Hank Toy's Devil

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A devil came to an old Mormon on an icy winter night when mounds of snow outside, as big as cars, lay black and cold, nearly invisible. Having searched since the beginning of the world, this devil found the man in a clapboard house on the edge of an Idaho town settled by pioneers who'd halted on their way to Canada, fearing harsher winters farther north. Hank Toy had lived eighty-seven years in this town of a few roads and houses, a tiny post office, and a gas station long since boarded up. He'd raised a family and made a living fixing machines in open wheat fields and dank potato barns, unaware that an ancient devil had ranged the world for millennia, seeking its one last hope in him. Hank had simply turned on the kitchen light and the thing was there. Hank gripped the handles of his cart—an aluminum walker with wheels and handbrakes. He clenched his jaw, standing unmoved in his dingy t-shirt and thread-bare Wranglers trousers. He'd come to the kitchen to wash his dishes and take out the trash. His daughter Jeanne was coming up from Pocatello in the morning, and she'd been watching for signs that he could no longer care for himself. Each week she burst through the front door calling out, "How you doing, Dad?" Looking past him, scrutinizing the house, she never waited for an answer. If Jeanne found him in the kitchen, frozen like a statue and staring at a devil, her sister, Trudy, would make her put Hank in a nursing home for sure.

The old man might have thought an animal had gotten into the house—a big dog or even a bear. The thing smelled like a bear, a mixture of garbage and metal. But it couldn't have been an animal. The doors were locked and the windows were shut against the cold, against the snow that had come down for eleven days, leaving the old man bound inside to lurch around with his cart. When Hank turned on the light, the devil was simply standing

there, oily and seething like a corpus of writhing worms. Too lonely to be afraid, too old to be startled, Hank didn't speak. He simply reached up and flicked off the light. He turned his cart and shuffled in toward the living room, where the television chattered like a silly monkey.

Then the devil, who'd once had a name but had long forgotten it, spoke two words. "Help me," it said.

Hank Toy turned his head, held it there. He couldn't see the devil in the dark kitchen, but he could smell it.

"Help me," the thing repeated.

Hank knew the voice of a liar, even though the thing hadn't yet lied. "Go to hell," Hank said, looking forward now, wheeling toward the dancing light of the TV.

"You don't remember?" the thing asked.

Hank had lived a long time. Memory was all he had.

"You were there," the devil said, whispering from behind. "You're the one I remember."

"I been right here my whole life," Hank answered.

"You wept for me," the devil said. "When the glorious Sons of the Morning were cast out of heaven for rebellion, you wept. You have to remember that."

"No, I don't," Hank said, and he dropped into his green chair to stare at the TV.

Hank didn't know this devil. He only knew what the Bible and the Mormon scriptures said, that God had had children before the heavens and earth were formed, and a third of these hosts rebelled and fell to earth, becoming the devil and his angels.

"You knew me," the devil said to Hank. "Before the War in Heaven, you knew me and you wept."

Hank looked down at the hands in his lap. His left hand had been without its middle finger for forty years, cut off in the gears of a conveyor belt. His other hand and wrist had been swollen as big as a softball since the stroke. Seeing his crippled hands, Hank knew he was still alive, alive in his green chair as a devil orbited around him now, slow and heavy in its own dark gravity.

"We only wanted to save you," the devil said, "save you from a wicked world."

"I got no truck with you," Hank said to the devil. "I got work to

do." He had to get the kitchen floor swept and the trash out before Jeanne came.

The devil slowed its orbit, its voice the low rumble of a tractor's engine. "Remembering you," it said, "looking for you—it's all that kept me from flying apart."

Hank blinked hard, the smell thick in his nose.

The devil circled before him. "I combed the earth, looked in the face of every man ever born. Finding you. . . . Find you, find you. . . . You kept me from losing myself. Saved me until this day." The dark thing was writhing, turning in on itself again and again. In its contortions it didn't touch the floor, couldn't touch the floor, it seemed.

Gripping his walker with his better hand, thinking he might be losing his mind at last, Hank pulled himself to his feet and began to wheel toward the kitchen in preparation for his daughter's visit. She came once a week, bringing groceries, doing the cleaning she thought he'd left undone. Sometimes she took him for rides in the car, his face turned like a dog's to the wide fields and great western sky. Would she see the thing when she came? Would she admit it?

"Speak," the devil said.

Hank wheeled slowly, ignoring the thing, not wanting to lose his grip.

His daughter would be full of questions. "Did the Grant boys shovel the sidewalk?" "How long has the furnace made that noise?" "Where'd you get that bruise?" "Why is there a devil in the kitchen?" She might be cleaning the tub or walking him to the car, one question on the heels of another. "You never tell me anything," she'd say. He would look around, trying to follow her eyes, her words that moved too fast. How was he supposed to know every little thing?

"We're going to make a list," she said one day. "We'll make it together."

They sat at the kitchen table while she wrote down the things she wanted him to do each week, things like the dishes and his laundry and the dusting. "If you can do these," she said, "no one has to worry about you."

Mostly she worried about letting him stay in the old house

alone. Trudy wanted to put him in Autumn Hills, an assisted living facility. But Trudy lived in Michigan and Jeanne lived just an hour away, in Pocatello. Jeanne didn't want any regrets. "Let's not prove Trudy right," she'd say, kissing Hank's cheek when she left.

Hank labored toward the kitchen, his devil at his shoulder. "God loves you," the devil said. "You walk in His image. You can speak for me."

"Who'd speak for me?" Hank asked.

"You knew it was wrong," the thing said. Its voice turned soft, like a seductress. "I looked for you among the righteous. You were my friend. You were there, my friend."

The thing encircled Hank once again, moving and swirling, like thin traces of smoke in the air. "Power upon thee, my friend, over lives and deaths."

"You can't do anything to me," Hank said, hoping it was true. "You're not even here."

"You loved me then," the devil sang in a hundred circles around its mark. "You wept, in your goodness you wept."

As Hank wheeled through the devil's cloud, hours and days spun forward and backward. He switched on the kitchen light and the devil was before him, looking like Rod Wooster, son of old man Wooster and general manager of Wooster Farms, a big potato operation that employed Hank so many years ago. "Good man," the devil in Rod's form said. "That's good work." Hank fixed machines. Rod worked a different machinery—state agencies, market forces, family alliances, bankers, and potato brokers. "Befriend the mammon of unrighteousness," Rod liked to say. "Scripture says so." A boss cheated migrant workers on their pay, someone altered figures on a federal application, a grandson lied about how a $50,000 truck got in a ditch, and Rod Wooster had an answer: "It's how things get done."

"Speak out of turn and you get fired," Rod told Hank. So Hank stayed quiet.

Returning to its writhing form, the devil said, "I searched for an upright man. I knew you wouldn't be a hypocrite."

But Hank had compromised, too many times to count. And not just for Rod Wooster. For every potato boss and mucky-muck and every ambitious church leader. What choice did he have? One day he was eighteen and driving a grain truck down St. Anthony's

Main Street when he saw Miss Potato Harvest 1942 in front of the Arcadia Theater, her strawberry hair dancing in the wind, her lithe figure the very secret of life. They married and had a house full of children. Hank gave his life for them, working muscle and brain beneath tractors and harvesters and under the open hoods of potato trucks. How could he not sacrifice everything he had to their goodness, their sweetness and their need? He put in sixteen-hour days, skipped meals, pushed until he was too tired to feel tired. Didn't his wife need a place to live, a place to shelter her babies? Didn't those kids need clothes and money in their college funds? For them he would have carried all the potato trucks in Idaho on his back. In the cold and damp, hands grappling with dirty engines, he endured managers and salesmen and grandsons. He suffered the men who wore clean shoes and didn't farm but told farmers how to farm—buzz-headed government men with regulation books too thick to read, rules made for those who couldn't read them.

He even watched a man die and said nothing. What goodness did he have after that?

"You were the noble one," the devil whispered, penetrating Hank's cloud of confusion. "You had to compromise."

The stormy swirl cleared, leaving Hank alone in his own kitchen to wonder how many hours had passed, how much life was left before him. He stilled for a moment, his gut heavy with regret. Then, lifting his eyes, he saw the devil before him in the likeness of a state agent wearing a three-piece suit. Small and effeminate, bald-headed, a forced smile across its ethereal face, the devil said, "Shake on it, friend."

Hank shook the devil's hand, feeling nothing there.

"See," the devil said. "No tricks."

"I've got no goodness to give," Hank said, wheeling forward, easing the suited devil to one side.

"Don't you want justice?" the devil asked.

"Whose justice?"

"Didn't God level you with his judgment? Didn't he hit you like a hammer?"

The stroke had put Hank in a hospital bed for the first time in his life. He lay there for days, his daughter Jeanne tending him,

nurses feeding and changing him like a baby. What good was a man who couldn't work? The arm of flesh had finally failed him. So the world was unfair. Like a fool he'd fallen for it. He couldn't drive a pickup or grease a joint or put a wrench to a bolt. His children had their own lives. His wife had worked herself into a grave before him. None of that mattered when he couldn't wipe his own rear.

In the darkened hospital room, still and naked, he found a woody, stubborn core at his center—not hope, but fact. He would live. He would live by the same grit that had centered him in muddy fields beneath Buck Foster's International Harvester on rainy October nights. With no other reason to live but this, the fact that he lived, he got up and walked. When Jeanne came in the next morning, he spoke to her through the un-paralyzed side of his face. "Home," he said.

"Trudy says you need to be in Autumn Hills," she answered.

Hank knew people in that place, old people with no life in them. "No," he said, "home."

The boys—Hank's grown sons—cared the way sons care. They didn't say anything when Jeanne brought up Autumn Hills. They had families and work and were no help at all. A few days later, despite Trudy's protests, Jeanne took Hank to his empty home, where he fixed his own meals and took his cart outside, jostling over the gravel as he went to the corner and back. He'd made it through the summer and fall, alone and stubborn. But now winter had left him shut up in the house, shut up with a devil.

Smiling before him now in his three-piece suit, the devil said, "The cleaner the shoes, the dirtier the business."

A knot twisted tighter in Hank's brain, the devil's webby reasoning.

"God sits in heaven like a potato boss," the devil said. "In his clean shoes he judges us, down here in the filth."

"The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us," Hank countered.

"We only fought for what we believed in."

"Believing something don't make it true."

"Hasn't time proven we were right? Look at the world. Didn't we prophesy? Give man agency and you'd get blood and horror.

We only wanted a compromise—like you, like the way you lived your life."

"I had a wife and babies. They came first."

"Noble compromise," the devil said. "Not His way at all—all or nothing, iron rods and fists. . . ."

The devil began to spin around old Hank Toy once again, as fast as the flywheel on a John Deere Model R. "You have to speak for me," it said, becoming once again its slick and seething self. "His Son died for you. He'll listen to you."

A man dead, a father, a son on trial—that's what it came to, years ago on a cold day in October. Hank was in the fields that afternoon, working on a stalled ten-wheeled truck. He stood on the front tire, bent into the engine cavity, while Braxton, one of the Wooster grandsons, sat in the cab and shouted orders at the migrant workers—one a fifty-year-old called "Chucho," the other, Javier, who was barely twenty. Chucho and Javier went behind the truck, and pretty soon Hank saw the smoke from their cigarettes. Looking in the big side mirror, the boy saw it too. "Grandpa doesn't want those Mexicans smoking," he said.

"Is he gonna come out here, thirty miles from the office, and stop 'em?" Hank asked.

The boy said, "Watch this," and he hit the starter, just for a moment. The truck lurched six feet backward, throwing Hank to the dirt and knocking Chucho under the truck, behind the wheels. Then the boy must have panicked. He must have pushed in the clutch or thrown the truck in neutral. Hank was unable to get to his feet as the dual wheels rolled over Chucho, crushing him. Before the old man died, before the ambulance came, Javier walked off through the fields and was never seen again, leaving Hank the only witness.

The county coroner served on the high council with old man Wooster. "I did an autopsy on that old Mexican," the coroner told Hank. "He was full of cancer. No need to tear up a boy's life over a Mexican that's almost dead anyway." Old man Wooster drove the point home: "Take your pick, Hank, a conscience or a paycheck."

Standing face to face with a devil now, his goodness lost long ago, Hank gripped the handles of his cart and wheeled toward a black plastic bag full of trash that stood next to the kitchen gar-

bage can. He could get the trash out, at least, before his daughter came. All his life he'd worked. He could work now, even if it didn't save him.

"God will listen to you," the devil repeated. "You compromised because of your goodness."

"God didn't compromise," Hank said. "He cast you out forever. Leave me alone, now," he said. "I got garbage to take out."

Bracing himself on the cart, Hank reached down with his good hand to grasp the knotted neck of the plastic bag. As he straightened, the flash of a car's headlights moved across the curtains.

"Someone's coming," the devil said.

"No one's coming. My daughter's coming in the morning."

"It is morning," the devil said, encircling Hank once again. Spinning a dozen circles around him in a moment, the thing mocked him: "It's morning and she's here."

Hank tried to look up at the clock, but the blur of the spinning devil made the clock spin too.

"She's here. She's coming. She knows what you did."

"What did I do?" Hank asked. He dragged the bag toward the back door, a trail of something liquid and sour forming in his wake. "What did I do?"

"You wept for God's enemies."

Hank opened the back door. He winced at the rush of frigid air from outside. "I did what I did and I'll take the punishment," he said.

"It's not right," the devil said. "It's not right."

The back yard was blackness until Hank switched on the yellow bulb over the steps, casting a veil of amber over the crystalline surface of the snow. An iron rail led down three icy steps to a narrow sidewalk cleared of snow by the regular efforts of the Grant boys. The snow stood three feet high on either side of the walkway. At the bottom of the stairs, a spot in the yard had been cleared for the green dumpster that belonged to the county. Hank simply had to get the bag into the dumpster. The Grant boys could wheel it to the street in the morning.

"No savior died for us," the devil said. "We were judged without mercy."

Hank stepped down to the landing, leaving his cart in the doorway. "You wanted to save yourselves."

"We fell the farthest. Shouldn't we have the greatest savior?"

Hank let the screen door close behind him. He reached out. The iron railing was frosty and cold and it stuck to his papery skin. Putting one foot on the step, Hank gripped the garbage bag with his good hand. He leaned on the cold railing, the devil orbiting his head like a ghostly, whirlwind snake.

"Remembering you," it hissed, "remembering you . . . kept me from losing myself. The others, they don't know who they are. They've all lost themselves. But we're brothers, my friend. I had you—the thought of you—to hold myself together all those years."

"I don't know you," Hank said.

"You were there. You knew it was wrong."

Putting his weight on the rail, Hank wondered if any man could be his own. The ones he loved, he loved so much. He worked and pushed for them, easing out just enough space to eat and breathe. How could he blame anyone else for his own compromises? Bosses and companies, governments and crooks, Gods and devils weren't to blame for a man's choices. Hank was no savior, but for the ones he loved he sold his soul. Too bad his soul couldn't cover the debt.

"You knew it was wrong," the devil said in a voice of reverence and sadness.

Hank teetered as he set his foot on the next icy step.

"God sent us down to fail."

Even in the yellow porch light Hank could hardly see for the devil's cloud.

"That's why you wept."

When the flash of a car's headlights swept a corner of the back yard, Hank stiffened.

"God's to blame," the devil said. "Judge him yourself."

A dog barked in the distance, and Hank moved to take a step. When he did, his feet simply flew out from beneath him. He came down on one shoulder before both kneecaps slapped the cold concrete of the sidewalk. His head and face lit into the hardened inches of snow next to the dumpster as his body twisted and tumbled between the narrow walls of snow on either side. His right

hand came to rest on the bottom step, the garbage bag landing at his feet.

For a moment, all was silence. No devil swirled.

Lifting his head in the stillness, Hank saw blood in the snow, blood on his hands. He let his head fall to the sharp contours of the hardened snow. He might have groaned once, a wordless shudder, as thick wheels of pain coursed from hip to crown. His swollen hand twitched. His legs were useless. He wouldn't be getting up from this. Half the night passed before Hank Toy's devil returned, subdued and reverent. "My god, you've fallen," the devil said in nearly a whisper. "You've fallen."

The porch light burned above Hank, illuminating soft snowflakes drifting in the stark yellow light. Hank laid patient in his t-shirt and Wranglers, too cold to feel the finer matter of spirit extricating itself from bone and flesh. He knew what awaited, more terrific than death: the door of God's judgment—plain fact coming down upon his head.

"I can't be blamed for this," the devil said, circling above Hank like a wheel.

"God is a judge," Hank said.

"I was wronged," the devil said. "I've always been wronged."

The brittle plastic of the garbage bag crackled in the cold air. Hank felt warmed by the snow melting on his neck. The icy concrete beneath him grew soft, giving way for his old muscles to relax. Closing his eyes, head resting comfortably on the snow, Hank remembered the boys who brought him the sacrament each Sunday, the older Grant boy and Pete Maynard, knocking a quick one-two-three rap before coming into the house to find Hank in his green chair, the TV off for the only hour of the week.

"Brother Toy?" one of the boys would call as they came in. The boys wore white shirts, the sleeves rolled up, their ties too long or too short, their dress shoes scuffed. Even on the coldest days they never wore jackets. Sixteen, tall and hip-less, not wearing belts, their dark slacks held up by a mystery, the boys came in and prepared emblems to represent the body and blood of Christ—bread broken in a silver tray, and water in a tiny plastic cup.

Folding their thin arms, heads bowed, unaware of compromises yet to come, the boys stood before Hank as one blessed the bread first: ". . . to the souls of all those who partake of it."

Hank would reach forth his trembling hand and bring the crust to his mouth. Not because he was worthy, but because God had bid it.

The melting snow now trickled down Hank Toy's neck. His belly swelled and sank with each breath. His legs felt like disconnected things. He lifted his good hand, trembling, as though he might be reaching for a tiny cup of water, an emblem of blood shed on an ignoble cross.

"You didn't fight," the devil said, despondent at the icy close of Hank Toy's life. "You didn't do anything."

"You said I wept," Hank answered, his voice barely a whisper.

"Because you knew it was wrong."

"It can't be undone."

"No, you're wrong" the devil countered. "God is God. He can do anything. By his slightest whim. . . ."

"A soul's its own," Hank whispered. "God doesn't take that away."

"What kind of heaven has a war?"

Hank lay with his eyes closed, unable to speak.

"We would have redeemed everyone," the devil argued. "We would have made everyone good. You would have never needed to compromise."

Hank Toy inhaled weakly. The devil flew a thousand feet, straight up into the dark night. Hank exhaled and the devil descended like a stone to the frozen earth. "Ah!" the devil cried in horror. "How you will be judged! With such torment you'll be judged!"

Hank lay still as death.

"Stand up," the devil begged. "Stand up and judge him. God was wrong. He wronged you and he wronged me. He says not to judge, but he judged us all."

Hank could barely speak. "God is my judge. I'm not His."

"Stand up," the devil begged. "I'll be like the rest. I won't know who I am. I'll be lost."

But Hank Toy didn't stand up. He died, leaving the poor devil to forget itself forever, its last scrap of rationality vanishing in one last thought—"I'll be lost."

The next morning, Hank Toy's daughter found him dead.

Walking through the front door, sensing the worst, she called out, "Dad, Dad?" The back door was open. The furnace was going. The house was icy cold. She ran to the screen door and threw it open, still calling out, "Dad." Her father lay in the snowy tunnel of the sidewalk, a crow pestering the garbage bag at his feet. The crow took flight as she hurried down the steps, drawn to touch his body, to embrace him and brush the snow from his shoulders.

Hadn't Trudy warned her? "Spare yourself the torture. You'll walk in one day. . . ."

Jeanne waited out front for the EMTs. They found her standing with her arms folded, shivering under the bright winter sun. Months afterwards she would still wonder if she'd done the right thing by letting him spend those last months alone. It was done, of course, and couldn't be undone. But before Trudy and her brothers' wives saw the house, Jeanne cleaned up the place as best she could, wanting them to feel their father had lived his last days in a decent home.

The boys didn't worry her. They simply did what needed to be done, just as their father had. Dutiful in their best slacks and boots, white shirts without ties, western-cut suit jackets, they and their brothers-in-law bore Hank Toy's casket to a corner in the cemetery on the edge of town. Good words were spoken, prayers and praise about steady work and careful choices. No one mentioned compromise or risk, fallen devils or old men falling.

Hank's daughter would always be glad for one thing: that she'd paid the price of finding him herself. Trudy had feared that most of all—finding him and being alone with the fact, even if just for a moment. Being the one who found him, Jeanne got to tell the story. Who among the living knew what had happened anyway? Hank Toy's devil didn't know. It no longer knew itself from all the other devils. The EMTs didn't know. They came and went, having only a job to do. The deputy sheriff, finding no crime, had no interest and drove off without a word. Only Hank's daughter was left to tell what had happened. Her father must have spent the day cleaning the whole house, starting too late, perhaps. Maybe he'd felt a new burst of energy. He just had one task left, taking out the trash. He'd done so well all summer and fall, taking care of himself, fiercely independent, still the good man he'd always been. It

was only an accident, after all. Anyone could fall down the stairs like that. No one was to blame.

But she still wondered if she'd given in too easily, indulged him too much. Even as she fell on his body that morning, brushing the snow from his rigid shoulders, she knew what Trudy would always think, what others might think too. She knew what she herself would think on lonely winter nights for years to come. How could a daughter leave her father to wheel around all day in an empty clapboard house, a stupid TV his only company? Hadn't he given everything for her, for her mother and her siblings? Hadn't he been so alone already? All those long hours in wet fields, working under those unforgiving machines? She could have forced him into Autumn Hills, and maybe she should have. But she'd compromised because she loved him. God would judge her. She had to let God judge her. She told herself not to think about it, to try not to worry. God knew what was right. She would tell herself that, over and over, until it became true.