

Coming Clean in the Devil's Bathtub

Simon filled another jar with water from the hot spring, capped it, and set it in the crate with the others. He watched the morning light rising over the tree line and breaking across the mountainside. Colorado boasted one of the grandest landscapes he'd laid eyes on – and he'd seen plenty all over the world during the Great War. Still not seen any he wanted to call Home.

Enough of that. Simon rose from his crouch on the bank and stretched, breathing in the tranquility. The only sounds were pines whispering to the spring, and the bubbling water answering back as it pooled in the clearing before flowing on down the mountain.

Rusty hinges and a cussing woman interrupted that peaceful conversation. The rear door of the delivery truck they'd been living in for the last year screeched open. A wooden crutch sailed out and skidded in the grass. Its mate followed. Then Bernice hopped out and picked them up.

She was ready – barefoot and wearing a dress just a step up from a flour sack. With the gleam in her hazel eyes and honey-colored curls dancing around her rosy face, she looked way too robust to be playing the part she did in their game.

But Simon had figured out during their adventures across the country that people didn't get too caught up worrying over the details if they got what they wanted. And that's why their game worked.

Bernice walked to Simon, dragging the crutches behind her. "How much longer?"

"Folks will be here soon." Simon had tacked notices to the board at the general store and the church down in the holler.

"No, Si. I mean how much longer are we gonna keep doing this? I'm tired. Aren't you tired?"

As usual, she'd been reading his mind, and his heart. He pulled Bernice to him, and she rested her head against his chest. "Very tired. But this will all be worth it when we wake up on our very own farm. Soon on a morning just like this, I'll be out in the pasture checking cattle but thinking about that mess of fresh-laid eggs you're cooking up. Maybe a slab of ham too if you don't make a pet out of the pig."

They giggled together and Simon breathed her in. She smelled sweeter than any old Colorado mountain air. He stroked her back, murmuring, "We're almost there on the down payment, Bernie. Maybe another six months. Four if our luck holds."

Bernice pulled back from him and nodded, her smile fading. She looked around and a worried hiss escaped her. "Why would someone name such a pretty place The Devil's Bathtub? Gives me the shivers, like something bad happened here."

“Just somebody being clever with it being a hot spring and all. Devil’s no more real than the Other Guy. We just work the side –”

Bernice chanted with him, “That pays better! Show Time!”

Bernice rose on her toes and brushed Simon’s lips with hers. She swung the crutches up under her arm and ran to the dirt road. She disappeared into the trees.

A small geyser of water spouted up from the center of the pool in a cloud of steam but then gurgled back down. The pines swayed, nodding agreement to whatever the spring told them.

“Brothers and sisters, I feel God with us!”

“Amen!”

Simon watched the people gathered across from him around the hot spring. They had come up on horseback from the holler or had piled in by the wagonload. A few drove motor cars. The ones not leaning on canes and crutches clasped their hands in prayer or waved them about in exultation – but they all carried the look of people hurting for miracles.

“Brothers and sisters, can you feel Jesus with us today?”

“Amen!”

“Hallelujah!”

“Praise God!”

Bernice was among them, swaying on her crutches. She kept her head bowed and her bare right foot turned in and curled. Her story if anyone ever asked was that she was from a little town over yonder, come all this way to see the miracle-working “Brother Peter Lovejoy.” But no one ever asked. Bernie always hovered around the back of the crowd until Simon got them revved up, so she was all but invisible in the light of promised wonders.

In the light of Simon. He knew he looked blessed. He was tall and blond with eyes the color of a prairie sky and a voice that could call down a god or rally a mob. With his store-bought trousers and shiny shoes, he was a man sat apart. A man who could do things. For just a coin or two he might do something for them.

“Do you feel God’s healing love flowing over us like this beautiful hot spring?”

“Amen!”

“Help me, Jesus!”

Simon’s eye kept settling on a bearded man who leaned up against the passenger door of their truck like it was his. He was spare but handsome with a silver goatee pointed like a spade and a dark fedora pulled down low on his brow. When the bearded man turned and walked around the truck, Simon saw that the man’s brocade vest was ripped in the back along the shoulder blades like some wildcat had been at it.

And the bearded man knew he had Simon’s attention. Whenever someone cried out, he caught Simon up in a wink and a grin.

“God is calling his instrument! I feel the power of Christ running through me like lightning in a thunderstorm! Who wants to feel it?”

The people surged against the bank.

“Here, Brother Lovejoy!”

“Brother Lovejoy – please!”

Simon looked over them, then shut his eyes and lowered his head. It was part of the act, but it was also getting harder to look at all those pinched desperate faces. Simon felt the words rising in his throat like bile, telling them to go home and stop being so naïve. But then he

imagined himself standing in a field of sweet corn. Just him and his corn tousling in the sun and nobody calling for Brother Lovejoy.

He took a deep breath and looked through heavy eyelids. Like a divining rod his arm rose, and his finger shot out to Bernice. Simon raised his head.

“Lady in the brown dress. God wants you to accept His healing love. Will you take it?”

Bernice nodded, sobbing. Two men helped Bernice set her crutches aside and she leaned on them as they lowered her into the pool.

Simon kicked off his shoes and waded across to meet her. He braced her back against his arm as she pretended to struggle to stand in the waist-deep water.

“Christ’s healing love!” Simon dropped his arm and Bernice fell back into the hot spring.

A hush fell over the crowd.

Bernice rose from the water on her own, her arms held high. The people gasped and cheered when she climbed up on the bank unassisted. Bernice did a quick little jig step and made a show of throwing her crutches away.

The excited townspeople raised their hands and called to Simon, imploring to be healed next. Simon waded back to his side of the water and climbed out, feigning exhaustion. He dragged himself to the crate of jars and set an empty metal coffee tin down beside the crate.

“Hallelujah! Brothers and sisters, I would love nothing more than to stay in the water until we drained it dry bringing God’s power to each and every one of you. But I’m spent. God’s instrument is tired, but I can’t let you leave empty handed. For just one dollar you can take a blessed jar of healing water home today!”

People crowded up to the crate. Simon always held his breath, waiting for someone to discover right then that the miracle had gone flat. But they always carried off their unopened jars

like stolen treasure. Did they open them later and believe themselves unworthy of love and miracles? Or did they leave them on their mantelpieces until all the water dried up, afraid to hope? Those images woke Simon up at night.

Soon the sounds of rumbling motors, wagon wheels and trotting horses faded away. Bernice slipped away between the trees.

The bearded man in the vest and fedora was the last in line. He pressed a paper dollar into Simon's hand and took a jar.

As the man turned to go, Simon looked at the dollar and frowned.

"Hey! This dollar is fake! It's got your picture on it!"

The bearded man laughed but kept walking.

Simon hollered, "I need a real dollar or my jar back, mister!"

The bearded man turned then. "But this water came from my spring."

"Your spring?"

He sat the jar down and bowed. "Welcome to my bathtub."

Simon choked out a laugh. "Oh, I get it. Devil's Bathtub. So you are The Devil, huh?"

The man doffed his hat and revealed two thick spirals of bone jutting through his silver hair. They twisted over his forehead like a ram's horns in miniature, but colored crimson and gold. They matched his vest.

"Oh, not *The Devil*. Just a demon. But this is my neck of the woods. You took a lot of water out of my bathtub today, so we need to talk about payment."

The demon glanced into the trees behind the truck.

"Why don't you come out and join us, Mrs. Henretty?"

Bernice emerged from the trees. Her wary eyes never left the demon as she made her way to Simon, like a rabbit watching a fox. Simon figured he looked the same. They clasped hands and stared at their visitor.

Bernice stammered, "Look, we don't want any trouble. You can take the money in the tin."

The demon shook his head, snickering, and pointed at the paper dollar still in Simon's hand. "As you can see, I have my own money. I don't want what you swindled out of the folks today. What I want is for you two to stop playing this game."

Simon threw down the dollar and snarled, "Why would a 'demon' care what we're doing? We're not hurting anybody. Not really," he added after a breath.

"What is it you say, Simon – don't worry over the details, as long as it comes out in the end? So the yokels get a show and no harm done." The demon's face clouded. "You two snake oil salesmen want to bet your farm on that?"

He took a step toward them, and Bernice and Simon backed up. "Or how about betting your souls? That's the game *I* play."

The demon chuckled when Simon pulled Bernice toward their truck, murmuring, "How could he know about the farm?"

Bernice whispered back, "He must have been hiding in the trees earlier when we were talking."

But that didn't explain how he knew their last name, Simon thought.

Simon turned back to the demon, pushing Bernice behind him. "Well, it takes one grifter to know another – and that's what you are with your pasteboard horns and parlor tricks! There are no such things as demons, and you can't stop us!"

The bearded man pointed a tapered finger with a yellow nail at Bernice, then crooked it.

Bernice shrieked and collapsed to the ground.

Simon fell over her. "Sweetheart? Bernie, what's wrong?" Simon watched in horrified disbelief while her legs withered before his eyes, thin as twigs. Her right foot folded on itself like a wrung-out cloth.

Simon tried to rage at the bearded man, but a sob escaped him instead. He cried, "What did you do?"

The demon pointed at himself, mocking Simon. "Who, me? You just told me I can't do anything!"

Bernice writhed between them, holding her twisted legs to her belly and moaning. Simon's rosy dreams of cattle and corn shattered against this scarlet nightmare of Bernie broken and in agony. Simon begged, "Make it stop!"

The demon's voice snaked hard and low against Simon's ears, riding beneath Bernie's crying. "Vow to me that *you* will stop."

Simon nodded as he rocked Bernice against him.

The demon struck a pose and cupped his hand by his pointed ear. "What's that? Didn't catch it!"

Simon shouted, "Yes! We will stop the game!"

In one fluid motion the demon swooped down over Bernice and picked her up, pivoted, and threw her into the spring. She disappeared beneath the water.

Simon screamed Bernice's name and raced to the bank. He jumped.

Bernice stood in the pool, water streaming from her. She patted her legs, eyes wide with amazement to find them whole again. She waded to meet Simon in the stream. He looked at her and she nodded, sobbing.

They watched the demon who stood motionless with no expression on his face. Still eyeing him, they clambered up the bank and stumbled past him to their truck. After a false start the old truck roared to life and it careened down the rutted dirt road.

Simon and Bernice were silent, wet and shivering in the cab of the truck. Simon kept stealing looks at Bernice's legs. Water trickled over his face that wasn't from the spring.

His attention snapped back to the road when they bounced across a washed-out gully. The glove box lid jarred open, and Bernice worked to push everything back in and close it. She frowned at a thick piece of paper folded in among the tools and hard candy.

"So we'll start smaller than we planned," Simon said, his voice weak.

"Si."

"We can buy a few acres. More if it's not choice land. Maybe a cow."

"Si. Look at this. Am I dreaming?"

Bernice held the paper up to Simon, but all he saw was the smile lighting up her face.

The demon stood by the spring and watched the road long after the sounds of their truck stopped echoing through the holler. When the wind picked up in the clearing and a cloud passed over the sun, he flinched and looked up with a grimace.

"I know! I'm sorry for the theatrics, but those kids needed a shaking up before we lost them!"

While he appealed to the skies, the horns shriveled like dead leaves back against his skull and flaked away on the wind. Two wings as silver as his goatee and a span longer than his body unfurled from the slits in the back of the brocade vest. He shook them out with a relieved sigh like someone escaping tight shoes.

The sun returned and the pines stilled, waiting.

He bowed his head and murmured, "Probably not a good time to mention the land deed I put in their glove box. I'll catch Hell for that one ..."

With a radiant smile and an unapologetic shrug, he leaped over the hot spring and disappeared into the vapor.
