

THE SOAP BANDIT

by Dennis Haseley

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The summer Jesse was seven years old he went to stay with his aunt. She lived in a town by the sea. She wasn't used to kids. There were no kids in that whole town. No one played in the water or ran on the beaches. What they would do, the men in their clean white suits and the women in their starched yellow dresses, was sit in the shade and drink tea. Sometimes they'd take a stroll. And every night they took a bath. They never seemed to laugh. And they never got dirty.

Jesse could tell he wasn't supposed to do these things either, but somehow he always got dirty.

The first week he was there his aunt took him to a fancy restaurant. The waiters marched around in long white jackets carrying silver trays piled high with food. Just after Jesse's aunt said, "Stop playing with your spoon, or you'll make a mess," Jesse accidentally spilled a bowl of chocolate pudding on the clean white tablecloth, and some dribbled down on his right knee. Everyone in the restaurant stared.

His aunt wouldn't look at him all the way home. When they got to her house she made him take a bath. Jesse sat all alone in the tub with a bar of pink soap.

The second week he was there his aunt took him to the town's big meeting to hear the mayor give a speech. The town band was standing in a line with shining instruments. The town policemen were waiting at attention by their white horses, wearing medals that shone like mirrors. Jesse's aunt was sitting in a folding chair, by the women in their starched yellow dresses, and the men in their clean white suits. And Jesse was practicing walking around the rim of the town's white fountain.

Just when the mayor was finishing his speech and everyone was politely clapping, Jesse lost his balance and fell in that fountain with a splash. Everyone in the town stared. Jesse crawled out all dirty.

His aunt wouldn't speak to him all the way home. When they got to her house she made him take a bath. Jesse sat in the tub a long time and watched the moon rise outside the window like a big piece of white soap.

And there were other days he got dirty. When he went walking on the beach and the waves would set him running, or walking near the woods and the trees would reach down their limbs for him to climb them. And he would. And then in the evening he would walk back through the town to his aunt's house, past everyone, looking dirty.

And it was on one of those nights when his aunt ordered him to take a bath and he was in his room just starting to take off his clothes that the soap bandit entered the town.

While Jesse was pulling off his socks the soap bandit rode through the dark streets on his cart pulled by his funny horse named Horace and he tiptoed into all the houses of the men in white suits and the ladies in yellow dresses while they sat sipping tea, and he snuck into their bathrooms and he took their white and yellow soap and he carried it out and put it on the cart that Horace pulled.

And while Jesse was taking off his shirt the soap bandit snuck into all the shops of all the shopkeepers and he reached onto their shelves and he took all their soap, orange and green, and he carried it out and put it on the cart that Horace pulled.

And while Jesse was taking off his undershirt the soap bandit snuck into the mayor's house while the mayor was giving a speech to his wife and he took the mayor's soap, which was golden and shaped like an egg.... And he snuck into the police station while all the policemen were brushing their horses and he took the policemen's soap, which was blue, like nightfall.

And while Jesse was taking off his pants and just getting ready to take his bath the soap bandit snuck into his aunt's house and he took her pink soap. And all the soap that he took he piled on the cart that Horace pulled. And then the soap bandit rode out of town.

When Jesse walked into the bathroom and saw there was no soap he called to his aunt and told her that he couldn't take a bath. "Impossible," she said, but she saw that it was true. And then she told him not to tell anyone else about their missing soap. And all over that town people were discovering the same thing when they went to

take their baths. And they all said, “Impossible!” But the soap could not be found, so no one said a thing, and all the next day and the days after that nobody whispered a word about the missing soap.

But then, one by one, each on his own, they started to look for soap. First they went to the store, but the soap bandit had been there first. So they went back to their houses and looked again through their clean bright rooms, and when they didn’t find any soap there they looked in other places where they usually didn’t go. They looked in musty attics and dusty cellars, and when they found no soap there they looked in places where they had never been.

Some drove out onto the muddy roads in their motorcars past deserted shacks and buildings looking for old soap factories. Others went to the library and quietly took out books on soapmaking and they went to junkyards and got vats. They went to butcher shops and got tallow and late at night they tried to make soap, but it came out looking like chocolate pudding.

And someone thought he saw a bar of pink soap floating down a stream but it was only a fish leaping in the sunset. And the soap bubbles someone thought she saw rising toward the sky were made by a family of frogs, croaking.

And the mayor took a torch into the town’s dark vault and the leader of the band searched inside the tubas and the policemen galloped on their white horses kicking up clouds of dust and stopped to look for fingerprints and foot tracks through magnifying glasses that made their eyes seem big.

They never found any soap, but whenever someone from the town saw someone else from the town he or she would say, “Oh yes, it’s a nice day for driving in a motorcar, or going to the library or taking a stroll...” and then they would hurry on never mentioning at all that they were looking for soap.

Jesse’s aunt just stayed in her house drinking tea. And Jesse climbed to the tops of the trees and crawled under rocks and ran along the shore looking at everyone looking for soap looking at the world....

Weeks went by, and then it was time for another big meeting of the town. It was the day for everyone to stand in the square and listen to the band and watch the policemen and hear the mayor speak. Everyone was there. But it was different from ever before....The policemen were there with their horses, but the horses were no

longer white. The medals no longer shone like mirrors. The waiters from the restaurant were there, but they were no longer neat and fancy. The band was there, but their uniforms were soiled, the bright horns dark. And the men in their suits and the women in their dresses were there, but the suits and dresses were no longer white and yellow. No one was smiling. They were all looking down as if they were feeling bad.

The mayor walked up to the stand to speak. “Fellow citizens,” he said. And then he stopped. And he looked at his clothes and hands, and a smile came to his face. “Pardon me,” he said. “You see I haven’t been this dirty since I was seven years old...” And then he looked around the crowd, at everyone standing there, and he started to laugh. And then everyone else—the men and the women, the policemen, the band, and the waiters—looked at each other and they started to laugh. And his aunt looked at Jesse, and he looked at her, and they began to laugh, too....

And that was the moment the soap bandit returned to town.

He rode on the cart pulled by his funny horse named Horace and it was piled high with all the soap from the town, the orange soap and the yellow soap and the white soap and the golden soap shaped like an egg and the soap that was blue like nightfall and the bar of pink soap...and the soap bandit unhitched that cart and left it right by the fountain. Then he bowed to everyone and he got on his horse and he rode out of town and they never saw him anymore.

But all the rest of the summer the people of that town played on the beaches and ran with Jesse through the waves and climbed the trees. And no matter what happened, Jesse never felt dirty again.