

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

By

Translated by Caitlin Duschenes (2013)

The Pilgrims

When my father – my father, who comes from a family of mediocre actors; my father, who hates any form of dressing-up because in his childhood he had to play small monkeys, Indians and parrots on grubby provincial stages; my father, in whose ears the mocking laughter of the audience still rings today – so when, one wet Sunday afternoon, my father discovered my mother in the bathroom secretly trying on colourful wigs, one after the other and with great enjoyment, he could not help but make her pay. As she screamed and clutched a bright red wig over her ears, he dragged her out of the bathroom and whipped her with his belt until she confessed and revealed her costume hoard.

Had my father not found a large number of miniature schnapps bottles hidden between my mother's costumes, carefully stored in a suitcase, he might perhaps have been able to forgive her; as it was, he was merciless. He dragged her before the household altar downstairs, where he forced her to kneel down and repent, at which my mother, who had not the slightest talent for prayer, burst out into such peals of laughter that he felt obliged to throw her out of the house once and for all.

From then on, I was under the strict supervision and guard of my great aunt. She ironed my shirts, handkerchiefs and underwear.

As soon as my mother had left, such a silence descended on the house that I began to suffer choking fits. They always began harmlessly, with a slight tickle in my throat while I was rattling off prayers during the morning devotions decreed by my father, but from prayer to prayer they would develop into a dangerous lump in my chest, so that I could only stumble and wheeze my way through the last four 'Our Fathers', until my father reluctantly wiped my forehead with a large white handkerchief and allowed my great aunt to accompany me up to my room, where I usually fell into a state of unconsciousness from which I would only awake, feverish, hours later.

As you can see, I was ready to die young and, despondent at the mere thought that I might not see my mother again before my death, I began to dream of her with all my might. I met her often, with a wide smile on her face and a bright red wig on her head, for I could not remember the real colour of her hair. No pictures hang in our house.

And I ended up dreaming of her so often and so vividly that one morning I woke up with completely red hair myself. My great aunt, livid, buried her head in her hands, dragged me into the bathroom and washed my hair under a stream of boiling hot water for hours. The colour did not fade, and so to avoid upsetting my father she tied a pastel green cloth around my head and told me to tell him that I was wearing a cold compress for my feverish fits.

This worked until the day I was on one of the long and tiring walks that my father took with me to strengthen my constitution, and a sharp gust of wind tore the cloth from my head, at which my father, whose anger cannot be described in words, brought a barber into the house to shave my head right down to the scalp every morning. But neither he, nor my great aunt who, with exotic essences and tinctures, tried in vain to dye my hair every colour imaginable, nor the priest paid by

my father to pray and read masses for me, nor the heat of the subsequent summer months made any satisfactory difference to the colour of my hair. It remained stubbornly red; it would not be dyed, would not be bleached, would not be cut. If I went to bed bald, I would get up the next morning with a full head of hair, which was pushing my father almost to the point of insanity.

And so that autumn he decided to take me with him on a pilgrimage to a holy spring, which he hoped would solve the problem. My great aunt folded my underwear and her hands and accompanied us as far as the garden gate, where she waved to us for one last time.

It was November, and stormy weather had set in. We struggled to make any progress, particularly since my father was firmly convinced that only those who approached holy places in awe and under their own steam could hope for salvation and therefore did not allow any of the passing traffic to pick us up. So we walked for three days and three nights until we reached the holy spring.

The crowds were huge, each person fighting for a place, so that I almost had the breath squeezed out of me as I tried not to lose my father's hand in the turmoil. People swung crutches and rags; mangled faces with rolling eyes were turned to the heavens. Everyone was pushing and shoving towards the holy water and my father tugged the fur hat which he had bought me especially for the journey down over my ears.

It took another day and night before it was our turn to seek my salvation. Surrounded by the silent prayers of the monks who lived there, I was plunged into the water right up over my shoulders until I thought my end had come. But just as I was on the point of recommending my soul to I know not whom, they pulled me out again, hit me on the back and pinched my cheeks until I opened my eyes and looked into the beaming face of my father. It was the first and only time that I made my father happy, for there was not a single hair left on my head. The morning sun probably glinted cheerily off my bare head as my father sheepishly pressed a large sum of money into the hands of the monks – now singing incessantly – and held me to his thundering heart for one brief moment, until he put my hat firmly back onto my head again and murmured "Thank God!"

That day, my father was so happy that he broke the habit of a lifetime and took me out to dinner. We went to a nearby inn and to my great astonishment I saw that my father ate and drank whatever was going, a great number of small glasses of schnapps and little chicken drumsticks with an abundance of freshly-baked potatoes, and more glasses of schnapps, and the lemonade for me flowed freely, so that I all but tore the hat from my head out of sheer elation and inner peace.

Since it had got so late, my father decided to postpone our journey home until the next day. We spent the whole evening in the pub together with the other pilgrims. The walls of the little room were decorated as though for a party with the rags and crutches of the unexpectedly redeemed. All the people who could once again move their arms and legs gathered around the large table in the middle of the room and began to dance and skip, which made my father frown, but the landlord mollified him with yet another glass of schnapps: Just drink, Sir, it's on the house – free as your Lordship's grace!

It was long gone midnight by now. My father's eyes were already glassy when the door suddenly opened and a troop of colourful mummers entered the room. They wore all sorts of masks and costumes and played tunes on instruments that were totally unknown to me; their playing tugged at

my heartstrings. My father's eyes began to gleam, and he even drew me onto his lap so I could watch what was going on better. I felt his burly thighs move to the beat. I even thought I heard him humming along quietly. Strange figures with long red noses elbowed their way between the tables, drinking from the guests' glasses and snapping up any leftovers on their plates.

But when one of them suddenly began to play on a huge comb, a deathly hush fell over the room. A young woman in a glittering robe and a red wig got up onto the stage and began to sing. And when she started to sing, all the red-nosed figures began to sob. Their tears hung on the tips of their noses for a long time before they finally dropped clumsily onto the tables and the floor. I felt my father's hands go clammy with sweat. His lips began to tremble and one piercing breath forced its way out of his chest. I realised he thought he was dying. Shakily, he got up from the table, grabbed at the singer's hem, pulled her down into the room and began to dance with her.

That night I lay without breathing and listened to my father in the next bed under the picture of the Madonna – the landlord had single-handedly put it up over the headboard that evening after my father, so full of what had happened to us, requested it – as he long and persistently worked things through with my mother.

The next morning the sunshine streamed through the window, and my hair stood on end once more.