

'Die Pilger' by Felicitas Hoppe (from *Picknick der Friseure*, S. Fischer Verlag, 1996)

By

Translated by Sarah Peyton Jones (2013)

The Pilgrims

My father comes from a family of mediocre actors and hates any kind of dressing-up, because, as a child, he had to play small monkeys, Indians and parrots on dirty out-of-town stages, and the mocking laughter of the audience still rings in his ears today. So, when my father caught my mother in the bathroom one rainy Sunday afternoon, secretly trying on colourful wigs, one after another and with obvious pleasure, he had no choice but to punish her severely. He did this by dragging her screaming out of the bathroom, a bright red wig pressed over her ears, and thrashing her with his belt until she confessed and revealed where she hid her costumes.

Perhaps my father could have forgiven my mother, had he not discovered, among her costumes carefully stashed in a suitcase, smaller schnapps bottles in larger quantities – and so she found no grace in his eyes. He dragged her before the household altar on the ground floor, where he forced her to kneel down and repent, at which point my mother, who possesses not the slightest talent for prayer, broke out in such helpless laughter that he considered himself obliged to remove her from the household once and for all. From then on I was subject to the strict bodyguard of my great-aunt. She ironed my shirts, handkerchiefs and underpants.

As soon as my mother had left the house, such silence prevailed that I began to suffer from attacks of asphyxia. They always began harmlessly with a slight tickle in my throat as I rattled off the prayers during the morning devotions prescribed by my father, but grew from prayer to prayer into a threatening lump in my chest, so that I could only force out the last four Our Fathers amid stuttering and wheezing, until my father wiped my forehead reluctantly with a big white cloth and permitted my great-aunt to accompany me up to my room. There I usually fell into a swoon, from which I only awoke hours later and feverish.

As you can see, I was prepared for dying from an early age; only the thought that I could not see my mother again before my death saddened me, so I began to dream of her with all my might. I often encountered her, with a broad smile on her face and a bright red wig on her head, as I couldn't remember her real hair colour. In our house there are no pictures on the walls.

And so powerfully and frequently did I manage to dream of her, that I woke up one morning completely red-haired myself. Horrified, my great-aunt clapped her hands to her yellow face, dragged me to the bathroom and washed my hair under a jet of boiling hot water for hours on end. The colour did not fade, and so she bound a lime green scarf around my head, so as not to alarm my father, whom I was to deceive by claiming that I was wearing a cold compress against my fever attacks.

This worked well enough until one day, on one of the long and arduous hikes that my father undertook with me to bolster my state of health, a fierce gust of wind tore the scarf from my head.

At this, my father, whose fury was beyond description, brought a hairdresser into the house, who sheared my head bald to the scalp every morning. But neither the hairdresser's efforts nor those of my great-aunt, who desperately tried to dye my hair all imaginable colours with peculiar essences and tinctures, nor the prayers of the priest my father paid to read Mass for us, nor even the heat of the following summer months could achieve a satisfactory alteration in my hair colour. My hair stayed red, it would not be dyed, bleached or cut. If I went to bed in the evening bald, I would get up the next morning with a full head of hair. My father was on the brink of losing his mind because of it.

Thus he decided, the following autumn, to embark on a pilgrimage with me to a holy spring, from which he expected great effect. My great-aunt folded my underpants and her hands and accompanied us to the garden gate, then waved to us one last time. It was November, and a stormy spell had set in. We advanced only with great effort, as my father, who was of the firm conviction that only those who approached the sacred site with reverence and on their own two feet could expect a cure, didn't allow us to accept a lift from one of the passing vehicles. We walked on in this way for three days and three nights, until we arrived at the holy spring.

The crowd was large, everyone was fighting for their place, so that my breath threatened to become short, as I tried not to lose my father's hand in the tumult. People brandished crutches and rags, deformed faces with eyes rolled back were raised to the heavens. The whole mass pushed and pressed towards the holy water, and my father pulled the fur hat he had bought especially for the journey more firmly down over my ears. It took another day and another night before it was our turn to attempt my cure. To the sound of the earnest prayers of the resident monks, I was dipped into the water deeper than my shoulders, until I thought my end had come. But just as I was on the point of commending my spirit to I don't know who, they pulled me out again, clapped me on the back and pinched my cheeks, until I opened my eyes and looked into my father's beaming face. It was the first and only time I made my father happy, for not a single hair remained on my head. The morning sun was probably reflected pleasantly from my scalp, as my father bashfully pressed a larger sum into the hands of the ceaselessly singing monks, and me to his pounding heart for a brief moment, before he thrust the hat decidedly onto my head again and murmured: Thank God!

My father was so happy on that day that, entirely contrary to his normal habits, he took me out to eat. We went to a nearby inn, and to my amazement I observed that my father was eating and drinking for all he was worth, smaller schnapps in larger quantities and little chicken drumsticks with freshly baked potatoes in abundance and schnapps again, and for me the lemonade flowed in streams, so that I almost ripped the hat from my head from sheer excitement and inner warmth.

As it had got late, my father decided to postpone the journey home to the next day. We spent the whole evening in the inn along with some other pilgrims. The walls of the small room were decked out as if for a party with the crutches and rags of the unexpectedly healed. Everyone who could move their arms and legs gathered around the big table in the middle of the room and began to leap and dance, which brought a frown to my father's forehead, but the landlord placated him with another schnapps: Just take a drink, sir, it's on the house, free as the Lord's grace!

It was already long past midnight. My father's eyes were already glazed, when suddenly the door opened and a troupe of colourfully masked figures entered the room. They wore the most diverse masks and costumes and played melodies on instruments completely strange to me, so that my heart grew heavy. My father's eyes began to shine, he even pulled me onto his lap so that I could

see the performance better. I felt his powerful leg quake with the rhythm. I even thought I could hear him humming softly along. Strange figures with long red noses thronged between the tables, drank from the guests' glasses and swooped on what was left on the plates.

But when one suddenly began to blow on a huge comb, dead silence fell in the room. A young woman in a shining robe and with a red wig on her head climbed onto the stage and began to sing. And when she started to sing, the red-noses began to sob. Their tears hung on the end of their noses for a long time, before they finally dripped sluggishly onto the tables and the floor. I felt my father's hands becoming damp with sweat. His lips began to quiver, and a whistling breath escaped loudly from his chest. I understood that he was thinking about dying. Swaying, he stood up from the table, clutched at the hem of the singer's dress, pulled her down into the room and began to dance with her.

In the night I lay breathless in my bed and listened raptly to my father. In the neighbouring bed - under the picture of the Madonna which the landlord had installed at the head with his own hands the previous evening, at the request of my father, full of what had happened to us - he importuned my mother at length and without tiring.

On the next morning, the sun shone brightly through the window, and my hair stood on end once more.