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Office Demons

By

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The day the first demon manifested in Claudia's home office she was two days away from her deadline. It was a very traditional-looking demon apart from its diminutive size: red, horned, bat-winged, with a cartoonish pointed tail. It popped into existence beside her laptop, puffy, squinting, and mewling like a kitten.

Claudia shrieked, pushed her chair away from the desk and stared at the demon as it struggled to open its newborn eyes. She instinctively looked around for something to smack it with, then froze as she realized that it was much too big to kill

with a rolled-up newspaper. Like a mouse. How would she kill a mouse? Traps. Are there demon traps?

She rolled her chair back to her desk slowly. It was almost cute, pudgy in a baby-fat way, like the iconic Japanese characters her niece was so into – ‘chibi,’ her niece would have called it. She had a chibi demon curled up on her desk, its eyes now open and looking not at Claudia but at the gargoyle bookend on the desk. She prodded the demon gently with the eraser end of a pencil, nudging it a little in the direction of the gargoyle.

It seemed perfectly content to lay there and flex its tiny, atrophic wings and make cooing sounds at a cast resin bookend. Like a baby bird or something, she thought. It's imprinting.

Satisfied that it was not going to scamper across the desk or spread the hanta virus, she aligned herself with her laptop again and tried to think about work. Her deadline loomed 36

hours in the future, and she was barely a third of the way through the project. She had put it off for too long and now it was crunch time. She opened a spreadsheet application, took a deep breath, and prepared to work.

Her desk was a mess. Who can function in this kind of environment? she thought. No wonder I'm not getting anything done.

The infant demon rolled over and squealed with delight at its own progress. Claudia found herself smiling at its accomplishment. She wondered if she should name it.



Two days later Claudia breathed a sigh of relief as the due date for the project was pushed out by a week, which should

allow her to not only finish that one but also take care of the new, smaller project that she had been given that morning.

She had thought about capturing the little red demon and releasing it in the wild, but she wasn't sure what a demon's natural habitat was, and after all the thing was still just a baby. It would probably be eaten by predators. So she made a little nest for it in an Inbox on her console and decided to name it Fred.

It hadn't eaten anything. She worried a little about that. A quick search of the web turned up "flesh of evil-doers" as something that demons ate. She felt reassured of her own moral character when it didn't seem to want to nibble on her fingers. Despite taking no visible sustenance, the little creature remained robust and appeared to be growing. It gurgled and cooed in the inbox. She gave it a string of paper-clips to play with.

The two projects waited for her. She decided to make a to-do list, to get her thoughts in order. Manage the problem better. Break it down into discrete tasks.

Beside her, the demon pushed itself up on its chubby infant arms.

The following Friday the ringing of the phone sent Claudia into a panic. The first project wasn't quite done -- well, not even really half-done, if she were to be honest with herself. She thought that she could probably hand it over as-is and then deliver the remaining pieces over the next week or two, but she would have to sell the idea to her boss, who was undoubtedly the person calling at exactly 8:01 a.m. She took a deep breath and answered the phone, ready to pitch the idea of a 'staged delivery' to her boss.

"And how far are you on the Newcastle project?" her boss asked, referring to the newer, smaller project that she should have had done last Wednesday. The worst behind her, the

delivery of the missing pieces scheduled and entered into her Outlook calendar, she could finesse this question with ease.

"The work-estimate was way under," she said fairly convincingly, she thought. "But I should have it done by end-of-day Tuesday. That one wasn't a hard delivery date anyway," she added. "The client should be fine with that."

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and she wondered if she had finally pushed too far.

"Tuesday, then. By 5:00. Talk to you then." The line went dead.

If she worked through the weekend, she could get it all done. She'd need to start on the small project today.

But later today, because right now, she needed to walk the dog.

The dog whimpered and refused to enter the office when she returned.

"What's the matter?" She stroked his furry white head. "It's only Fred. Honestly, being afraid of a baby." She pushed open the office door.

The dog sort of had a point. The little demon couldn't properly be called a baby anymore. More of a toddler, really. It tottered on its chubby legs, little wings flexing as if working their way up to flight. It babbled, waved its chain of paperclips around, and pointed at her printer where a second tiny demon slept. Behind her, the dog cowered and whined.

She peered at the second demon. "Where did you come from?" she muttered, wondering for the first time about the reproductive capability of office demons. This one resembled the first in form -- same wee batwings, same little horns and tail -- but was a mottled blue and purple, the colors of a bruise. Not as pretty as Fred, but certainly as cute. "Well, the more the merrier, right? It's not as if you need anything from me." It was true. No food, no water. There were nothing like demon

fewmets lying around for her to clean up. In fact, they smelled a little bit sweet and spicy, like cedar wood.

Maybe they would like to be together, she thought, and reached for Fred. A sharp pain in her index finger made her jerk her hand back. Blood welled in the small cuts.

"Did you just bite me?" she demanded of Fred, who just cooed and smiled at her, his teeth stained red with her blood.



Who does one call, she wondered as she counted them up, to get rid of demons? Is this something an exterminator can handle? Was it even ethical to call an exterminator? They seemed so... substantial. Would Animal Control and the Humane Society be a better bet? Or does an infestation of this kind require the assistance of the Vatican? She'd read that they actually had a department that handles exorcism, but she wasn't

possessed in the usual sense of the word. Her office was possessed, or maybe 'occupied' would be a better word for it. Like a gaggle of geese, or a pride of lions: an occupation of demons.

The first few phone calls were awkward as she tried to explain her problem to the person on the other end. Even her local Catholic parish had turned her down -- admittedly with better humor than most. She was hung up on five times and was ready to give up when she finally got a bewildered woman with a pest control company to book her.

"I'm sorry, I'm not clear what it is you've got -- are they insects?"

"No. They're demons."

There was a pause on the other end.

"Is that a kind of bird?"

"Not exactly. More like a kind of bat, really," Claudia said, examining -- but not touching, she knew better than that -- the wings of one of the newer demons.

"Oh, bats! Sure, we handle bats. They're in your attic, then?"

"No, they're in my office. On my desk, under my chair, in the filing cabinet."

"Those don't sound like bats."

"They're not. I said they were more like bats than birds, not that they were bats. They're demons."

The poor woman on the other end of the phone line was losing the thread.

"We'll send someone out to do an estimate. How is next Thursday?"

"You can't send someone sooner? They seem to be multiplying awfully quickly. I can't get anything done at all."

There's one curled up on my laptop. I think it likes the warmth."

"Thursday is the soonest I've got."

Claudia sighed and agreed to Thursday at ten o'clock.

Until then she would just have to hope that the population held steady at the current two dozen.

It was clear that she would have to move out of the office and abandon it to the new occupants. She went to the kitchen and got her tongs, the ones with the silicon-coated ends and the scissor-handle-like grip. Just in case, she found a pair of crusty leather work gloves in the garage.

She approached the laptop demon carefully. None of them seemed inclined to move fast, but the dozen bites she'd got in the past week had taught her to take precautions.

She nudged the sleeping demon very gently with the tongs. It mewled, but didn't open its eyes. Encouraged, Claudia carefully pushed the little demon off the laptop and

onto the desk. The one-inch drop to the cold desk startled it, and it finally opened its eyes and hissed at her angrily.

"Bite me," she told it, and hoped that wasn't the wrong phrase to use just then. The creature pushed itself up and screeched at her a little, but didn't seem to want to attack. She scooped up the laptop, unplugging it and leaving the cord sitting on the desk. The space under the desk where she was plugged into the power strip currently housed a trio of leathery, colorful not-birds. She would have to solve the problem of auxiliary power later. For now, at least she could get some work done.

The exterminator, when he finally came, stood in the office doorway for a long time, stroking his chin and making thoughtful noises. He was a tall, gaunt, pallid man, closer to what Claudia assumed a mortician would look like than an exterminator, though she would have to concede that the two were related. His cover-alls (which had a standard embroidered

patch that said “Turner”) seemed two sizes too large for him, and out of context. She could imagine this man in a somber suit and tie.

Claudia stood in the kitchen with her cup of coffee and watched the exterminator watch her demons. She could tell nothing from his expression.

“How long have you had them?” he finally asked.

“About three weeks.”

“That one’s the oldest?” he asked, pointing at Fred, who was now roughly the size of a golden retriever. Fred blinked idly at her from his place in the corner, just in her line of sight from the kitchen. Claudia nodded, then realized that the man hadn’t taken his eyes off the infestation.

“Yeah. He was the first. Fred.”

“Never name them. People get attached when they name them. Best to think of them as undesirable vermin.”

“Do you think you can get rid of them?” He took so long to answer that she wasn’t sure if he had heard her.

“We’ll see.”

A quick check of her email told Claudia that her client had not been understanding about her most recent missed deadline, and wanted a drop-dead date on which they could absolutely count on the project being complete.

Turner came and went, carrying cages and long poles with loops at the end, presumably for capturing the demons. They offered very little resistance, in fact, and Claudia wondered if she hadn’t been making too hard a job of it all. It appeared that the exterminator simply walked up to them, put the loop around their necks, and led them straight to the cages. A dolly moved them from the office to his truck. She wondered what would happen to them when they were gone.

The hardest part was just finding them all. There were none in the attic, which seemed to surprise Turner, but Claudia

felt that it seemed natural. They seemed to crop up wherever she spent time, and she hadn't been in the attic for years.

A couple of hours later Turner pulled away with his truck laden with demon-filled cages. They all seemed completely unperturbed by this sudden change in their circumstances.

Claudia watched them as he drove away. Fred raised a clawed hand in farewell.

The truck rounded the corner and disappeared from sight.

Claudia took a deep breath, went back inside, and tripped over a fat, green demon.

It hissed at her and snapped at her boot, and as she kicked it away another demon in the kitchen caught her eye. She crept warily back toward her office.

Fred stood in the doorway, steaming a little. His lips quivered over his snaggle teeth. Claudia backed her way through the house very slowly, reaching out behind her for the knob of the front door.

She heard the distinctive diesel chug of the exterminator's truck pulling back into her driveway. She opened the door.

"I didn't really think that would work, but it was worth a try." Claudia nodded mutely. "I suspect that they're barely corporeal. Don't worry, though. We're not beaten yet."

Turner set the satchel down on the tile floor, kneeled beside it, and rummaged through it. "Where did I put..." He pulled a book from the bag and sat down cross-legged on the floor. He thumbed through the book hastily, searching. Claudia tried to get a look at the cover: Hauntings, Possessions, and Poltergeists: A Handbook for the Amateur Exorcist.

"You can't be serious."

Turner looked up at her placidly.

"Ma'am, if you don't mind my saying so, you have demons. What did you think we were going to do with them? Set out mousetraps?"

“Right. You’re the expert.” She backed out of the entry way and toward the hall. “I’ll be in my room. Let me know if you need anything.”

The exterminator-turned-exorcist returned to his reading without a word.

A few minutes later she heard the sound of water running in the kitchen, followed by a loud crash, as of her pot rack falling from the ceiling. She lay on her bed and covered her head with her pillow. The demon in the closet snuffled indignantly.

She did her best to ignore the sounds coming from her kitchen and office. More pounding, likely from Fred; Turner shouting in what could only be Latin; more clattering and banging and at one point what she was certain was her crystal stemware breaking into a thousand pieces. She tried to read a book, which was futile, and finally resorted to headphones.

Eventually the sun slanted through the sheers with a warm evening glow, and she ventured back out into the main part of the house. The crashes had abated.

Turner lay on her couch in the living room, his already stringy hair made even more lank by perspiration.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “Can I get you something?”

“An aspirin, if you have it,” he said without opening his eyes.

She stepped gingerly through the wreckage of her kitchen and found one plastic cup at the back of the cabinet that had been spared. She brought the man a cup of water and two aspirin, and sat down on the ottoman.

“So. I see that the yellow one is still in the broom closet.”

“They’re all still there.”

“Fred?”

“Fred, too.”

“What do I do?”

“Ma’am,” he said, pulling himself upright to take the aspirin and water from her, “you’re going to have to figure out where they came from. And then you’re going to have to send them back.” He stood and brushed the broken glass off his satchel. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you.” He made his way to the door. “No charge,” he said, and left.



Getting started is the hard part, she thought as she faced off with what could now only properly be called a horde.

She hadn’t slept due to the racket that they made, dozens of snuffling, chattering demons infesting the north end of her house. Her bedroom was still unmolested, and she considered this the one stroke of luck she’d had during this ordeal. Now it was 8:30 a.m., sunlight streamed through the kitchen window, she couldn’t reach her coffee pot due to the small black and

green demon who had taken up residence on the burner, and Claudia had had enough.

Behind her office door she imagined a half dozen of them grew and flourished in the dark. The source of the muffled clatters and bangs that came from that room she could only guess at. Fred was in there still.

She went out to the garage to see what she had that could be used as a weapon. Her father had once used a shovel to dispatch an injured rabbit. She remembered the metallic thunk that the shovel had made, and wondered if she could really bring herself to do it.

What if she did it, and the others came to defend their peer?

She returned to the house empty-handed, brushing past the calendar tacked by the kitchen door as she did so. Something on it caught her eye. Mom's birthday.

Oh, no. It was yesterday. She had meant to call but had put it off, she told herself, because of the demons. She would do it now. She worked on what she would say to her mother as she tried to find the phone in the wreckage of the kitchen.

The phone rang helpfully from behind a squat, pink demon. Claudia sneaked her arm around it carefully, never taking her eyes off its face. She took her time, and whoever the caller was, they went to voice mail.

Its face. There was something about its face that seemed terribly familiar. Its mouth was rimmed in a shade of orange that Claudia particularly detested, and its eyes had an accusatory look to them that she had only seen on one person in her life.

She took a slow step away from the counter, phone in hand. She stared at the creature on her counter top, which stared back at her and shifted back and forth on its squat pink hindquarters. Claudia dialed the phone.

One ring. Two rings. Mom would have seen the caller ID now, and would say something snarky to Claudia's father about her ungrateful daughter. Three rings. On four it would go to voice mail. A split second before it could do so, her mother's voice answered.

"Happy belated birthday, Mom," she said.

The pink demon blinked once in surprise, and vanished, leaving only a dusty orange smudge where it had been.

"Yes!" she shouted into the phone. "Mom, I love you, and I'm so sorry I didn't call you yesterday but I've got to go right now. I'll explain later. I'll make it up to you, I promise. I'll take you out to the tea room for lunch this weekend. Hi to Dad for me," she said and hung up before her mother could say anything at all.

She stood in the kitchen and turned around slowly.

"You," she said to the mottled brown and green demon, "are the recycling I haven't taken out." It scuttled nervously

into the corner and cowered there. “And you,” she said, pointing an accusing finger at a diminutive, dirty white demon that had made itself at home on a pile of papers on her counter, “are the auto club membership I haven’t renewed.” The white demon snuffled and scattered papers onto the floor as it tried to arrange them into a nest.

The sound of the phone ringing again made her pause in her survey. Something wasn’t right. Something about the phone.

She’d been ignoring it all day. Surely there must be an Ignored Phone Demon somewhere. Something small, yellow, and shiny like Bakelite. Shouldn’t it be on the counter beside the phone? Or maybe nesting on top of the phone book. But there was nothing.

What could it mean?

There must already be a demon associated with that phone call.

A crash came from behind the door of her office. The phone rang again.

“Hello?”

The office door actually bulged when the next crash came. Claudia shrieked and dropped the phone, catching it just before it reached the floor.

“Hello?” she said into it again, her hand and voice shaking. A sound as of a large, angry animal breathing heavily came from the space under the door. She fancied she saw a wisp of smoke, and smelled sulfur.

“Claudia, I’ve been trying to reach you since yesterday. The Stilton project was supposed to be handed off yesterday. I’ve been on the phone with the president of the company three times since then and he wants an explanation. So, in fact, do I.”

Her stomach turned and she felt the ice-water sting of unavoidable accountability pour down her back. She stood

paralyzed for a moment, trying to think of what to say to her employer.

There was quite definitely smoke coming from under the office door now, and the sound of something hungry grinding its teeth.

“Claudia?”

The office door burst right off its hinges. Claudia screamed and jumped away, trying to dodge the splinters and hardware that came flying into the kitchen. Demons hissed and scrambled for cover. The phone was forgotten.

She hid behind the counter and watched the smoke clear. She had locked that door a week ago, with a number of demons still inside, all of which were probably quite angry at having been abandoned to the dark all that time. A number of demons, including...

“Fred?”

The snaggle-toothed thing loomed in the doorway, too wide now to step through without turning. He was slouched and hulking. His ill-fitting lower jaw dripped with infernal drool, which hissed and bubbled as it hit the linoleum floor. His skin was still shiny and red, particularly so on the roundness of his abdomen. He looked healthy, she thought with an odd sense of relief. He looked scary as hell, but he was fit, healthy, and not at all angry. He rolled his blood-shot yellow eyes up at her in the most pathetic way. He looked miserable.

“You’re the Stilton project.”

Behind him glimpses of lesser obligations moved in the dim light of the office.

She moved toward him slowly but steadily until she was standing within reach of him. She touched his shoulder gently and he moved aside to let her into the office.

She found the office phone and Fred watched her intently while she dialed.

“Sorry about that,” she said when her boss answered.

“There was – there was an accident in front of my house.

About the Stilton project.” She took a deep breath. “It’s not

done.” She waited for what seemed like a very long time for

the silence to end. When it didn’t, she forged ahead. “I need

more time. I thought I could get it done, but I haven’t, and I

need more time.”

“How much.”

“Three days.”

“I’ll see what I can do. When this is over you and I are

going to have a very long talk about your future with this

company, but for now I’m going to get you your three days.

And you’re going to get it done. Understood?”

“Understood, sir. And thank you.”

A dozen eyes blinked at her in the office half-light.

She retrieved her laptop from her bedroom, silent and dead, having run out of battery life two days ago. She pushed her way past the substantial bulk of the two demons under the desk and located the power supply. The laptop bleeped into life.

Fred ambled around the side of her desk and crouched down in the corner behind her. He seemed comforted by her presence, and strangely, she felt comforted by his. She reached over and scratched him behind his horns. He shut his eyes and within minutes was wheezing softly to himself in sleep.

Her email inbox was a nightmarish stew of questions, answers, requests, responses, requirements, and demands. She checked the time: 3:00 p.m. She would spend today sifting through this, finding all of the project guidelines that she'd missed.

It was nearly nine o'clock when she finally read through the last item in her inbox. She was startled by a loud 'pop' and

the acrid smell of burning electrical wire. Across the room where there had previously been three pale and patchy demons there were now only two. They looked at each other and shifted themselves into the space left by their fallen comrade.

She had read everything pertaining to the project, and she knew what her next step was. She needed to eat something, get some rest, and be ready to work hard tomorrow. She shut down her laptop and headed for the kitchen.

Fred rolled over in his sleep.

Before she went to bed she took out the recycling. The bottle-brown demon followed her to the curb, scuffling through the carpet of autumn leaves and leaving a trail of singed fallen foliage behind it.

It disappeared as soon as she closed the bin.

She woke at six the next morning, before her alarm had even gone off. She found a new demon in her closet that she initially had trouble identifying. She finally realized it was the

same color and texture as the shoes she had bought in a fit of breakup-induced consumerism and had meant to return to the store unworn. She found the shoes still in the shopping bag. She resolved to start a pile by the front door for the things she couldn't handle without leaving the house. The little Unreturned Shoes Demon ambled along after her.

She found the Over-Due Oil Change Demon squelching quietly to itself in the garage.

By seven thirty she was at her desk and working. She gave the still sleeping Fred an affectionate pat. He looked smaller and more vulnerable when he was asleep.

The day flew. By lunch time she had written a modest document detailing how she was going to implement the client's requirements, which she emailed to her boss as a gesture of good faith.

A quick round of errands on her lunch break cleared the entry way of supernatural manifestations.

She settled in to write the module. She had forgotten somewhere along the way how much fun it was to immerse herself in building something and making it work. She found herself blinking in the darkening office, five o'clock having come and gone. She was at a good stopping point and had all of tomorrow to finish. She was certain that it would be enough, certain in a real way rather than the kind of certain she'd been until now.

She took a glass of wine to her front porch and watched the sunset. Fred followed her and sat beside her on the steps. He didn't seem at all intimidating now. In fact, she found herself looking down at the top of his shiny little head. How could he have seemed so huge and frightening just yesterday?

Claudia's sleep was deep and dreamless. She was up again the following day at six.

The kitchen was now completely uninhabited, except for herself and the dog. The coffee maker perked and hissed

cheerily, filling the house with olfactory pleasantness. She wandered happily to her office, where Fred, now the sole survivor of the occupation, waited for her.

The module was nearly done. She had maybe an hour of work left on it, and then a couple of hours of testing. It would be easy. She'd be able to notify her boss of its completion by noon.

Something nagged at her while she worked. Something chewing on her brain stem, some reason to feel guilty still. It wasn't the work, that was nearly done, and she'd found her stride again. It was something else.

Fred shifted in his place in the corner, and snored. He was the only one left. He really was smaller, she hadn't imagined it.

Her momentum faltered a little at this realization, but she pressed on. She had been right. It was quarter to eleven when she fixed the last bug, and eleven thirty when she zipped up her

files and attached them to an email to her boss. Her cursor hovered over the 'send' button, her hand on the mouse.

Fred woke, startling like an infant, which he resembled once again. She looked down at him, the tiny thing that he had become, and reached out to him. He toddled toward her and she lifted him easily to the spot in front her printer. He had liked it there best when he was little.

“You know,” she said to him, “I think I’m going to miss you.” She gave him a tickle. “But I’ll be glad to have my life back.”

He smiled and cooed. Claudia clicked 'send.'



Claudia smiled with satisfaction as the Physical Fitness demon who was hiding in the closet went poof when she tied on her running shoes for the first time in weeks.

She jogged around the block with the dog, enjoying the morning sunshine. A few houses down from her own a man stood in front of his garage, the door open. The man stood with his back to Claudia, a rake in his hands, pointing inward at the suburban museum to hardware and sporting goods.

Claudia jogged up the driveway and stood beside him, trying to catch her breath. She extended a sweaty hand.

“I’m Claudia.”

“Rick,” the man said, never taking his eyes off the dark cavern of the garage.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Rick. So... demons?”