

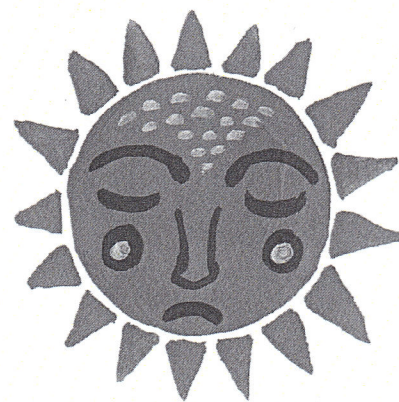
transmission

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Bird of Prey

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This year even people from the city had come. Three shaved heads in a cabriolet, two women with flowery dresses and a young couple, who looked so alike with their hair dyed liquid black and their eyes painted dark, that Fiona couldn't decide who was boy, who girl. They all stretched or yawned and slapped their thighs as if they'd been travelling to the end of the world.

Fiona's mother was already past the two cardboard watchtowers where the doctor and his son were sitting in their costumes: striped jerkins and helmets from the toy store. They had stapled the city arms to their chest – nobody there to sew it on. The doctor's wife had died three years ago. You'd think the doctor himself would know how to sew, with the number of accidents they had in Welsum.

Last month Fiona's father had cut off the tip of his index finger in the mower and, before that, Fiona's best friend Jessica had been squashed by her own horse when she tried a jump. The doctor couldn't help either of them. Fiona's father had to drive to the hospital himself, his finger wrapped in a tea towel. But blood seeped through and Fiona had to tuck the tea towel hand into a freezer bag. Then she was allowed to sit in the front seat, because she had to shift the gears for him.

What kind of doctor couldn't stand the sight of blood?

The fucking back of beyond, Fiona thought, when she looked at

the doctor's hideous costume. Her brother said that, about the town. He also said that the whole Middle Age Festival was totally hideous. Fiona wished she had stayed home, with him.

"Fee, hurry up. The chocolate is melting," her mother swung the basket with the pig's ears. Pig's ears were her speciality - heart shaped puff pastry, the tips dipped into chocolate.

"I'll wait here," Fiona said. She felt old, and suddenly tired. She had turned twelve just a few days after the mower cut her father's finger, but she remembered nothing of the birthday, except that Jessica hadn't been there. Of course not.

"Wait for what?"

"My friends," Fiona said. Her mother opened her mouth, but before she could say anything, the doctor spoke. "It's alright. I'll keep an eye on her." Then, changing his voice, he said, "I, my dear lady, am a man of many professions – not only am I a humble guard, but also a doctor."

A doctor who fainted when he saw Jessica's crushed body. A doctor who cried like a baby when the knacker came to get the horse. Fiona rolled her eyes.

"Okay, here's your ticket." Fiona watched her mother walking uphill to the castle.

"Three piles of rubble and a dungeon," Fiona's brother had said. "You can't even call that ruins."

"The whole festival is only an excuse to get pissed before dawn.

It's pathetic," he had said. If he wanted to get drunk, he would just do it. He wouldn't have to climb a hill, dressed like a fag. For that, Fiona's mother had slapped him, but only lightly, with the back of her hand.

"Fucking highlight of the year. So pathetic," her brother whispered to Fiona, holding his cheek in his hand. Fiona agreed. But when she smelled the pig's ears her mother was baking, she went and helped her mother dip the hearts into chocolate. As she did every year, she stole one. Usually, she shared it with Jessica in their den in the hedge. Each got half a heart. Fiona always ate the chocolate tip first and then she had only the dry pastry left, while Jessica saved the best for last. This year, Fiona ate her whole heart like Jessica, but the chocolate melted on her fingers and she wondered how Jessica had managed to stay so clean. She also wondered why the chocolate still tasted so good, even now Jessica was dead.

"Hurry up Fee, it's time to get dressed!"

Fiona crawled out of the hedge. The princess costume hung on her wardrobe. Fiona touched the grass stain. Her mother had slapped her for that last year. The fabric felt cracked and rough, like her mother's hand. Fiona sat the small crown on her head. When she still had her hair long, the crown had looked cute. She looked at her cropped hair.

"Hideous," she said.

Her mother opened the door and



when she was already in Fiona's room, she knocked and smiled at Fiona. She was already in her green peasant dress and her hair was plaited and wrapped around her head.

"Oh, you look so cute, Fee. I think it looks even better with your short hair. Grown up. Yes, definitely more grown up."

"It's hideous."

Jessica had said cropping the hair was totally unnecessary. Medieval methods, Jessica had said. When *she* had the lice, *her* mother had only used a comb and that shampoo that smelled like petrol.

"It does not look hideous. And it will look even better, when you're in your costume."

The city people weren't in disguise. The three shaved heads wore shorts and T-shirts. Fiona stared at their naked legs when they walked past her. In Welsum, only boys wore shorts.

"All hail!" the doctor said to them in a disguised voice.

They smiled politely and asked for three tickets. The doctor's son leaned out of his tower and pointed towards the only path.

"It's that way," he said. "You can't miss it."

Fiona felt a hot flash running down her spine. She pulled the crown from her head and folded it into a flat golden square. The couple came next. They didn't talk, took the tickets without looking up and held hands all the time. Fiona named them Blackheads.

The flowery dresses came closer, whispering to each other.

"What a lovely little princess you are, dear," said the one with the glasses. They had lipsticked lips like film stars, but their faces were wrinkled like Fiona's mother's. When they were gone, Fiona walked over to the cabriolet.

She took off the petticoat, the pink jumper and her puff sleeved blouse. Then she put on the jumper again. Her reflection in the dark metal of the car door looked older, and broader than she was. She turned around. It was okay. No, not only okay, it was pretty good. A bit like the mini-dress she had seen in the catalogue at the hairdressers. She hid the clothes under the car.

On top of the hill it was hot. People hid in the shadows under the stalls, their faces red and their bodies droopy. They circled like ponies at a fair. Some kids squatted in the inner ward. Fiona recognized Oliver, the swine. Everybody called him that, even Fiona's mother, maybe because of his stiff-bristled hair. Last week, he had thrown a spider in Fiona's face.

Suddenly smoke curled up and the kids screamed and scurried away. "Like woodlice, when you lifted the heavy stone in the garden," Fiona thought. One of the Blackheads ran towards the fire and tried to stomp it out. The other Blackhead came, took off his shirt - 'so that is the boy' - threw it onto the flames and together they jumped and stomped, till the fire

was killed. The girl scooped up the ashes into one tatter and carried that bundle to one of the bin liners that hung everywhere in the trees.

It was just like every year: there was the rhinestone jewellery, hidden behind stuffed peasant dresses. Next to it sat the witches' tent with the wooden toys. She was, in fact, the home economics teacher, but she had a black spot on her forehead and always red-veined eyes and her left shoulder hung four inches lower than the right. Behind her tent was the dungeon. It was a tower, set into the ground on the side of a small hill. On the plunging side the stone wall stuck out of the earth, but when you went uphill, it was just a round hole in the ground, covered with a round iron grid. The stall leaning against the dungeon wall was always the busiest. Not because of the contorted, thick earthenware plates they sold, or the green glazed goblets, or the clay birds that whistled when you filled them with water and blew in a little hole in their tail feather, but because all that was made in the sheltered workshop. A girl with violet skin and a drooling boy in a wheelchair worked the stall. Fiona used to collect the birds. She had filled them all with different amounts of water and played concerts on them. Last year she had tried milk, and lemonade. When she had played the milk bird in the hedge, a real bird had answered. Then Fiona had left the milk in too long and when Jessica put the →

tail feather in her mouth, she got so sick, that she threw up on Fiona's carpet. They had smashed all the birds later, with stones.

Through the smoke in the beer tent it was hard to make out faces. That red blotch over there laughed like her father, it made the whole bench shiver. Fiona squeezed through the rows of hunched backs and she pulled the seam of her jumper down with both hands. She tapped her father on the shoulder. When he turned, he had his fish face on - his eyes swam away and his mouth opened and closed, while he was trying to say something. Instead of token money, he took real money out of his back pocket. Fiona slipped away before he could hug her. She hurried to get out of the stench.

"Smells like relict," Jessica and she had always said and held their noses. Relict was the smell of beer and smoke and charity shops.

From behind the dungeon came clay bird whistle and laughter. The three shaved heads appeared and between them were the flowery dresses. Fiona sat on the rim of the dungeon and held down the seam of her jumper. She stared at their legs, the white skin of the men between the dark curled hair, the tanned, thick calves of the women. "Ugly," she thought.

A hand appeared and in it a dark brown bird with a lipstick on the tail feather.

"Here, this is for you," the one with the glasses said.

"Don't be shy. It's a present," she took Fiona's hand and pressed the bird into it. It was warm and wet.

"There you go."

When they moved along, Fiona heard the woman say:

"I was just the same as a kid, can you believe it? Too shy to make friends. Poor girl." The others laughed.

Fiona sat on the rim and tipped

it over. She heard the clay body shatter, the bird must have broken in thousand pieces. Fiona liked the sound and she walked over to the earthenware stall. She picked a blue and a red bird. But when she searched the front pocket of her jumper, the money from her father was gone. The violet girl smirked.

"Poor you. Not enough money?"

She put the birds back in their places, carefully, as if they were real birds, and delicate.

"Fuck you," Fiona said.

The Blackheads came, the boy still naked to the waist, and they looked at the display without saying a word. When the violet girl wrapped a goblet for them and the drooling boy counted the change into their hands, Fiona took a blue bird.

It shattered even more nicely this time. Fiona thought she could see some blue shards glittering in the dark. She remembered how the smashed birds had looked on the ground of the cave in the hedge.

Every time the violet girl was serving a customer, Fiona came down and picked another bird and climbed up again and dropped it into the dungeon. Someone clapped his hands behind her. It was Oliver. He came so close, that Fiona could make out the freckles on his skin.

"Can I have one?" he asked.

Fiona gave him a bird. He threw it into the dungeon.

"Boring," he said. He pulled a knife out of his pocket, with a white handle.

"I stole it from the witch," he said. Then he began to scratch away the mortar that held the iron grid atop the dungeon.

By the time the music in the beer tent started, Fiona and Oliver had nearly loosened the iron grid, Oliver scratching with his knife, Fiona picking the mortar with her fingers. When the witch came out of her tent for a smoke, the violet

girl said something to her and they both looked at Oliver and Fiona and frowned. With a voice Fiona knew from school, the witch called out to them: "If you bother Lisa, you bother me and you know what that means, don't you?" She even lifted her crooked finger. "I know you, Oliver Stone. I know you!"

The sun set and with the cooler air came girls in short skirts and boys with long hair. Fiona's brother came. Oliver had stuck his knife in the grass and both were pulling at the grid.

"Are you having fun?" he shouted and disappeared in the beer tent.

The iron grid screeched like a hurt cat, when it first moved. Oliver and Fiona keeled over. Fiona examined her hands. Deep red welts crossed her palms. She wiped off the orange rust flakes and got up. Without the grid the dungeon seemed darker than before.

Someone came creeping up. Oliver and Fiona were sitting on the rim, their legs dangling above the abyss. Below them the witch was packing her toys and Lisa was talking to her in a low voice, while the boy counted the money. They heard the coins jingle. The shadow crept closer and with it came a whiff of relict.

"Isn't that your father?" Oliver said. They were sitting on the rim, their legs dangling over the dark.

The shadow rolled over and began to snore. Fiona wished she could just slip into the dungeon and disappear.

"That's your father, isn't it?"

A scream, as shrill as the scream of the iron grid, startled them.

"Thieves!"

The violet girl pointed at Oliver and Fiona.

"Calm down dear, calm down. What is it? What did they..."

"Thieves!" the girl screamed till her mouth could not form the words anymore.

“Hees! Hees!” Oliver mimicked.
 Fiona stood up.
 “Let’s split!”
 But Oliver just repeated, “Hees! Hees!” and didn’t move. The witch came towards them.
 “I warned you!” She stumbled over something.
 “What ...?”

She held up Oliver’s knife and came closer, her left arm dangling from her low shoulder as if it were already dead. Oliver began to shiver so heavily, that his teeth shattered.

Fiona tried to save Oliver, but you can’t be faster than a witch. There was a smacking sound, and then Fiona saw Oliver swaying. The witch struck out again, but this time Fiona was there and she pushed the witch into the dungeon.

Lisa howled.

“Murderer! Murderer!”

The howl woke the shadow.

His eyes were red-veined, like the witch’s, but the fish face was gone. First he grabbed the howling Lisa, slapped her twice and told her to pack her stuff and her drooling friend and go home. Then he pulled Oliver from the rim, spanked him and told him to wait, till the police came.

Fiona was staring into the dungeon, trying to make out the broken body of the witch.

Next year, there weren’t any people from the city. But the doctor and his son still had the city arms stapled to their chest and Fiona’s mother sold pig’s ears and Fiona’s brother said he’d rather die in a dungeon than drink with the peasants. The biology teacher sat in the witch’s tent and Fiona wasn’t wearing a costume. That was all that had changed. And Oliver was nowhere to be seen.

