiracies could only ever thrive in

7

a place like this, or perhaps it was simply that her poor reason—shattered in a thousand pieces—had once more got the better of her.

Mrs Barzi went on death rattling and Valerie squinted. Her eyes had been inflamed since the day somebody had snatched her out of her body without putting her back properly: three months earlier, going by the earth time scale—but, then again, who went by that?

“Good-bye,” Valerie said.

Once home she opened the book at random:

Problems of the eye, the gateway to the soul, indicate that you do not want to see something important.

That’s just it, thought Valerie, ha-ha, and again her eyes started to itch like crazy. Glaring light poured in through the south window so she closed the blinds until only thin strips penetrated the dents in the slats. She opened the terrace door for Miou. The grey cat sidled round Valerie’s ankles and curled its tail round her calves. The pain in her eyes stung like a thousand needles.

The phone rang. Valerie froze. Something—she felt it exactly—was lurking in the left-hand corner of the room, then it leapt to the phone and screamed: Pick it up! way Valerie was determined not to give in to this ghost which had settled in her house without being invited. She lit a candle on the chest of drawers and watched a gnat fly towards the flame. Her heart clenched.

On no account, she thought, may I open the door to my soul to see something important, for if I do, I will be burnt up like this poor insect.

Valerie stared at the charred remains of the gnat and was overwhelmed with pity, she wanted to lie down and die with the defenceless creature.

Where was the poor insect’s soul now? Was it where Miriam’s soul was? She closed her eyes and a flood-tide of

images came rolling in. She could not remember ever having had such wild imaginings as she'd had since September 23rd. Gory battles raged, she saw horses bolting in panic, a gathering of holy men and a landscape of vast steppes. A horse disentangled itself from the raging flood of images and told her his name. She considered writing the name down, and with trembling fingers searched for a pen in the chest of drawers. Too tired to sit in a chair she dropped to the floor, leant with her back against the sofa and tugged a piece of newspaper towards her to scribble the horse's name in the margin.

Massacre in Arizona, read the headline of an article in the paper and it seemed to her as if there was some strange connection between this article and her flood of images. That's it, she thought, and drew a ring round the headline.

She was just about to write down the horse's name when a wave of sweet bliss washed over her and she had the feeling that she was stepping outside her body just like that day when ... Write! Write!! she told her hand. But it was so good to swim around out there, basking in the feeling of bliss and she wanted to savour it for a while. She was so tired ... so tired ... Sleep overwhelmed her.

When she woke up again, it was dark outside and the candle had almost burnt down. She reached for the newspaper and saw to her amazement that along the edge something really was written:

*A horse named Gitanes
A black and white Berber paint
his head reminiscent of an Indian*



2

“Yes?” Valerie held the receiver away as if she was instinctively expecting something unpleasant.

“Your daughter’s locker...”

Valerie could not answer.

“Will you come over?... or shall we throw the things away?”

That something in the left-hand corner hopped about like a hobgoblin. It taunted gloatingly:

You’ll die.

“I’ll come.”

Before Valerie set off, she removed the protective cover from the book Mrs Barzi had given her and read the title: *Conversations with the Dead.*

The smell of horse manure assailed Valerie’s nostrils and the itching in her eyes became unbearable. She had never liked horses: not in the past and now even less. She would have liked nothing better than to turn round and run away. A pretty girl with large dark eyes and long chestnut-brown hair was leading a black horse across the yard. The girl turned round, Valerie had the feeling that the girl, who

was about thirteen, was reading her thoughts. Perhaps she had been one of Miriam's friends.

It took Valerie all her strength to push the wooden barn door open, but the effort jolted her back to the present. A dog came leaping towards her, she jumped and thrust the animal away, it smelled of wet hair.

Miriam had once shown her the locker right at the beginning when she had taken on the gigantic horse she was sharing. *I didn't spend enough time in the stable with Miriam, hardly any, Valerie thought, because I loathe horses. I never took Miriam's love of horses seriously. But then how could I? They are dangerous, potentially lethal. It's inconceivable to spend any time near them. I was a bad mother.*

On the back of the locker door was a photograph of the giant, one of the ugliest horses Valerie had ever seen. He was called 'Korbass'. An ugly horse with an even uglier name. It was all so inconceivable.

The locker door made a metallic sound when Valerie yanked it open. Miriam's riding helmet fell out and rolled across the floor. She picked it up and stroked it gently as if she could compensate for something by doing that. On the shelves she found a pair of riding gloves made of brown leather, cowboy boots size 35, a bag of horse food, a tin of hoof polish with its brush, a hoof scraper, a large and a small grooming brush. To touch the objects, Valerie thought with a shock, feels like touching Miriam or what Miriam now was.

Valerie grasped the hoof scraper with her fingers, clutching involuntarily until her knuckles were white. This plastic orange currycomb with its bent and twisted bristles was the only connection she still had to Miriam.

The door to the tack room burst open with a brutal push because it jammed, and a delicate woman with a floppy hat and thin light-brown hair came in. Over her flowery blouse

she was wearing a crocheted jacket that made her look rather quaint as if she had just popped out of a children's book.

"You are Miriam's mother?" the stranger asked, and again Valerie had the unpleasant feeling that somebody was reading her thoughts. She stuffed the hoof scraper into a cloth bag as if she had been caught doing something forbidden.

"I can imagine what you are thinking," said the children's book character. Since when had anyone invited her to say anything?

No, you can't, thought Valerie and stared at the ground. She found herself peering at a pair of turquoise crocodile cowboy boots with pointed toes and stitched seams?

"Miriam waited for you," said the cross between cowgirl and Mary Poppins.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said."

"I don't understand."

"Yes, you do."

Valerie found the answer rude and much too private.

"Please, leave me alone now. This is all very difficult for me."

"If you want somebody to talk to, here's my card."

Anger surged inside Valerie. This stranger was looking for customers at a time like this. That was why she had come. She wanted to take advantage of the situation. Valerie ignored the outstretched hand and the card, and turned back to the locker. Behind her she heard the woman leave the room, leaving behind a strange mood like a sticky cloud. Valerie felt as if she was hanging from a pendulum and swinging back and forth between two worlds, each more unreal than the other.

For a moment Valerie was even wondering whether this woman had actually been here in the tack room at all, or whether she had merely imagined the whole thing. Since Miriam's accident every possible phenomenon—each one blurring the edges of reality beyond recognition—had occupied her mind. Valerie's glance leapt to the feeding box where the violet card lay: proof that the lady had actually been there. Valerie didn't manage to read the card because at that very moment the girl she had met in the yard, accompanied by a friend, appeared in the doorway. Valerie quickly stowed the card in the rear pocket of her jeans.

From the furthest back corner of the locker she extracted a postcard and blew the dust off it. It showed a black-and-white-piebald horse. The words she had noted down came to mind again. She turned the postcard over and there, in Miriam's childlike handwriting, were the words: *a horse called Gitanes*. Valerie felt dizzy. On the edge of the card in small letters was printed the horse's breed: *Berber paint mix*. She looked at the horse and thought of the fourth line of what she had noted down: *his head is reminiscent of an Indian*. She studied the horse's head and discovered that it actually did have something of an Indian about it.

She cleared out the locker completely, also took the saddle, the bridle tack and the half-empty bag of food and stowed it all away in the boot of her car. She couldn't bring herself to take the things into the house. Somehow the boot seemed to be a suitable place for Miriam's belongings, a mobile twilight zone.

At home Valerie flicked through a box of horse postcards from a shelf in Miriam's room. She would have given anything for an explanation of the strange overlap between her notes and the postcard in Miriam's locker. Surely she had already seen the card with the black-and-white paint

horse before Miriam had taken it with her to the stable and that's why it had come to mind by chance. Perhaps Miriam had also shown her the card and told her that she would take it with her, although Valerie could not remember that. She discovered a series of cards which depicted various horse breeds, to which the card with the *Berber* also belonged. If she had actually seen the card lying around, perhaps she had had it in her hand when tidying up—in that case the precision of the human memory was astonishing. How else could she have known a black-and-white piebald *Berber*, when she didn't even know there was such a breed as *Berber*.

How on earth could one explain the horse's name *Gitanes* otherwise. She had probably also read the name *Gitanes* while tidying up, her subconscious had taken to the name *Gitanes*, 'gypsy' in English, because even as a child she had wanted to travel around with the gypsies—and so it had found its way to the front shelf in the great archive of her subconscious. Such things were probably normal for psychologists, therapists, clairvoyants. She put the card back in its box with the other cards. The explanation about the unconscious appealed to her more and more the longer she thought about it.

To get rid of the irritating odour of the stable exuding from her jeans and her pullover she went into the bedroom and changed her clothes. As she slid her jeans over her hips, the visiting card of the woman with the floppy hat fell from her rear pocket and lay, reverse side up, on the carpet. Something had been noted down on it by hand. Valerie bent down. Scrawled on it was: *Gitanes*. Valerie's thoughts froze.



3

Reason told her she ought to talk to somebody, to a person who understood her situation, but she could not muster the energy to phone anybody. Her reason also told her that this somebody should on no account wear turquoise crocodile cowboy boots.

The wind toyed with the mobile hanging in the apple tree, producing an angelic tinkling sound. Valerie bit into an orange, licked her fingers clean and had the feeling that the orange was turquoise.

Now that Miriam was no longer there, it occurred to her that for years she had been neglecting her friendships and that there was hardly any person she was on intimate terms with left in her life. Nobody phoned to ask how she was; she had had a mere five cards of condolence: one from Miriam's school class, three from distant friends and one from the new parish priest whom she had never met.

Miou jumped onto her lap, sorted her limbs according to some invisible geometry then relaxed completely. "You are the only one I still have," Valerie said and stroked the cat's grey fur. That afternoon she once more gave in to the telephone ringing. "We haven't heard from you for weeks." It was her sister, Tamara of the grating voice.

"I've heard nothing from you either," replied Valerie weakly.

"Are you OK?" Tamara asked.

"Absolutely," replied Valerie.

"Can you bring a cake? Better still: two. One with buttercream and alcohol and something dry for the children, something they can hold in their hands." The calendar caught Valerie's eye. What day was it today?

"You are coming, aren't you?"

If I haven't flown off on a witch's broom by then, thought Valerie. The idea of celebrating her mother's birthday within the family seemed to her to be as alien as a space ship landing on a cake plate.

"How are you? You know I want the truth. I know what's up anyway."

For a moment Valerie considered telling Tammy about the multiple occurrence of the name *Gitanes* and the hoof scraper which presented a connection with the realm of the dead.

"I'm getting on fine as always," she said.

"Liar."

"Leave me in peace, Tammy, I'm OK."

"It'll do you good to be amongst people."

Sure, Valerie thought.

"Lunch is at half past twelve... Will you be wearing black?"

"No."

"Are you working?"

"Everything's fine, Tammy." She slammed down the receiver.

She thought about how she had always had to blackmail Miriam with riding lessons to get her to come to family celebrations. Ten riding lessons for Auntie Leonie's birthday last year. Valerie felt ashamed at the thought. Nobody

there notices me and nobody listens to me, Miriam had complained. They treat me as if I were invisible.

Valerie spent the rest of the day acquiring the makings of a lemon cake and a Black Forest cherry cake. As she was sprinkling flour, baking powder and sugar onto the mixing board, she heard Miriam's voice as if she were sitting there, right next to her on a stool, weighing sugar and flour and beating eggs. 'The flour is the dragon which lays the eggs. It feeds the eggs with baking powder, so they will grow big and strong.' Valerie carefully tipped the yokes into the hollow. 'Then it blows sugar onto the eggs, so they'll have something to munch.'

Valerie deeply regretted that she had agreed to go. She knew that her family was unable to cope with Miriam's death and would do anything to find a guilty party—and an explanation. They would say something ugly. With a knife Valerie cut up the butter just like a dragon battling a fire-spitting monster.

As she was attacking the baking board, she again thought about the crazy woman with the crocodile-leather boots. Valerie strode into the bedroom. The visiting card lay on the little African table next to her bed, still reverse-side up. Valerie turned the card over. It read: Evi Schaefer, *Shamanic Life Guidance*, together with a telephone number. Next to it: a picture of a rainbow-coloured horse. Shamanic life guidance, Valerie thought, but had no idea what it meant.

After she had taken the cake base out of the oven, she doused it with alcohol and covered it with cherries. She put the layers of Black Forest cake together and thought about the quotation in the book from Mrs Barzi about eyes and what they do not wish to see. She coated the whole cake

with cream till it was completely covered, then she sprinkled it with chocolate chips.

“Hello Tom.” Valerie said, giving her father a fleeting hug. She and Tamara had been using their parents’ Christian names for a long time. It had been Tamara’s idea; she was determined to be grown up, and Valerie had played along because “Mummy” and “Daddy” sounded to her like army ranks.

“How are you?” her father asked and took her coat. Without waiting for an answer Tom shunted her along the hall and into the living room.

Valerie’s mother had as always overdone her make-up and was wearing a check blouse and drainpipe trousers with a broad buckle-belt. She had got it into her head to play the American-style country girl even though she had grown up in Berlin and had spent most of her life in cities. She had brought the idea back from a holiday in the American West. A few years before she had persuaded Tom to buy a house in a village and a dog as well. In the meantime they had three: Great Danes.

They were badly trained and came charging at Valerie. Her mother bossed them about—which had not the slightest effect on them. With people her method was more successful—which also raised an interesting question possibly worth following up.

Tamara stretched out one arm to hug Valerie, while in her other hand she balanced a spoonful of vanilla mousse which she then popped into her mouth.

“You don’t know how happy I am to see you. I should have been concerned about you much earlier. You look awful.”

Fortunately Tamara had *not* bothered about her sooner. To be taken care of by Tamara was like being hung on a meat hook and spun round.

“I will make up for it,” her sister added. “Don’t look so horrified. You know I can scan you perfectly.” Tamara had made a great career in the personnel department of a technology company and boasted that she only needed to see a person once to be able to tell whether they would make a profit for the company or cost it money. She liked to claim that her x-ray eyes were incorruptible. Right now she was busy scanning Valerie.

“You have to drink mugwort tea,” she said after an alarmingly long pause. She wandered into the kitchen and searched through her mother’s cupboards. “I’ve found something even better.” She tapped Valerie on the shoulder and handed her an open box of dried dates. Valerie looked at the sell-by-date. It had overrun by two years.

“Since when have you been functioning as a dietary consultant?” Valerie asked.

Tamara ran the spoon with the vanilla cream slowly and with relish over her lower lip. “I’ve done a course,” she said triumphantly.

Valerie slipped the dates unnoticed into the waste bin. Tamara had already lost interest in the subject. She knew nothing about people. Certainly not about me anyway, Valerie thought. It is a good job I didn’t give in to the temptation to tell her about the horse postcard. Even if my most urgent need is to find somebody who can provide some explanation or other that I can live with.

Throughout the meal Valerie felt as if any moment a hoof scraper might drop from above and plop into the soup bowl. At the extended dining table sat her parents, Tamara and her husband Mark (who tended towards violence), her brother Leif and his wife, Selma, as well as their three chil-

dren. Valerie didn't know what to fear more: the conversation at the table or the hoof scraper.

"I hope they shot the horse the same day," said Mark in the silence which had set in after the soup. Mark was not only potentially violent but also an insufferable know-all who wore too much gold jewellery. "What did you say the nag's name was?"

"Korbas," said Mathilde, Selma's ten-year-old daughter, who also loved horses.

"They *did* shoot it," Mark insisted.

"No," said Valerie

"That killing machine's still alive? Tell me where he is and I'll blow his brains out. You shoot horses between the ears, don't you?"

The idea seemed to amuse Mark. Valerie could no longer stand it and got up from her seat. She was involuntarily struck by guilty feelings about Miriam's death, but on the other hand, how could she feel at home in a family where a character like Mark had found a nesting place?

"Where are you going?" asked her mother, who reacted like a seismograph to mood swings.

"To the toilet."

As Valerie came back along the hall, she heard the family talking.

"If you ask me, she is ready for the loony bin. Another month alone in that house and we can have her taken away. We really must do something, and I mean ..."

"Valerie is too intelligent to have anyone tell her what to do."

"I will see to it that the horse is shot," said Mark.

Valerie's stomach contracted like a piece of dry bread. I ought to go, she thought, and had the feeling that her reason had at last returned. One beat later her reason told her