

originally published at *Blackbird*, Spring 2018 (Vol. 17, No. 1)

Live Oak

a short story

by Kate Reed Petty

The last time I met the devil, he looked exactly like me, except he had the body of a man. It took me some time to understand why I recognized him, the way you can miss yourself in a photograph you didn't see taken. My same thin hospital gown had slipped forward around his collarbone; he had my same tattoo, but on the wrong side. Meanwhile he was talking to me about my body, my broken bones, my punctured lung. He was asking me: *Are you really ready to die?*

I was twenty years old. I'd recently had my first beer. I was devoted to my little sister and infatuated with my English professor. In another month, I would be taking a break from school to ride my bicycle across the country; I planned to arrive in California with a firm decision about whether or not I wanted to go back. This and many other decisions were stretched out ahead of me, momentous but discarnate; I handled them every day, tossed them gently in the air.

Just that morning I'd been in Shenandoah, warming up for a thirty-mile ride, and the last thing I remembered was not the collision, not the windshield, not my trip through the glass, but the sun, cresting a cloud just as the hill I'd been climbing gave way, and I took my hands off the handlebars and stretched my arms into the sky and saw a flock of birds change direction, hundreds of them together, all at once.

"No," I told the devil. Absolutely not. I was not ready to die.

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As I get off the train, my phone rings. I know it’s my sister, but the people around me don’t. They turn toward the sound on reflex. My phone must play the same song as theirs.

I cross the platform and set my small bag down. The ringing stops, then starts again. I pull out my phone and press DECLINE, but before I can put it back in my pocket a text message appears: ARE YOU PREGNANT?!?!?

My little sister is still at the age where pregnancy is the end of the world. I am not pregnant, but I am not yet ready to tell her what I actually am.

I text her back: NOT PREGNANT. JUST BUSY. WILL CALL SOON PROMISE XO

She responds that I’m a JERKFACE, but at least she’s not worried, which is all that I owe her, for now.

I came to New Orleans to find the devil. It was here—jumping into the swimming pool on the roof of a hotel, my mother at a conference downstairs—that I saw him for the first time. This was years before our deal. He was drinking under an umbrella, fleshy, with thick, curly hair and a lazy eye that kept rolling around. I thought he was just another businessman at the hotel. I had recently become embarrassed by the steady gazes from the men around me, and I was careful not to look at him too often. But I looked once, coming up from underwater, and saw him lick his finger to turn the page of his book, and the book was leather bound and heavy, and the tip of his tongue was split down the middle.

I gasped. He looked up sharply at me. Somehow there was no air in my lungs to duck back underwater and so I was watching as he disappeared, with a faint rush, a sound like shuffled paper. He left behind his empty drink, sweating alone on the patio.

Last night I looked for him on the train, just in case. But the only one I met was a white man from Toledo who was terrified of flying, but who would be damned if that was going to keep him from this year's National Conference of Realtors.

He was heavysset in his middle age, with a trim, gray goatee and liver-spotted skin, and he wanted to talk about his children, as a way of talking about his divorce. For the five minutes we shared in the cafe car line, he was so insistent about his goodness as a father that I suspected he hadn't treated his children well at all.

He wanted to share a table but I excused myself and my box of grilled chicken, and went back to my compact train room, and watched out the window most of the night as the states of the former Confederacy rolled by; I practiced what I was going to say to the devil when I found him. I would remind him of our deal: a hundred years.

Of course he had tried to sell me on fewer. He told me most people take thirty, with a forever-young rider. He offered to throw in a vain, tragic death, no charge. He told me I wouldn't like being a hundred and twenty. But back then, I wasn't afraid of getting old. I was twenty; I didn't know getting old was possible. I turned down talent, youth, wealth, and everything special, in exchange for the maximum length of life, a guarantee that I would live to see the twenty-second century, and do it just as myself. I had recently had my first beer. I had wild misconceptions about my English teacher. Another hundred years of what I had was enough.

I woke up the next morning and made the nurse gasp just by reaching out and touching her arm. And two months later I was back on my bike, my decisions firmly in hand.

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It’s a long walk from the train station to the Bywater, where a friend’s aunt is lending me her apartment. The aunt is gone, as she is almost every week, playing the piano on a cruise ship. She is happy to share her apartment, my friend has assured me, because she loves to have someone entertain her cat.

It’s a little after seven; the sun is up, but hardly anybody else. Just the bellhops and busboys in front of the hotels and bars, washing the previous night from the pavement. In my hometown they do this with hoses. Here they’ve got soap and push brooms, and they have to scrub and scrub. I keep having to step sideways around the water, into the street with the delivery trucks. At one of these crossings I nearly run into a heavysset man walking the opposite direction. For a second I think it’s the realtor from the train, and I panic. We both cut left, we both cut right. He says, “Do you want to dance?” I smile politely—it’s not the man I recognize—and dodge quickly past. A block later I turn, and look over my shoulder, and he’s gone. Was that him? It seems impossible. But the devil is sneaky that way.

The aunt has left her keys at a coffee shop. The man behind the counter is about my age, with natural hair cropped close and bright eyes. He’s compellingly handsome, and must know it, the way he makes eye contact and smiles. I smile back, too widely. I can’t help it, even as he tells me he’s got no idea what I’m talking about.

“Is there an office, or somewhere you could maybe double-check?” I say. I want him to like me, but I also need him to find the envelope with my name on it, so that I can put my bags down and entertain the aunt’s cat.

The man smiles and shrugs. He can’t help being so handsome. He gestures around the empty coffee shop, which he only just opened. The alt-weeklies are still tied in a bundle on the

counter, the thermos of cream is still in the sink, there is nowhere to hide. I ask for a cup of coffee. A hotel is not the end of the world, I think. But think of the poor cat.

Then the man opens the cash register, and says, "Ah! Virginia!" so suddenly, so chewy and eager I think for a second that he's the devil, expecting me after all. Except that he's gotten my name wrong.

Still, good news, he's found the envelope. It was tucked into an empty bill drawer, the one on the far left, where the hundreds might go if there were any. The envelope has my name wrong, too, but to avoid more confusion I say, "Yes, I'm Virginia." He tells me my name is lovely, a mistake and a lie, but I blush anyway as he hands me my coffee, light and sweet.

In the aunt's apartment I take a shower, then sit on the balcony drinking the last bit of cold coffee in the paper cup and petting the fat, brown cat. He has one of those animal faces that seems to look right at your soul.

"Dumb cat," I say.

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I borrow the aunt's bicycle and go to the hotel where we first met. But when I get there, there is no hotel, no building. I'm standing in front of a parking lot, with an early bird special of \$20 a day.

Across the street, though, there is an antique shop. I think that I recognize it. The warm glow of lights in crystal sparks a little longing in my chest. I think I loved that shop when I was eleven.

Inside the warmth is even stronger, the glow under the chandeliers, thousands of dollars hung by gold chains. The man who comes wobbling out of the back has a cane and an eye patch, and what's left of his hair is pitch black. I think, *Here's the devil for sure!*

"Do you remember me?" I ask.

The man looks at me for a second. "I apologize," he says, "but I don't remember customers the way I used to."

"I'm looking for the devil," I say.

"Pardon?" he says.

"I'm looking for the hotel," I say, "across the street."

"That hotel's been closed," he says. "But . . . if you need a hotel . . ."

He is already walking into the back, leading me on, and I think, *This is it*, but instead of our contract he takes out a tourist map and carefully traces my path to another hotel, right-left-right, making absolute sure I understand.

But there's no building there, either.

I stand looking at the empty lot, weeds growing between cracks in the pavement, until a pair of tourists comes up and asks me what I'm looking at. Neither of them is the devil.

I choose a direction and ride straight for half an hour, through neighborhoods that change in the space of three blocks. I pass bus stops and gnarled trees and historic signs, houses falling down, houses being built back up.

Eventually I find a bar, the kind of place with four beers on tap but only bottled water. The calendar on the wall is current, but blank, except for the word **OIL**, written and circled in thick black marker on the ninth of the month, still a few days off.

I'm not supposed to drink in my condition, and so I order a beer. On a small stage in the back, a man is playing the blues. He's probably fifty-five, a little fat but not large, and balding, with pale skin that flushes peach as he sings. His voice is even more remarkable coming from his

round mouth and weak chin. He looks like the janitor at an elementary school, and he's got a voice like he sold his soul for it.

When he takes a break, he promises the small crowd that he'll be back soon. His speaking voice is shockingly thin. He comes up to the bar beside me for his beer on the house. I realize that he's closer to thirty than fifty-five.

"Did you sell your soul for that voice?" I say.

"I'd hope my soul would be worth a little more than this," he says, gesturing to mean this bar, this free beer, this small crowd of afternoon drunks.

"You just say that because you can sing. If you couldn't, it might be worth it."

"Did you sell your soul for a degree in psychology?" he asks.

I realize that he's not the devil at the same time I realize that he thinks I'm flirting. I don't want to keep talking under those terms, so I tell him the truth: not just a broken deal but a slap in the face. Not a hundred years, but four to five, if I accept the doctors' math, and the doctors' definition of lucky.

The man stares at me. "That's a weird joke, sweetheart," he says. "You might offend some people like that."

"If I were joking, it would be a rotten joke." My phone rings, and I take it out of my pocket and press DECLINE. Then I hold it up to my ear and say "Hello?" Then I sit, nodding every few moments, listening to nothing, until the man takes his beer and goes outside to smoke.

I knew he wasn't the devil all along.

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In the park across the street from the bar I find a long grove of live oaks.

The trees are standing close enough to each other that their branches just barely touch. The canopy stretches out in both directions, changing the color of everything. It's a gray-green world, and the sound level goes way down. It's like a cathedral.

The trunks are straight, almost uniform, evenly spaced, like columns stretching up to God. But the branches reach out and then down, some of them all the way to the ground; those are like old women testing a bed before sleep, or like monsters dragging gnarled knuckles on the ground, or like blind men touching the nearest wall to get their bearings. Everywhere a branch has touched the ground it has turned and grown back toward the sky. The trees are like a row of mausoleums, in a cemetery not far from this spot. And they are like trees, only larger, and more beautiful, than all of the trees I know.

And the thought occurs to me: if the devil broke his end of the deal, maybe I can break mine. I could take my own soul back. For the first time in my life I consider what it would be like to die with a soul. It was not something I noticed, when I had it. They say you don't know what you've got until it's gone. But I sold mine as soon as I learned it was real. I wonder, if I had it back, how long it would be before I went back to taking it for granted. Would the feeling last longer than the short egg timer of my body?

My sister sends me a text message: YOU'RE BEING A JERK.

I ask her: CANT A WOMAN HAVE A DAY TO THINK?

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On the way back I pass, again, the empty lot, the not-hotel to which the man in the antique shop sent me. And it has changed. On the pavement, now, there is an expanse of green, in a perfect square. A man at the far side is unloading more green from the back of a pickup

truck. He is in his twenties, with thick ropes of braided hair tied back from his work. He is eager for an audience.

He's a landscape artist, he tells me, and these are his baby ferns. Each stands two inches tall, tightly coiled around itself. Each has its own tiny shot glass of dirt. There are five thousand of them, altogether, and they are a kind of fern that works like a clock. The artist has been careful to give them exactly equal water, exactly equal light. Tomorrow, at two, they will unfurl, all together, all at once.

Just before that happens, the people he has called and emailed and begged and advertised to will gather and stand around with a glass of wine in hand and wait until it happens. He is charging them ten dollars each, so that they will take it seriously.

"That sounds like an amazing thing to see," I tell him, but he tells me that the seeing is not the point. It is the sound.

For years before this he has been gathering an archive of recordings of approximate sounds. Sounds of ducks' wings lifting off of a pond, paper collated, soft plastic sheets crumpled up. He has developed a kind of perfect pitch, specific to the rustle. When he hears the sounds the ferns make, he'll know exactly which of his archive is the match.

As soon as he does, he'll put in ear plugs, and won't listen to anything else. He won't even be able to listen to the archive, deciding between this one or that, because that would contaminate the true sound. He must choose the right one, remove the earplugs, and play the chosen recording—paper or duck wings—and it must echo with the sound of the memory.

He's pleased that I like the idea. "Would you like to come?" he asks me. But I already know the sound he's talking about. And I know that by tomorrow I'll be gone.

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It’s a little after seven. The sun is just leaving; everybody else is coming out. I’m looking for the right kind of bar. Somewhere with cigar smoke and red velvet. It takes me hours to find a place, wandering through crowds, men calling out from the doorways, but when I find it I know it’s the one.

Waiting for a drink, I send my sister a text message. I don’t tell her everything. I tell her enough. Then I turn my phone off.

And then I have the feeling, sudden and sure, that the devil is watching me.

The room is filled with people who are comfortable in a room filled with people. There is the white woman with dyed red hair, waiting by the bathroom. There is the little boy whose parents should not have brought him here. There is the bartender, who glances at me and nods just when I wonder what he’s hiding. It could be anyone. The devil is sneaky by definition.

When he walks in through the door, I recognize him immediately. Of course it is the man I met that day. “Of course,” I say, and the look on his face does not change, as if he does not hear, or does not care. The bartender knows his order, is already serving his drink.

And the next morning I’m up early again, earlier than almost everyone, except for the bellhops and busboys who are up working—have maybe been working all night. They scrub and scrub, and I step off the sidewalk to get out of their way, as they scrub the streets with soap, and rinse them clean.