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Two For the Price of One

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Two For the Price of One ...  

... Harold Males

I peered through the cigarette smoke at the dapper little man seated opposite me in the booth.

"I repeat." He stated, "I have something of great value to sell you, at a relatively low price."

I lifted my beer, sipped at it and replied, "And I repeat, I don't need any French postcards."

The little man looked annoyed. "You do me a great injustice. My wares are not of such a low order."

I sneered at the little man's outraged dignity. "Tell me what you got to sell and then beat it."

His face brightened and he announced, "I have a soul for sale."

"You what?"

"I have a soul that I wish to sell you. Perhaps you'd care to examine the merchandise before you buy? Look!"

And he brought his clenched right fist up onto the table. It glowed a dull, pulsating red. Smoke curled from between his fingers and a faint crackling sound could be heard.

"Then you're . . ."

"The very same, at your service. You may refer to me as you wish. I'm not at all partial to any one particular title."

I cowered back into the booth corner as he leaned towards me in his eagerness. "Go 'way. I don't want nothing to do with you."

"But I can help you. I can sell you a soul."

"Go 'way. I've got a soul."

"Have you?" He laughed softly. "Oh, maybe you've got a small one; one that's fit for the gas station attendant you are now. One doesn't need much soul to pump gas or change oil. You fancy yourself a writer however, and for that, your soul is not nearly large enough."

"The stuff I write is good."

"Good for what? Your plotting is perfect, your characters are well defined and the unities are always observed. It's a pity that none of your stories have that slight spark that could make them come alive. I can give you that spark, with this." Once more he brought his fist up on the table. "Unless you'd rather spend the rest of your life pumping gas."

"What is that?"

"It's the soul of a writer who is now in my domain . . . a famous writer."

"How can two souls fit inside one person?"

"Your's as you know is rather small and for that matter, so is this one. This one however, has one thing you lack, namely, creative talent. Oh, please don't look so offended. It's only the truth. The two souls will complement each other and since neither is full grown, they'll fit comfortably enough."

"What's your price?"
"I just knew we could do business. My price is cheap. At your death, I collect your soul as well as this one. Two for the price of one, you might say. I never could resist a bargain, but we all have our failings."

"And I'll be able to write good stories?"
"Like none this generation has ever seen, my friend."
"Get out your contract, I'll sign."
"That's old hat, my friend. Your word is good enough. And now . . ."
"Wait, I want to talk with you a minute."
"Of course, but please make it brief. I'm a busy (you should excuse the expression) man, you know."
"How come I don't have to sign in blood?"
"No one ever had to do so. It is a base canard perpetrated by my enemies."
"And where are your horns?"
"I never had any. You can thank your theologians for that silly idea."
"I'm taller than you."
"Fear always did make me seem larger than I really am. And now I really must be going."
"Wait, One more question."
"Yes?"
"What is hell like?"
"As it has been said on Earth. I allow each person to create his own hell. You know what you hate and fear most. You'll devise much more fiendish tortures for yourself, than I could ever hope to dream up. And now I really must be going. Oh, your purchase, here."
"Stop. I've changed my mind."
He giggled obscenely and opened his clenched fist under my nose. The world exploded inside my head. I caught one brief whiff of burning sulphur. I passed out.

I came to with the bartender shaking me. "Closing time. You okay, Charlie?"
"A good night's sleep will fix that. Come on, I gotta close up."
"Yeah, you're probably right. Be seeing you."

I left the bar and walked through the deserted streets to my apartment. Stories, characters, dialogue whirled through my head. They were alive. I had that spark. I had to write. My footsteps quickened.

"The hell with hell. My name will be immortal."

At my stoop I looked up. There was a light on. Angie was waiting up for me again. Angie, sweet Angela. Prettiest girl in the neighborhood. Could've married any one of half a dozen guys with dough. Instead she married me, Charlie Fredericks, who was gonna be a famous writer some day. Six years, lousy jobs, poor food, no kids and a cold water flat, but now, at last, I'd keep my promise.

"Charlie, you been drinking again."
"Just a couple of beers, Angie."
“You want something to eat?”
“No. Go to bed.”
“Ain’t you coming to bed?”
“No. I feel like writing some.”
“But you gotta get up early to go to work.”
“I ain’t going back to that gas station again. I’m gonna sit here
and write.”
“What’ll we eat?”
“I’ll sell what I write.”
“Who’ll buy it?”
“What’sa matter? Don’t you think I’m any good?”
“Guess I better take that job in the laundry, tomorrow.”
She turned and went into the bedroom. I stayed up all night
writing, and in the morning, Angie left the house to go to work in
the laundry.
That’s the way it went for the next year. The stuff I wrote was
good, damned good, but the slick magazines wouldn’t touch it. They
said it was too morbid. The literary magazines were glad to take it,
but they either paid hardly anything at all or they gave you a sub-
scription. I had more damned subscriptions than I knew what to do
with.
I hadn’t changed too much from the guy I was. I drank a little
bit more than I used to. Occassionally I took a reefer. Nothing you
could call a habit though. Just something I picked up from some
musicians I met.
And still Angie went to work in the laundry. She looked as pretty
as ever, but she was thinner and she chain smoked. But Angie was
a good kid. She never complained. She was as good a wife as a
writer could ever hope for. Then it was over.
I came home one night in time to see the ambulance pull away
from our house. I ran up to the knot of neighbors and asked what
had happened. Mrs. Palermo turned to me and spoke scornfully,
“You bum. She tried to give herself an abortion and she bled to
death. You killed her, you bum.” She spat on the sidewalk. The
neighbors nodded sad assent.
I stumbled up the stairs. “Angie” I moaned. “Angie, I love you.”
There was blood all over the apartment. “Oh, Angie.” My God, I
needed a drink. I wrenched open the cupboard. All we had was some
sweet red wine. I grabbed a tea cup, filled it, gulped it down and
refilled the cup. “Oh, Angie. What have I done to you?”
I swayed and fell forward. The sharp edge of the stove was com-
ing up at my eyes, but I didn’t care.
Blood, wine, red all around me. Smoky dull red and in front of
me . . . the dapper little man of a year ago.
“Welcome, my friend. Now that wasn’t so bad, was it?”
“Angie’s dead.”
“Sorry, she wasn’t mentioned in our agreement. If it’s any com-
fort to you, she’s in the other place.”
“My stories never sold.”
“They’ll sell now that you’re dead. You’ll be rediscovered. Your
name will be shouted up and down the length of the land. You have achieved immortality.”

“What’s my punishment in hell going to be?”

“You have already decided that. Down here, no one will ever know of you. All will scoff when you claim to have been a writer. Your fate is thus: You are condemned to an eternity of faceless anonymity. This is your hell, and it’s all of your own choosing.”

Useless tears coursed down my cheeks as the devil finished speaking and turned to go.

“One more question, please?”

“Of course, that’s the least I can do for you.”

“Whose soul did you sell me?”

“Why, I’m surprised at you. I thought you had figured that out for yourself by now. That was the soul of Edgar Allen Poe.”

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**A Fling at Lunacy**

(AI, out of the spring dust, hunger and homelessness covered by veneer of youth, came to Betty’s lunchroom where a memory melting span of years old Betty dozed moldy with hair, her chins steadily sinking deep between her gut glued breasts. AI’s smile up welled something in her eyes like glinting water through a sheath of ice. That day, a local poet said, the moon was straddled by the sun. Many heat filled weeks the summer breathed on rippling muscles in the sand and words of love on surf, until one dawn a blackbird studded wind was full of leaves, and AI into the dust was gone.)

Down on the lonely, rain dark beach, Betty took a fling at lunacy (Don’t go! Don’t go!) On sand she whacked a bloody nose to feel his salty lips, and burrowed in thistles to kiss the nape of his neck (Don’t go! Don’t go!). She entwined herself in splintered driftwood to feel him bite into her flesh and held her ear against the earth to hear his moving body sing inside her head (Don’t go! Don’t go). Breathless she pounded up the beach in passion of a chase, collapsing presently knees first into the sleet buried waves sobbing, O please don’t go! Don’t go! not to AI but to a slender, toe-nimble Betty, skipping out so far into the Northern sea that even AI could never bring it back.

... Douglas Hodgman