10-18-2011

The Devil Come on Sunday

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/fishladder/vol3/iss1/5

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I tell you what, I aint impressed. Maybe I should say fooled. Fooled is a much better word for you. You don't fool me, Bobby Hunter, not for one single second. You are the Devil and I know it. There was a time when I forgot that detail, but never again. Now, I know I aint got the age you got, and I sure don't talk as proper as you, and me bein' a girl and all, but that don't mean I can't tell a snake in the grass from a puppy. Down here, things aint so hard as Ohio. Ohio. Just the name of it sounds silly. I never been there mind you, but I'm guessin' you're all the proof I need seein' as how you're the greatest invention come outa that state and all. We are simple folk, I aint denyin' it. I said simple, Hunter, not stupid. We got a way of walkin' slow down here. Even our talk is easy. I aint tryin' to deny my own people but it's the truth. Now, I figure there's a reason for that. I figure it's cuz we know that when we step off the porch, and our first foot hits that southern dust, no matter where it is we're goin', it's gonna be there whether we take off runnin' or whether we take note of every step and every pebble along the way. And if where we're going is gone by the time we get there, then God musta swooped it right up cuz aint nothin' gonna happen without his say so anyway. You must think you own your life, Mr. Hunter, but I'm tellin' you right now that if the Almighty wanted you he wouldn't ask your opinion first. Just ask Granny Joe.

Bobby Hunter, I would never say any of these things to your face cuz I have the manners every Christian southern girl has. Granny says a girl should keep her mouth shut if she knows nothin' pretty's gonna come out. So I kept my mouth shut this whole time and I will continue like that, but I swear it gets harder and harder to stand here and smile and let you kiss my hand and hear you use your fancy northern words when alls I wanna do is pull my hand off your lips and slap you with it. Why, I'm even shocked at myself for thinkin' these things. Shame on you, Bobby Hunter, for turnin' me sour before I had a chance to get ripe. I s'pose if comfort aint gonna come from no place else, I feel a little better knowin' the whole town feels like I feel. But, and this may be a blessing for you even though it might do you some good to know the truth, we all have too much
manners to be anything but polite. So we gonna go on bein' polite.

Now how long has it been? My, it feels like a lifetime. I weren't half way to thirty back then, but you have aged me quick cuz I swear I feel nearly sixty. Well, I aint one to go on so. I know exactly the day you showed up and each and every day since then and I will not lie you dragged five years into twenty.

Louisiana was so hot five summers 'fore this one. The hottest I've ever seen it. Why, even the fig trees bent over sweatin' and gaspin' for air—their fruit draggin' on the ground. The road seemed to spread into the orchards and cover all the state with its copper dust. There weren't nothin' a girl could do to keep cool that summer. We glistened like butter over warm rolls. It was like a hot, wet blanket laid right on top of Lillie, Louisiana, makin' sure its people forgot the meaning of fresh air. I will not lie, Hubbard's Pond nearly dried right up, it's banks all cracked and peelin' like dry workin' hands—kids afraid to step on it thinkin' they cut their feet up. And right along with that fat summer waft blew in you, Bobby Hunter, the man from the north. I got nothin' against northerners, and neither does the rest of Louisiana, but we just may develop somethin' after meetin' you, Bobby.

Of course you would have the nerve to mosey on in on a Sunday afternoon. Like you was testin' God. You would steal the Lord's Day right away from him if you could, and I believe you do try. But the Lord aint so distant as you would like to think, Hunter. Pastor Hadley preached that afternoon about the Devil. Do you remember? He said that the Devil preys upon those who are strong in the Lord's army as well as those who are weak. I will not ever forget his sermon. He said that the Devil comes creepin' in, takin' on different forms and shapes and all, so that we can't recognize him. I sat next to Granny Joe thinkin' that I saw the Devil once, he was in the form of a bottle in my Granny's pantry I am sure of it. I had seen her take a swig with her women's group that meets every Sunday evening when the men are in town talkin' politics or whatever it is that men talk. Now I was barely old enough to peel a carrot back then. I aint sayin' I should be pardoned for stealin' a swig myself but I sure woulda left that devil on the shelf if I'd known it would make me sick as it did. Pastor Hadley went on preachin' that afternoon in a church whose doors and windows were so wide open that it musta looked mighty inviting to you. Maybe you woulda just passed us on by otherwise. Maybe not. But we had no way of knowin' that openin' the windows would attract you, Bobby, instead of a cool breeze.

The Pastor, long-winded even during that terrible heat wave, kept us in that church long enough to name all the deadly sins and make us pray for forgiveness for the sins we was sinnin' that we didn't even know we was sinnin'. I aint quite sure if you been present long enough to hear those words, but it might do you some good becin' humble for a change. But I doubt you'd listen to those words even if you heard them. That is just the kinda person you are Bobby Hunter, stubborn. You have got to be the most stubborn man that ever stepped on the land of Louisiana.
Well, the sermon ended, finally. Pastor Hadley made us promise to be aware of the Devil and all his trickery. I tell you what, I turned around and before I had a chance to shake my Granny Joe’s hand and tell her what an inspiring message that was, I saw you. I knew you were trouble because I know a lot of things before I actually know them. My Granny tells me that I have her mama’s eyes—not that they look alike mind you, but that her mama could see things that just weren’t there and so can I. Once I told Granny that I saw rain comin’ and she laughed cuz it was the middle of the dry season. A hurricane charged through Louisiana the next week. Granny didn’t laugh after that. But there you were with the shiniest white shirt on and the collar pressed so flat it might have cut through a finger trying to put it on. I aint as smart as I should be, but I can recall every detail from your silver cuff links to your polished black shoes. Now, how you managed to keep them shoes lookin’ like that I will never know. You cannot step outside in Louisiana without gettin your feet covered in dust. That will forever be a mystery to me, Bobby Hunter.

But there you were, lookin’ like the dolls that Granny Joe keeps on her mantle—perfect. Perfect to the point of being aggrivatin’. And you stood in the back of our tiny church like you were made to stand there—like God had placed you there and you were on his mission. I swear it almost hurt my eyes to look at you. All that beauty stuffed into one man. And I knew right then and there that you had to be the Devil. I reckon I shoulda told Pastor Hadley that I had found the Devil, that he was no longer in bottle form, but in the form of a beautiful man, but I just kept my mouth shut. I was mindin’ my manners. Curse my manners. I know they get me into more trouble than anything else. I immediately went to you. Already, the folks made their introductions and welcomes like you was the senator or someone real important. But I had no troubles gettin past them. I just had to give you my hand. I was dyin’ to know what the Devil would do with a girl’s hand. And I figured since I already knew you was the Devil, well, there weren’t no way you was gonna get the best of me. So I stuck out my hand covered in my Sunday glove and introduced myself as Miss Louisa Georgia Everett: Louisa for my home and Georgia for my Granny’s home.

You kissed my hand long, Bobby Hunter, too long. Even five years ago I knew you was trouble. You lifted your eyes real slow, like you was tryin’ not to get caught. Or maybe you was tryin’ to get yourself caught—I aint sure which. But you looked right into me and then away again, like you was shy or ashamed or somethin’ that indeed you wasn’t. You think that innocence is part of your natural charm. Well, I tell you what any charm you have, and you do have some I will not lie, it is certainly not natural and has never been innocent. You made it up, and now you use it on young southern girls such as myself. You were like an animal with a hurt wing, starin’ up at me that day with golden eyes, like you needed my help or you may just perish. Well, I aint no fool. I knew I couldn’t just leave you there—bein’ so beautiful and shiny and all. I took you right home to Granny to get you some after church cookin’ and introduce you to Louisiana.
They might be interested to know that the Devil come on Sunday.

Granny was so happy to feed an extra mouth. Especially a northern man’s mouth. So happy she told you to stay long as you needed shelter and three meals. She was gonna show you how the real cookin’ was done. She said it’s been so long since she had any proper comp’ny that she near forgot how to serve a guest. I don’t reckon Granny knew you was the Prince of Darkness in disguise, else she wouldn’t call you “proper” comp’ny. I sat on the stool, fiddlin’ with my Sunday ruffles, lettin’ my eyes fill up on you. You was smooth like bayou mud, helpin’ Granny with fixin’s while you stole glances of my hair, my chin, my ankles. You said you was college bound. You needed to see the world first, though. Granny said this was as good a place as any to start. I watched your lips open and close as you gossiped. And I know that smile on your mouth wasn’t cuz Granny was tellin’ you all the good ‘ole stories. But you shoulda listened, Bobby Hunter, cuz they was some good ‘ole stories, and you mighta learned somethin’. Daddy came in soon enough to talk politics. You bein’ of the north and a different animal all together, he thought you must have some thoughts on somethin’. He said a man don’t belong in the kitchen, it’ll turn him strange. So he stuck a pipe in your left hand and led you off to the porch. I let my finger know the sleeve of your shirt as you passed. It musta been made out of cloud—smelled like apple blossoms and Granny’s bakin’ flour.

Four weeks you stayed without sayin’ more than a fist fulla words to me, Hunter. I s’pose you thought you was securin’ my affections. Stealin’ your glances and duckin’ behind your eyelashes, playin’ some backwards game. And whose gonna say your trickery didn’t work? I nearly forgot you was the Devil. Well, there aint no one in all Louisiana gonna convince me you weren’t in love with me. And don’t you dare say I aint old enough. I am sick a hearin’ it. I don’t need age to tell me when a man loves me, you hear. I was old enough to fish rattlers out of Hubbard’s Pond. I could walk all the way to Eddy’s and back with Granny’s grocery list. I knew the best time to pick figs and I knew their ripeness changed every year. Young. Don’t tell me I aint old enough to know that your silly eyes makin’ looks at me did it cuz they had a tick. No, Bobby Hunter, you loved me as ever a man could.

Honest, I know the very day you fell in love with me. Oh, you was taken with me from the start—that hot July Sunday—but you was mad in love by the end of September when I took you diggin’. That mornin’ I crept out on the porch, earlier than the sun, cuz I know that’s when you like to start your day. You told Daddy there was nothin’ prettier than bein’ under the sun’s first rays as you looked me dead in the eyes. So I got to you then, before the sun could. I took the wicker chair next to you, knowin’ full well didn’t neither of us have a right to be there. There was light like golden fuzz over the east. I told you ‘bout Hubbard’s Pond and the swamp weed that grows like wild hair near the eastern corner. I said that when the sun first rises, the weed stripes the pond and the banks past it. If we was lucky, we’d dig up some fine crawdads. I took your
hand and gave it a tug and told you to come. You said diggin' sounded good to you. I tell you what, you looked like a beam of sun just struck you—happy as all to get up and follow me.

I weren't sixteen. And you, Bobby Hunter, bound for college. I told you to keep up and mind the rattlers and don't step on any big stick mounds cuz they was prob'ly some critter's home. You shoulda seen your face, Hunter, I swear you was shaky as a willow branch. Your first trip into the pond and you was worried 'bout your life. But you was tricky and you tried to cover your panic by askin' me how come I know so much about swamps and ponds and critters and such. I told you I reckon its cuz I lived all my life in Lillie, aint been no place else. I reckon I should know lots 'bout where I come from.

After remindin' you to keep up least twenty times, we found Hubbard's. That was the first and only time I saw your shoes anythin' but shiny. Well, they was shiny with mud, but not shiny with clean. I found a low branch that grew sideways out of a tree instead of upways. I plunked myself down waitin' for you to catch up. I guess Ohio aint got so much jungle like Louisiana. Or maybe it does and you just don't visit it. You hid your heavy breathin' and hopped up next to me. You told me I was quite the wild girl. I knew that was a good thing.

I guess we just didn't have so much want to go diggin' for crawdads after we sat down to rest our legs—like they was protestin'. So, we sat there and nothin' else. We just stared into the pond all mornin' and then all afternoon. You told me that Ohio was on its way up and I nodded my head and kicked at some tall grass. You said you had big plans and that you was gonna explore the country before makin' all your money. I told you that was a good idea and I scooted close to you so that our hips touched. You talked and talked and I listened like I loved you, cuz I did. I reckon I forgot all about the Devil wearin' you for a disguise. And Bobby Hunter I aint never lied, ever. Since the day I come outa my mama I been clean. You loved me. You put your arm 'round me on that branch and told me your dreams. You opened your future to me like I was gonna be included in it.

Five whole years you been with me and Granny and Daddy just smiling that sugar smile and gossipin' and feastin' your eyes all over me. You sucked away my charm, you did. And I let you, too, because I knew you loved me. Why, almost all my memories come from you. And now here I am. All growned up. I aint bound for school, but I gotta lifetime of learnin' behind me. And there you are, Mr. Hunter, holdin' your pipe like it's the only thing dear to you. You'd prob'ly shrivel up and dry out without it. You wouldn't have it if Daddy didn't gift it to you. But you don't care 'bout any of that. You don't care that we loved you like family and now after stealin' our home and our time and recipes and stories and hearts you say you gotta be goin', you say you stayed too long.

Granny says she got vinegar in her eyes so she wipes 'em on the back of her hand.

Don't know why she's cryin'; you aint worth honest tears. And Daddy's shakin'
your hand like it's the last hand he's ever gonna shake. All this fuss. Well, I aint impressed. If I could give you back the dreams you gave me I would, but I can't. Aint no sense goin' on 'bout it. And you won't see me cry. I'll just stand here thinkin' my sinful thoughts and show you my hand so you can kiss it goodbye for the last time. Well, leave already Bobby Hunter. We got no room in Lillie for the Devil.