

Sign Here

by Charles de Lint

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1

"YOU'LL never guess who came over last night."

"You're right. I won't."

"Come on. You could at least try."

"Why do you want me to work for this? Just tell me already."

"It was Brenda."

"Bullshit."

"I'm serious."

"I thought she dumped you."

"No way. *I* dumped her. Nobody ever dumps me."

"Whatever. So what did she want?"

"Cheap sex."

"Now it really is bullshit."

"I'm kidding. She wants us to get back together."

"What did you say?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are you getting back together? Maybe you dumped her, but you're always talking about her."

"She was a great kisser."

"But?"

"No buts. I just don't know. I didn't say yes or no."

"So what did you do?"

"Nothing. We just talked."

"About getting back together."

"No. More about what we've been doing, old times, stuff like that. We must've been up until almost three."

"And then you had sex."

"No. Then she kissed me good night and went home."

"Still a good kisser?"

"She was always the best. We're supposed to get together again tonight."

"So it's semiserious."

"I don't know what it is."

"You know what I did last night?"

"Jumped your own bones?"

"Oh, very funny. No, I met this guy in the Crossroads Bar and he showed me this trick. Look at this."

"How'd you do that?"

"I figure it's mostly a mental thing."

"What, like, you only hypnotized me into seeing it?"

"No, the flame's real. Good trick, isn't it? Be a great way to pick up a girl in a bar—just light her cigarette with a snap of your fingers."

"How'd you do it really?"

"It's this way of, I don't know. Seeing things differently. Like, you can actually see the molecules of the air and you just kind of convince them to be something other than what they are. Apparently, when you get good at it, you can do it with anything, and not just a tiny flame like this. But air to fire's supposed to be one of the easier ones, so that's why he started me out with it."

"And he just showed it to you, out of the blue."

"Pretty much. He said he's been looking for someone he can teach all this stuff he knows, and that I looked like the right kind of guy. He said I was 'receptive.'"

"More like gullible."

"Hey, this is real."

"Let me—ow!"

"I told you."

"So what's he get out of it?"

"Nothing, really."

"Come on. He's got to want something."

"Well, he had me sign this piece of paper..."

"Jesus, what did you sign away?"

"My soul."

"Get real."

"That's all it said. He gets it when I die."

"This is too weird."

"Don't go all Catholic on me. I don't believe in souls and neither do you. Hell, when was the last time you were in a church?"

"Yeah, but think about it. That was based on limited knowledge."

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, souls are kind of like magic, right? And this trick the guy showed you *is* like magic."

"So."

"So if one kind of magic can be real, maybe other kinds can, too. Maybe we do have souls."

"You think?"

"Well, I'm leaning more to the affirmative right now."

"I've screwed myself, haven't I?"

"I guess it depends. What did he look like?"

"I don't know. Kind of normal."

"No horns—no tail?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake."

"You're the one he taught to make a flame by snapping your fingers."

"That's real."

"I know it's real. I saw it."

"I guess he looked kind of like Elvis, circa the Vegas years, only older."

"Elvis."

"Not exactly like him. More like Harvey Keitel sort of playing him in that movie we rented a while ago."

"Finding Graceland?"

"Yeah, that's the one."

"And you just up and traded him your soul to be able to light smokes for women in bars without using matches or a lighter."

"I don't own a lighter."

"I know you don't. I'm making a point here."

"I don't get it."

"The point is, how stupid can you be?"

"Hey, he's going to teach me other stuff. I'm going to be his protege."

"Until you die and he gets your soul."

"Something like that. If I even have a soul."

"The more I think about it, the more I'm betting we do. I mean, why else would the guy ask you to sign it over to him? But the difference between you and me is, I still own mine."

"I am so screwed."

"Maybe, maybe not. We're smart guys. Maybe we can figure a way out of this. Hell, maybe we can even come out ahead."

"I'd settle for having my soul back."

"It's not gone yet."

"You know what I mean."

"Let me think on this."

2

"So did you ask him how to live forever?"

"Yeah. He said, if I can't figure it out for myself, then I don't deserve to know. But he showed me another good trick. All I have to do is concentrate, sort of like you do with the air molecules, except this is with molecules of time."

"I don't get it."

"It lets you predict the future."

"Get out of here."

"No, really. But it's a bitch. I can only look ten seconds or so ahead and it gives me a headache that makes a hangover feel good. But it's like the other thing, he said. The more I practice, the easier it'll get and the farther ahead I can see."

"So you could predict lotteries and horse races and all kinds of crap."

"I guess."

"Did you get a name from this guy?"

"He said I could call him Mr. Parker."

"Meaning, it's not really his name. That's just all he'll give you."

"I guess."

"Well, I've figured out the living forever bit."

"Bullshit."

"No, he was right. It's pretty simple, really. Here. Look at these."

"What are these?"

"Souls."

"How'd you get them?"

"Well, I figured I'd try buying them. So I went into Your Second Home and kept offering the losers drinking in there five bucks if they'd sign over their soul to me. You'd be surprised at how many people who swear they don't believe in God will balk at signing over their soul, but I got a few takers."

"Yeah, well, I wish I'd been smart enough not to sign away mine."

"Doesn't matter now. You've got these."

"I don't get how it works."

"I don't either. Not yet. But there's got to be a reason your Mr. Parker wanted your soul, and I figure this has to be it. You must be able to use the souls you acquire to prolong your own life. And if you don't die, then he doesn't get yours."

"I don't know."

"Just take them. Ask him if you can trade for yours. Only don't offer them all at once."

"I won't."

3

"So how'd it go?"

"He didn't want them. He says there's varying grades of souls. The ones you got are only worth a year or so because the people that signed them over don't really care about their lives anymore."

"He could tell that just by looking at pieces of paper?"

"Apparently. He says you need higher quality ones to buy you a decent amount of time."

"But we're on the right track."

"I suppose. But it doesn't feel right."

"What doesn't?"

"Trading people's souls like this."

"Hey, they didn't have to sign them away."

"But they didn't know."

"So what are you saying? I should give them back?"

"I don't know. It's just... after signing away my own, I can feel for them."

"I was just trying to help."

"I know. And I appreciate it."

"So what did he teach you today?"

"Nothing new. He just showed me some meditation tech-tuques to make it easier for me to narrow my focus. You know, so that when I practice, it's more productive."

"Figures. He's already got you hooked."

"It's not what you're thinking. Maybe he conned me with the soul business, but the rest of what he's showing me's on the level. Here, look how hot I can make this flame."

"Jesus, it's like a tiny blowtorch."

"Cool, huh?"

"Sure, if you ever want to weld anything really, really small, I guess."

4

"Mr. Parker?"

"Yes?"

"My name's Robert Chaplin."

"Oh, yes. Peter's friend. The one who's trying to help him break his deal with the devil."

"*Are* you the devil?"

"The devil is rather a recent conceit. I'm much older than that."

"Which doesn't really answer my question."

"It's not really relevant. Was that all you wanted to know?"

"No. I... this stuff you're teaching Peter. Is it all just going to be parlor tricks?"

"What I've taught him, and will teach him, are hardly tricks. They are lessons that will help him to understand the underpinnings of the world. The more proficiency he gains, both in understanding the makings of the world and in manipulating them, the closer he will come to achieving the potential I see inside him."

"Unless he dies first."

"Everyone dies, Mr. Chaplin. Everything has an expiration date."

"Except for you."

"Even me. I'm long-lived, not immortal."

"So why Peter?"

"He has a bright fire in his soul. He has so much potential."

"But what's that to you?"

"I like to help people."

"By stealing their souls."

"That isn't how I'd phrase it."

"Then how would you phrase it?"

"I'm bound to help others. It's... part of the bargain I made."

"Of course. You had to make a bargain, too. Who'd you sell your soul to?"

"What exactly is it that you want from me, Mr. Chaplin?"

"Can you teach me?"

"Teach you what?"

"Everything."

"That depends. What can you give me in return?"

"I guess I've only got one thing you want."

"If you're referring to your soul, I'm afraid not. Even knowing you have it, does not make you value it any more than you did before you gained that knowledge."

"And Peter did? Valued his soul, I mean?"

"He did, indeed."

"He didn't believe any more than I did."

"I assume that's simply what he led you to believe. Your friend has hidden depths that it appears he never shared with you."

"Whatever. So I'm out of the loop."

"Not necessarily. Offer me the soul of someone who values what they have and perhaps we can do business."

"And once it's accepted, the contract can't be broken?"

"Not so long as both parties adhere to its conditions."

5

"I've got this weird idea, Brenda."

"What's that?"

"Well, things didn't work out so well before, did they? Between us, I mean."

"I don't blame you. Neither of us were pulling our weight. It takes two to make a relationship work."

"I know that. But I was just thinking... if we're really going to try to make it work this time, maybe we should, I don't know, put it all down in writing. Make it official."

"You want to get married?"

"Not this minute or anything, but that's certainly something to work toward. For now I was thinking more of a kind of contract—something to show that we're taking all of this seriously."

"A contract."

"Yeah. We each write down what we're putting into this and what we expect from the other person. We keep it simple."

"How do you think that will change things?"

"I don't know. It'll be a commitment in black and white. Something we can reread if we start to get frustrated or antsy. To remind us of how we really feel so that we don't say or do anything stupid."

"Like writing our own wedding vows."

"Sort of. Except this would be more our relationship vows."

"You're right, it is weird."

"Yeah, I thought it was. Too weird, right?"

"No. I actually like the fact that you're taking the time to think about this sort of thing."

6

"This is really nice."

"Thanks. But I can see I got a little long-winded, now that I'm reading yours."

"It's not about the length, Brenda. It's about what we mean."

"But you were able to put it so succinctly. 'If you give me your soul, I will always honor, cherish, and respect you.' That's beautiful."

"Thanks."

"Only why do you say 'soul' instead of 'heart'?"

"I don't know. Heart didn't seem to encompass every-thing that we should be giving to each other."

"You know, I never saw this side of you before."

"I've had a lot of time to reflect since we broke up. Is it something you can sign? I can certainly sign yours."

"Hand me the pen."

7

"So? What do you think, Mr. Parker?"

"She has an extraordinary spirit. Strong and true and full of grace."

"You can tell that just by holding the paper up to your face and smelling it?"

"Hardly. But her essence permeates the paper. I was simply admiring its potency."

"That good, huh? Well, she always was a looker and she kisses like you wouldn't believe—though I guess you wouldn't be into that kind of thing."

"Let's just say I'm selective. I certainly appreciate your bringing her to my attention."

"Well, I know the best way for you to show that appreciation."

"I'm sure you do, Mr. Chaplin."

"So, do we have a deal? Her soul for what you can teach me?"

"I think an agreement can be made."

"Great. So where do we start? With the little flame business, or can we cut right to the .living forever trick?"

"Patience, please. You haven't simply dialed an 800 number."

"Hey, I delivered. I expect you to do the same."

"And so I will. But first I need you to go home and re-fleet on your place **in** the world—where you are now and where you would wish to be in, oh, let's say start with five years from now."

"What for?"

"Then, when you return to me, we will have a better understanding how to begin your education."

"That's not how it worked with Peter. You just started right in on showing him stuff."

"Indeed I did. But each of us is different, and so the paths we need to take to reach the same goal can also be very different. Peter doesn't jump into a new thing, so the best way to begin with him was by doing just that. You, on the other hand, are already an impetuous individual. So for you, we need to balance that higher energy with elements of a quieter meditative process. It all has to do with balance."

"So I just think about who I am, what I want?"

"Indeed."

"Okay. I guess I can live with that. Only tell me this. It's not all going to be this mumbo jumbo, right? You're going to show me something practical, too."

"I believe, Mr. Chaplin, that you will find that I can be the most practical of men."

8

"I can't believe you did that, man."

"Did what?"

"Tried to trade off Brenda's soul to Mr. Parker."

"Oh, please. What the hell was she doing with it?"

"You just don't get it, do you?"

"What's to get?"

"It's not about taking people's souls and using them to live longer yourself. It's about giving. It's only by helping other souls reach their full potential that your own lifetime is extended."

"Is that what Parker told you?"

"He didn't have to. I've been working on those meditative exercises he gave me and damned if I'm not starting to see connections between everything. There's not a thing we say or do that doesn't have repercussions. The smallest kindness can blossom into an age of renaissance while one cruel deed can bring down an empire."

"Jesus, did he see you coming or what?"

"Yeah, I think he did. But not the way you think. I'm honored that he felt I already had such potential."

"And what about his not taking the souls of all those losers I offered him because they'd only give him a year or so more of life?"

"It's because they require too much work, Robert. There are so many people in the world that it's better to work with those that have the higher potential because if you can win them over, then they'll start doing the work, too."

"Work, work—what the hell are you talking about?"

"An enlightened world where everyone takes care of each other and the planet they live on."

"Right. That's why he was so happy when I traded him Brenda's soul."

"You didn't trade her soul. It wasn't yours to trade."

"Bullshit. I handed it over to him, signed and delivered."

"You're missing the point. If you don't keep up your side of the bargain, then the contract is void."

"I haven't had time to keep up my side."

"You had time enough to try to trade her soul."

"Then why was he so happy to get it?"

"He wasn't happy about that. He was happy because she's such an advanced soul. Waking her up to her full potential will take a fraction of the time it would normally take with others."

"Like you?"

"Sure, like me. I'm not ashamed to say I've got a ways to go. But at least I'm on the road."

"And I'm not?"

"I don't know what you are, Robert. I guess I never did."

"You're a hell of a lot darker than I could ever have guessed. I mean, what do you even care about, besides yourself?"

"Wait a minute here. If Parker's helping people, why does he need them to sign over their souls to him?"

"It's just to make a connection. A powerful connection. Yeah, it's sort of freaky when you realize that you really do have a soul and you've just signed it away. But the more you work at what he gives you, the quicker you come to understand that he couldn't possibly keep it. If he did, he wouldn't advance anymore. He wouldn't be able to help other people anymore."

"This is such a load of crap."

"Let me tell you about this thing I found, Robert. It's a void. You know, a place where none of your senses can come into play because there's nothing there for them to sense."

"Am I supposed to be listening to this?"

"There's a place like that inside each one of us. I think it's where we go when we need to mend, like when you go into a coma."

"And your point is?"

"I think you need to go there. Not just because you're hurting yourself, but because you're hurting others."

"Hey, keep back."

"I'm not going to hit you. I'm just going to touch you— here."

"Where... what the hell did you do? I can't see anything..."

"Mr. Parker says that sight goes first, hearing last."

"I'm going to kill you, you—"

"You're not going to do anything. You're not going anywhere."

"Christ, I can't feel anything. Don't do this to me, Peter."

"..."

"Peter."

"..."

"Come on. Quit screwing around."

"..."

"I'm not a bad guy."

"..."

"Peter?"

"..."

"Oh, Jesus. Anybody... ?"