

Hank Kirton

Work

“I’m a craftsman,” I kept telling myself. “An artist.”

I confronted my job at dawn, my dread rising with the light. I worked outdoors and every morning I prayed for rain. We couldn’t work in the rain.

The day was bright and clear.

I parked my dying Dodge Shadow under a catalpa tree, took a deep breath. Karen’s upcoming abortion was still on my mind and I’d thought about calling in sick just so I could THINK.

I left the car with the tree and headed toward the fields.

It was early summer and the smell of the flowers was overpowering. Twelve acres of flowers and flowering trees; each little stab of color puffing perfume into the air. I’d been working at Addax’s Art Nest for two months and already the smell had become cloying, noxious, headache inducing.

I walked across a worn wooden footbridge that forded a narrow stream they kept stocked with shy, timid goldfish. I glanced at my wrist and saw I still had a few minutes before I had to punch in, so I stopped mid-stream and looked down. The water was kept clean with a filter, the little river-bottom paved with perfect white pebbles. I didn’t see any goldfish.

I stood like that for awhile, looking at the calm, speckled current and the cattails and blooming milkweed beyond. I thought about Karen.

And then I noticed the buzzing - that hateful droning - and it wrecked things; the quiet, my daydream. I finished crossing the bridge and headed into the office.

Mr. Philips was sitting behind his sprawling, Polyester acrylic desk, smoking his breakfast-cigar and spreading fresh honey on a piece of burnt toast. He looked at me, then back at the toast. “You’re almost late,” he said.

I shrugged and apologized. Gertie and Dave were already there, drinking coffee, chatting. They were never almost late. They gave me synchronized nods of greeting. I nodded back and then filled out my time-card: Hank Kirton, Employee #24, and punched in. I was five minutes early. I slid



my card into the rack and then approached Mr. Philip's desk to suffer my assignment.

He sucked his cigar and bit into his toast, slowly releasing smoke. He tossed me a photograph while he chewed. I looked at it: a small boy in red pajamas smiling in front of an ugly Christmas tree. His teeth were crooked. They overlapped.

The boss told me, “Kid’s name is Robert. Died from a bad case of leukemia last year. His parents want his portrait done with his name underneath. Robert. Make sure you write it neat: Robert.”

Calligraphy was not my strong suit.

I slipped the photo into my pocket and nodded. “What’s the canvas?”



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“Hornet, tree 17. Get going.”

“Hornets?” I said. Very few customers ordered Hornets. We sold a few to aging punks and pseudo-Satanists but most people wanted cute, peaceful bumblebees.

“Yeah, hornets,” said Mr. Philips. “You gonna make me say ‘Get going’ again, Kirton?”

“No, sir.”

I walked behind the office to pick up my box of paints and a ladder. The stink of the garbage pile out back - collected from three local restaurants and used to attract and feed yellow-jackets - was a welcome break from the smell of the flowers.

I grabbed what I needed and trudged into the jungle of blossoms, trying not to notice the buzzing wave of bees rising in my wake.

Tree 17 was a huge gnarled apple tree surrounded by goldenrod with the number 17 spraypainted on it. I looked up at the large, gray hornet’s nest hanging from a thick limb, surrounded by angry black satellites.

I set up the ladder and started to climb.

This was my job.

The first sting hit before I reached the top; a fiery needle in my neck. I slapped the hornet, pinning it against my skin and then pinched it loose, grinding it to pulp with my fingers. I flicked most of it away, and then wiped shredded exoskeleton off on my jeans.

I climbed another two rungs until I was face to face with the nest. I placed my case of paints on the ladder’s shelf and pulled the picture of ROBERT out of my pocket.

I looked at the dead kid and the ugly Christmas tree. A hornet landed on my forearm and I didn’t move. I just stared at the picture. The kid was smiling but he had sad eyes. I wanted to capture those eyes. The hornet on my arm flew off without stinging and I began to sketch Robert on the nest with a thin piece of charcoal. I wondered if I should fix his teeth a little.

Another sting landed on my scalp and I tried to ignore it.

I suffered two more stings by the time I finished the sketch – one on my back and another on my neck. I could feel them starting to swell, turning to painful knots. The sun was shooting straight at me, making it hard to see, drawing out sweat.

Gertie’s voice behind me: “How’s it going up there, Hank?”

I turned. “Hey, Gertie. It’s going okay, I guess. What’d you get today?”

“I got a dog.” She held out a picture, flapped it and then looked at it, cocking her head. “I think it’s an English setter or something.”

“Where you painting it?”

“On a stingless honeybee nest. Heading over to the cave now...”