

Haffed

I

The thing about him was he always wore a little white bib, tightly laced around his neck. He was 12 years old today, and he still wore it. In Blooe, people didn't wear bibs. They wore long coats and brown boots. Or perhaps a feather here and there. So one morning, feeling particularly inspired, his science teacher went up to him, back straightened out and his shirt impeccably pressed.

“Young man, I'm not too sure how to put this to you. As you know, we have a dressing code here at Blooe. This thing around your neck, it doesn't fit into it”.

The boy stared at him, perplexed.

-Remove it, is what I'm saying.

-Um... Well, no?

-No?

-No. I don't think I'll do that. I like it, it smells like home.

-Right.

The principal looked at the skinny kid entering his office.

60 pounds. No.... probably 55. But no more than 60, that's for sure.

The man eyed him, silent.

There definitely *was* something not quite right in the way his eyes met his cheeks when he smiled, or the way his head came to an abrupt plateau towards the top. When you're a principal, you hear so many stories about this kid or that one, that you aca (and sometimes schoolteachers too), it came from the compression of “half-head”. *God...*

“You can come in” he said, adjusting his glasses. It was hot, and the sweat made the pair slide down his nose.

Haffed shyly came forward and sat down on the chair. He was barely tall enough to look over the desk at the principal. His mouth quivered, and his glassy eyes shone against the midday sun.

What the hell could he say to him? *Hey kid, I don't like your face! And neither does Mr. Dubois! or if you don't take that fucking thing off, I'll tear it myself you chopstick!*

No. Hell, you just had to look at him, and you felt uncomfortable.

He pushed aside the stacks of other reports on his desk..

He sent the kid home, with a gentle pat on the shoulder and a warm smile.

Haffed was walking home through the Corn Sea, with its fields of corn where the cobs grew bright red, and where the horizon slipped from view. Behind him loomed the school, black bricks and spiky angles. Haffed walked hurriedly until he'd put a fair distance between his half a head and the charcoal building. He snatched a tall weed and tore it in half to fidget with. Fireflies sprinkled the air at night here. He had caught one the other day, and had broken its wing in the process. He felt really bad about it, and he hadn't tried anything of the sort ever since.

He strolled along, not knowing what to do with himself. He was going to have to go back. Back to school, if not tomorrow, then the day after.

He had to linger outside for a bit, or else his father would know there hadn't been much learning today. He thought about the long halls and the many ranks of unknown faces. The faraway voices echoing against white walls. The noise. And his heart cowered deep within him, wishing it were somewhere else.

II

When its dusk outside, and you sit against a tree, you expect two things from that tree:

You want it to support you and you hope no insect's gonna bite you in the ass. But in Haffed's fields, there were no trees; only lightpoles. He lay down against one, and stared at his feet. He was fiddling with a fingernail, carving deep crevasses between the skin and the nail.

That's when a brush of hair bristled against his elbow. Haffed jumped, afraid it would be some hairy spider.

But there wasn't any.

What he saw was a triangle hole at the foot of the trunk, just about the size of his own head. Electricity fizzled in the overhead wires, and the whole pole seemed to hum with vibration. Now that he looked at them, all the poles shook to the same mute tune. The triangle door was clean cut; Haffed could tell it had been trimmed with care.

“That you certainly do! (a sip of drink, and a belch) You know, all of this talk about hair and strings takes me ba-

“What are you?” asked Haffed.

Every one of those little things stood still. They all gazed at him, silent. Even Haffed was a little startled. He’d never been this blunt. Then a young little hairy thing ventured to answer. He was itching all over.

“*Who* are we is perhaps what you’re asking, little man.

Basil grinned.

“Well, that’s more than a lot of people present here tonight can say.” He said. “Your ignorance is excused then. I suppose our story went with the missing half.”

“Electricians. But then the fireflies, you do that too?” Haffed asked.

“Oh...the fireflies” Basil said, giggling. “That is but the icing on the cake.”

“It’s a side hustle”, a stockier DeBrooms added.

“It’s a small caprice we indulge in. Its pretty isn’t it? And pretty is enough for us.” said Basil.

“...has always been enough...” a half-attentive voice threw in.

Haffed laughed, amused to see a fantasy come to life.

They all stared in delight at nothing, pleased with themselves.

“WELL NOW! WHY AM I STILL HEARING YOU BRUSHING AROUND?”

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Haffed came back with clasped hands. Pure orange light shone through his skin. He opened them and the firefly hovered above the narrow crowd, its light blinking on and off.

“ I think your fireflies are beaut-

“Don’t! Do not try to deter me with flattery.” Diva said sharply.

Haffed looked at her, unable to understand what drove her or what she really wanted.

“But they *are* indeed magnificent.” she continued. She turned to Basil and whispered: “What’s the weirdo’s name?”

“Diva please he’s right there”

“Its Haffed Miss.” Haffed said.

“I see that you have an eye for beauty Haff. And beauty you shall see! Tonight!” Diva said, as she gestured theatrically. “I have been cursed you see. I cannot walk over there; you shall take me” she continued. It wasn’t really an offer; more like a command.

They cranked her up on Haffed’s head. She lay on her right side, like a passed-out diva. And a heavy one at that. Haffed leaned dangerously to the right, and tried to steady himself.

And presently Haffed turned to see the fields submerged in a mist that thickened by the minute. The lights of the city faded away. Faintly, Haffed began to see the silhouette of carnival rollercoasters, their bright yellow lights spreading in the sky.

He stood silently, admiring something that outdid the reach of his own imagination.

Diva eyed him, and snarled, “You don’t have the faintest clue where were going, do you?”

Haffed looked at her, and she read *yes* in his eyes.

“Why, since none but you know of our existence, we thought we’d celebrate ourselves, mind you. Once a year it comes! Out with you! And off to the Eve of The Bristles!”

Diva leaned forward in emphasis, setting Haffed off course.

Haffed had the impulse to go back to bed, to the shelter of his own dark room. But when he looked back, his house was out of sight. Or rather, it melted with the tall weeds, and glided on the mist. It all felt very dreamy. When he found his equilibrium, he joined the march, and headed to the Eve Of The Bristles.

III

Now, from afar, the rides had already seemed like mountains, but up close, they were something else entirely.

The rollercoasters raged back and forth, their iron faces glistening in the yellow light. The rails themselves were perched on the scalps of gigantic heads. While carts rolled overhead, the heads

ran on sets of wheels, and navigated in chaos. So that nothing guaranteed you the path ahead would be there the next minute. And over his shoulder, Haffed saw a pair of brooms being nearly shredded under agitated rides, while others cowered under food trucks or simply ran away, laughing.

Haffed had thought that the festivities would be a fair of sorts, with clowns and all. But this was much more like an arena. He kept on looking around for gladiators in their metal armors. And every broom present seemed to be thrilled by the agitation.

“Each ride has a name of its own, look!” Diva shouted over the noise.

Cansell Witless, the world’s stupidest had a bronze and baggy face, with rusted chins. He dragged himself forward, slow as a slug. He was the most incoherent of them all. *Watch Out! Witless On Your Way!* had been graffitied on his forehead in bright red.

Then there was *Waxim Slomelt*, a tower of melting copper. Its wick burned perpetually, so that every year Waxim was a bit more shapeless. And it knew it. It ran in all directions, eager to feel alive for the time that it had left. Its ride was particularly steep once you got to the top, but the Brooms loved it.

Haffed had never seen Waxim before, but even to him it seemed agitated. More than the other rides.

It came straight at him, reckless in its course. It crashed against *Cansell Witless* and both rides fell over. Haffed threw himself out of the way, landing in the canvas of a tent. A thrust of dust *whooshed* over him. He leaned on his elbows and closed his mouth and eyes.

When he re-opened them, he saw a bigger one. A much bigger ride. Diva pulled herself up back on his head. Her face was convulsed in laughter.

The ride wheeled slowly towards him, still a silhouette through the yellow cloud. Haffed could hear its engine squeak and grind against itself.

There’s hell trapped in that rollercoaster, Haffed thought.

And then he saw it.

The *Aquiline Ride* rolled gracefully around the court, while the small Brooms laughed and cheered it on. Haffed was expecting a monstrosity of a thing. But the *Aquiline* was lean, of pure cold iron. It was yet untouched by the brutality of the other rides, b (e)-1 (dw 22.-1.24Γdy0Γc 0Γw ()Tj-0(a)4r)-2

All of this was fun for them, and Haffed had to admit, it was fun for him too. There was something absolutely selfless and primal in the surrounding chaos. He felt like a toddler playing in a sandbox.

Haffed stood at the entrance, letting the mass of the ride wash over him. He was wild-eyed.

“I can’t ride this.” he said, “I have half a head and wear a white bib.”

A flicker of hair came poking him in the eye.

“Aouh!”

“And a lucky thing at that!” Diva said, her strings more ruffled than usual.

“Huh?”

“I said, and a lucky thing at that! Who could’ve carried me all the way over here, if I didn’t have your half-a-head to sit on?”

“Oh” he said, “I never saw it that way.”

He let ranks of brooms seat themselves before going up and taking the last cart.

And at that *The Aquiline* spun forward, fuming and wild.

The cart flew along the serpentine rail, going over the border of the head at times. Its wheels screeched.

Haffed jumped at every turn and bump, and felt dizzy. A good dizzy. A handful of Brooms fell over along the way. Diva herself had a good run, but she went flying and landed on her straw bosom, uninjured.

From the corner of his eye, Haffed saw *Cansell Witless* trying to get back on its feet. And every time it failed to do so, small Brooms sprinted over to vandalize the ride with bright colors. At this the *Aquiline* laughed madly, throwing its head back.

Haffed’s cart shook and jammed on the very tip of the ride’s aquiline nose. The noise from under was hushed by the clouds. And for a moment he saw far and wide over the city, over the fields and over all the small things that had seemed so big before. He saw the black school, ridicule and powerless now.

And Haffed felt immense.

The Aquiline took a sharp turn left and Haffed’s cart jerked back down. He nearly fell. Haffed closed his eyes and held on as tightly as he could to the safety bar. The steel occasionally knocked against the bones of his hands, but he didn’t let go. He couldn’t.

When the screeches and the squeaks and the laughter came to a stop, Haffed dared to open his eyes. He peered over at the carts ahead. Nobody there. The whole wagon was empty!

He was the only one left.

He slowly climbed off the cart, staring straight ahead. A crowd of brooms gathered around him in a large circle.

The Aquiline swooshed around to face Haffed. It knelt reverently, nose to the earth. A deep voice growled from within its iron shell, “You have ridden through the night, and have seen far and wide. Where others fell, you held your ground.”

The Aquiline peered into Haffed’s eyes.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Haffed and I can ride the biggest of rides.”

“I can do many things, young Haffed. What do you desire?”

“I want to change” he said.

“Change is in you” the Aquiline answered.

Haffed frowned a moment.

“I’m afraid.”

“Then I shall release you from fear.”

And with that, the Aquiline turned around and rolled patiently through the mist, fading away.

Haffed stood still. After a beat, the brooms exploded in a choir of cheer.

The child with half a head left the carnival grounds with Basil by his side. The young broom wouldn’t stop babbling about the Aquiline, and Haffed felt that a tinge of jealousy was ruffling a few strings down there.

The brooms escorted him back home. As he climbed into bed, Haffed saw once more the square of light on the ceiling, with hairy little figures strolling away, heading towards their own light pole homes, in the nest of night.

And then the light blinked off.

IV

The golden light shone on the rim of his hand, painting each grain of dust in the still air of his bedroom. This morning, all stood still.

Haffed lingered sideways a moment, halfway off the bed, halfway in. Then he stood up and wiped the crust off his eyes.

He reached mechanically for the white bib resting on his wooden chair, and held back. He wouldn't put it on. Not this morning.

He ate breakfast as he had always ate it. He took his lunchbag and stepped out the door. He hesitated. He saw the school building from his front porch. Dark, with spiky angles.

Maybe I could just stay right here. Sit on that chair and read books, or wander in the cemetery.

He stared into the sun. He squinted, blinded.

No.

He stepped one level down, his feet shacking. He took another step, and another step and another. Until he had reached the bottom.

Head high, Haffed dragged himself forward through the fields, a small silhouette against the sun. He halted next to the pole, waiting for DeBrooms to come pouring out in cheer and laughter.

And they did.

On the