

Non-Disclosure Agreement

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Year: 2001

I went to Los Angeles to burn down a house.

It was a low-stress conflagration. Just a run-of-the-mill house-burning sequence for a television miniseries. It was working-titled *Tribulation Alley* — set in a post-Rapture world populated by a lot of recently reformed agnostics and the odd Anti-Christ.

Because it was television, we wouldn't be filming the fire in any serious way.

You see, real flames don't look good on TV.

Most of the high-budget holocausts you see on video these days are computer generated. With a real fire, it's too hard to get the continuity right, even with a multi-camera shoot. It actually takes about an hour to burn a house down properly, so you have to jump cut too many times. But the vast rendering farms employed by Falling Man FX (mostly located in Idaho, I think) can reduce a house to cinders in an attention deficit disorder-friendly twenty seconds.

On top of the timing issues, the yellows in a really kick-ass blaze are too sallow for digital video. They have a sort of jaundiced reticence, which we punch up to a hearty crimson glow. It's not reality, but it looks better.

Despite the limitations of the physical world, Falling Man still burns down the odd house now and then. We study the results carefully, just to keep ourselves honest. For reference, basically, and to get a few fresh ideas. So out to LA I went, matches in hand.

The *Tribulation* crew had evidently used the house only in exterior shots. It was empty of furniture, completely unfinished. It had a Potemkin-village flatness, the walls paper-thin and bereft of plumbing or wiring. For the first day and some, I had the crew install paneling, to keep the walls from burning through too fast, and spread some rolls of old carpet on the floor, to get the smoke right. Even though most of us haven't seen a house burn down, we know instinctively what it should look like. And if we don't, our kids will. That's our Golden Rule at Falling Man: every generation of movie-goers needs better and more expensive special effects.

It's a philosophy that keeps the money rolling in.

About lunchtime on the second day, I was satisfied with the flammability of things, and we wrapped until that night. This house-burning scene was in daylight, according to the script, but we always burn at night for better contrast. Sunlight's one of the easiest things to add: full spectrum, parallel light. An idiot can make the sun shine.

Besides, real sunlight doesn't look good on TV. Except for the golden hours of dusk and dawn, the sun is a tacky, garish creation, which blows out what little contrast exists on digital video.

I should have gotten some sleep before the big burn. I was still on New York time; passing out would have been easy. Maybe if I'd been better rested, I wouldn't have gotten myself killed that day.

But I was on the company dime, so as I was driven back to my hotel, I contemplated the tiny minibar

key that was attached by a tiny chain to the smartcard that admitted me to my room, the rooftop sauna, and the ice machine.

I've always been fascinated with mechanical keys. I guess a lot of computer geeks are. Very early crypto. And a fascinating email screed had recently been forwarded to me. It proclaimed that one's status in society bears an inverse relationship to the number of keys in one's possession. The lowly janitor has rings and rings of them. The assistant manager has to get in early to open up the fast-food restaurant — the boss comes in later. And as we climb the economic ladder, more and more other people appear to open the doors, drive the cars, and deal with the petty mechanics of security. So here I was, boy millionaire in the back seat, armed with only my hotel smartcard and that tiny signifier of minibar privilege, as miniscule as the key for some diary of childhood dreams.

Much like the empty pages of a blank book, this small key had limitless power over my imagination. I felt in its tiny metal teeth the ability to consume six-dollar Toblerone bars and twelve-dollar Coronas. To pick through exquisitely small and expensive cans of mixed nuts and discard all but the cashews. Indeed, in my initial reconnaissance of the bar, I'd spotted a child-sized humidior in the back, no doubt offering cigarillos of post-Fidel provenance and jaw-dropping price. And all these miniaturized delights would be charged to Falling Man.

Fondling that little key in the back of the car, I realized a secret truth: This moment was why I had come to LA. To raid the refrigerator.

Later, it occurred to me that if I had somehow known that my death was nigh, I would have done pretty much the same thing with my last hours, indulged pretty much the same sensuous pleasures and petty revenge. Perhaps on a grander scale, but with no greater depth of spirit. And I suppose that's why I was sent to Hell.

That night at the burn, I was woozy.

The six beers were nothing, and those airplane-sized bottles of Matusalem Rum wouldn't have inebriated a five-year old. But I was a child of the post-smoking era, and I should have stayed away from the cigarillos. I felt as if some pre-Cambrian 1950s dad had locked me in a closet with a carton of Marlboros to finish off. My mouth was horribly dry, and I craved a drink. Preferably from one of the giant hoses that drooped in the arms of the firefighters that the LAFD had sent to oversee our little inferno.

With the desultory taste of ashtray in my mouth, I didn't even bother starting the fire myself. I left the honors to a production assistant with a cute smile.

I just mumbled, "Action."

She threw the large, Dr. Frankenstein-style connection switch, and the gallons of accelerant we'd sprayed throughout the doomed house ignited. A wave of comforting warmth spread from the fire, reaching us through the cool desert air a few seconds after the first flames burst from the bungalow's windows.

A ragged cheer went up from the crew, rewarded at last for the hot work of prepping through two August days. Six of them held palmsized digital cameras. Four locked-down cameras shot the house from its cardinal directions, providing x- and y-references for the shaky images from the handhelds.

We didn't bother with microphones. Real fires don't sound good on TV. Too crackly, they're just so

much static. We generally insert a low rumble, like a subway going under you, with a white-noise wash on top.

The six camera-jocks dashed in as close as the heat allowed, working to record the warp and woof of the blaze. They tried to catch the dramatic and particular details, a beam splintering in a gusher of sparks, a trapped pocket of air exploding. We wanted to capture this fire's effulgent specificity, so that the art director back at Falling Man could escape the tried and true spreading-flame algorithms that all the other FX houses used. We wanted something unique, almost real.

Like nineteenth-century scientists taking spirit photographs, we were trying to capture the soul of this fire.

The PA whom I'd allowed to start the blaze put her hand on my shoulder. I looked up and was struck by the simple, pyromaniacal joy in her eyes. The woman's touch was unselfconscious, unsexual, and I saw her twenty-something innocence writ by the dancing red light on her face, and in my jaded, thirty-something way preferred that to the blaze itself. I watched her, until a cracking noise and a sudden intake of breath from the crew brought my eyes back to the fire.

One corner of the house was threatening to collapse.

A gout of flame had sprouted from the base, running like a greedy tongue up the vertex of the two walls. The supporting beam hidden behind this column of fire must have been wet new wood; it was hissing, throwing out steam and sparks explosively. It began to buckle and twist, writhing like a snake held captive in a cylinder of gas and plasma.

"This is the money shot!" I cried, waving all the handhelds around to that side. I was breathing hard, heart pounding and cigarillo hangover suddenly vanquished. I ran a few steps toward the house. Even in those meters the air temperature raised noticeably, the blaze now a heavy and scorching hand pushing against my face. It dried my contact lenses, which gripped cruelly at my eyes like little hemispherical claws.

I felt as if I was waking up from a long dream, like when you realize the exquisite detail of the real world after a prolonged session in VR.

I turned back to the PA, who had followed behind me, and shouted, "This is why we do this."

She nodded, her pupils as wide as the zeroes on a hundred-dollar bill.

One of the camera-jocks knelt just in front of me, his little camera a whining, frightened bee.

"Give me that thing," I said.

Nice last words, don't you think?

I pressed one eye to the viewfinder, clenched the other shut to protect it from the heat, and moved forward. I pushed in close, the heat a strong wind against me now.

Objects in viewfinders are closer than they appear.

Someone shouted a warning, but this was my shoot.

In the limited view of the camera, I didn't see the whole thing. But I presume the corner beam gave way near its base and fell outward, propelled by the gasses trapped within its green wood, or perhaps by some randomly concurrent explosion inside the house.

It reached out, a hissing, flaming arm, and struck me solidly where I knelt, braced against the outdraft of

the blaze. It wasn't the fire that killed me, just pedestrian kinetic energy. My corpse was hardly burned at all.

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The Devil (aka: Beelzebub, Satan, and the Artist Formerly Known as the Prince of Darkness) entertained me in an office rather like my dad's cubicle when he worked for IBM. There was that same penumbra of stickies framing the fat old cathode-ray-tube monitor, the rhythmic chunking sound of a far-off photocopier, the pre-email proliferation of paper everywhere, and Old Scratch himself was wearing a blue suit, white shirt, and red tie.

But it looked better on him than on my dad.

He nodded a hello. There was no need for introductions; I knew who he was. He's the Devil, after all. The crafty smile, his seductive grace even on the pre-ergonomic office chair, the unalloyed beauty of his face all made his fallen-angel provenance clear. I had no doubt that this was real.

But the IBM setting seemed a bit odd.

"Is this some kind of ironic punishment thing?" I asked, imagining an eternity of writing Cobol code and wearing a tie. A fitting fate for New Economy Boy.

"Not at all," Satan replied, waving one elegant hand. "Irony is dead. Your generation killed it. Besides, nothing beats hot flames. We're in the business of damnation, not poetic justice."

His limpid eyes drifted across the jokey coffee mug, the dusty and fingerprinted glass of the CRT, the thrice-faxed office-humor cartoon thumbtacked to the cubicle wall, taking them all in with a kind of vast sadness. He was awfully pretty, just like they say.

He looked at me and sighed.

"My point with this apparition is to impress upon you my weakness."

I looked at him in horror. "For bad office design?"

"Not that," said the Devil. "Although I must say, the cubicle has crushed more souls than I lately." He regarded the screen saver on the terminal: the words **DO NOT TOUCH ANYTHING ON THIS DESK** rolled by in quiet desperation. He shuddered, then turned toward me.

"To be frank, we need your help."

"My help?"

"With an FX issue."

I narrowed my eyes.

"You see," the Devil continued, "over the last few decades, we down here in Hell have begun to realize that we have a little trouble with our ... look and feel."

"I don't follow you."

He smiled, perhaps at my choice of words.

Then he shrugged. "I think it's these video games, although some of my minions say it's CGI graphics. But

whatever is to blame, recent studies have found that the average American male spends fourteen hours per week in some sort of interactive infernal environment. And we just can't compete with the graphics in first-person shooters these days. Many of the souls coming down here lately find the underworld rather ... cheesy, I'm afraid."

"You mean ...?"

"Yes, alas," the Devil lamented. "Hell no longer looks good on TV. Nor even in reality."

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It was true.

We soared over the damned, their voices crying in a great wail of pain. Although we were above the tongues of the flame, the heat clung to me like fishhooks. Every square inch of epidermis felt like sunburned flesh sprayed with jalepeño juice. And the smell was far worse than the sulfur we all know from rotten eggs. It was of a purer species: fifth-grade chemistry set sulfur, though tinged with a darker, murkier scent, like a dead rat behind the wall. The stench was awful even from our lofty height. I can't imagine what it was like inside that pit of fire.

But Old Scratch was right. The visuals were very last-century. Gouts of hellfire shot across the damned in big tacky bursts, as if some Coney Island flame-breather were running around down there. And the flowing rivers of flame were so Discovery Channel: turgid and crusted with solidifying earth on top. Nothing halfway as cool as the boiling oil algorithms that Falling Man had created for the prequel to *Death Siege*, and that was just a Showtime original. We'd devised a mesmerizing and viscous black liquid all run through with scintillating veins of sharp crimson, like a negative of a bloodshot eye texture-mapped onto flowing blobs of mercury.

And the Hadean backdrop of reddened craggy mountains were totally pre-fractal. I've seen scarier coral.

"This looks like a heavy metal video from the early eighties," I opined, blowing my nose from the heat.

"So you'll help me?"

"I want a deal memo first," I said.

Naturally, he had his paperwork already in hand.

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Now, this was not your basic Daniel Webster-style deal with Beelzebub — swapping my soul for unlimited wealth or devilish charm. The Devil had been priced out of the geek-soul market. Vast riches were at that point pretty unremarkable for anyone with a software background. Hell, geeks can even get chicks these days. Satan couldn't find anyone good to do the work, because he simply had nothing we wanted.

This facet of the New Economy no doubt appalled the most beautiful of former angels, and had thus far stymied his upgrade efforts (uncleverly codenamed: "Hades 2.0").

Until I came along.

You see, I wasn't totally dead.

I was having what's known as a "near-death experience." My singed but not irredeemable corpse was in

the back of a LAFD ambulance right now, headed toward probable reanimation at County General. But instead of the usual approaching white light that goody-goodies enjoy, I was getting a sneak preview of the Other Place. (We don't hear so much about those, do we? I figure it's a media selection thing — visions of hell don't get you on *Oprah*.) Soon, I was going to return to the living, whether I took the Devil's offer or not. But I had seen what lay in store.

"So no money, no gnarly magic powers?" I complained as I scanned his contract. "What exactly do I get for helping you?"

"In exchange for my help with my look-and-feel issues, you will receive certain highly proprietary information."

"Microsoft source code? I *knew* that guy was on your side."

"No, something far more valuable," the Devil whispered. "The Secret of Damnation."

"The what?"

He sighed, and all drama left his voice. "The secret of how *not* to wind up in hell, imbecile."

"It's a secret? Isn't it like a sin and forgiveness thing? I mean, it all looks very Judeo-Christian down here."

"Young man, it's not that simple. Because of your cultural background, you're merely seeing the Judeo-Christian, uh ... front-end. But Hell has many facets, many aspects."

"So this is just the Judeo-Christian interface?"

"Yes, but the Secret of Damnation is universal," the Devil concluded. "The deeds and ideas that doom the soul are the same everywhere."

"And this information is proprietary?"

He nodded. "Only God and I know the source code. You mortals are mere end-users."

"That's harsh."

"And believe me," the Devil said, "salvation grows harder to achieve every day."

I looked back over my life, and wondered what — besides my casual agnosticism, rampant Napster piracy, and willing participation in the commercialization of Xmas — could have damned me. It wasn't immediately obvious. My recent near-death had made me realize that I was somewhat shallow. (I'd sort of known that anyway.) But I didn't think I was really *evil*.

I could always try to be a better person once this bad dream was over. Give to charity. Be a Big Brother. Pay the Falling Man pixel-jocks another buck an hour. But what if that didn't tip the scales?

I remembered the terrible heat of the flames. However visually cheesy and culturally specific, a real trip to Hades meant pain for eternity. And pain *never* looks good on TV.

I also realized that I could leverage the subsidiary value of the Secret of Damnation. Once I knew the Secret, I could spread the word. Start a new religion with guaranteed results. A new, streamlined religion for the new century. Skip the rituals and dogma, and get straight to the part about not going to Hell!

Now there was a business model.

"Okay," I said. "It's a deal. You'll get the best infernal front-end this side of *Fireblood IV*. Just tell me the Secret."

"First," he said, "you must sign this."

Damn, I thought when I saw the document. An NDA.

Now, I've signed about a thousand non-disclosure agreements in my day. In the software world, every meeting, every negotiation, even the most tedious of product demonstrations begins with this harmless and generally meaningless ritual. "We promise not to tell anyone what we learn here. Blah, blah, blah." If you made a giant map of every non-disclosure agreement ever signed, with a node for each software company and a connecting line for each NDA — rendering the whole New Economy as a sprawling net of confidentiality — any point would be reachable from any other within a few jumps: six degrees of non-disclosure.

But this was the NDA from Hell.

One peep about the nature of the Secret — verbal revelation, gestural hints, Pictionary clues, publication in any media yet to be invented throughout the universe and in perpetuity — and I would be back down here pronto and permanently. Damned.

This was the hitch, the gotcha that Old Scratch always puts in his contracts. I was going to have to keep my mouth shut in a big way.

But I signed. Like I said, it was pure reflex.

And then I got to work.

The first order of business was getting an art director. Hades 2.0 was primarily a graphics upgrade, so high-quality pixel help was essential. I decided on Harriet Kaufman, a freelance artist who'd worked with *Falling Man* before, and who could be trusted not to tell anyone else at the firm about my little side project.

My body was alive by now — a shot of adrenaline had restarted my heart — and I was comatose in a hospital bed. Now only semi-dead, Hades had grown a bit fuzzy around me, but I could still function down here. To get me started quickly, the Devil let me borrow a machine with a fast net connection.

A buddy search revealed that Harriet was online, so I instant-messaged her. It turns out that my immortal soul types faster without my corporeal fingers in the way, and with better punctuation and accuracy.

>thought you were dead!! Harriet responded.

>Nope, just near-dead. I've got some work for you.

>didn't you catch on fire or something? you're in the hospital, right?

>Just singed. Still comatose, actually. But I'm working remotely, from Hell.

>LA?

>No. *The* Hell. But I'll be back in NY soon. And while I was down here, I got a job.

>is this some kind of sick joke?

>No, Harriet. Like I said, I got some work for you. \$\$\$!

>who is this really?

>It's ME! Listen. Who one else would know this: Remember that time when I got drunk at your apartment and we tried, but couldn't?

>OK! OK! but you said you were comatose?

>Body on the slab. Soul in Hades.

>whoa. i get it now. you **are** dead, and you set up some sort of dead-man switch, like you always talked about.

I winced when I saw these words. I had always claimed to have a dead-man switch installed deep in Falling Man's system, in case the other partners decided to get rid of me. My story was that if I didn't type in a special code once a week, my dead-man program would recognize my absence and activate, rampantly destroying all the company's stored data. It was insurance, in case I ever found myself locked out of the office, or worse, cut out of the stock options. The truth was, however, I'd never bothered to implement the dead-man software. It was too much trouble. After all, as with nuclear weapons, a credible threat of massive retaliation was sufficient to maintain the peace.

Harriet continued:

>so this is just some posthumous conversation program, designed to fuck with my head if you died. you programmed it to mention that time at my house. that is so nasty of you. **was** so nasty, I guess.

>No, this is ME, not some crappy chat software.

>prove it.

>A Turing Test? I reach out to you, asking for help from beyond the grave and you give me a FUCKING TURING TEST?

>ok. you just passed. only you would bring up a turing test while you were dead. geek.

>Thanks.

>now, you said something about a job?

I briefed Harriet, explaining who the client was and what he wanted, but saying nothing about the payment plan. After our little discussion, I decided to wait until I was walking the earth again before I made any more hires. The last thing I needed was a load of people pestering me about the afterlife. I had that non-disclosure agreement to worry about, after all.

A few hours later, my eyelids started to flicker, and I found myself in the demimonde between an LA hospital room and my Hell cubicle. The Devil, like some gorgeous and jocular supervisor, came over to shake my hand and say goodbye.

"When do I get the Secret?" I interrupted.

"After delivery. Just don't get hit by a bus before then."

"I'll be careful."

"And don't forget my little non-disclosure clause," he added.

"Mum's the word."

He smiled cruelly at my show of confidence. I could see in his eyes that he fully expected me to fail, to spill the beans and wind up in his clutches for eternity. I started to say something brave.

But then the netherworld faded, and I was back. Bright lights, stiff bedclothes, and thundering unstopably into my awareness: a *world* of pain. It turns out that even first-degree burns can take you to the extremes of agony.

I gurgled a scream, and flailed my arms. Someone grabbed my hand, and I heard a call for morphine.

So now I know what Heaven feels like, too.

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Harriet and I did good work together.

For Hell's new lava, we used a liquid motion package designed by these hydrofoil designers in Germany. Extending its parameters with a little code of our own, we set the lava's viscosity to crazy — our lakes of fire hopped as lively as a puddle in a Texas hail storm. Cruel geyser heads lurked below the surface, periodically erupting to scatter a scalding mist upon the cruel abysmal wind. Harriet colored the lava an ominous dark red, texture-mapped with scanned photos of my still-scabby burns and run through with sinuous veins of eye-gouging electric crimson.

We decided to go fractal with the mountains. Each pointy crag was sharp enough to scratch a diamond, each lacerating jut of rock serrated with infinitely recessing edges-within-edges, razor-fine down to the microscopic level. You could cut yourself just *looking* at the stuff.

We also went fractal with the Styx 2.0, making it infinitely crooked, infinitely long. A boundless barrier between the mundane and the eternal.

Working alongside Harriet, I saw the project reflected in her eyes, their steely blue aglitter with the millions of reds in our perditional palette. My hand was always on her shoulder as we crouched over twenty-thousand-dollar monitors, and I felt the flutters of her soul in the taut muscles that extend from neck to mouse-arm. The hellish imagery turned her on, inflated her pupils like blobs of black mercury expanding in the heat of our virtual netherworld. She was hooked, transfixed, spitted by a primal sexual response to the visage of death.

She didn't really believe in our diabolical client, I could tell. But the project manufactured its own verity, until the view in the monitor became as real for her as for those who would one day occupy it.

I had known the project would capture her. Harriet was one of those artists who instinctually resisted computers, only to be ultimately seduced by them. She loved her paints, but a stroke of pigment can't be corrected. There are no RGB values to change, no pixels to nudge. You're stuck with the happenstance of that moment, without an Undo command or even a backup file. And that's a losing deal, it had always seemed to me. She always claimed that one day she'd forswear the mouse and pick up her paintbrushes again, but the ability to tween and tweek was an irresistible siren. The algorithms that we geeks had used to colonize the screen had colonized Harriet as well.

It's an old story. Religions start with a madmen's inspiration but end up with sensible canons and commandments. Barter systems are rationalized into the liquidity of cash and credit. Mythologies are repurposed as role-playing games. Communities are arrogated by IPOs. With the visual arts it took a while longer for the number-crunchers to take over, but eventually we always win.

Art may be pretty, but rule-governed systems rule.

Our biggest graphics challenge was hellfire, the ambient affliction of the damned. We needed something that would burn without devouring, a necessary provision for endless torment. But fire that doesn't consume its fuel always looks wussy. It hovers over the burning victim like it was Photoshopped on post facto, about as scary as the disembodied and exaggerated blaze of charcoal sprayed with too much lighter fluid.

We brought in some programmers and created dozens of new algorithms from scratch. We watched videos of forest and brushfires, warehouse conflagrations, accelerant infernos, the oil-well holocausts of the Gulf War. I picked my scabs endlessly, looking for answers in that crumbling, itching flesh.

Finally, we hit paydirt in that old standby: napalm. When napalm consumes flesh, it burns its own sticky fuel, charring the body beneath as a secondary effect. Sprayed with fire extinguisher foam or submerged in water, it remains alight, attached to its victim, demonically implacable.

Vietnam-era video has its limitations, of course, so we checked out a few second-amendment websites and got the recipe. We concocted a small batch of napalm from soap flakes and kerosene, and headed out to the Jersey swamps, bringing along cow-hearts and a couple of raw pigs that we'd scored from a loading dock in the meatpacking district. We burned the whole grisly pile.

During the filming, I had a flashback to my near-death in California. Waves of heat came from the crackling flesh, and a stench not unlike the sulphurous reek of Hell.

I looked over at Harriet, who had dropped her digital camera to stare at the flames with naked eyes. Tears ran down her cheeks, streaking the soot that had darkened her face. She gazed back at me with horror. Harriet had treated the whole project as an enjoyable lark until now. Vanity graphics for an imaginary client, my personal fetish. But I could see that the level of detail was starting to get to her.

The look in Harriet's eyes dampened my pyromania for a moment. What was I doing, working so hard to make Hell look better? How much pain would I have caused by the time Hades 3.0 came along, augmenting as I had the tortures of a multitude of lost souls?

But then I remembered: I was avoiding my own damnation. My motivation was enlightened self-interest, the fulcrum of a better world.

Harriet and I fucked in the production van while the inferno waned. The smell of cooking meat made us wildly hungry, and the late-August heat channeled the soot and ash that covered us into tiny black rivers of sweat. For a few minutes, we were demon lovers, savage and inhuman.

And Harriet wept, filthy and condemned, all the way back to Manhattan.

Despite ourselves, we'd gotten the footage we needed. Frame-by-frame analysis revealed how the pigflesh charred while the greedy napalm burned, the pigs' innards curling out to embrace the flame, providing fuel from within. My programmers refined the process to a simple algorithmic dance, which writhed in perpetuity like a blazing Jacob's ladder, an infinite meal encountered by a ceaseless appetite. Soon we had hellfire on tap.

It gave us all nightmares — even the programmers, who didn't know our client's business model. But it looked very good on TV.

A few weeks of tweeking later, we were done.

The day we delivered, Harriet and I went out for a celebratory drink.

"Did the client pay you?" she asked.

I nodded. True to our contract's terms, I'd received a FedEx that afternoon, the Secret of Damnation printed out in a one-page summation no longer than a pitch for an action movie. The whole thing would have fit easily on one of those big-sized post-its. I had read it twice, then folded it up and carefully placed it in my breast pocket. I would burn it that night, after one more read. It seemed simple enough, but I didn't want any loopholes or trick language screwing up my trip to heaven.

"Yeah," I said. "The project's all done."

I'd already paid Harriet off with cash out of my own pocket, just like everyone else on the job. And a healthy bonus for not squealing to my partners that I was working on the side. But from the look in her eye, she wanted more now.

"Was it a lot of money?" she asked.

"Well, not money, really."

"I didn't think so."

I coughed into my beer. "You know I'm strictly non-disclosure on this."

"Of course."

We drank for a while. We were still lovers, but barely so. Nothing had ever come close to those minutes in New Jersey, enveloped by the grime of a new abyss.

"I think," she said, "that I'm finally going to take that vacation I keep talking about."

"Africa?" I said weakly, careful not to inflect my voice with any enthusiasm.

"Yeah," she said. "Africa. Just me, some paint and a few brushes. I'm going strictly analog for a year, maybe two. Like going native. No computers for a while."

"I see." I couldn't believe she was saying this, so soon after I'd read the Secret.

"No Photoshop, no modeling software. Just real objects to look at and to paint. Pigment and white canvas. Sky and landscapes."

"Sounds ... nice," I said flatly.

"So," she asked, "is it simple?"

"Is what simple?"

"The Secret of Damnation."

My hand went to my breast pocket, a sinking feeling hitting me like the NASDAQ in freefall. "How the hell did you know about that?"

"He told me. He came to me and told me what he paid you."

"That *fucker*."

"So I want a percentage. Tell me the Secret."

"I can't."

"Just part of it. Give me a clue."

"I signed an NDA, Harriet. I can't even give you a hint. If I tell, I go to Hell."

She shrugged, laughed as if she'd only been kidding.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to put you in breach of contract." A pause, a wicked smile. "But it's pretty straightforward, right?"

"Harriet! Stop."

"But — "

"No hints, no adjectives, no information. Nada." I put my hands over my mouth.

"Okay," she said slowly, swirling one finger around the lip of her glass flirtatiously. "But if I was doing something, something bad? Bad enough to get me sent to Hell, for instance. Could you give me a sign?"

"Like scratch my nose with my right index finger?"

"Yeah, you could."

"No, I could *not*. Harriet, this is the Devil we're talking about," I said. "Not some jealous boyfriend I can hide from down in Miami. He's the Prince of Darkness, the Lord of Hades, and if I fuck up he'll come and carry me away screaming to Hell. You know, the one we just *created*?"

"Yeah, sure," she said. "Whatever."

A silent moment elapsed.

"But is it a big thing?" she asked playfully. "Or just a detail?"

I shut my eyes, locked both hands over my face. I didn't want any clues to pass over my visage — agreement or denial, warmer or colder. I tried to think of the latest virus hoax, the closing prices of Falling Man stock over the last week, anything to occlude the fatal knowledge in my mind.

Despite these efforts, I clearly remembered the Secret of Damnation. The simplicity of the idea, the easy charm of it. I could have explained it to Harriet in two minutes.

"Come on, relax," she said. "I don't believe any of it anyway."

"Yes, you do," I said from behind the curtain of my hands.

She snorted. "It's obvious what's going on here. This all just started out as self-indulgent therapy for you. You're a software über-geek who thought you were king of the world, until you almost died. Mortality wasn't pretty, and worse, it was way out of control. So you decided to deal with the post-traumatic stress the only way you know how. You decided to domesticate the afterlife into a software project. It's so predictable and lame. You hire a few coders and artists to put your near-death hallucination — clearly inspired by the *Tribulation Alley* burn — onto a nice, safe computer screen. There, you can adjust its frame rate and resolution, play with its aspect ratio and palette. Then you burn it onto a disk, and you think you've got eternal life now. It's pathetic. You've reduced heaven and hell to *pixels*, for God's sake."

"No," I insisted. "What we made, it's really Hell. I swear it is."

"It's nothing but a screen-saver!" she shouted. "By definition: some nice graphics that do *nothing!*"

"Harriet, I instant-messaged you from beyond the grave, remember? And you just said that you met the Devil, for Pete's sake!"

"You messaged me from a County General Hospital in LA, you fuck. I checked the timing. You'd come out of your coma by the time I got your message."

"That's impossible."

"I called them. You were already ambulatory."

"They made a mistake. Or maybe it's a time zone thing. I woke up *after* I messaged you, I swear."

"LA's three hours *behind* us. Any mistake would have worked the other way around."

"What about the Devil? You said he appeared to you."

"The Devil, sure. You hired some cute actor — some *very* cute actor, I might add — to mess with my head. What, did you think I'd fuck you again for the Secret of Damnation? Was this whole thing a way to get in my pants from the beginning?"

"No, it was a way to get out of Hell."

She laughed again, but the sound was dry and ragged now. "Listen, I don't know whether you're pulling some elaborate hoax on me, or if you really believe all this. Either way, you're totally out of your mind. But I'll still take the bait, if that'll make you happy. Tell me, what's your idea of salvation?"

"Salvation?"

"Yes. Tell me what you think goodness is. What do you think saves us, redeems us in the end? What's the Secret?"

"I'm not at liberty to disclose that."

"Fuck *off*."

"I told you, I signed an NDA!"

"I'm not buying that shit! There's no Devil, just you and your ego and your post traumatic paranoia. Let me help you."

"I'm not going to damn myself."

"Listen, I've been staring into your personal pit of evil for the last six weeks. I helped you visualize it, went there with you, even fucked you there. Aren't you cured yet?"

My reply was strangled by a whiff of sulphur.

"Show me the other side of you," she pleaded. "You saw Hell because when you almost died you realized there's this hole in your life. A stinking pit, right? So you worked through it onscreen. Good for you. And now this bogus Satan comes to tell me you've had a revelation. Fine, I want to hear it. But talk directly to me for once. Please. What's your Secret of Salvation?"

"I'll got to Hell if I tell you."

"You won't go to Hell just for talking to me, darling."

I covered my mouth again.

"Just talk to me!" a sob breaking her voice.

For the first time since we'd napalmed our sad little pigs, true anguish showed on Harriet's face. Like me, she had seen Hell, even if only on a screen. The brave new Hades 2.0, red in tooth and claw, every searing pixel of it. She had shaped and morphed it, tweaked and tweened it, wrangling every RGB value to its optimum. She had even felt it for a moment, out in our Jersey swamp, the heat and stench of that chemical fire as it consumed the offal we'd brought with us, body doubles for the damned.

Despite her words, I knew she now believed in Hell.

But unlike me, Harriet didn't know how to escape. She lacked my trick, my Secret, my certainty of heaven. And she must have known that she was damned as I had been.

She rose from her chair angrily, slammed a twenty on the table, and stood.

At last I realized the horror of the Devil's NDA. For the rest of my life, I would be trapped by my knowledge of the Secret, stuck in contractual amber as I watched friends and lovers walk blithely toward an eternity of pain, unable to stop them. Unable even to hint at the grim future I foresaw. Decade after decade of powerlessness. How many souls would I damn through my inaction?

The devil had snared me, not in his domain, but in my own private little hell of non-disclosure.

"Wait," I said.

Harriet stood there, her eyes burning.

I almost said it, almost told her. I almost went to hell.

"Nothing."

She turned and fled.

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It is, of course, only a matter of time.

No one can bear the weight of this knowledge forever. At some point, I'll slip, and reveal the Secret to save someone. After all, the damned are all around me. My friends, co-workers, and lovers are all stained with the soot of the burning. I still read the NDA every day, more carefully than when I foolishly signed it. It's a very well written contract. An expression or a gesture leading to the truth could damn me. Any hint at all.

Sooner or later, I will fuck up.

I've thought of suicide, the quick and dirty way to lock in my special knowledge, my insider's price, but I'm too much of a wimp to pull the trigger.

At this writing, I live in Africa. Less than one percent of the population of this city speak English, an added layer of protection. But my old software buddies still visit, and I'm too lonely to turn them away,

though I can see how damned they are. A few of them seem to know that I have a secret. They question and prod me about my new life, about why I left their world. Perhaps the Devil appears to them as he did to Harriet, just to tempt me with their salvation.

He wants my soul badly.

But I haven't completely despaired. Old Scratch showed his weakness to me, back when I was dead. He doesn't have good software help. He doesn't understand the new paradigms of information distribution.

So I've finally implemented that dead-man switch, the threat that I once held over my partners' heads.

Every month, I send a message, the correct codeword from a non-patterned series of my own devising. The FallingMan.com server waits for this missive impatiently. Should I die (to be trundled safely up to heaven), or finally screw up and spill the beans to someone (to be carted off screaming to hell), my monthly codeword will be missed, and the server will leap into action.

Indeed, if you are reading this, that is exactly what has happened.

So please forgive the breadth and intensity of this spam. I'm sure someone's had to delete this story from about ten thousand mailing lists, and my recording of it should occupy about half the Napster and Gnutella indexes, listed as everything from the Beatles to Britney Spears. Part of my job at Falling Man was viral marketing. The whole world is reading with you.

So this, my friend, is no secret:

Forget the backups. Screw the pixels. Lose the smartcards. Avoid the minibars. Overthrow the rule-governed systems. Break the commandments. Exceed the algorithms. Ignore the special effects. Don't undo.

Disclose everything. Paint the landscape.

Go analog.

Save your soul.

Scott Westerfeld

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Proofed, XML'd, and styled by [Swiftpaw Foxyshadis](#).

Text last modified on 4 October 2001, v1.0. Text generated on 30 November 2002 by Foxbook v0.84.20021120.