

In the Bill of the Beast

by TheSoftie

Even in the middle of summer, it turned out that a temperature soaring over 110 degrees on a cloudless day was enough to drive most beachgoers away. All the better for Hazel, though—the noisy crowds of tourists that usually occupied this baking strip of sand had made it hard for her to get her tan finished.

It was the last day of the *Pearl of the Atlantic*'s stay in this scenic island cove, and she'd had a dinner date with her girlfriend, Brooke, set for tonight from the moment she'd arrived. She'd already bought some jewelry and a lovely dress, and Hazel had been hoping to get a tan to complete the look. She'd been unable to sit still with the business of the beach earlier in the week, but it was practically abandoned today.

She hummed happily as she laid out her towel and popped in some earbuds, picking out a calm playlist to listen to. After applying a light layer of sunscreen and setting a timer to remind her when to turn over, she lay down and closed her eyes, luxuriating in the tranquil atmosphere. Hazel quickly found herself growing tired, the relaxing warmth and peaceful music lulling her to a light sleep. As she drifted off, she pictured tonight's date, and a soft smile graced her face as she thought of how pretty she'd be...

Beep beep! Beep beep! Beep be—

Hazel fumbled around with her eyes still shut until she found her phone, turning off the timer. She blinked a few times, finding that the sun had descended a bit from its zenith, but that the beach was still empty. Just as she was about to turn over and try to get some more rest, she noticed that her previous evaluation wasn't *entirely* correct. Stalking around some distance away was a large pelican, which must have either ignored her or not noticed her. With a shrug, she decided it couldn't hurt to give it the same treatment, and flipped over onto her belly before settling back in for another half-hour.

Much as she tried, however, she now found sleep elusive. The soft *crunch* of sand underneath the pelican's webbed feet was fine enough, but every time she found herself growing drowsy, the bird waved its wings and let loose a loud squawk. For a few minutes, she figured she'd just wait for it to go away, but eventually it woke her one too many times.

‘Gah!’ she shouted in irritation, sitting up to look at the offending pelican. ‘Could you find some other beach to flap around on? I’m trying to tan here.’

The bird stared back at her, its attention aroused by her outburst, though it obviously couldn’t understand a word she’d said. After a few moments, it squawked again, then began to walk closer.

‘Ah, forget it, you’re just a dumb bird,’ Hazel muttered, still annoyed but reconciled to the fact that she wasn’t likely to get another nap. She sighed and returned to her tanning position—which, unfortunately for her, prominently presented her sweaty, sunscreen-lathered butt to the pelican’s inquisitive bill. It marched up and inspected the sunbather’s rear for a few moments as she lay motionless, blissfully unaware that the bird was eyeing her up. Then, with one swift motion, it pounced.

Hazel’s eyes shot open as she felt the creature’s bill latch around her butt, provoking a visceral scream of shock. Propping herself up and turning to confront her assailant, she tried fruitlessly to pull herself out of the pelican’s vice-like grip. ‘What the—get off of me! Stupid bird...’

Despite her best efforts, she found it impossible to work free from the bird’s bill. Hazel could only watch with horror as the bird slowly, delicately pulled its head up, lifting her up by her butt. The pelican’s relatively small size belied an impressive amount of strength, and with some difficulty it was able to raise its intended prey entirely into the air. Suddenly, gravity was on its side—a fact that Hazel realised once she started flailing more violently. She flailed her limbs and screamed bloody murder, but the only effect was to jolt the pelican’s bill open further, allowing it to swallow her deeper.

After a few moments of blind struggle, Hazel abruptly stopped when she realised the negative effect her escape attempt was having. She was more or less stuck in a jackknife position, with her upper legs and lower torso inside the pelican’s pouch. Moving more deliberately now, she placed both hands against the bird’s bill and attempted to push her way out, but to no avail. The pelican responded by progressively weakening and tightening its grip several times, dropping her a few inches deeper with each cycle. Its pouch didn’t seem large enough to contain all of her, and its stomach had to be even smaller, but...well, she’d already underestimated this bird once, and it hadn’t turned out well so far.

‘O-okay, I can still g-get out of this...’ Hazel stammered, trying to avoid aggravating the pelican as she leaned forward and attempted to grab her phone. ‘Just gotta...c-call Brooke and let her know what’s going on...no need to p-panic...’

As if mocking her, the bird chose that moment to take a particularly large gulp, leaving only Hazel’s shoulders and head along with her lower legs outside its mouth. Just like that, her phone was completely out of her reach—and it was becoming increasingly obvious that, as impossible as it seemed, the pelican was entirely capable of swallowing her whole. Hazel’s momentary burst of confidence promptly gave way to sheer terror, and in an act of desperation she reverted to flailing wildly, her legs kicking at the creature’s bill in the vain hope that it would somehow cause it to let her go. Instead, it took the easier route and simply swallowed one last time, unceremoniously dropping Hazel into its pouch.

To her surprise, it wasn’t entirely dark inside the pelican’s mouth. The thin skin surrounding her was so stretched by her body—even forced into the fetal position, as she quickly found herself—that it was slightly translucent, letting in some light from the outside world. It was hard to see much with her limited movement, but by twisting her head Hazel was able to spot the entrance to the creature’s esophagus behind her, a narrow opening that seemed to be just a few inches in diameter. She would say it was impossible for her to fit down it, but she was wary by this point of being proven wrong again.

While Hazel grew relatively accustomed to her strange surroundings, the pelican began to move again, waddling more slowly now that it was carrying such a large meal. Over the span of a few minutes, it crossed the beach towards a shaded cave beneath some rocks, out of the sun—and less visible to any potential passersby, its prey noted with a sinking heart. Her struggles exhausted, Hazel resigned herself to waiting until the pelican either swallowed her deeper or let her out. As she settled into her position, she realised with disappointment that she was probably going to miss her date with Brooke. Well, at least if she made it out of this, she’d have a hell of an excuse.

‘Hazel? Are you out here?’

Hazel started awake at the sound of her name. She hadn’t meant to fall asleep this time, but the warm confines of the pelican’s bill and the relaxing quiet of the empty beach had lulled her to a brief rest. The faint light visible through the partially-clear pouch had grown dimmer and redder; it was close to sunset, and the cave was cast in long shadows.

Some distance across the beach, though, Hazel was able to make out a lone figure, standing near her towel and looking around. ‘Brooke?’ she murmured, still waking up.

‘Her stuff is all here...’ the woman said, kneeling to investigate what Hazel had left behind when she’d been eaten. ‘Her phone’s still playing music, but she hasn’t touched it in hours...where could she have gone?’

‘Brooke!’ Hazel shouted, recognising her girlfriend’s voice. ‘Brooke, I’m over here! Please, h-help me!’

To her dismay, the sound didn’t carry enough for Brooke to hear her. However, she *was* noticed—by the pelican, which seemed to have fallen asleep as well, and now roused at the desperate shrieks of its prey. Lifting up its head, the creature began trying to swallow its unruly meal, leading Hazel’s protests to become even more frantic.

‘Brooke, pl-please! I—I don’t want to die! Please, you have to—*gahh!*’

Her cries were abruptly interrupted as the pelican gave a massive gulp, its esophagus forcefully expanding as it pulled Hazel deeper, once again starting with her sumptuous rear end. As the bird continued to swallow, showing no sign of slowing down as her belly and legs slipped into its throat, the woman’s screams devolved into incoherent babbling, tears running down her face as she came to terms with her dire circumstances.

‘Maybe she just left in a hurry and forgot her stuff?’ Brooke mused. ‘...yeah, that’s probably it. I’ll bet she’s waiting for me at the restaurant now...shit, I’ve gotta hurry...’

Hazel could only watch as Brooke grabbed her towel and phone and ran off towards town, taking with her the only sign that she’d been on the beach. As she stared in shock, grappling with the sudden loss of her last real chance at salvation, the pelican continued to steadily swallow, gradually pulling her into its esophagus. Unlike the jarring series of gulps with which it had forced her into its pouch, this process was proving much smoother—little consolation given she was moments from being digested, though. Her voice hoarse from screaming for help, she could only manage a weak ‘Brooke...’ before the pelican swallowed her entirely and she was surrounded by darkness.

The remainder of Hazel’s life was defined by torturous pain. As much as she pleaded for release—or, at the very least, the sleep she’d drifted off into earlier—she was kept awake for

hours by the increasing sting of acid soaking into her skin and the raw, violent agony as she was tenderised by the rough stomach walls. Her thoughts descended from hopeless acceptance into fevered fantasies of being unexpectedly thrown up or rescued by Brooke—interspersed by moments of lucidity in which the horrific scenes of her ongoing digestion were alarmingly clear. One moment she imagined herself at dinner with her girlfriend, being complimented on her lovely tan; the next she felt her hand crushed until it was violently forced off of her arm with a sickening *crrk* of bone. Her voice was, by now, almost entirely gone, her vocal cords irreversibly damaged by the pelican's relentless digestive system, but her mouth still moved as she whispered short, single words—*Brooke, please, help*.

Finally, mercifully, she became too weak to stay awake, her mind and body shutting down as she lost the last semblances of humanity. In the darkness of the pelican's full belly, as her melting skin sloughed off and her mulched remains collapsed in on themselves, what remained of Hazel's eyes slid shut for the final time.