

Hooray for Hieronymus!

Annabel stood outside the heavy wooden door. The master was working well into the night and she had taken the liberty of preparing him a late supper. She hesitated before knocking. Would he welcome the interruption? He didn't like to be disturbed when his muse was paying him one of her lately infrequent visits. But he must have been famished. He hadn't eaten since the morning. What was he working on that was important enough for him to fast until its completion?

He didn't respond. Perhaps she had knocked too softly for him to have heard her.

She knocked again, louder. As before, the master didn't come to the door or call out for her to enter.

She resisted the temptation to knock a third time. He might think her impudent if she did. In any event, it probably wouldn't have mattered how loud or long she knocked, for oftentimes he became so absorbed by his work that not even the crack of doom could divert his attention from it.

From the other side of the door came the sounds of a violent physical struggle. Something made of glass shattered.

"Master!" Annabel cried. "Are you hurt?"

A terse groan was his reply.

She set the supper tray down, pushed the door open. The bizarre spectacle that confronted her made off with her tongue. There was the master, the most renowned painter in the land, wrestling what appeared to be a monstrous bird. It

was an odd-looking thing. It possessed an elongated beak and furry black ear flaps, like a dog's, that hung far below its diminutive head. Although it was manifestly avian, it wore human garb in the form of a scarlet shawl and wooden clogs longer than a court jester's boots. A sky-blue metal funnel sat upon its crown in lieu of a hat.

"Have at it, demon!" the master said. He wrapped his arms around the bird from behind and, arching his back, heaved it off its feet. It kicked and writhed, making guttural squawks.

The master cast Annabel a flustered glance. "Don't just stand there, girl, assist me."

The demon bird pecked him on the hand and came away with a quivering sliver of his flesh in its beak. Bellowing in pain, the master released his captive.

Annabel was utterly confounded. What did the master expect a lowly servant girl to do to quell the creature's rampage?

In desperation, she grabbed a straw broom and beat the bird over the head with it, accentuating each strike with a terrified yelp.

"That's it!" the master shouted as he rummaged through some paint jars. "Keep the abomination occupied! Now, where in God's name did I put the bole? Ah, here it is!" He plunged a brush into a jar of rust-colored paint.

"Master!"

The demon bird had trapped Annabel in the narrow gap

between the side of a cabinet and a wall. It swept the broom out of her hand, with a mocking chortle, then opened wide its beak to accommodate her head.

“MASTER!”

Brush loaded, the master dashed to her rescue. “Touch not the maiden, foul creature!”

The dread odor of iron oxide drew an alarmed squawk from the bird, which hopped about-face, throwing its wings up to protect itself.

“Hah!” the master scoffed. “Feathers won’t save you from the wrath to come!”

He flicked paint at the bird. Russet flecks spattered its plumage and it shuddered as if in the throes of the falling sickness. Seizing it by its chest, he snarled, “To Hell with you.” He then lifted, twisted, pulled, squashed, and spun it like a hunk of sculptor’s clay. All the while it shrank at an astonishing rate, metamorphosing into a brownish gray lump, until within seconds he could hold it in one hand.

Annabel watched, mouth agape. Had sanity forsaken her?

The master grinned. “Iron! How Satan and his minions detest it!”

He slammed the struggling protean mass in his bloody hand against the painting he’d been working on, rubbed it into the wooden surface. It fused instantaneously with the material.

“Now to entrap the demon . . .” He attacked the painting with his brush.

Annabel stammered. Shock and disbelief clogged her throat, blocking the question she was so anxious to ask.

“Fear not, child,” the master said, “it cannot escape. Only an unwitting dupe of Satan, voicing utter blasphemy on Walpurgisnacht, can free the demon.”

* * *

Narinda and Craig admired the painting.

No they didn't.

But they pretended they did. Although even they would have to admit they were doing a crappy job of it. It was hard, in fact, well-nigh impossible, for them to mask the contempt they had for the visiting exhibition.

They glanced toward the opposite side of the room. A class of private school kids were giggling at the target painting's deranged imagery.

“Now?” Craig asked. He was a bearded length of doweling with Buddy Holly glasses who looked like he ate soy for breakfast, lunch, and tea.

“No,” Narinda said.

“But, Nin, think of the symbolism. You and me in front of all those privileged little turds. The proles versus the corporate polluters of tomorrow.”

“Noooo,” she hissed. “The public will hunt us down if we go around upsetting nine-year-olds.”

Her lime-green short-cropped hair, black nose ring, wiry

tangles of armpit hair, assorted body tattoos, and distinctive perfume, which carried that subtle fragrance of industrial cleaning fluid, electrified Craig with priapic tingles. Not that he would ever tell her that. He wouldn't dare!

"OK," he said. "Fair enough. Right you are."

The kids trooped after their female teacher, a babe with blood-pumping breasts, into another wing of the gallery, leaving the target painting in peace.

Narinda elbowed Craig, forcibly. "This is us."

She stormed toward the painting, Hieronymus Bosch's famous triptych, *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*, like an irate customer heading for a sales counter. Craig followed. Several paces behind.

They'd smuggled all of the stuff necessary to carry out their vital work in their jacket pockets. It was winter in Melbourne. None of the NGV's security staff looked twice at them.

Narinda shook a can of spray paint like a maraca. The metal pea inside it rattled frantically, catching the notice of several gallery visitors. She proceeded to spray a large orange X—X for *extinction*—on the protective glass covering the triptych's middle panel.

A plump, bookish-looking woman gasped melodramatically. "What do you think you're doing?"

Acting in sync, Narinda and Craig squeezed Super Glue onto the palm of one hand each and then pressed those hands against the wall upon which the painting hung. He offered

her a fawning smile. *Did I do good? Did I? Did I?* She failed to acknowledge the offer.

“Help!” the bookish woman yelled as though witnessing a brutal assault. “Help!”

A security guard tore into the room. When he saw the orange X on the glass, he had a mental flash of him passing a Jobseeker form to an apathetic Centrelink officer. He should never have stepped out (just for a second!) to admire the hot teacher’s hot ass. It was May 1st. His birthday. What a day to be sacked.

Mobile phones videoed the newsworthy event. Narinda hoped her nose ring did her justice.

“You’re shocked by some paint on a piece of glass,” she said, “but you don’t even blink at the damage being done to our planet by man-made climate change. Once the Earth is gone, it will be gone forever. There will be no replacing it. If we don’t take drastic action now, we—”

“How about you help the planet by not causing criminal damage?” an old duffer said. “That’d be a bloody good start.”

“Yes,” the bookish women said, “that’s a valuable work of art!”

Narinda guffawed. “Valuable? The Earth is home to all life. It’s worth infinitely more than some stupid relic of the past.”

The guard sidled up to her. “Excuse me, you have to come away from there.”

“Our hands are Super-Glued to the wall. We’re not going anywhere.” She looked at Craig. “Are we?”

He shook his head. *No, we're not.*

Her eyes narrowed.

“No, we're not.”

The guard retreated to a quiet corner of the room and promptly touched base with the relevant authorities.

Some of the private school kids had wandered back into the room to see what all of the raised voices were about. The hot teacher came looking for them.

“Miss?” a blonde female student said. She pointed at Narinda. “Is that lady going to Hell for doing that to the religious painting?”

“There is no Hell!” Narinda said. “There is no Heaven! THERE IS NO GOD! They're all lies invented by white men to subjugate women and people of color!”

Craig nodded obsequiously.

A distant clamor started up.

“We must ban all . . .” Narinda started to say but was shouted down by the growing hubbub, which sounded like the residents of a zoo in Hell, staging a mass breakout.

All eyes in the room fixed on the source of the tumult. The triptych.

A spider web of cracks spread rapidly outward in the middle glass pane. Everyone, save Narinda and Craig, backed away from the painting like a politician from an election promise. The pane fell to the floor in a shrill cascade. Poking and prodding, a volleyball-sized bulge disfigured the wooden panel, which stretched as if elasticized, while something on

the other side of the painting searched for a way out. It found one. The room erupted with startled yips as a pair of wings, shiny and black, burst through the panel, parting it like a curtain. The demon bird poked its head out. When it saw whose paintings were on the walls, it squawked in disdain. Something shoved it from behind. It snapped its beak at the annoyance.

“The thing’s not real!” Narinda shouted in Craig’s direction. “It must be a hologram or something. They’ve done this, those rich Nazis, to stop us saving the world.”

Shit-scared though he was, Craig perked up at the attention his secret love was paying him. Oh Gaia she was beautiful!

She vented at the room’s fascist walls and supremacist ceiling. “It’s gonna take a lot more than smoke and mirrors to stop us! You hear me?! A *hell* of a lot more!”

Squawking exultantly, the demon bird hopped out of the painting and strutted about like Mick Jagger performing “Jumpin Jack Flash.” Free at last!

Suddenly it halted and glared with infernal enmity at the handful of visitors who hadn’t run screaming out of the room. The goggling group copped a few warning snaps.

“Hey!” Narinda yelled. “HEY! Do you seriously think we’re gonna be swayed by this hocus-pocus? IS THAT WHAT YOU THINK?!”

The bird seemed to wince at her caterwauling, as if she’d smacked it on the back of its smallish head, then turned Poko-

Moko-style toward her. The arrogance fled her face.

“Our fast-dying world,” she said warily, “cannot afford time-wasting, irresponsible nonsense like—”

A prodigious hop brought the demon bird beak to nose with her.

“L-l-l-leave her alone,” Craig said.

A pair of crimson avian eyes, ablaze with satanic mischief, set upon him. He would have bulbitated had Narinda ordered him something more substantial than a green salad for lunch.

“I mean it,” he added with a firm lack of conviction.

The bird leaped in front of him and tilted its beak into a position not conducive to his sustainability. He mewled. Then SNAP! His arms and legs twitched like the limbs of an electrified frog as blood spurting from his headless neck painted an abstract masterpiece on the wall behind him. His head landed at Narinda’s feet, lobbed there by the bird’s blood-splashed beak. Dark red sputum oozed out of his mouth as he burbled, “I wuuuuuv yoooooo . . .”

Narinda shrieked in horror. A good thing Craig was dead, for her response to his heartfelt declaration would have surely killed him.

The only weapons the security guard possessed were his fists and they were no match for the demon bird’s beak. So he did the only thing he could do. He ran away.

SNAP! SNAP! SNAP! SNAP!

Forewarned that her head was next, Narinda struggled to emancipate her glued hand from the wall. “Let-me-go! Let-

me-gohhhhh!” The bird lent her a helping wing. She narrated the separation of palm and epidermis with an agonized scream.

The bird’s beak adopted the position. Decapitation loomed.

Just then, the guard roared into the room, brandishing a claw hammer he’d grabbed from a part of the gallery undergoing renovation. “Get away from her! You get away from her!”

He swung the hammer like a maniac. The *iron* hammer. A glancing blow clipped some feathers off the demon bird’s bonce. It flung itself backward with a freaked-out screech. The wall thwarted its retreat. The guard came at it again. Although weakened, it managed to repel him with a few lunging beak snaps.

Narinda rocked back and forth on the floor, nursing her skinned hand and mumbling incoherently. Before the guard could rally, the demon bird shoved her up into its wings. She squealed for help. Begged for it. Received none. Where were all the teal independents when you needed them?

Wiggling feelers belonging to perhaps a monstrous insect were driven back inside the painting by the bird as it hopped through the opening it had made, with its climate activist load. The rent panel healed like leprous flesh touched by the hand of Jesus.

A wizened old Chinese woman applauded. Not even Disneyland Hong Kong could put on a show like this.

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The triptych had, miraculously, sustained net-zero damage in the incident, footage of which had been viewed by up to one-billion people on X and other social media platforms. The devil? ChatGPT? Pauline Hanson? The debate was still white-hot as to who or what was behind it all.

Speculation raged in the art world about who had modified the painting. One thing art critics agreed on that it must have been a supremely talented art forger, whose brush strokes, indistinguishable from those of Bosch himself, had seamlessly added the female climate activist to the masterwork. Arms flailing, eyes tumescent with fear and hopelessness, she lay pinned to the ground by one of the demon bird's feet. At least she was where she could do the most good. Carbon emissions in Hell were off the charts.

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