

RED DEVIL

>> HANNAH CALDER

“Let’s have another round for the bright red devil that keeps me in this tourist town.”

Joni Mitchell

She cradles warm chicken eggs in her apron. Good with a slaughter knife, good with an axe, she keeps the house free of blood and sawdust; makes her husband’s trousers, then watches him take them off and throw them into a corner of the bedroom. She has apple cheeks, and German braids and never looks older than she is.

Occupation: Farmer’s wife.

Religion: Catholic.

Hilda, the Red Haired Devil nurse leans forward in her seat.

“Are you OK, Barbara? Do you need anything?”

“Church today. Yes. Church today.”

The.Day.Is.Sunday.Day.Of.Our.Lord.I.Will.Go.To.Church.With.

Mother.And.Father.If.The.Red.Haired. Devil.Permits.It.

Barbara, perched at the edge of her tightly-made bed, has transformed her nightdress into an outfit fit for church. The slit at the back for hands has been sewn shut. She’s fashioned a ruffle from a striped pillow case. Scoop of a pirouette. Collar of a clown. Her hair is as taut as the sheet beneath her, except for one missed, flyaway strand.

Where did she get hold of a needle and thread from?

The Red Haired Devil's hair colour comes from a bottle, but Barbara doesn't realize this. The brassy fake fire of it wouldn't fool anyone except perhaps a mental patient on the search for the devil and his minions. There is nothing cruel about Hilda, only a slight ripple of depression in her eyes, the imprint of an unexpected turn in her husband's affections. She is neither happy nor unhappy, only glad that she is at work rather than at home where those flirting beasts are doing things she cannot put words to, only the smallest whiff of a hunch, and a paranoid hunch at that.

She wants to talk to Barbara about her predicament. She also wants to run home and catch them at it. But then what would she say and do? Her blushing embarrassment would put her at an instant disadvantage. Confrontation always confuses her, leads her to trip up on the hilarity of it all so her sentences fragment words rats fleeing her mouth in all directions. It is better to finish her shift and arrive home at the expected time so that she can continue to pretend that everything is just fine, thank you.

"It was Sunday yesterday. Today is Monday. MONDAY. Day of the moon."

"The what?"

"Nothing. It's Monday. Apple pie day. Apple pie and custard."

Hilda looks at Barbara and smiles. "You can wear your outfit next Sunday. Would you like that, Barbara?"

"Devils. You're all devils."

The sunlight hammers at the cool shade they have found. There is so much shade, enough for ten groups to picnic happily. It is the forest, the high mountain forest, on a trail torn from a tourist guide. Mia doesn't like to sit on sloping ground. When she stands up, after hours of picnicking, she will discover her back has gone out. Of course! Stupid me! She'll think and she'll be right because this has happened more than once, maybe 3 or 4 times and every time, except this time, she forgets to remember.

She finds a rock, perfectly flat in one part, big enough for her only to sit. Jorgen and Hilda can sit on the uneven floor because they have perfect spines from which their pelvises hang like Christmas baubles. She will not tell them how excruciating it can be for a back after hours of sitting on a slope in case they ask her to trade places.

"Here's a good spot. Some shade, some sun, a rock."

Jorgen has found a piece of grass (maybe a goat has pissed on it?) and is using it to pick his teeth. What is there to pick? They haven't eaten anything. Is he orally fixated? Is he desperate to have something in his mouth? What would they think back at the institution where last week Franz shoved the end of a broom in his mouth and hurt himself? Poor Franz! He hurt himself terribly, but happily.

Mia is prettier than Hilda but only by a hair's breadth and neither is pretty according to the Great Book of Prettiness, just in certain circles or around men of their league. Jorgen is of their league plus 1 or maybe 2 because he has a strong chin, not helped by his odd

teeth, although it's not clear what it is about them exactly that is odd, and his hands, which can be ridiculously pretty in certain lights and hideously boring in others. Nobody quite knows where to place him, but seeing as both Mia and Hilda are wearing colors that bring out the highlights in their hair that catch the light all seem to be on equal, even ground—metaphorically speaking at least.

Prettiness doesn't matter. Sexual innuendoes, flirty chases and extra raucous laughs do. Loyalty and commitment are out the window and have been for days now. Mia doesn't know that she is to blame for everything. Hilda doesn't know that she is a victim of circumstance. The only one who knows anything is Jorgen and all he knows is that two women delight in his company and one wants to feed him treats from a picnic basket after rolling the other headlong down the mountain. But this is nothing worth worrying about. Happily and indeed. Phew!

Why did Hilda's mother send for Mia, poor cousin Mia from the overcrowded, loud, stupid family that nobody invites anymore? Hilda is fine alone.

She hates that Mia is sitting on the only flat surface to be had. "Here's a good spot" my foot! And she's opening the picnic basket as if she packed it. And she's handing Jorgen a knife as if it were her knife to hand over. And she's laughing for no reason. Just laughing away like everything he says is funny when it can't be because he's not funny at all and never has been. That is so not funny. How can she laugh? How can she throw her mouth around like that for the whole mountain to see? She cannot cut straight. The cheese is thicker at one end, threadbare at the other. That's not a sandwich. A kid could make a better sandwich than that.

"Let me make my own. I like to make my own sandwiches."

When the sandwich sits before her on the plate, garnished with a sprig of parsley, a perfectly sliced slice of tomato, she always sits back admiringly and thinks "What a great sandwich maker I am!" To Jorgen this is ludicrous, although he isn't absolutely sure if it is true. It's just that she always smiles at whatever sandwich she has made and frowns when somebody else makes one. It all churns up in the same mouth into a ball of wet mush so who cares whether it looks good or not?

He's come because of Mia, not because of Hilda, but this thought it so painful for him that he doesn't dare even have it. A picnic with his wife of 10 years after climbing up a steep slope for almost 2 hours, is not appealing in any way, but chasing after the overripe hindquarters of his wife's cousin and then watching her mouth suck flesh from an olive pit is all very worthwhile. He doesn't know when he became so shallow and pathetic, but he guesses he isn't likely to change soon.

It must be because Mia comes from another book. An Italian one. An 18th century one. Jorgen is early 20th century Germany material, hardly anything worth writing about. Skip forward a few years into Hitler territory and we'd be talking, but he's stuck with the skinny man on the unicycle and the Murderer's Calendar that together turn his wife inside out straight at the pupil of the public eye, straight into the pocket of the doctor who seeks fame at the expense of his family.

Her book is leather bound. Her book is smart and clear. Each word is made up of a series of straight lines and curves, as are all words in all books. Plus dots.

Hilda is focused on the verb “to be”. All arrows point to this moment here. The Buddhist now she read about in a book on religion because she does read and she does read things that nobody else knows about. She reads more than anyone knows, reads everywhere, any which way she can. It bothers her that all text, whatever the font, won’t let her pass without telling her something she may or may not want to know. Usually, it is unnecessary information that nobody needs to know and shouldn’t have even been written down in the first place. That things may burst on her taste buds or throw her for a loop or surpass her wildest expectations is neither here nor there. But the idea of a man in his now and a woman in hers is something to think about.

And dwell upon. Because she is not good at doing nothing and she certainly cannot think nothing. And sometimes she imagines that the whole idea of nothingness in the now is only a trick, like a carrot dangling before a hungry donkey, to send us in frustrating circles of guilt and keep us still enough to arrange us into groups. This is Hilda’s thought. That with our minds on the spiritual prize we are easily herded. Who is she following? Why doesn’t she just stop? She doesn’t know why she suggested a picnic. To pretend that her and Jorgen are happily married and still feeding each other down by the river bank? To trick Mia into thinking that she exercises frequently and has strong thighs? She wishes this now would become a before or a then or a once upon a time the end.

To be fully accepted at the Hall Jorgen must begin the group diet. The diet consists of mostly raw, locally grown, in season fruits and vegetables. Some grains are allowed, but not all. Some of the grains written down on his diet sheet are ones he’s never heard of and wouldn’t know how to prepare. Hilda will? Meat is absolutely forbidden, as are dairy products and eggs, unless the eggs have been cooked at a rolling boil for 10 minutes or more. Honey is allowed, but not recommended. All food must be eaten in company, never alone, and the person sitting to your left must place his or her hand over your plate and say, “Bless this plate and the nutrients it brings my friend.” Even if you are eating with a family member or someone you’ve never even met, you must use the word “friend” because otherwise the effect won’t be the same. Water must be drunk sparingly and thought of as the nectar of life, not something to pour willy nilly everywhere. And it can never, under any circumstances, be consumed with food.

“Here’s the list.” Jorgen tacks the list to the wall beside the kitchen cupboard. “Once I’ve been initiated, I can only eat what’s on here.” He is prodding at the piece of paper as if each word is an ant trying to run away.

Hilda has already read it. She always reads anything Jorgen gives her to read well before he gives it to her. How she manages to do this she isn’t quite sure, but it may have something to do with her obsessive desire to read all text she ever encounters. Any piece of paper, open or folded, locked inside an envelope or ripped up into tiny pieces must be read and read immediately.

“I can’t be expected to prepare your meals with these restrictions. I barely have time to

cook. This just makes my life harder.”

He looks at her angrily and snatches the list from the wall. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll just eat at the Hall.”

Hilda doesn’t know the reason, but the sight of the thumbtack on the wall with a little tab of paper still hanging from it makes her want to cry.

She didn’t know that Jorgen’s zealous love of the Back to Life movement would lead to this, or anything remotely close to this. He has eaten meat in large quantities his whole life. He has never even heard of some of the grains or fruits on this list. Neither has she.

He only eats his eggs fried. In lard.

“What is happening to you?”

Coming down the mountain that afternoon Hilda trips and falls, grazing her hands and knees and momentarily exposing the pale backs of her calves to Jorgen and Mia. She is shaken by the fall and ashamed at herself for not just staying home and leaving them to it, for tricking herself into believing that by chaperoning her husband she could stopper the inevitable kiss, etc.

Back at home, as husband and wife in their private bedroom territory, she feels her desperation quieten and turn intimate. Their bedroom cannot be intruded upon. She can sit beside him. She can straddle him on the bed and stroke his hair. She can undo the buttons on his shirt. But she won’t. Even though he is her husband he is also the man from the train station last Wednesday who Hilda sat beside while she waited for the 2:13 train to take her to work. She could feel the lines begin to struggle to bend inside her until she had to bite her Tourette tongue to stop it from darting out and licking the man upside the cheek. Her own husband akin to a strange! How strange we are.

The fact he has buried his head in a newspaper gives everything away. Hilda is fooling herself. Anyone watching this play would know that, but she is so sweet, so the nice part of me, that I want her to have happy and lucky things happen to her.

“Why did you tell Mia you like art? You don’t.” Hilda asks this as she is folding clothes and putting them away into drawers, her back to Jorgen. She doesn’t want him to see her mouth.

“I do. How do you know what I like or don’t like?”

“I’m your wife.”

His hands remember. The feel of a clean sheet of paper, the paintbrush handle like a magic wand, its fine hairs loose and moving or stiff with paint that dyes the water in the glass undrinkable. The quiet space of the art room after school that his instructor has left open. Just for him. The key that he has been entrusted with placed on the table before him.

After school ended he went to work in his uncle’s workshop building cabinets and beds and dining tables for people with both taste and wealth. He stopped painting altogether because it was “frivolous” and “a waste of money”. Yes, father.

Years later, as if it were something to be ashamed of, he would find a private corner of the local library and sit for hours looking through art books. He discovered Piranesi's *Vedute di Roma* in a book on Italian architecture and as small as she was, difficult to make out in her black etched obscurity, he saw Mia for the first time, standing out from all the other beggars and waifs. He knew she had been working as an artist's model in another time period and another book, but he didn't know he would prefer her to the Coliseum. His defensiveness gives most of it away. That Hilda is trying to make sure he doesn't see the curving distaste in her mouth gives the rest away. She will take note and add what she notes to the growing list of things not to trust, things to change and things to try not to see the real meaning of. He is hurting her. He doesn't know anything about her work, the project she has been entrusted with, the Doctor's patience for her little mishaps and tiny displays of inaptitude. Because she will be good! She will shine! She will build his art collection up to the proportions enclosed here.

Only last week she was able to interpret the meaning of two of the symbols on Josef's calendar. The Doctor agreed with her wholeheartedly and wrote something down in his notebook, even before she had finished talking. But Jorgen knows nothing about her work. He never asks. He seems interested in everything but the stories she tells upon coming home from work. How was your day? Full of wonder and surprise and fulfilling little moments of joy has become a single "fine". Such a deceptive little word. She realizes now that she may be wrong about her husband's lack of interest, but it has taken Mia's presence in their home to make her see this and this makes her blood expand so it doesn't fit into her veins anymore and even as I write this little droplets are popping from the ends of her toes and staining her stockings red. What a quiet private thing anger can be, she thinks, wanting to smack the newspaper from her husband's hands so that he has to look at the pain in her eyes.

She has finished putting the clothes away and doesn't know where to stand so that Jorgen cannot see her face. She goes to the window, turns the edge of one of the curtains over in her hand and looks intently at its hem.

"It's going to be a calm evening," she says, looking out across the evening meadow, so mellow, so much a lullaby almost brewed. The fact of space and birdsong momentarily remind her that it is a Tuesday evening, almost time to prepare dinner, and as with all Sunday evenings she will do some things and then some other things and then climb into bed, before her husband, to warm the bed for the both of them. A gesture she has never explained to him, but one that reminds her that she must love him. She is a woman. A woman and a wife. Hungry for something made with potatoes and butter. For the warm goo of flour on her hands.

"I'm going down to prepare dinner."

Hilda is licking her three parts oil one part vinegar one teaspoon honey and one mustard

fingertips when Mia comes into the room.

Is she germaphobic? Will she struggle through her salad thinking the whole time that my saliva may have touched her lettuce? She's changed her outfit. Only rich people change for dinner and she is not rich. Her fiancé left her in Rome. Two months before their wedding. He was rich. Stinking rich. Funny expression that. I'm sure he changes for dinner every night, (even if there are no guests), retires to his room before dinner, perhaps for a light snooze, certainly for a shave, a drop of something alcoholic that he pours from a decanter. He might even wash his face and hands from a magically full bowl of water and then "blot," not dry, them with a magically clean towel. Never dirty or crumpled or damp. Where do all the dirty towels go? How come a clean one is always just in reach of a man like Mia's ex-fiancé?

Her dress is red and white pin-striped. It sounds awful, but somehow it isn't, although Hilda would never give a dress like that a second look. She's not confident enough for either red or pin-stripes. They both suggest she knows what she's doing, which she rarely does. She is sure the food isn't up to par for a dress like that, but more in line with the plain dark blue fabric of her own dress. What she calls her house-dress.

"You look nice. Going anywhere fancy?"

Hilda has turned into somebody's jealous mother all of a sudden. Where is her red hair straight from a bottle, her good-enough prettiness and resemblance to me? Where is early-Hilda, someone I'd be happy to be friends with? 1980s Hilda cycling through the high street with her pixie boots, tight jeans and brassy-red fuck-you-all hair?

"You look nice."

That's better. Hilda would say this.

"Thanks. " Mia walks over to the stove, lifts the lid from a pan of boiling potatoes and says, "Jorgen and I are going to test out his new diet tonight. He didn't tell you? You're not in on it with us, are you?"

Mia is delighted by the tension in the air. She is just the right person for this role. It pleases her and makes her want to cover her mouth and laugh a loud ha! Such power can be had over a husband! Such sweet and easy power!

"Jorgen is not starting that diet. Today or ever."

"Why not?" Mia is wide eyed with astonishment at the tone of Hilda's voice, a voice that reveals a mixture of exhaustion and rage. A slow anger, turning her voice a deep brown-red.

"What's this?" Jorgen has entered the room. He is hungry and can smell the pie his wife has baking in the oven. Beef and vegetable. Nothing I would ever get excited about, but Jorgen is early 20th century Germany and has meat for brains, sausages for fingers, slices of sliced body parts for skin. He is all man. All beef. All blood on the mind.

"Mia is saying that you are starting that ridiculous diet and that she is too, but that is not what we agreed on. I cannot cook with such restrictions. Who is this man to tell you what you can and cannot eat!?"

"I can cook." Mia is smiling and standing tall on her tippy toes with excitement. "I don't

mind at all.”

Why didn't her fiancé throw her overboard on their way to Rome? She is such a bad actor pretending to be an actor. Her motives could be filed under ulterior.

Jorgen just wants his pie and fat and onions. He always chooses the most complicated route and just this thought makes him feel sleepy and under-the-weather. He walks into the living room and sprawls out on the rug, sinking his face into the crook of his elbow. He begins to listen to his breathing, focusing on the fact of saliva, the reality of the freckles on the skin of his arms that popped to the surface only today at the picnic, where all his mad lusting came to a head and he kissed Mia as his wife forged on ahead trespassing through the shivering bracken with her stick. There is something about his wife's need for a walking stick that appals him. What fear she keeps in her eyes! It frightens him that another human being would choose to depend upon his love. A love that is the colour of water and the weight of kindling.

He is drawn to the Back to Life movement because he is too weak not to be. The heat goes on when the Master speaks. The women are like fresh, healthy loaves. The men always stand, never sit, rocking back and forth on the soles of their boots. The children exist! Because the reproductive organs of such fine people always work well. Everyone smiles. All the time! There is no depression. Dreams are never dashed, always fulfilled. Breasts are either hard with milk or soft with passion. Children run from eves, roost in the hay, speck the sky with their kites and balloons. His heart swells towards these people, desperate to become one with their rightness.

Mia understands him and, yes, she would readily prepare his meals for him. She is as eager to be saved as he is, as eager to find there is and always has been fierce, pulsing light within her. The Master draws it out in both of them as they stand in the assembly feeling the heat of each other's intentions. Hilda is too bitter and twisted by the sick people she defends and tends to, the shit on their bodies and hands, the raging twisted crying, the one size fits all outfit they all wear, poor sods, as they are wheeled, screaming from one bad mental patient movie to another, from one doctor's smug analysis to another's. She doesn't see how dark the circles are beneath her 21st century eyes, how many times a day she complains, or that she sighs more than she laughs.

We should be laughing. We should be chasing children up riverbanks, throwing wives onto picnic blankets to tickle them, painting watercolour washes of the world.