

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 stop listening after a month or two. Or else you lose track of what's what. But he'd heard a thing or two about this one. That was Haffed right there. And, faithful to the tactless logic of children (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.

It was dark inside. Black.

Haffed took a step back. He slowly turned away and hastened back home. There was something about that dark spot and the humming of the electricity that tinkled at the bottom of his bum. And when you tinkle there, it's because there's something not quite right.

“Home” was an old house. It was a poor sculpture made from wood, plaster and flaking white paint. It seemed to be the organic extension of the battered soil around it. While Haffed's school loomed over you, his house leaned away, as if trying to avoid eye contact.

Haffed walked through the whining front door and sat down in the kitchen. He glanced over the table at his father. The man was grinning to himself, as he watched with fanatical care the potatoes in the oven. His father wore a big green sweater, with a polar bear shoveling snow on it. It was a winter shirt, but he wore it in the summer too. Haffed found the usual sweat circles under his arms. He wanted to smile.

Instead he came to help him with the cooking, and burned himself with the aluminum foil wraps.

After supper they each read in silence, and Haffed went to bed. Haffed closed his eyes and twisted himself in some unknown position. He reached under his bed for a blue package. He ate raw pasta that cracked between his teeth. It calmed him.

But tonight it didn't.

He let his mind wander around the house. Thinking about the grease stains on the oven, about the road outside, about the fields and...

about the triangle door. Haffed shrugged, but there it was.

He got up clumsily, and gazed at the square of light projected on the ceiling by the lightpoles outside. He could make out small things or figures against the light.

The tickling crept back, only this time it didn't scream *Get the hell outta here!*

It whispered, *Go look...*

He shredded a final strand of spaghetti in a loud CRACK! He tiptoed his way down the stairs and to the front door, and boomed out the house. His pyjamas billowed under the cool wind. The sky was blue, deep blue. And in the night, the world seemed immense. The fireflies shone brightly along his path, and Haffed wondered if somebody owned an electrical switch of sorts that turned them on and off. The night air enlivened him, and he ran down the road. As he came near the pole, his pace slowed. An orange light poured out from within.

Haffed knelt and peered, as best as he could, through the opening, to see a quaint party drinking champagne. Their voices were hairy...scratchy maybe. As if their cords had been torn out, dragged on hard gravel, then put back in.

They had heads of their own. And a body. But they weren't properly people. That Haffed knew for sure. At least not in the way he knew them at school.

“Yes, yes I know. I brushed them this morning. I like them stiff.” a high-pitched voice was saying.

“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. Well, we are, quite simply, the Brooms people. Or the people of the Brooms. From the DeBrooms family, of course.”

Haffed looked at them, unimpressed. Now that he saw them a bit closer, they did have something of the broom in them. Clouds of grainy dust lay scattered about their stiff hairs. It was in the way their skin felt fibrous by just looking at it.

The little young thing searched for a glint of recognition in Haffed’s eyes.

There wasn’t any.

“I’m Basil” he said, turning to face the rest of the Brooms. “And I believe we are more than due for a little history session then.”

A murmur of approval spread across the party. Haffed figured they must’ve liked history a lot, or maybe just their own.

Basil took a monastic pose, holding his glass high above his fellow brooms, and began, “The DeBrooms family came in these fields when the city itself was but a feeble village, who could have been swept away by the weakest of winds. And as citizens in our own right, we were given the honorable duty of lighting the city’s lightpoles at night. And a great task at that!”

The crowd mumbled with pride. Some Brooms stood up, back straightened up, eyes closed, in reverence to something mighty. Haffed found this quite ridiculous.

How important can this really be? They’re brooms!

Basil was now strolling about as he spoke. The floor was his, he knew it and he liked it.

“If you weren’t so big yourself, I could give you a tour of our portrait gallery. DeBrooms of old lit their poles with candles, and... oh, did they burn themselves. These were the pioneers.(a few tears here).” He continued.

He broke off from the didactic tone and took a sip from his glass.

“And then there’s us. With modernity and all, we’re mostly electricians now.”

Basil took a step forward to the entrance.

“And you. What are you?” he said.

“Oh. Well not much, I think. I’m Haffed, and I have half a head.” Haffed said.

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?” a deep voice boomed from above.

Silence. The party hushed.

And out from an elevator, there came a fat DeBrooms. Haffed figured it must’ve been a she, but he really wasn’t sure.

The thing crawled ahead with the body of a toad and the legs of a chicken, panting from the effort. It could barely walk.

“It comes once a year and you’re still here?” it said, with a hissing emphasis on the *still*.

It came within a breadth’s distance of Basil’s face, and lingered there.

It whispered, with hushed anger,

“Do you know what I would give to be able to go out there and celebrate with the rest of you?”

Basil faced her, humble. Regardless of the mad dog that growled in his ear, he remained calm.

This isn’t the first time he’s been there, Haffed thought.

Basil spoke softly, “We have a guest, Diva.”

Diva DeBrooms turned to look at Haffed’s face, halfway squeezed through the triangle door.

She backed away for an instant, then controlled herself, chin high.

“Futile. Just futile. For centuries the best of us have kept the DeBrooms line safe. And it takes one stupid-drunk-incapable broom to bring a human into the soup.”

“It’s not his fault! I’m the one who barged into your soup.” Haffed said, and then he was gone.

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, but for a childish scratch on his right flank. It had a spear-like nose that spiralled forward, and round eyes.

And presently, the Aquiline stopped a few feet from Haffed, waiting for the previous batch of Brooms to disembark, dizzy for the most part, and the next one to get on board.

“The DeBrooms say that if you can ride the Aquiline, why, you can ride the world!” Diva said, straight into his ear.

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 way, little brooms joined his march, some perched upon his plateaued head, some clutching his ankles. They urged him on. And Haffed's pace quickened, and became more confident as he came closer to the school. It loomed towards him as always, ink black and spiky.

Wind flowed through the fields of corn, all the way to the school, filling its corridors and its classrooms. Erasing chalky lines on the many blackboards, making students mock their teachers.

But Haffed sensed that the winds blew not for them,

But for him.