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about 2,900 words

## Sell Outs

by Mahi Hossain

"So! What's your deal!" Asked the fat man sitting beside me who was constantly picking his nose.

In reply, I gave him my 'it's none your business but you are lucky that I'm a polite person, I will remain silent' smile. Of course, he did not understand it because his brain inevitably was ill-nourished and by the look of it, he was almost certainly

drunk. He kept picking his nose and now with it added a big smile that told a lot about his intelligence.

His teeth were not yellow. They were extremely white with a slightly bluish aura around them. I really do not remember how long we have been on this train but he has been eating since the beginning of it that I'm sure of. I think that is the reason his teeth are not yellow. Those yellow dirt get chewed down to his extremely big belly.

Maybe because I was getting bored or maybe because I was impressed by his teeth I asked him, "What about you? Why are you here?"

"Money." this time he was monosyllabic.

This time I looked at him rather stupidly for some time. Maybe he saw the irony in it(though I still doubt he did) and smiled rather broadly.

"A lot of money!" he continued as if he had never stopped. "I was practically drowning in it!" he finished with a belch that smelled somewhere between rotten egg and dirty sweaty socks.

I smiled because I was polite. And prepared for his questions to land on me. This time I decided I was not gonna avoid it. I would tell him the truth.

But he did not ask me again. Rather he asked for another food trolly. It came by itself floating in the air and the empty trolly in front of us vanished. The system was rather neat! And I suddenly felt hungry. So me and my co-passenger both picked up each a big hamburger and started chewing them.

The bread melted inside my mouth and the cheese complimented it. The meat was soft and it also followed suit. I chewed and chewed until I realized that I had finished my first one and was chewing my second. I did not stop. I also did not realize that I had closed my eyes. I opened them and saw that the fat man was looking at me with a broad smile, a little chunk of meat was stuck between his front teeth.

"Delicious ain't they?" he said proudly as if he had made them. "I'm Charlie by the way."

I said my name and smiled sheepishly. Since we were now tied by the bond of melting hamburgers I realized that I can not avoid him even if I wanted to. In fact, I started liking him a

bit. Also, there was the fact that he recognized me upon hearing my name, and that made it impossible for him to stop talking.

"You are the writer!" he said, now making his big yellow eyes even bigger.

I told him that *indeed* I was the writer and asked him how he knew me since money-making was not really my topic of interest.

What he did after hearing this, I could not believe my own eyes. He smiled amiably and produced a small notebook and a pen from somewhere and said, "Big fan! Autograph please!"

I gave him an autograph like the millions of times I have given before. He took the notebook and pen back very carefully, as if my touch had made them very fragile. These interactions made it impossible for me to have any negative feelings about him anymore. So next time when he opened his mouth again, I was not really taken aback.

"So! That was your deal! Your writing! Your imagination! I get it now!....." he exclaimed, mesmerized like a ten-year-old boy. Now, this was a spectacular thing to see considering his stature and all and would have found a place in my writer's

notebook but I'm done with that business. So I smiled and enjoyed the moment and also did not contradict his assumptions.

The train did not have any carriage, that is to say it was not segmented and had only one large carriage. There were obviously other passengers sitting around us. I observed particularly an old lady with several teeth missing. She was looking outside the window and smiling to herself. She was clutching something tightly in her hand. I wondered what her deal was!

Charlie followed my eyes and as if reading my mind asked the old lady what her deal was.

"Revenge," she said smiling sweetly. "Found out about my husband's relationship." she finished, rather indifferently.

Charlie made an 'O' with his lips while smiling with his eyes.

The old lady understood this gesture and nodded.

"Sweet isn't it!" asked Charlie.

The old lady said nothing but her smile broadened and the kindness in her eyes vanished; replaced by something darker, much much darker.

The train stopped but no one stood up. The gates opened. The 'W' on top of them came to life with green lights. There was a big black stone mansion in front of us. Nobody said anything but started climbing down from the train. They started walking towards the big gates of the mansion instinctively, like windup dolls. Charlie and I followed suit. He was acting as if he were my bodyguard. I have never thought in my wildest dream (oh yes! I had lots of them!) that my writing could ever induce such loyalty, especially in someone like Charlie!

We walked irregularly, not in files or lines. Outside the big gate, there were some strong-looking men and women wearing black sunglasses. They asked for our names and one by one they let us in. We were around thirty to forty people so it did not take very long to complete the whole process. After this, one of them, a tall strong-looking man with copper color skin and a goatee addressed us all, "Dear Sell Outs! Welcome to the lowest pit of hell! I do not know what you have been expecting but I'm quite sure not this!" he spread his hand sideways to give us a clear idea about what 'this' was. Also he had removed his sunglasses and his eyes were a deep shade of orange as if fire was blazing behind them.

"Oww! I never imagined demons could be so hot!" whispered Charlie to my ears, still a ten year old boy. "I know they are made of fire and all, but look at those bumps and curves!" he admired.

I was not really interested in all that right now, I was feeling tired. I do not know if souls are allowed to feel tired but I was feeling tired nonetheless. So I did not smile but started to move. I pushed and went in front of the crowd.

".....and because you have taken part in the deal," the non-curvy, less hot demon was saying before I interrupted him.

"Can you please let me in? I'm not really feeling well. Besides, I know all that you have to say." I told him, rather impatiently.

"Ehh?!..." The demon looked rather surprised and taken aback. "But I thought you were a polite person?!" the demon said. Now his voice was coming from just beside my ears though I can see him clearly standing in front of us. *One more thing about demons!*

"Yes, you are a great mind reader and all! But I know all these are happening inside my head!" I said wearily.

One side of the demon's mouth moved in amusement.

"Technically my dear writer, you do not have a functioning head attached to you right now!" he said, very amused.

I sighed. "Alright! Alright! I will be linguistically correct," I said annoyed. "I know this is happening inside my metaphorical 'soul head', which you can call consciousness if you want, all the same to me because I know that this is an illusion created by you!" I finished, in one breath.

His smile broadened. "Welcome to the afterlife!" said the Devil rather amiably. "What gave it away?"

"Thank you very much! And as for your question I'm sure you know the answer, don't you? Since you made sure everyone's face looked like yours!" I explained, failing to hide the amusement in my voice.

"Not much of an illusion, eh?" he asked. Now the whole backdrop was vanishing like mist and replacing it with my big lavish living room. I was standing by the window, looking at the busy city life. While he was sitting on a wooden chair without any armrest. But he looked very comfortable. He was wearing his usual long shabby coat. He put one leg over the other and took a



long drag from the cigarette between his fingers. The paper of the cigarette sagged a bit from the drag, creating vein-like lines on its surface. He was barefooted which contrasted very well with the snow outside. He offered me a cigarette and a burning matchstick.

"It was not so bad, but your face really does not go with a curvy body you know!" I said, now smoking the spiritual(it must be! Otherwise I could not hold it!) cigarette he gave me.

His smile was rather fitting in his angular face. "I'm flattered that you remembered my face! It's been a long time, no?"

I looked at my dead body. It was lying comfortably on the couch, very dead and very old. Some bluebottle flies were collecting their trophies from my opened mouth and rubbing their legs(or maybe hands!) together as if they were praying. I was glad that my eyes were closed. I died an old man's death, peacefully in my sleep. *Indeed it had been a long time!*

"Your face is hard to forget you know!" I said looking at my dead body. Then averting my face I fixed my glance on his red eyes and said, "What are you waiting for? Let's go!"

The Devil stood up from the chair, dropped and killed the cigarette butt with his bare feet. Limping he went to the table that had a bowl of fruits in it and picked up a big red apple. He looked like a classic Renaissance marble sculpture at that moment. Handsome, tall, well contrasted from the background.

"You humans are really interesting, you know!" he said now chewing the apple. "I really like this job of mine! One thing I do not understand about you people though..." he gave a pause "...how you fail to understand what you actually want!? If I could have figured it out my job would be very boring honestly!"

"Daddy works in mysterious ways!" I said, now one side of my mouth was active in a smirk!

The smug smile from his face vanished for sometime. He kept eating the apple, now looking outside of the window. "Why did you cheat on her?" came his counter offensive. And with it returned the smile.

My smile vanished. Instinctively I looked at the photo in a photo frame on my desk. Twenty five years old me looked back at 'soul me' laughing broadly wearing a wedding suit. But beside me

where my wife should have been there was a torn end. *That was of course the part of the deal.*

Satan looked satisfied. He smiled sheepishly as if saying *you asked for it!* Then said as if giving the final touch to a speech, "You asked for her, don't you? She was your deal!"

"So fucking what?!" I was really getting angry now which meant The Devil won. He always did!

"Nothing! *ABSOLUTELY* nothing! Just I feel really sorry for your poor friend! After all he was the one originally meant to marry her." he said and managed to look sad. "They loved each other very much! Only if you did not sell your soul to me and asked for her they would have been happily married!" he finished with a sigh.

"It is none of your business, is it? If you cared so much why did you seal the deal?!" I said, again weary.

He spread his hands and said, "I did not write the rules! Do not get all worked up on me now! You know the rules!" now his shadow on the wall looked like a man with enormous raven black wings.

*Of course I did!* He made it very clear to twenty five years old me. And I was all OK to go with it!

"Don't worry, you will meet your friend very soon. After all....."

"....he is guilty of a murder," I said, stealing his words. "Murder of himself!" I finished.

The Devil looked very pleased. Now he was smiling sympathetically. As if he cared, like a wolf does for a little lamb.

"You know, when I first got the news I felt very cold. As if my heart was made of ice and it was throbbing against my ribcage, sending uncomfortable icy pulses everywhere! I think that was when everything started to roll. But that is no excuse for what I did." I said, as if chatting with a friend. "I think I had lost interest in her because I got her and my friend's death was just the push I needed to go beyond my denial." I finished with a conviction.

"But you had paid a very high price for that! That's what I was telling you earlier, I do not understand you people! Why would you treat something like that for which you have paid a

very high price?" Now the devil was looking at a real loss. "In fact this is the highest price one can pay! You sold your soul to me and asked for her! You said you wanted her as you own! And in the end you cheated on her driving her mad with grief! For what!? Temptation?" asked Satan, not expecting an answer. "You know very well that I don't tempt anybody! That's all bullshit! I just collect tax! I'm a taxman! You guys do all the doings and blame me for these! That's what frustrates me most!" finished The Devil.

I said nothing. *What was there to say? He made it very clear how big of a price it was! I have to live without her for eternity!*

"Worst part is, all those things you people ask, for your poor souls, will by default go to heaven after you guys are dead. No wonder everyone in heaven is so rich!" The Devil said with a scowl. He remained silent for some moment. As if he was really thinking over and over again what he was going to say next. "Well, I have got you guys at least! You people are really smart and were all famous for it! I take you all to the lowest pit of hell, at my great hall and keep you as my company for eternity!" he said, now a little bit cooled down.

Suddenly I realized the problem. *Why did it not occur to me earlier?* "But why? I mean what's your interest in it?" I asked quickly, as if he is about to fly away.

His red eyes met mine, he was smiling again and looked impressed. "That is exactly my interest!" he said, pointing his index finger to me.

"What?" I was really at a loss.

"My creation in action!" he said very passionately. "Intelligence! Knowledge is nothing without intelligence!" he finished, apparently very satisfied!

I understood. It all became very clear to me. My face lightened with a genuine smile. Suddenly a strong wind started to blow. I saw he had opened the window.

"Any last wish?" he asked.

I thought for a moment and said, "I want to see her for the last time."

He looked at me without any expression. Then said shaking his head, "You people!....."

Suddenly my living room disappeared. Now we were standing in a garden where many people were moving around irregularly.

Some of them were saying something incomprehensible. Nurses with white dress and glorious bossoms were helping them here and there. Among them at a corner, on a bench an old lady was sitting. She was smiling and murmuring something to herself while shaking to and fro. I went to her and sat beside her. Suddenly she picked up her head and looked at me as if she could see me! I looked at Satan, questioning. He shook his head negatively while limping away from us.

I noticed she was clutching something in her left hand. Curious I observed closely and realized what it was. It was a torn part of a picture which if was whole then fit perfectly inside a desktop photo frame.

I sat there for some time, savouring. She had gone back to her usual business. I saw at a distance The Devil was smelling a rose. He looked at me and nodded. *It was time!*

I stood up. Tried to touch her hands with mine for the last time but they went through. I nodded to myself, turned around and started walking towards Satan who was still smelling a rose.

END