

## **Waters of Bethesda**

Joe Dubois arrives back in town after a week out wandering in the bush, searching for it. He has been searching for 20 years but hasn't found it yet. The search has become an obsession with him, consuming his life. Eyes narrow when he talks about it to those who know the story. The Story. Joe tells The Story to any and all who will listen. It is a great story but it can't be true.

Chilled, tired and hungry, Joe heads to the old saloon. It is the only place where one can get a bite to eat and a cold beer in this little town on the edge of civilization. Joe quickens his pace, the idea of a seat by the fire, a sandwich and a beer sounds like heaven. Upon entering the saloon, he sees several of the town's wilderness guides sitting at a long table by the fire. The fire is roaring in the massive old fireplace and Joe is drawn to it. One of the guides spots Joe entering and waves to him, inviting him to join them. Joe knows these men and women well. He has trained most of them. This tight knit group spend their summers hiking eco-tourists into the wilderness around the town. The winters are spent in the saloon retelling stories of the crazy, naive tourists they encounter over the summer.

As Joe arrives at the table, the group are laughing at a story that Stella has related about a city fella. Stella, a native woman, is a popular guide with the millennials who come to trek in the wilderness. Having a native guide somehow adds authenticity to the experience. This was Stella's first year as a guide. Stella, having finished her story turns to greet Joe. She notes his seven days of beard growth, a dense white stubble. She guesses that he has been out on one of his week-long hikes north of the town. She is curious what he does on these hikes. When she asks anyone else they smile a knowing smile and tell her to ask Joe about The Story. She thinks maybe now is the time to ask.

Taking a seat at the table, Joe greets everyone. He keeps his coat on, letting the warmth of the place dispel the chill. He settles in for a long afternoon of stories and laughter. Stella bides her time, let's Joe eat and relax before making her request. In a lull in the conversation she turns to Joe, "Joe, whenever I ask anyone about where you go on your week-long treks north of the town, people tell me to ask you about The Story. Stella does air quotes about the words 'The Story'. The group is suddenly quiet, focused on Joe, hoping that he will once again tell The Story. Joe locks Stella in a long steady gaze. "It is a long story. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

Stella nods, "I wouldn't ask if I didn't."

Joe shrugs. "Okay."

Matt, Joe's best friend, halts Joe, "Hang on. Before you start, let's get another couple of rounds." He signals to the barkeep, making a circle in the air to indicate the whole table and holding up two fingers to indicate two rounds. The barkeep smiles and nods in understanding. This group keeps his bar afloat during the winter months.

Joe starts his retelling of the story. In its retelling, the story has developed a life of its own. "Some thirty years back on a fine autumn day, this old man comes into town. With him is an old dog. They don't arrive by bus or car, but walk in, the old man using a walking stick." This is significant to the story because as they all knew; the nearest town was 100 km away. "Both walked with a limp, the sort of limp that results from worn joints. These two had a lot of miles on them. The man was old, I mean real old. Hunched over, long white hair, long straggly beard. Think Gandalf old. His clothes were worn; his boots barely had any soles. The dog looked equally old, face grey, coat lack lustre, thin. They moved real slow. Right away, I thought

prospector. Some old fool with gold fever. Come to waste what little life he had left in him looking for something that wasn't here."

Stella sniffs, "There is no gold here. Everyone knows that. He should have known better."

Joe smiles, "That's it though. He wasn't looking for gold. He tells me that he is looking for something much more precious than gold or gems. 'Something that every man wishes he had more of but none find.' were his words."

One of the men calls out, "A good woman!" To which everyone but Stella laughs.

Stella gives the man a withering stare. "You lot don't deserve a woman, good or bad."

Joe continues his telling of the tale. "The guy books himself into the hotel here and hangs out in the saloon when he is not out prospecting. His dog is always with him; lies at his feet on the saloon floor. Sometimes the old man just sits alone and drinks at the bar, sometimes he takes up that table in the corner and spreads out maps, satellite photographs and notebooks. He studies those things for hours. He is looking for something but he isn't revealing what it is."

Stella snorts, "Didn't ya try asking him?"

Joe nods, "I tried several times." Joe does his best impression of a crazy old man, 'I'm running out of time.' Then the old man would point to his dog and add, 'He's running out of time.' Then he would add, 'I know it is here somewhere.' I would ask him, "What's here?" Joe pauses for effect.

Stella is getting impatient with Joe's story telling drama. "And, what did he say?"

"He would get this far off look in his eyes and that would be the end of the conversation. I tried over and over but could never get an answer out of him."

Stella is unimpressed with the story so far. "So your story is about some old coot that is half crazy. That could be half the people in this town."

One of the guys cuts in. “There is a lot more to the story than that. Go on Joe!” The other guides have heard the story many times but they always enjoy watching the reaction of someone new hearing it for the first time.

Joe is enjoying Stella’s impatience and her skepticism. He knows that by the time he is finished telling the story, she will be as befuddled as everyone else who has heard the story. He continues, “I asked the guy if he needed a guide. But I knew what his answer would be. Those old prospectors like to keep everything secret, afraid that someone might jump their claim. He politely refused, saying that he had maps and a good idea of where to look. The whole time I am talking to him, I am studying him; from his steel grey eyes to the eagle tattoo on his right forearm. I notice that the man has a perfect set of straight teeth and an expensive looking wrist watch. He is also very well-spoken, not your typical cussing and swearing prospector. This guy had a previous life in civilization. Anyway, every week the man would trek out north of town with his dog. He would disappear for days, trekking back into town and repeating the whole thing all over again the following week.”

Stella wants to cut to the chase. “Sounds like you. So what is he looking for?”

“Not so fast. So we are, like you are now, dying to know what this guy is up to. One week, I follow him out of town. I have to hang way back because I don’t want his dog the catch wind of me. After several days, the guy comes to a depression in the ground. In the depression is one of those spring-fed pools. It is warm. Steam is rising up out of it. The old man stops and takes off his back pack. The dog lies down to rest. The old man extracts some electronic equipment from his back pack – looks like a microphone on a long cable, connected to a control unit. The man moves to the edge of the pond and tosses the microphone into the pool. He feeds out the cable, letting the microphone sink. He returns to the control unit and does some

adjustments. After this, the man sits down near his dog, back against a large rock. I'm like, "What the hell. Who prospects by tossing something into a pool and taking a rest?"

"The old man gets his maps and notebook from his back pack and starts examining them, writing notes in the notebook."

"After a couple of hours, the old guy gets up, checks the control unit. He shakes his head, as if in disappointment. He stands and calls to his dog. The dog slowly rises and putting his backpack on, the old man leads his dog out into the forest. I wait some minutes and then go to the pool. It is a scummy little pool. The sides are encrusted in yellow deposits and it stinks of sulphur. The surface of the water is covered in a green slime. I can't imagine what interest the man could take in this. I check the control unit. It has a display screen showing a trace of a horizontal line. There is nothing happening – no periodic blips, no bumps or dips, the line is dead flat. So the guy is attempting to record something about this pool. I have no idea what it is. By this time, I have lost the man's trail but I know he will be returning to check his equipment. I settle in to wait for his return. Several hours later, the man and his dog return. The man checks the control unit, shakes his head. He is talking to the dog. He says, 'Let's leave it over night. See if there might be some activity over night.' I head back to town. I have seen enough, learned little."

I never reveal to the guy that I followed him. You never know how these old prospectors will react. Autumn turns to early winter. The first snows are threatening to close him down. He is quite concerned about this, keeps mumbling that he is running out of time. One week he heads out as always. But this time, things turn out quite different." Joe pauses for effect.

Stella doesn't appreciate his drama and urges him to get on with it.

Joe smiles and continues, “Some days later the dog comes limping back into the town. The dog is all cut up and holding a paw up, unable to put any weight on it. We wait for the old man to follow but he never shows up. We are thinking the worst. The dog is always with the man, he wouldn’t leave his side unless something terrible happened, perhaps a run-in with a cougar or grizzly. I called up Matt here, told him what I knew. I told him that I was taking the dog south to the vet in Milltown. Matt organized a search for the old man. But where to look? The old man could have been trekking for days.”

Stella looks to Matt to tell her what the searchers found. Matt smiles and nods to Joe. “Let Joe tell it. This is where it starts getting strange.”

Joe starts again, “So I take the poor dog to the vet. The vet examines him. He has puncture wounds. The vet checks the injured leg and says nothing is broken. He then feels the dog all over. The dog yelps now and then when the doc touches a sore spot. The doc shakes his head. “I think he was lucky. Looks like superficial wounds. I’d like to keep him a few days for observation in case there is internal bleeding.”

“So I leave the poor old dog with the vet, not sure if he will pull through.”

“Meanwhile, Matt and the guys who are following the old man’s trail come up empty. With no clues as to where the man might be, they could search forever, walking right past him in the thick woods. We report the man missing to the sheriff.”

“A few days later I am back at the vet’s office picking up the old man’s pooch. I am expecting to see a sad, old limp mutt. I am waiting in the reception room when this dog bursts through the door, dragging the doc on the other end of the leash. Here is an excited, energetic and strong dog that looks like the old man’s dog, but then again no, there is something different about him. I say to the doc, “Man. You are a miracle worker. A week ago this dog looked old and tired.

In fact, his owner was worried that his time was about to run out.” As I say this, the dog is jumping up on me and crying in greeting. The tail is fanning the air, blowing hair across the floor. I look at the dog once more, unsure that it is the same animal. But I can see the shaved areas where the doc stitched up his wounds. I pay and leave the place, wondering what kind of magic elixir the vet gave the dog. Maybe the old prospector wasn’t feeding him properly. Maybe the long days on the trail were too hard on it.

The following week the sheriff calls me. Wants me to come down to the station. I figure it is bad news. Perhaps they found the remains of the old prospector. Turns out I was wrong. Instead, the sheriff introduces me to a guy that I had never seen around town before. The sheriff says, “This is Paul. He has been assigned the case of the missing prospector. I want you to take the old man’s dog out and see if you can pick up on his trail.

Paul asks me about the old man. I tell what little I know. I tell him about the hot spring that the old man was so interested in. We decide to head out onto the trail with the dog. Perhaps the dog will lead us to the old man. By this time winter has arrived. The snow isn’t deep but it is cold. I worry about the dog but I needn’t. The dog quickly takes the lead. We follow the dog for three days. Late on the third day, we come to a clearing in the woods. The dog stops here. We are wondering what to do when a movement in my peripheral vision catches my attention. Looking in the direction of the movement, it takes a moment for me to recognize a white page blowing in the breeze against the white background of the snow. We rush to the spot. There, before us is the old man’s knapsack, concealed by the snow. Its contents are scattered about the place. We look around for a body, seeing none, we start gathering up the materials and stuffing them back in the knapsack. Pulling a map from the snow, I see that it is stained a reddish brown – blood. It could be the dog’s blood or maybe that of the old man. Paul will have it analyzed when he gets back

south. Collecting everything we can find, I pull out the man's notebook. Perhaps it can provide us with an account of those final moments here. I read it aloud so that Paul can hear. The dog is sniffing the knapsack, whining."

"The last few pages of the notebook are wet and the ink has run together. I read it as best I can. It says, *"... looks to be the perfect candidate. My probe recorded ultrasonic vibrations occurring pretty much continuously but their intensity peaked every four hours as more warm water gushed into the pool. Like the pool at Bethesda, the waters are 'stirred' periodically. I guess that the movement of the pressurized water through the cracks in the rocks below are generating the ultrasonic waves. I stripped down and entered the water, it is warm but slimy. I tried to convince Blackie to join me but he wanted nothing to do with it. I took matters in my own hands and picked him up and carried him into the pool. He struggled at first but then relaxed and quietly paddled around in the pool. I think the warmth and buoyancy felt good on his old joints."* I looked at the dog at that point. 'Old with sore joints' did not describe this sleek, energetic animal. I continued reading. *"We bathed in the pool for several hours, unsure how long it takes to reap the benefit. We are on our way back to town now. At the end of a long day's trekking, I have taken the time to record this discovery. After all these twenty years a searching, I think I have finally done it, finally found one. The next few days should tell the tale. I knew they had to exist, just needed the right conditions. The nay-sayers will be eating crow when I get back to civili.*

"His writing ends there, mid-word. We can only assume that something happened that interrupted him. Perhaps the sudden appearance of a mountain lion or grizzly. The dog made it back to town, the man's belongings are strewn about the clearing and there is no sign of him. We search around the area some more. We try to get the dog to guide us but the dog has no idea what



we want him to do. After several hours of fruitless searching, Paul suggests we get back to town and call out a search helicopter. The FLIR can detect heat signatures in the woods below. If the man is still alive, it should find him. So we returned to town.”

Stella is wrapped up in the mystery of what happened to the old prospector. She urges Joe to continue, “Go on. Did they find him?”

Joe shakes his head, “No. Never found him.”

“So you don’t know what happened to him.”

“No.”

“So why was this guy all juiced about some thermal pool? There are lots of those up in that area.”

“Exactly. I think that is what brought him here in the first place. But he wasn’t looking for just any pool; he wanted one with these vibrations.”

“Why? What was so special about it?”

Joe gets a wide smile on his face. “Special indeed.”

Stella looks at Joe with exasperation. She looks at the others around the table. All are wearing weird smirks. “You’re playing me. Why do I feel there is a big reveal coming?”

Joe says quietly, “We recovered the old man’s notes and maps.”

“And?”

The notebook detailed the man’s travels all over the world. He was an historian. A professor. He took early retirement and went in search of his special vibrating pool. For over twenty years this guy had been travelling the world looking for one.”

“And what was so special about it?”

“Well, his notes refer to a number of historical passages about healing waters.”

“What, the guy was looking for a spa, a mineral pool?”

“Not quite. A little more special than that. His notes mention a bible passage: John 5:2-4. If you look that up, it is a passage about a pool at Bethesda where Jesus meets an old, paralyzed man. The man tells Jesus that he has been waiting at the pool’s edge for years in order to be cured of his affliction. The pool has health restoring properties, but only for the first to get into the pool after an angel has stirred it. Because the man is paralyzed, he can never get into the pool fast enough. For the record, Jesus cures the man and he walks away from the pool.”

“There is a reference to a Healing Hole in a mangrove swamp on Bimini in the Bahamas. A Portuguese explorer, Juan De Solis, wrote in a letter in 1516 to the Pope that he had found such a pool in a mangrove swamp. During outgoing tides, the channels pump mineral rich fresh water into the pool. The Pope ignored the letter.”

“Another note in the old man’s book mentions Herodotus in the fifth century BC who wrote of the Macrobian. These people reportedly lived to be 125. He attributes this to the fact that they bath in a fountain that smells like violets.”

“Another note mentions Alexander the Great. In writings called the Alexander Romance, it is recorded that Alexander travelled to the ‘Water of Life’.”

“Then there is a brief mention of someone called Prestor John writing during the crusades in the eleventh century. These are all historical references to a fountain of youth; fountains and pools that have restorative powers. I think our old prospector was looking for a fountain of youth.”

At this, Stella slaps the table. “Hogwash. You really think that’s what this guy was doing? He was nuttier than hell then. And you guys are idiots to listen to this nonsense.” Stella stands, ready to take her leave.

Matt cuts in, “But that explains what happened to the dog. An old dog, suddenly young again. How do you explain that?”

Stella pushes her chair under the table, “Some good veterinary care, Matt.”

Joe puts up his hands to stop her. “Hold on. There is more.”

Stella is putting her coat on. “I won’t waste anymore time on this. Good afternoon boys.”

Joe pleads with her, “Just a minute more.”

Stella hesitates. She can see the hurt in Joe’s eyes. “Okay, I’ll give you one more minute.”

Joe finishes the story off. “So the dog comes to live with me but he is acting strange. Every morning he trots over to the saloon and sits on the front porch, looking up the street to the north. It is like he is waiting for his master to return.”

“That’s so sad.” says Stella, her voice cracking.

Joe continues, “The following spring a man walks up the road into town. I happened to be at the saloon, on the porch enjoying one of the first warm days of the season. The dog suddenly sits up. He is staring at the stranger and his tail starts wagging. As the man approaches closer, the dog gets more excited, the tail is beating the air and he is whining. Suddenly the dog leaps from the porch and sprints to the stranger. The man sees the dog coming toward him and kneels on the road. The dog leaps into the man’s chest and the two share an excited meeting.”

Stella smiles, her heart warmed by the thought. Still with a knot in her throat, she says, “So the old man has returned to town. He wasn’t killed after all?”

“Not quite. This man is younger, looks to be late forties. Definitely not the old prospector, perhaps a younger relative. The man walks up to the saloon. He says, ‘Thanks for taking care of Blackie. I’ll be taking him home now.’ I ask, ‘You a relative of that old prospector? His son perhaps?’ The man replies, ‘Something like that. Well, I’ll be on my way.’ I invite the man in for a drink, on me. He hesitates and then agrees. We enter the saloon and sit at the bar rail. Blackie lies on the floor at the man’s feet, just like he did with the old prospector. Drinks in hand, I ask, ‘We have the old man’s notes and maps. Do you know what he was looking for?’ The guy looks me straight in the eye and says, ‘Something that all men wish they had more of but none ever find.’”

“I have Deja vu at that point. The way he said it, it was exactly how the old prospector said it. I examine the man’s face. The skin is smooth. The man is clean shaven but for a couple of day’s growth. Does he look like the prospector? He has the same grey eyes of the old prospector. I wonder. Could it be?”

“The man tells me that he saw a news clipping of the missing prospector and his dog. How the dog had survived. When he read this, he had to come and find the dog. We jaw a bit more and then, he thanks me for the drink and once again for looking after the dog. He gives me a stack of bills, says, ‘For looking after Blackie, for the vet costs.’ We shake hands and that is when I see it. He has a tattoo of an eagle on his right forearm. I get the chills. I look from the tattoo to the man’s face. He winks at me and then turns and leaves with Blackie at his side.”

Matt slaps the table. “That gets me every time. A hell of a story.”

Stella has sat down again by this time. She says, “No! You made that up!” She looks to Matt for support. Matt is smiling, amused at her reaction; the same reaction they get from everyone who first hears The Story.

“It’s the truth. I swear.”

Stella stammers, “There is no fountain of youth. Those are fables. It’s impossible.”

Joe asks her, “Are you sure? I’m not. I am convinced that the man found one and I have been looking for it ever since.”

### **Epilogue**

**News scientist, 21 January 2023:** Treatment with low-frequency ultrasound has restarted cell division in aging human cells and reinvigorated old mice, reports Michael Le Page: In a report on work done by Michael Sheetz and his colleagues at the University of Texas Medical Branch, he reports that exposure to low frequency ultrasound appears to reanimate senescent cells, restoring their ability to replicate and halts the emission of compounds that cause senescence in other cells. The treatment seems to reset the Hayflick limit, a limit on the number of times a cell can divide. “As well as restarting cell division in aging human cells, it has reinvigorated old mice, improving their physical performance in tests such as running on a treadmill and making one old mouse with a hunched back move around normally again.”

“..senescent cells secrete chemicals that cause inflammation or induce senescence in other cells. The growing number of senescent cells in various tissues in our bodies as we get older is thought to be one of the main causes of aging and age-related diseases.”

“His team also treated entire animals by placing mice aged between 22 and 25 months in warm water deep enough to cover at least half of their bodies, because ultrasound waves lose less power travelling through water than they do through air.”

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Could ultrasonic vibrations be created by natural processes in nature such as pressurized water passing through channels? Could it be possible that historical accounts of life restoring waters are examples of naturally occurring low-frequency ultrasonic vibrations? The Biblical account of the pool at Bethesda speaks of the waters being stirred by an angel. Could this be a geothermal process, periodically injecting water into the pool and as a by-product, generating low frequency ultrasonic waves?