

Why Tipper is not bald!

Berrie Heesen

Trrrrrrrrrrinnng. The doorbell rings. Uncle wanders to the door, he knows who has rung and he is not in any special hurry. Tipper is standing in the doorway. Tipper's father had phoned to ask if Tipper could come round. Tipper was brought by his father but Tipper will not even allow father to come in with him. Even though father has known Uncle much longer and probably much better than Tipper does. Tipper is going visiting and Dad should not be there too. Tipper's father drives away as soon as the door opens.

«Ah there's Tipper, how nice to see you again,» says Uncle.

Tipper laughs. Uncle has some soft down on his head again and is not completely bald any more. The last time Tipper saw Uncle he was completely bald.

Uncle mutters: «What a pity I cannot let you in.»

Tipper stares in surprise. Has Uncle got something that can make other people sick, just like a cold or AIDS?

«Only people who are bald may enter.» Uncle Berrie's tone is not to be taken lightly. It sounds awfully threatening.

Tipper gets a shock, is he really not allowed inside? Would Uncle now only allow people inside who are bald, who are prepared to join in with Uncle and shave off all their hair before going in? Tipper certainly does not intend to shave his hair off, because Aiwa strokes his head sometimes and says that he has such nice curls. Tipper wants to go in. Whatever should he do now? The drawers!

Uncle, I am not a grown-up yet. Children are not bald, at my school nobody is bald. I cannot just go and shave off all my hair.»

Uncle Berrie looks at Tipper, strokes him on the head.

«All right my boy, if you do not want to come in then you do not have to. It was your idea to come here, I did not ask you to. Your father has a mobile phone nowadays, I will call him to ask him to come back.»

Uncle is very serious, Tipper does not understand it at all. Why is Uncle being so difficult all of a sudden? Yes, it is true that Uncle is sick, the doctors have been messing around in his brain, but surely

Uncle can just talk normally? Were bald people nicer to talk to? Ladies were sure never to come inside again, thinks Tipper. A tear escapes from his left eye, as Tipper had looked forward quite a lot to his visit to Uncle. The way they talk together is so nicely different to how it is with other people. Has Uncle forgotten all that and does he now not want to see anyone any more? Is Uncle already dying a little? Tipper does not get it at all. He would have been better off going along with his two friends, they were going to the beach to swim. He had cancelled, as he had arranged to come and see Uncle and now he was not even allowed in. How stupid.

Uncle bellows: «JOKE.»

They stand there laughing hard, how could Tipper have not realised? He knows so well that Uncle likes making jokes. «It would suit you well, though, Tipper, a bald nut,» says Uncle. «Girls often like to stroke it, I know all about that now, so maybe it is a good idea. Come on in my boy.»

They go to the garden, it is good weather, the sun has been shining for days on end and it is very warm. They go into the garden where there is a nice big jug of lemonade on the table.

«Not back at school yet, Tipper? Awful isn't it, that it takes so long until you can go to school again. Do you know that the school summer holidays in the Netherlands are shorter than in other countries around us? It must be really horrible there. An awesome world.»

That is a play on words, as Uncle knows very well how the youth have turned «awesome» around and see it instead as an indication of something that is good. The more awesome the music, the better. The more awesome the new film about World War II, the better. Tipper knows very well that this is so, Uncle's daughter is always saying that everything is awesome.

«Is Bintje here?» asks Tipper. That is Uncle's son who is almost the same age as Tipper. They both like playing games, preferably good and difficult games that Uncle has a lot of.

Games of concentration, usually about wars or sometimes about trade.

«Not here Tipper! They are in their other home. And I thought that you wanted to see me. If you have come for him then you have come to the wrong place, and also do not need to have your hair shaven off, as I have phoned the hairdresser.»

Once again Uncle sounds rather threatening. «I do hope that the hairdresser himself is bald, Uncle, otherwise he is sure to make a real mess on the top of my head.» Tipper is not going to be fooled by that one again.

«I wanted to ask you something, Uncle. What did Bintje say when you told him?»

Uncle looks up. Drink up your lemonade first, he says. That's quite a story, do you really want to hear it? Tipper nods, he has been wondering about it for three days. What would he do if his father were to tell him something like that? He did not dare to phone Bintje, so his father had said, ask Uncle first. That is why he had come this afternoon. Uncle agreed.

Uncle likes that, people - and that includes children - who are good and clear about what they want to know. Whether they will get an answer is of course something else. That depends on the question being posed.

Uncle explains. «I will tell you about it. This is how it went. I came back from hospital, the children were also there to collect me, they had even brought a friend of theirs who had a cap. I did not know anything yet. It was a tumour, that was all. Good tumour, bad tumour, we will deal with that later. There is time enough to worry about that. Then they went on holiday - as you know, they live in two homes. That was a holiday on a beautiful island in the Mediterranean Sea, which we had planned together. We had in fact meant to go there together, but that was not possible, as I had just come out of hospital and there was no chance of going on holiday immediately. I had not yet been told exactly what was going on in my head. At the time I thought mainly: The problem has gone, hasn't it?

Gradually I began to feel better. They left three days before the results came about what kind of lump it had been, that had taken them 5 hours to remove. You remember, the tumour. They were far away when I heard. Of course Aunt Pukkie was with me. Suddenly the surgeon said that this was the end, the curtain was falling. Well, almost falling. No medicine. And if I ask him again tomorrow, that man will say the same thing. I know that his colleagues would say the same thing, even if I went to Belgium. The surgeons there say roughly the same thing. That is how it was, the children away and me here with my life turned upside down.

Very difficult Tipper, very difficult.

Every day I thought about them and oops, tears in my eyes. I told them nothing on the telephone of course, this is not the kind of thing you tell people on the telephone. They did not phone either, as they were having fun floating about on the sea and it was very warm. Ten days later they were back. For ten days that was as far ahead as my thoughts could reach: I have to tell them. I did not collect them from Schiphol. Not there of all places, I thought. They arrived at night and the next day they came home here.

They had had a lovely time and they were as brown as berries. Even Rastatje and she always needs to be careful in the sun. There Daddy stood in the living room.

«How are you?» she asked.

I said: «Do you really want to know?»

«Yes.»

BOOM.

«Berrie is not allowed to live long.»

I tell you Tipper, I had thought beforehand, what am I going to say? And I did not know, I did not want to know, I did not want to think up anything, I thought: something will come naturally, the words of the moment. Surely this moment is not the same as all other moments. This moment

is different. There really is no need for me to think about something like this. Anyway, I had to cry every time I thought about them. What I did know was that it needed to be just as intense as when I myself heard it. There is no other way.

So you can imagine it, everyone crying, being a nuisance to the neighbours. If Uncle Berrie is ever a nuisance, he would prefer to do so by laughing loudly, but not now. You already knew about it, but your father made sure that you did not speak to Bintje. I had arranged this with your father. You can understand that now, there was only one person who could tell him this. So we cried and we cried. So much wetness that it would have put out any cigar.

After half an hour I told them the whole story, what I had heard in the hospital, what I had thought and seen, that I had written it all down three days later. I do not need to tell you that any more, as drawer specialist you know all about it.

Tipper nodded, Tipper swallowed, Tipper hiccuped.
I told it and immediately Rastatje said: «Read it to us!»

I hardly ever read my stories to them, I was surprised by the question. I got a shock too, there is nothing in the story that I had not just told them. It was for the second time, though. And what is written on paper is often harder than what is spoken in words. With spoken words, you can think that maybe you did not quite hear it right. It is different on paper, as then you can reread exactly what is written there, you cannot change a piece of text yourself. That would be fooling yourself and you do not usually do that with news like this.

That is how I told it Tipper. Is that what you wanted to know?

Tipper did not know at all what he wanted to know, or what he would do if his father had told him news like this. In that case, he would prefer it to be a divorce, which is also rotten news, but at least they would both still be nearby, thought Tipper

«What did Bintje say?» Tipper asked.

«Bintje said this. Eheheheh eh, I do remember it, I think. He said, each day of the six months must be a good one for you. I want to do something to make them good days. To make you laugh at least once each day. We laughed straight away. Laughed good and hard. You should ask him sometime what we laughed about, I cannot remember it any more.

«Well» ripper, Bintje slept with me that night, it was late and we were tired. As a last thing Bintje said this. You, with your morale. You go and win from that patient who has survived for 8 years; with a morale like yours you should be able to make it to 10 years.

You know it Tipper, we like playing war games. The morale of the battalion is always very important to see whether or not they can win the battle. A lot of the struggle concerns the morale. Believe that you can win, believe that you can still go on. I thought it was a nice idea. We are going for the 10. But I thought: What do I need to do? I have no idea Tipper. What can I do myself? On

the 6th of July I was working away good and hard in Dordrecht, I noticed nothing. A complete surprise it was Tipper. A totally unexpected attack. As powerful as Pearl Harbour and at least as clever. No clues, no signs and of course at the weakest spot, right in the middle of the language area in the left half of my brain. I must say I have a certain respect for that. The enemy has handled it darned cleverly. I have no idea whether morale can ever be strong enough against an enemy like that.

Sure, the Americans did win against the Japanese. Did you see that film Tipper, Pearl Harbour? The next day I went with them to see this war drama. Splendid film and nearly all the important things in life are included. The Americans really dealt out a pinprick by going to Japan to bomb them.»

Tipper is silent, he wants to say something but all of a sudden the words stay stuck to his tongue. They do not want to come out. Tipper wants to leave. This is just a bit too much. Uncle rings his father who is waiting round the corner and has decided not to come in today.

Tipper walks out the door, although he wants to feel Uncle's skull first.

«Uncle, just imagine that I am a girl!» he says as he runs his fingers through Uncle's soft down. Uncle laughs. «Bye, bald nut.»

The car drives away and in the garden Uncle lights a Cuban cigar.

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To be continued (health willing)

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Back to current electronic table of contents