
I MET THE DEVIL ONCE

by: Bil. Alvernaz

VOICE: (512) 351-7845

EMAIL: bil@alvernaz.com

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I met the devil once, but I'll come
back to that later.

The reason I mention that encounter is
because I thought about it as I just sat
there in a surreal stupor, blinking and
thinking, while the doctor calmly said what
he said.

I had been anticipating bad news, but
when I heard exactly what I was expecting to
hear, I realized what I really wanted or had
hoped against hope for was good news. I
think we all hope, secretly or otherwise,
for uplifting news no matter how
disheartened we get (even if we won't ever

admit to having those pangs of optimism surging inside of us).

I had become numbed and drained from being so tired of feeling bad. I wanted to get back to being my "old" self. It had been so long since I had felt like me I almost couldn't remember what that was like.

Suddenly I was sitting there facing my doctor as my heart skipped a beat. Finally, I would find out what was going on. In an instant I was okay ... READY! There on the doctor's desk was what had to be my patient record file, bulging with all kinds, colors, and sizes of paper from my countless exams - all of which I had endured (uncomfortably and otherwise) to get to this politely strained, hard-to-catch-a-breath moment.

Without hesitating or taking the slightest breath, the doctor tilted his head slightly sideways and said, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but you have an affliction that more than likely will be fatal. It cannot be treated. However, we are quite

certain about the eventual ..." he paused, then said, "... uh, outcome."

My mouth dropped open. I let go of my grip on the chair and limply slipped into a slouched position ... like I had just been shot.

Still not seeming to take a breath, the doctor said, "As we reached the millennium and then in the subsequent years, there has been an amazing number of cases like yours. Hundreds of thousands, millions worldwide, actually. You know of this mysterious malady, right?"

Bobbing my head up and down I attempted to sit up straighter. The doctor's lips kept moving as phrases, statistics, and anecdotes tumbled out of his mouth. Looking at him in an odd sort of way, I felt hot and was sure I would throw up as my face either flushed with or drained of all color - I couldn't tell which. I heard sounds, barely recognizable as words, all strange and muted.

This is when I realized hope coursed through me ... which brings me back to when I met the devil. After all, hope is how the devil markets his "services," isn't it?

I met the devil in the medical clinic where I was waiting to do more blood tests on a dark, rainy afternoon. I had seen several doctors at this clinic and also had most of my tests done there. I signed in at the registration counter and was pleasantly surprised to see a place to sit down. The empty chair was in a row of chairs by the wall, directly opposite the entryway.

I liked this spot because it was close to the gigantic aquarium. I liked the fish, but mostly I loved to watch the African Frogs dart all over, oblivious to their confines ... much like those of us who sat there waiting, suppressing anxiety, constricted feelings, urges to scream, worry feeding on dread, and, yes, hope.

I didn't feel like reading any of the magazines I had already thumbed through

several times, so I leaned my head back against the stone wall. I let out a long sigh and quickly nodded off into an unexpected, but welcomed catnap.

It had been a hectic month of learning more about using smart paper, the new technology that soon would be making computers obsolete. Through sophisticated miniaturization, computer chips had now been reduced to such a size that the powerful chips were embedded right into the fiber of paper. No more bulky machines, monitors, or printers, just this smart paper where you did everything ... and when you were done, you had the final "printout" ... all without the need to ever "print it out."

This new technology was dazzling, because everything was now done right on paper itself. Smart paper saved so much time, but there was an incredible adjustment getting used to working with it. It took a certain mental shift to get away from the bad habits (and limitations) of working with

the now prehistoric personal computers. It wasn't that using smart paper was all that difficult, because if you could write or print then you already knew how to use smart paper. What was frustrating for so many people - me included - was that they tended to make using smart paper harder than it really was.

The deafening sound of thunder exploding and rattling windows instantly snapped me out of my pleasant snooze. I quickly sat up in a crooked sort of way. Yawning and blinking, I saw the devil walk in - right as lightning etched a monstrous zigzag pattern in the darkened sky, back lighting him in strobing flickers of black and white. I had absolutely no doubt this man was the devil. I have no idea how I knew that as he stood in the doorway for a moment surveying the room.

The lightning's glow around the devil dissolved like glittering pixie dust as he walked in my direction. I was absolutely

sure this man was the devil, because it was obvious this wasn't your average person ... there wasn't a drop of water on him, nor was a strand of hair out of place on his head of thick, gray hair.

Tall and muscular, the devil appeared to be in excellent physical shape. He wore a black turtleneck sweater and stone washed jeans. The well-worn Reeboks - laces untied - seemed out of character on this distinctive man with piercing eyes, accented by high cheekbones.

Then he was right in front of me, without having seemed to walk a single step. Pointing to the empty seat next to me he asked, "Okay if I set here?" The voice was velvety, soothing in a way I had never heard vocal chords resonate. Each syllable was uttered with such sincerity that "heavenly" is the only word to describe the aural sensation.

I briefly looked at one of the frogs zooming downward in the fish tank, spooking

all fish who happened to be in the way. Then I made eye contact with the devil, saying, "Yea, sure. No one is sitting there. Help yourself." I stretched my lips over my teeth, producing a civil smile - all without showing any teeth.

There wasn't any color in his eyes. They appeared to be all pupils, just black and captivating while at the same time compassionate, surrounded by an ultra white sclera. One look into those eyes and you couldn't help but feel like you could tell this man anything ... and that he would listen ... and that he wanted to help you. It was just something emanating from him that made you feel that way. But this was the devil! The bad guy, right? He was so much different than I ever expected the devil to be ... and, well, while I had never really thought about meeting the devil, this was not what or who I thought the devil would be.

The devil sat down and crossed his legs, letting out a long sigh. He looked deep into my eyes, saying, "Yea, it would be great if more people did, wouldn't it?" That voice. It was wonderful.

Puzzled and frowning, I asked, "Be great if more people did what?"

Smiling curiously, the devil said, "What you said about sitting down. 'Help yourself.' I believe is what you said." I could have listened to him talk forever! He carefully emphasized each sound of each word and knew exactly when to pause for maximum emphasis.

Realizing he was making conversation, I took a quick breath and said, "Oh, I see. I was talking about you taking the seat, but, yea, I know what you mean about people helping themselves." I winced, wondering if what I had said made any sense. I don't know why but I sensed he had sought me out specifically. It didn't take long for him to get to the heart of his intentions.

"Look," said the devil, leaning closer to me, "You know as well as I do that most of these people are here because of their own doing ... or un-doing. Instead of helping themselves, they have done or not done certain things to reach this point in their lives ... and now each one of them, like YOU, has turned their lives and souls over to doctors."

I pulled back slightly. The devil didn't budge from his imposing position as I thought for a moment and said, "Sure, some people create their own health problems, but most folks are here to get help for conditions over which they have no control."

"Ah, but that is where you are wrong," snapped the devil, shaking his head slowly left and right. His voice, though stern, still sounded comforting.

Before I could so much as blink in disagreement, the devil continued, "Listen. Doctors do NOT have any answers? They experiment through trial and error, like car

mechanics, until they hit on something that seems to work - all the while lulling the masses into passivity with chemicals ... and charging them through the nose for it. People have elevated doctors to 'God' status despite a phenomenal failure rate!" His voice was slick, soothing, and believable.

I butted in with, "So you're saying it's a waste of time to be coming here?" The devil didn't flinch as he immediately played his cards in this poker match he knew he would win ... and had probably already set me up for.

Sitting back in his chair and folding his arms, the devil said, "I'm simply saying everyone has an alternative. YOU have another option." My interest was obvious as he carefully enunciated the next words he spoke, "An ... option ... that ... will ... most ... definitely ... work." His voice now was lyrical and enchanting. Eyebrows raised, he added, "Are you interested?"

I heard myself abruptly ask, "Interested in what?" It was like I was observing myself verbally joust with the devil. At that moment I had no doubt the devil was offering me a solution ... a resolution ... an answer - something no doctor had could come up with!

Leaning closer, giving him just enough time to read my mind (which I have no doubt he was able to do), the devil smiled in the most captivating, hypnotic, charming way, saying, "Suppose in an instant you could be back to your old self, feeling like you did before all of this started? If I could make that happen, what would it be worth to you?"

There it was - HOPE - coursing through my body again, ready to explode out of my lips in the form of me screaming, "YES! YES! YES!" The devil definitely had my attention and he knew it. I stated what I truly felt in my heart, "It would be worth whatever it cost. I would find a way to come up with the money, no matter what the price."

Nodding his head up and down like a gambler about to show four aces and sweep the table, the devil slowly said, "So, you're saying you would gladly pay the price? No matter what!"

"If I had it to pay, yes," I said, titling my chin upward in an unsteady, self-assured way.

Smiling broadly, the devil softly said, "And, you would be prepared to effect such a bargain this very instant?"

"Any point, anywhere, anytime, anyhow," I said matter of factly, wondering if I really was in complete control of what I was saying and thinking. Instinct told me the devil could easily deliver on anything he promised, and that his word was as good as gold. Somehow I just knew that.

The devil grinned, let out a sensual sigh, and said, "Well, then, you ..." his words trailed off as his expression hardened. He pursed his lips and squinted as he looked towards the doorway. Thunder

boomed and lightning bolts etched the sky one more time.

I looked to see what was going on. A nun just outside the entry way was snapping her umbrella inward and outward, almost in sync with the thunder, to shake off the rain. When she glanced in my direction the expression on her face became a look of horror. The nun dropped her umbrella and ran towards me, holding the silver crucifix on her necklace outward.

I had no time to react other than blink as I wondered what the hell was going on.

Falling to her knees as she reached me, the nun quickly produced a rosary and started praying. At the same time she took off her necklace and shoved it into my hands, clasping her warm hands around mine. Wishing I could be invisible I wondered, "Why me?" Everyone in the clinic was looking at us. Then it hit me! The nun knew it was the devil who had been sitting next to me!

I turned to the devil. But, he had vanished! There on the center of his chair, spinning furiously, was what looked like a business card. The nun spotted it at the same time I did. She grabbed for it first, dropping her rosary and knocking the necklace out of my hands into my lap.

The nun screamed as she quickly jerked her hand back to her chest, both hands covered in blood that was now soaking into her white habit. It looked to me like the spinning card had slit open her fingers and thumb in much the same way you get a paper cut - only from all the gushing blood, it looked like she had been slit with a butcher knife. Before I could react or say anything, a nurse rushed up from out of nowhere and whisked away the sobbing nun. I crossed my legs to hide the necklace and crucifix. After a moment I grabbed the necklace and slipped it into my coat pocket.

I knew I had to get that card before anything else happened. I wasn't reluctant

at all to pick up the still spinning card. As soon my fingers touched the card, it stopped spinning - and no cuts either. I carefully tapped the card with my index finger before picking it up. The card was warm, almost hot. I picked it up before anyone noticed and quickly shoved it into the same pocket where I had put the necklace. It wasn't long before the police showed up. After they interviewed me for what seemed like an eternity, I went in for my blood tests. I never did see the nun again and nothing came of my conversation with the police.

It was too late to return to work, so I went home where, before doing anything, I lit a fire. Much to my surprise, it took right off. "Must be that new cord of oak wood," I mumbled to myself as I sunk down in my favorite spot on the sofa by the fire and started going through my mail. I had completely forgotten about what was in my coat pocket until I felt heat coming from it.

I slowly reached into my pocket and felt the card. It was still warm, but there was no necklace. Then I touched what felt like powder. In somewhat of a panicky reaction, I emptied the pocket into my hand. The card tumbled out along with gray dust. My mouth dropped open as I suddenly realized the card had disintegrated the necklace and crucifix. I heard myself slowly utter, "This is too weird!"

The thick, shinny business card was embossed with bold, black letters:

**FLAME SUMMONS HOPE
A SEAL IS EXCHANGED
ASSESSMENT EXACTED**
*> You Have More To Gain Than You
Will Ever Know And Nothing To Lose <*

I studied the card, wondering what each line meant. I was intrigued, but a voice inside of me cried out, "GET RID OF THAT CARD NOW!"

With a flick of the wrist I pitched the card into the fire.

The card erupted in orange and blue flames amid crackling sounds. A puff of

black smoke formed a tiny human figure that grew larger, expanding towards me until it was life size. Suddenly the devil emerged quite naturally from the quivering, vaporous silhouette like a celebrity stepping through a stage curtain.

"Geeze-us!" I shrieked and reacted by pulling backwards.

Brushing some soot and a few embers from his arms and chest, the devil smiled wickedly, saying, "Not quite."

Handing me the card I had just thrown into the fire, the devil said, "Here. You better keep this." The card was very warm but didn't show any signs of damage!

I sat there stunned, trying futilely to sort out what had just happened. I couldn't think of anything to say or ask. The devil sat down on the sofa next to me and said, "Yea, yea. I know. It's all pretty hard to take, isn't it?"

All I could do was nod my head up and down.

"Look," said the devil in that most wonderful, soothing voice, "Your best bet here is to not worry so much about the, oh shall we say, 'mechanics' of how all this works. What is important is that I can resolve ALL of your problems - the ones you have now and all of those that will happen in the years to come."

After blinking several times, I managed to say, "Okay. Look. I have no doubt who you are, but I ..."

He held up his hand, the same way my doctor did to stop me from talking, and said, "I'm not so sure you really do know who I am, but that is beside the point. Here is the deal. I'm prepared to offer you perfect health, along with amazing physical strength, for the rest of your life ... and what a long life it will be, where money will never again be a problem for you. Additionally, for any problems you encounter, just summon me with the card and I will come resolve things instantly."

He paused, obviously waiting for me to speak.

"For what?" I asked.

Showing a toothy grin, the devil said, "For a very, very small price."

Raising my eyebrows, I said, "Why is this so important to you?"

"You don't have the capacity to understand," said the devil with the saddest tone in his voice.

Shaking my head I said, "I understand more than you think. You think just because of who you are you can get whatever you want in exchange for someone's soul."

The devil scoffed saying, "You think this is about your soul! First of all, I don't want your soul. Second, Hollywood and organized religion don't know what's really going on. Third - and, this is the most important part - what I want is something called a 'seal'."

I dared not ask any questions. I just sat and listened.

The devil talked at great lengths about things from creation onward and how there was no good or evil, just circumstances and free will constantly at play. He explained what happens after you die and that there is no heaven or hell, only passage ways to wherever individuals freely select to go next.

When he finally stopped talking, the devil looked at me and said, "Be honest now. Did you understand?"

I bit my lip and said, "Honestly? No."

The devil smiled warmly, saying, "I see doubt and questions in your eyes."

"I don't get it," I said, "None of this makes any sense. I want what you are offering me, but something inside of me says this is all wrong."

Letting out a long sigh, the devil said, "No one gets it. The fact that you did

and do believe in me is the starting point for you trusting me. Know that I won't hurt you. The seal I want from you is what your soul is balanced on and together all seals are the fiber holding together the universe. You carry your soul for eternity, but for each lifetime you get a new seal upon which to balance your soul in relation to the universe. My role in all of this is to claim your seal at the time of your last breath or it will be lost forever. And, I can't take the seal without your permission."

"That's it?" I asked.

Nodding in agreement, the devil said, "Yep. That's it. So? Do we have an agreement for the exact exchange?"

I looked at the devil, his business card I still held in my hand, the fire, and then back at the devil again. Then I looked down at the floor, thinking there had to be more to all of this, because things just couldn't be this easy. Hearing the faint beating of a drum that I realized was my own

heart beat, I swallowed hard and said, "I'll have to think about it."

Hiding his obvious disappointment, the devil forced a cavalier smile and said, "You know how to reach me." And, with that his image dissolved from view.

I put the card in my sock drawer and never used it again. I looked at the card from time to time. Perhaps YOU would like to have it?

