

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

By Thea Bradbury

The Pilgrims

My father comes from a family of undistinguished actors and loathes every kind of costuming, because as a child he had to mime little apes, Indians and parrots on grubby suburban stages, and to this day the mocking laughter of the audience echoes in his ears. Therefore, when my father caught my mother secretly trying on colourful wigs in the bathroom one rainy Sunday afternoon - one after the other and evidently with great delight - he couldn't help but punish her terribly. He dragged her from the bathroom as she screamed and pressed a scarlet wig against her ears, and thrashed her with his belt until she confessed and revealed where her costumes were hidden.

Perhaps my father could have forgiven my mother had he not discovered great quantities of little schnapps flasks amongst her costumes, which were stowed carefully away in a large trunk. But now she could find no mercy in his eyes. He dragged her before the family altar downstairs, where he forced her to kneel and do penance; whereupon my mother, who possesses not the slightest talent for prayer, burst into such uncontrollable laughter that he felt himself obliged to throw her out of the house once and for all. From then on, I was subject to the strict control of my great-aunt. She ironed my shirts, handkerchiefs and underwear.

As soon as my mother had left the house, such a quiescence set in that I began to suffer from attacks of asphyxia, which invariably began harmlessly with a faint scratching in my throat as I rattled out prayers during my father's enforced matins. From prayer to prayer, however, it grew to a threatening lump in my chest, so that I could only choke out the last four Lord's Prayers through stutters and wheezes, until my father reluctantly wiped my forehead with a large white cloth and permitted my great-aunt to accompany me back up to my room, where as a rule I fell unconscious and only woke, feverish, hours later.

As you can see, I was prepared for death early, merely thinking wistfully that I would not be able to see my mother again before I died. Therefore I began with all my strength to dream of her. I encountered her often, with a wide smile on her face and a scarlet wig on her head, because I could not remember her real hair colour. There are no pictures in our house.

So intensely and frequently did I succeed in dreaming of her that one morning I myself woke up entirely red-headed. Horrified, my great-aunt clasped her hands before her yellow face, wrenched me into the bathroom and washed my hair for hours under a stream of scalding water. The colour would not fade, and so she bound a lime green cloth around my head so as not to upset my father, who I was to fool into believing that I was wearing a cold compress to guard against my bouts of fever.

This went well, until one day during one of the long, tedious walks that my father undertook with me in order to improve my health, a fierce gust of wind ripped the cloth from my head.

At this my father, whose fury was beyond words, called a barber to the house to shave my head bald to the scalp every morning. But neither the hand of the barber nor the hand of my great-aunt, who desperately attempted to dye my hair every conceivable colour with peculiar essences and tinctures, nor the prayers of the pastor, who my father paid to say masses for me, nor indeed the heat of the subsequent summer months could achieve a satisfactory change in my hair colour. My hair stayed red; it wouldn't be dyed or bleached or cut. If I went to bed in the evening bald, I would get up again the next morning with a full head of hair, bringing my father close to losing his mind.

The following autumn, therefore, he decided to go on a pilgrimage with me to a holy well, from which he expected great effects. My great-aunt folded my underwear and her hands and accompanied us as far as the garden gate, from where she waved to us one last time.

It was November, and stormy weather had set in. We made only slow progress, especially as my father - who is firmly convinced that only those who approach holy sites with great reverence and on their own two feet can hope to achieve salvation - did not permit the passing vehicles to take us with them. So we walked for three days and three nights, until we arrived at the holy well.

The throng was immense; everyone fought for their place, so that my breath threatened to run out as I tried not to lose my father's hand in the tumult. People brandished crutches and rags; deformed faces with distorted eyes were turned to heaven. Everyone pushed and shoved towards the holy water, and my father drew the sheepskin hat which he had bought specifically for the journey more firmly over my ears.

It took another day and another night before it was our turn to attempt my salvation. Beneath the fervent prayers of the local monks, I was plunged into the water until it rose above my shoulders and I thought my end was nigh. But just as I was on the point of commending my soul to I don't know who, they hauled me out again, clapped me on the back and pinched me on the cheeks, until I opened my eyes and gazed into my father's beaming face. It was the first and only time that I made my father happy, because not one single hair was left on my head. The morning sun probably reflected graciously off my scalp, while my father abashedly pressed a large sum into the hands of the assiduously chanting monks and held me to his hammering heart for an inconspicuous moment, before he shoved the hat decisively back onto my head and murmured: Thank God!

My father was so happy that day that, quite contrary to habit, he took me out to eat. We went into a nearby inn, and to my great astonishment I noticed my father eating and drinking for all he was worth: little glasses of schnapps in great quantities and little chicken drumsticks and with them freshly-baked potatoes in profusion and schnapps again, and the lemonade for me flowed freely, so that I almost tore the hat from my head from uproarious excitement and inner warmth.

As it had grown late, my father decided to postpone our journey home till the next day. We spent the whole evening in the inn together with some other pilgrims. The walls of the little room were decorated as though for a party with the crutches and rags of the unexpectedly cured. All those who could move their arms and legs again congregated around the large

table in the centre of the room and began to dance and leap, which caused my father to furrow his brow; but the landlord pacified him with another schnapps: Just drink, sir, it's on the house, free like your patience, sir.

It was already long gone midnight. My father's eyes were already glazed when the door suddenly opened and a troop of colourful masked figures entered the room. They wore the most varied masks and costumes and played melodies on instruments that were quite foreign to me, so that my heart became heavy. My father's eyes began to shine; he even drew me onto his lap so that I could better observe these goings-on. I felt how his powerful thighs trembled in time with the rhythm. I even fancied that I heard him humming softly along. Outlandish faces with long red noses barged between the tables, drank from the guests' glasses and snatched whatever was left lying on the plates.

But when one of them suddenly began to blow on a huge comb, it became deadly silent in the room. A young woman in a shimmering robe and with a red wig on her head climbed onto the stage and began to sing. And when she began to sing, the red-nosed ones started to sob. Their tears hung for a long time on the tips of their noses, until they eventually fell sluggishly onto the tables and onto the floor. I felt how my father's hands were growing damp with sweat. His lips began to tremble, and a wheezing breath forced itself loudly from his chest. I understood that he thought he would die of it. Swaying, he raised himself from the table, grasped at the seam of the singer's dress, pulled her down into the room and began to dance with her.

That night I lay breathless in my bed, listening raptly to my father, who, in the neighbouring bed, under the image of the Madonna - mounted single-handedly over the headboard by the landlord at the request of my father, who was preoccupied with our misfortune - nagged my mother persistently and at great length.

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