

Storylandia

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The Wapshott Journal of Fiction

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Ginger Mayerson

Dr Hackenbush Gets Some Culture

1989

Pamela Tucker was a woman sure of many things. She was sure she was a good painter. She was sure she'd gotten a good foundation in art at East Los Angeles Graphics. She was sure she wanted ELAG, as they called it for short, to succeed, and to that end, she was sure she and eleven other up-and-coming LA artists had done the right thing in copying a rich man's David Alfaro Siqueiros painting as a fund-raiser for ELAG.

She was also sure it was a pretty stupid way to raise money to keep ELAG going. She didn't know who thought it up, but it must have been a pretty twisted mind to have twelve painters set up in the drawing room and copy the Siqueiros so the copies could be auctioned off at this party. It had been cruel. Mr. Vogler, the owner of the Siqueiros, had a buffet lunch set out every day they were there copying, but either from rage or sorrow, none of the copyists ate much of it.

But Pam figured it was all for ELAG, and the new director, a large lady from the east coast, Manuela Something y Something, had new energy, drive and whatever the ELAG board thought it would take to get the school, workshops, and galleries back on their feet. For the past forty years students had received

free art instruction from ELAG. It had sparked a few great artists, or as great as Los Angeles allowed any of its artists to be, but it also trained countless teens to be organized, thorough and thoughtful in their work. Some worked in graphics, animation, or the movie industry as artists, but most held down workaday-type jobs, raised their families and let their love of art warm the cold, cold world around them.

It was, Pam had heard, only in the past few years that infighting between the board and a string of poorly chosen local directors had nearly brought ELAG to its knees. Hence the board had brought in new blood and new thinking and, hopefully, a future.

Although she hadn't been there in years (ELAG was quite a ways east of her studio), Pam still loved the place. Someday, she wanted to take her children there for art lessons, if she had any children, and if she didn't she planned to volunteer to teach there. If they'd have her; she'd heard it was Chicanos only these days. Nevertheless, Pam still had deep and profound feelings for the place that taught her how to ruin her clothes with linseed oil and pour her heart out on a variety of media.

So Pam was very sure she'd done the right thing participating in this fundraiser. She was also very sure that the Siqueiros over the fireplace, flanked by six copies on either side, was not the one she'd copied from two weeks ago. She looked at the fingers of her right hand, and then peered into the softly lit garden for inspiration.

“Why am I here? What am I doing here? What have I done to deserve this? Why must I suffer?”

Mabel Hackenbush, vocalist, front-woman and baritone ukulele player extraordinaire for *Dr. Hackenbush and her Orchestra*, leaned over the man in a baggy tuxedo curled into fetal position on the garden bench. She didn't lean too far because her black horn-rim glasses slid down her nose and her form-fitting

evening gown gave new meaning to the words ‘plunging neckline’; this neckline was deep like the Mariana Trench is deep. “What was that, Arlo?” she snapped. “Speak up, pal, I can’t hear a word you’re sayin’ down there.”

Arlo Mega uncurled and leapt to his feet and shook his fist at the oak tree, and presumably the heavens, above them. “I said, why must I suffer?!” He yelled this, so not only Hackenbush but the party guests nearby heard it as well.

“Because you’re a great artist, but a fucking disaster in social situations.” Hackenbush smiled pleasantly and waved at the people staring at them as she said this. “And if you won’t drop this martyred artist pose I will leave you here all by yourself to defend yourself from these art patrons, posers, socialites, and other such weirdoes.”

Arlo got a hurt look on his face. “You wouldn’t do that to me. I asked you to help me through this ordeal.”

“Then straighten up and fly right, Mr. Mega,” Hackenbush sighed, adjusting her black horn-rim glasses. “Or at least do your half of the schmoozing. I didn’t give up one of my precious nights off to listen to you whine.” She pulled his jacket shoulders back into some semblance of order; there was nothing to be done with his hair, which stuck up in coarse black tufts even on good days. “Remember, it’s all for a good cause. You like East LA Graphics as much as anyone who studied there.”

“This is a stupid way to raise money,” Arlo grumbled, pulling his cuffs straight.

“I heard they fed you pretty good lunches,” she said, lighting an unfiltered Pall Mall and picking a shred of tobacco off her tongue.

“Food! Who can think of food when you’re standing in a room with other artists copying a Siqueiros easel painting, one I’d never heard of, and wouldn’t have heard of if this sick obsession white people are having with Frida Kahlo wasn’t driving the prices of every dead

Mexican painter through the ceiling. Thanks,” he said, accepting a Pall Mall and a light. “Don’t get me wrong, Hackenbush, I have nothing against Siqueiros and Kahlo,” he continued. “I think it’s high time they and that whole scene, except Rivera, got more recognition. It’s just having twelve ‘up-and-coming’ LA painters copy the damn thing so Mr. Lawrence Vogler can show off his Siqueiros that he probably got for a goddam song in the sixties, and then auction off the copies and the money goes to ELAG.” Arlo favored her with one of his best sneers. “What a joke. If they really cared, they’d just auction off some of the work in my studio and give me a cut. I’d settle for half.”

“You’re missing the point so much, I’m not even going to try to explain it to you. Oh, and they don’t care, they’ve never cared, and they’re never ever gonna care. So, pull yourself together, Arlo. and face it.” Hackenbush was laughing so bitterly, she had a hard time getting that out. “But, honey, I can see why you’re insulted,” she said, pulling her own self together. “It is kind of an insult that you have to copy the work of someone who’s too dead to appreciate it in order to help some artists who are too poor to pay for their own art supplies.” She took him by the shoulders and looked deeply into his eyes. “But, Arlo, whoever told you life was fair?” she asked, a touch too dramatically. “Or fun? Or profitable? Or—”

“Nobody, baby, but I wish someone could tell me why a jerk like Vogler gets all this.” Arlo waved in a general way at the garden around the mansion nestled in the best part of San Marino. “And you and I pay taxes on our unemployment—”

“When we can get it,” she put in.

“—and tip twenty-three percent to cover the fucking waitress tax,” he concluded.

“Because we was born just in time to get fucked—”

“—and not even kissed—” he added.

“—by the Reagan Revolution,” she finished,

briskly. “Sorry, Arlo, if we’re going to fight a class war tonight, we better go home and change out of our good clothes. I, for one, have eaten too much of Vogler’s food and drunk too much of his booze to be in the mood to tear down the dominant social group right now.” She listened to Arlo’s low growl, which meant his mood was improving. “What have you got against Diego Rivera?”

“Nothing,” he said. “He’s an icon and gets enough press. I like Siqueiros, too, murals and easel paintings. I just think this painting has become valuable to Vogler because the price shot up, not because it speaks to his soul or whatever.”

“Maybe it speaks to his wallet. Does it speak to your soul?” she asked.

Arlo hesitated. “No. It’s not a strong piece compared to Siqueiros’ other work,” he said. “But right now you can’t judge a famous dead Mexican artist by what his work is worth, only what it costs.”

“Welcome to the late 20th century, Arlo,” Hackenbush murmured under her neutral smile. Truth be told, she wasn’t enjoying her evening much either. There were too many annoying people at this party. For one thing, her ex-fiancé and ex-guitar player, Eddy Lee, was there with his trio as the entertainment. Yes, they were playing some very tasteful and occasionally tasty low-key jazz, but it annoyed her to see him working when she was not. Even though he was on the bandstand, she was the one who felt like the show.

“Well, we’re not the only ones suffering tonight,” Arlo said, failing to notice Hackenbush was a million miles away just then.

Another stressor for Hackenbush was Renee Soleil, vocalist, hellcat, and Eddy Lee’s ex-girlfriend prior to Hackenbush. Being in the same species as La Soleil was hard on Hackenbush; add in being dumped by Eddy Lee in common with her was just injury onto insult.

“I mean, all the painters are here,” Arlo went on, feeling he had her full attention because she wasn’t interrupting. “They all brought dates or spouses, so that’s times two. Except for the ones who are twisted enough to like this kind of thing.”

Vogler’s son, Emil, was pissing Hackenbush off as well. He and Janet Tran, who was practically his fiancée, were strutting around like they not only owned the place, but owned everyone in it.

“It’s all window dressing, Hackenbush,” Arlo said darkly. “Have a party, sprinkle in a few wacky but housebroken artists for color, not because you understand, God forbid appreciate, their work, but just because it’s the vogue right now.”

However, Hackenbush, like anyone with a ear for gossip, knew that bitch Janet Tran was sleeping with Eddy Lee for fun, and Emil Vogler for status.

“Take Linda Lim,” Arlo said, perking up a little. “One of the best sculptors alive today. Vogler wouldn’t understand her work if it was surgically implanted in him.”

It was Janet Tran who’d organized this fundraiser. She was some kind of photographer, scene-ster, aspiring art maven, talent-less wench who took pictures to get attention, not because she had any soul or vision.

“Shorty Smith is here,” Arlo said. “I’d bet money Vogler has never seen you two dance in his life.”

This got Hackenbush’s attention. She’d been dancing with Shorty even before she met Eddy Lee. It was comforting to see Shorty in the swanky crowd milling around the patio, nattily dressed and adorable as ever, standing next to his current boyfriend, the not-so-swanky Gregg Miller, who was also Hackenbush’s current guitar player. That those two were still together after more than a year was rather amazing and mostly a tribute to Shorty’s cherubic looks and hard-headed good sense that had won over and kept Gregg from living out

his Keith Richard fantasies. On the other hand, if Gregg was living out those fantasies with Shorty, well, good for both of them.

“And there’s Melanie Moreau,” Arlo said, waving at a cool blond in a strapless number. “I saw her play Desdemona last year, she was brilliant. Y’think Vogler saw it? I doubt it.”

Hackenbush shrugged and then froze. She’d just spotted someone she didn’t like almost as much as she didn’t like the person that person usually went to these kinds of parties with.

Following Hackenbush’s piercing polar gaze, Arlo said, “And there’s Mimi Buk. I heard her read some of her poetry a few weeks ago. She’s, ah, getting better... I think.”

Hackenbush began to scan the crowd.

“And it’s not just the poetry thing,” Arlo continued. “It’s the performance thing.”

“Don’t say it,” Hackenbush gritted out, looking around her for a quick exit. She’d never make it over the wrought iron fence in that dress.

“No, really, Hackenbush, the line between performance art—”

Hackenbush winced hard.

“—and readings—”

“Arlo, stop!”

“—gets blurrier every day.”

“No! Arlo! No! Stop!” she hissed furiously.

“Let’s face it, Hackenbush—”

“Let’s not!” Her skin was starting to crawl.

“—the most misunderstood person in any gathering of non-felons is always going to be—”

“No, Arlo, no! Don’t say it! Don’t! Say! Her! Name!”

“—Ana Phalaxia.”

A gaunt, smirking wraith-like creature materialized from the shadows, or the hydrangea, behind them. Ana Phalaxia, blinking in the glare of the luminarias lining

the garden path, stepped forward and fixed Hackenbush with her terrible eye. “I heard my name.”

Arlo murmured, “Sorry, Hackenbush,” and tried to slink away. He was firmly yanked back to her side.

Ana Phalaxia always looked like something the cat dragged in on a rainy night. And then dragged out again and tried to bury somewhere. Tonight she was all dressed up and, incredibly, looked even worse. As if summoned by dark arts or the smell of her master’s corruption, Phalaxia’s protégée and hench-poet Mimi Buk joined them. As they arranged themselves to cut off any escape, Ana smiled at Mimi and turned back to her helpless victims. “Now, what were you two conventional artists talking about?” she asked sweetly. It was horrible, and ‘conventional artist’ was a pretty serious insult from her.

Squaring his shoulders, Arlo was going to be brave, but Hackenbush saved him the trouble.

“We were talking about that genius in the Bay Area, J.F. Elouardio,” she said. “Certainly you’ve heard of him, Ana, even if you don’t read ‘The Secret Alameda’ magazine on a regular basis.”

“Perhaps,” Ana drawled. “I hear of so many things. What does this Ernesto—”

“Elouardio,” Arlo said helpfully. He wasn’t sure where Hackenbush was going with his idol, J.F., but he at least wanted Phalaxia to get his name right before Hackenbush slammed her into the ground.

“J.F. Elouardio is one of the greatest artists evah,” Hackenbush drawled at Phalaxia. Hackenbush was a girl who got a lot out of a long ‘a’ sound. “He makes acrylics look like oils, oils look like enamels, his collages make grown men cry, and his assemblages, my dear Phalaxia, he’d have done a better job than God cobbling Adam together, if he’d been around, and certainly J.F. would have made an even better Eve. One that could fly, control her fertility, and photosynthesize her own food.”

“I see,” Ana folded her arms and narrowed her eyes.

Mimi and Arlo took surreptitious steps to get behind their respective dates.

“But J.F. has left us all even further in the dust, Ana,” Hackenbush declaimed. “He makes insects of us all.”

“Oh? How so?” Phalaxia asked coldly. She knew she looked a little like a Praying Mantis, but never liked being reminded of it.

“Well, I’ll tell you: J.F. Elouardio is making art in his head,” Hackenbush fixed Phalaxia with her own terrible eye. “And leaving it there.”

Phalaxia was a pretty good sport, at least when Hackenbush had her on the ropes. There was no way to call the singer a liar without starting World War III, and, if she let herself enjoy it, Hackenbush had just spun her a pretty good yarn. “I see,” she said, almost pleasantly. “How... exclusive. Is he selling well?”

“Feh, yes, but that hardly matters to such a genius.”

“He must have excellent representation,” Ana said, and figured she better change the subject before Hackenbush launched into some neurological explanation of neocortical art sales. “Speaking of fine artists, I mean the kind who let their work out of their heads,” she said over Hackenbush’s shoulder to Arlo. “I saw your teacher, Davido, here earlier.”

“Really? I’m surprised. He said he’d see Vogler in hell before he’d copy that painting,” Arlo said. “I only did it because ELAG twisted my arm.”

“Well, you did learn to draw there,” Hackenbush said tartly. “And paint, and sculpt, and write grants, and—”

“Yes. I know.” Arlo scowled at Hackenbush’s sarcastic frown and then at Phalaxia’s louche smirk. “Is he still here?”

“Davido?” Phalaxia asked. “I haven’t seen him since I saw him talking with someone behind the caterer’s tent. He wasn’t in fancy dress, so I don’t image he was planning to stay.”

“Huh. That’s surprising...” Arlo was frowning now.

“Arlo! Come with me!” A muscular woman with short hair grabbed the painter and dragged him toward the house.

“Who was that?” Mimi asked.

Hackenbush and Phalaxia jumped; they’d forgotten she was there. “I’ve no idea,” Phalaxia told her protégée. “Hackenbush?”

Hackenbush sighed. “That was Pam Tucker. Good painter, no manners whatsoever.”

“Is she one of the copyists?” Phalaxia asked.

“Yeah, don’t be cruel, Ana; those twelve poor bastards put aside everything they hold sacred to help ELAG,” she said. “I salute them.”

“As do I, Hackenbush, as do I,” Phalaxia murmured. “But I also understand why Davido didn’t cave in.”

“He’s too big and arrogant? Try again, Ana, he hasn’t sold anything in years,” Hackenbush snarled. “I hear he’s living on his ego and handouts from his students. He’s washed up.”

“That’s not entirely wrong, but not what I was going to say,” Phalaxia said with an edge to her voice. “Davido didn’t cut his art teeth at ELAG; he’s got no loyalty to it.”

“Especially when many of the ELAG kiddies went on to study with him and then left him in the dust,” Hackenbush said. “No, no reason for Davido to care about ELAG a’t’ all a’t’ all.”

“Please don’t quote Hobo Kelly to me,” Phalaxia said. “My little sisters watched that show until I wanted to kill them all.”

“Too bad for you, Ana. By the way, where did you get that dress?” Hackenbush asked, recoiling slightly from the rag just barely covering Phalaxia’s ectomorph frame.