

Balancing
a short story by Adam Roberts

: 1 :

Allen met the Devil on the way into work. 'Come along,' said the Devil. 'I have a proposition.' But meeting, meeting. Strange to have the same word for meeting and re-meeting; don't you think we ought to have a word for 'to meet again'? Allen felt the déjà vu strongly, as soon as the tang of the Devil's presence registered on his consciousness: the sheer familiarity. Old shoes creasing like cloth round his feet, not new leather squeaking and rubbing his heel. Already-breathed air.

So, here at the beginning, is the important part.

One minute Allen was standing next to this long-faced, pale man dressed all in brown, as the lobby buzzed around him. He barely had time to register the presence -- indeed, was studiously avoiding meeting his eye, looking past him at the closing lift door. Bums and strangers did sometimes make their way past security to loiter in the lobby and try to coax money from the well-off workers hurrying to get to work on time. Allen had even wondered if security colluded in this; if, perhaps, enterprising mendicants paid a small fee to encourage the security guards to look the other way in the knowledge that they would make it back and more from the affluent pressed-for-time folk within. The lift door hushed shut.

And the next minute, with no sense of intervening time, Allen was on the roof. It was no illusion. The stainless-steel panels (the architect's name was Frank L Tipler, and he was an award-winner -- you may have heard of him) sloped gently to the architectural ha-ha of the guttering, and beyond was nothing but air and the view of crammed stone and steel of London Town. A push of air was moving over Allen's face, touching a line of chill inside his shirt-collar. He turned about with the slow deliberation of a drunk, not fully believing his senses. He turned through a hundred-eighty, but saw only the roof stretching upwards to its central ridge, and the chimney-pot bunching of lightning conductors and television aerials. Then a certain alarm took hold as he realised he was on the roof, and he turned again, this time through a complete three-sixty. Turned a little too rapidly in the recklessness of his fore-shock, slipped, and started skittering on one knee down the slope.

'Woah,' said the Devil. He reached over with a hand whose strength of grip was not advertised in its slimness, and grasped Allen's shoulder. 'Watch yourself, Mr slippy.'

Allen felt himself hauled upright again. Here was the gentleman in brown: a face completely hairless, even to the point of lacking eyebrows and eyelashes; skin pale without quite bleaching into albino. He was wearing a tight-fitting cap of what looked like brown cashmere, an almost hippy piece of headgear. But his suit was very formal, bespoke and precision-tailored. His large-lidded eyes had a sleepy, half-open look, and his very long nose drew a firm line down to his small, pursed mouth, like a fleshy exclamation mark. A dimple tucked into his narrow chin.

'What?' asked Allen, loudly. 'What?'

It was ungainly, tell you the truth. He didn't come over very well.

'Please,' said the Devil, leading him back up the roof towards a skylight and pressing down on Allen's shoulder until he was seated on the lip of it. 'There's no need for you to muck about. Which is to say,

know-what-I-mean? -- don't please.' Delicately, the Devil lowered himself to sit next to Allen on the lower ridge of the skylight. He even let out a small grunt of satisfaction, as if he had been on his feet for far too long.

'Who are you?' Allen asked.

'Devil.'

'How,' said Allen, looking around, 'how did you bring me up here?'

'Now,' said the Devil, his eyes puckering with the edge of irritation. 'I really don't have time for all that. You know who I am. You even recognise me.'

Allen stared hard at the man, and then looked away. This was ridiculous. What was he doing on the roof? The roof of all places? I mean, as he was prone to saying, pur-lease. Roof! Chilly, ice-coloured clouds were rushing across the sky, as if hurrying to leave London. Below him the morning rush in the city was dying down. From where he was sitting he could see right up Tallow Chandler Street, where the last grey-suited figure was jogging clumsily, chasing the vanishing 8.30 clock-in. A pair of tourists, immensely fat, were standing placidly on the pavement watching this person go past.

'Are you Death?' asked Allen. The whole encounter had a curiously vivid quality. Could he have fallen down in the lobby in some sort of fit? Was this a reverie preluding his own death? He tried to picture ambulance-men clustering round his body, the hubbub downstairs. But that image refused to come alive in his mind.

'Must say,' said the Devil, muttering. 'I'm rather too pressed for time for games. You're not the only one with appointments to keep.' Then he smiled, very wide.

Allen glanced at his watch. A shade after half past. The second hand was twitching its way round the track. Shouldn't it have stopped? But the needle-thin hand was still trembling on, pushing inexorably onwards. Towards the time of his meeting with Kaufmann. He had a meeting with Kaufmann, and you know how cranky Kaufmann gets if you turn up late. He turned to the Devil.

'What is this then?' he asked. 'What is it you want?'

The Devil sighed shallowly, and made a languid gesture with his hand. 'A much healthier attitude. And, yes, as it happens I am here to make you an offer.'

'An offer.' The morning air was cold so high up. It being summer, Allen had decided not to wear the overcoat on his way to work. The crush of the tube would have made it uncomfortably warm. But up on the roof, with the fresh young breezes of the day straining through the material of his shirt directly onto his skin, he began to wish he had something to keep him warmer.

The Devil inclined his head.

'What sort of offer?' Allen said.

'An unusual one. One that demonstrates my power. And, I might say, one without obligation to yourself of any kind.'

'Without obligation?'

'I know, of course,' said the Devil, smiling the faintest of smiles with the corners of his mouth. 'I recognise the vulgarity of all this salesman-talk. But it precisely describes the circumstance. I shall make my offer. You can then either accept or decline. If you decline, you'll hear nothing more from me. If you decide to accept, however,' and here the

Devil brushed imaginary crumbs from the corners of his upturned mouth.

'I'll lose my soul,' put in Allen, sharply.

'Dear me no,' said the Devil, as if richly amused. 'Not at all. How medieval. Nothing of the sort.'

'What then?' asked Allen. 'Something for nothing?' He swallowed. Perhaps he was indeed arguing with the Devil. It was almost exciting. 'I don't believe it.'

'Whether you believe it or not, that's neither here nor there. But if you accept my offer, then I shall simply give you what you ask for, and then I will be gone. Turn me down, and I'm gone anyway. Either way you'll not be troubled with me further. There are no catches, no tricks, and I require nothing from you.'

Allen looked again at this man, looked in his face. His skin was, he saw, unusually smooth. Only the edges of the eyes betrayed even the hint of a wrinkle. 'I don't understand,' he said.

'What's not to understand?' said the Devil. 'Ah, but of course you don't mean that. You mean you don't understand why.'

'I guess so.'

'Why is really neither here nor there. Now. Do you want to hear my offer or not?'

'What if I say, uh, not?' Allen asked, looked around him. He was wondering how he was going to get down from the roof. And what he would say if anybody spotted him up here. What explanation could he offer?

'If you don't want to hear my proposal, then I shall simply go away,' said the Devil. 'And, in case you're anxious, I will return you to the ground without ill effects. But you will, I promise you, spend the rest of your life wondering what my offer was going to be.'

Allen looked around again. 'What is this offer, then?' he said. Perhaps playing along with the illusion would bring it to a swifter conclusion.

Perhaps he was still asleep, lying in his bed. It would not surprise him.

It could be that he was more anxious about meeting Kaufmann than he had realised. Maybe the worry about that meeting had infected his dreams. And yet there was something hard-edged about this experience that seemed to remove it from the world of dreaming. Could he ever remember feeling cold in any dream he had ever had before?

He was being stupid. Surely the duvet had slipped off him, and the open bedroom-window was letting in a breeze, and that was registering in his dream. He turned to the Devil. 'What is the offer then?' he repeated.

'I am glad you asked,' said the Devil. He put his fingers together in a church-steeple, smiling thinly. He had a curiously unblinking stare, Allen realised. 'It is simple enough. I offer to weigh in the scales the pleasure you have caused in the world, and also the pain, and to pay you the balance.'

'I don't understand,' said Allen.

'That is the second time you have said that,' said the Devil. 'Only this time I suppose you mean it more particularly. Well, you are an intelligent man, and it is not hard. Try to determine the amount of pleasure you have caused; the happiness, the delight, the bliss. Every pleasurable sensation you have ever prompted in every person you have ever met. Now try to work out how much pain: how much disappointment, misery, suffering, again in every person your life has touched. Which quantity is the larger? Subtract the smaller from the larger and are you left with a residue. Of pain? Or of pleasure? Accept my offer and you will find out, because you will

experience, actually experience in yourself, precisely that difference, precisely that amount of pleasure. Or of pain. Perhaps you have lived a good life and have caused little pain but a great deal of pleasure. Well, then, accept my offer and you will be given the combined pleasurable sensations from all the people you have ever pleased. Not merely one person's bliss, but perhaps hundreds, or thousands -- less only the amounts of pain you have caused. All the people you have ever helped, all the lovers you have given good sensations to; all of it at once, experienced by you simultaneously. I could be offering you the most intensely blissful experience available to a human being.'

'Or,' said Allen, 'the most painful.'

'That, of course, depends upon you, upon the life you have led. But if that is what you suspect, then I would advise you not to accept my offer.'

Allen sucked in his lower lip, contemplating.

'The pleasure I have caused,' he said. 'How do you work that out?'

'The pleasure and the pain. And it is something very easy for a person in my position to determine, believe me. Explaining to you precisely how would be rather hard.'

'When you say the pleasure I have caused,' said Allen, still pondering.

'Do you mean to people I have actually met? Friends, lovers, that sort of thing?'

Again the Devil made his dismissive gesture with one hand. 'Human being relations are not, alas, so easily reducible to a tight group of personal contacts. The sum is derived from all the people touched by your life, whether you have met them or not. But, as I am sure you appreciate, that only increases the pool of pleasure -- or pain -- from which I am giving you the chance to draw. Let us say your accountancy firm has helped out a company on the other side of the Atlantic, perhaps saved it from bankruptcy. Well, then, all the feelings of gratitude and security experienced by those workers, even though you have never met them personally, would be added to your account: divided, I suppose, between the various of you who worked on the account.'

'Divided how?' asked Allen, his accountant's instincts intrigued.

'Divided by a complex spiritual algorithm that would be of little interest to you. But you understand the principle upon which my offer is based?'

'When would I, uh, experience this pay-off you are talking about?'

'How many questions you ask,' exclaimed the Devil in a level tone of voice. 'Of course you would experience it as soon as you agree. But I am not asking you to agree straight away. Shall we say three days? That has a certain chime to it, doesn't it? Three days from now is Sunday.'

'Saturday,' said Allen, automatically.

'Oh, Saturday, yes. Three days from now is Saturday. Well, I shall come back at this same time this coming Saturday, and you can tell me then whether you have accepted my proposal or not.' The Devil stood up, so abruptly as to pop straight upright like a jump-cut in a film.

'Wait,' said Allen, clambering up beside him. 'Before you go. How about telling me why? What do you get out of this?'

The Devil drew the pad of his middle finger over the line where his eyebrow should have been. It was a delicate, almost feminine gesture.

'Why me?' Allen asked. 'Why am I the one to get the offer?'

'What,' said the Devil, 'what a terribly human sort of question to ask.'

And, as abruptly as before, Allen was in his office, standing in front of his desk; and Natalie was poking her head round his door in that twitchy

bird-manner of hers, and telling him that Kaufmann was paging him.

: 2 :

A full day's work had bleached the incident of vividness, until the evening trip home on the tube, in its smelly, crowded, heated immediacy, gave his memory of the morning on the roof a quaintly chilly, fantastical edge. It had been, he thought, a dream of peculiar intensity, and at an odd moment. Presumably he had made his usual way to his office in a sort of sleep-walking daze (he had asked Natalie, but she could not swear to have seen him coming in. Maybe, she offered helpfully, he had slipped in behind her back when she was pouring fresh grinds in the coffee machine?). At lunch Allen had even stepped outside to have a look up at the roof, but the angle wasn't right for him to see past the rim. Maybe (he thought later, in the juggling, shifting underground carriage) maybe it was an acid flashback. Except that Allen had never tried acid. Speed a few times, in his clubbing days. But were there such things as speed flashbacks? And if there were, wouldn't they be more frenetic, not a placid conversation with the Devil sitting calmly on a skylight?

The tube stopped at a station and a celestialnaut got on. A woman in her late fifties, with several layers of clothing and cross-shaped hair-clips. There was a cardboard sign hung about her neck on string: JesusLove LoveJesus.

She came over and sat next to Allen. 'You've got a lovely smile,' she said, without preliminary.

'Thank you,' mumbled Allen, embarrassed.

'You have children?'

'A child,' said Allen, shuffling in his seat and looking the other way.

'I can tell. I can tell a father's love shining from his heart. I had four children,' she went on, 'but one of them died. But Jesus still loved him and took him to a wonderful place. And I was a manic depressive until I found Jesus.' She pushed a leaflet into Allen's hands: Celestialnauts: Jesus's Space Travellers Sent Down to Save. It was in Allen's mind to say something to her, but she had turned to the person on her left. 'You've got a lovely smile,' she said.

I met the devil today, Allen thought to himself. Then he tried the thought again, this time capitalising the protagonist. I met the Devil today.

Devil Devil, Devil Devil.

He got off the tube at his station and climbed the stairs instead of waiting for the lift (a conscious decision to help reduce his increasing loss of tone around his waistline), counting off the steps in threes. Should he tell Moira? About hallucinating a meeting with the Devil? She would worry. Tell him he was working too hard. Maybe bicker at him to go see a doctor. Maybe even a shrink. What would he say? 'I met the Devil this morning.' He could almost picture Moira's face: you're losing it, the stress of work is finally getting through to you. At the top of the underground stairs, panting slightly, he remembered that the Unwins and the Wraggs were coming to dinner.

The lift had released its cargo just before him, and he had to queue to show his pass to the guard. A large crucifix hung over the lapels of the man's London Underground uniform below a worried-looking black face. At his turn, and as he flashed his pass, Allen asked, on a strange whim: 'Do you believe in the Devil?' The man pretended not to hear, waved him

through.

'I need you to go out again,' said Moira as soon as he came through the front door.

'Don't I get a chance to shake the dust from my shoes?' he said, dumping his suitcase by the stairs.

Moira was standing in the doorway that lead to the kitchen, her arms crossed. Her hair was up, which she only did when she was cooking. 'I need ginger. And the only cream we have is not organic.' Chris Unwin, something of a stickler, would eat nothing that had been touched by pesticides.

'Put it in a jug or something and tell Chris it is organic,' said Allen.

'He's not to know. Where's Emma?'

'She's doing her Elephant tonight,' said Moira. 'You should remember. She was telling you all about it this morning at breakfast. And we still need the ginger.'

'Organic ginger,' said Allen, beaming. 'Of course. Do I have to go out and pick Emma up?'

'If you were paying attention at all at breakfast,' said Moira, 'you'd remember that Darcy is going to drop her off when she takes Felicity home. But go and get the ginger now, and the cream, and then you can have a drink.'

Allen stepped back out and walked briskly along the road towards the cluster of shops. Checked his watch; the same clucking second hand, the same bland golden face, as had recorded the length of his conversation this morning with the Devil. Five to six, now. The grocer closed at six, but there would be time. Organic ginger. Should he get the cream? Then he thought: how would His Satanic Majesty calculate that up on his spiritual calculator? Would cheating Chris Unwin out of his organic cream count as causing pain to the man? How could it, if Chris never knew about it? And even if he realised, even if the taste somehow betrayed Allen's small act, would it really count? How tiny did a grain of pain-causing have to be before it slipped through the sieve of this spiritual adding-up and was forgotten? Did swatting a fly count? And if it counted, from whose point of view, the man or the fly? What would be added to Allen's account -- the small flick, the momentary blip? Or the body-crushing deathly agony of being pressed out of existence? Whose perspective was the relevant one? He shook his head. It was ridiculous. But, on the other hand, there was the pleasure. Idly scratching a puppy's stomach might be a barely registered distraction to the person doing the scratching, but it might send the puppy into paroxysms of pleasure of the intensest sort. Was all that recorded too?

Of course, Allen was fairly sure that the Devil had specified human interaction. But, presumably the same principle applied. Maybe a friend had seen Allen in the street, but Allen had simply not noticed him (his eyesight was not good these days without his contacts, and he often didn't put them in because he didn't like the sensation against his eyeball). Maybe that friend had been hurt, offended, upset -- could Allen help that? And yet, would that pain be added to his account? How many forgotten birthdays, how many overheard remarks not intended for the eavesdropper's ears, how many cruel but necessary breakings-up with old girlfriends, or firm talks to junior staff? It was surely not possible to get through life without causing a certain quantity of pain, if only in the necessary briskness of human dealings. Could Allen be blamed for that? Would it still be added to his account?

But, on the other hand (and with a certain dawning sense of the cunning of the diabolic offer) the pain was only ever relative to the pleasure, wasn't it? Say, criticising a junior -- as Allen remembered doing a year and some ago with Francesca Harrow, or Barrow, or was it Frances (he couldn't quite remember). Large pinkish face. Beer-coloured hair in bangs. Allen had been forced to lecture her over her sloppy interpersonal skills on an assignment with a difficult client -- perhaps that had caused pain in the short term. But in the longer term, it had surely helped her with her career. What if they looked back and thought that the week of discomfort Allen had caused had been in the service of a greater good? Wouldn't that person's many years of being better at their job outweigh the more temporary immediate hurt? Assuming, of course, that the individual recognised that Allen had only been being cruel to be kind. So, again, the question of perspective reasserted itself. What mattered? Maybe the person had held a grudge -- an irrational grudge, perhaps -- for all those years. Would that count as pain to be chalked up against Allen's account? Even if the original incident had been in the individual's best interests?

Allen was back at his own front door now, with a white plastic bag dangling from his wrist carrying some stem ginger and a tub of organic single cream. He tried to swat the circularly buzzing thoughts out of his mind. It was ridiculous. Some strange fantasy. Too much bookkeeping in his accountancy exams; it had bubbled under and come up again as this bizarre notion that pleasure and pain could be added up like money in twin columns.

And through the door with his keys in hand, Emma was running down the hall to greet him, carrying shreds of grey felt before her like a prize. 'Miss Sanders said I could keep this,' she said, hugging him and showing him her ragged trophy. The way Emma pronounced her teacher's name: Miz Saanders. She folded the felt carefully. 'They were left over from the trunk, and now they're mine.'

'What will you do with them, sweetheart?' Allen asked. Emma looked serious. 'I'll have to think about it,' she said.

: 3 :

On Thursday Allen woke up without a thought of the Devil in his head. The dinner party had taken his thoughts away from all that. He had thought of sharing the incident with the whole group, making a joke of it, but he had decided that to do so would only be to open himself to ridicule. Then he had only drunk the wine, and let his eyes unfocus slightly, and follow the ebb and swell of the conversation wherever it took him. By bedtime he had forgotten the whole ridiculous incident. He woke the next morning feeling muggy, had to rush his shower and run to the tube.

It was only when he stepped into the lobby that the memory of the previous day returned. He jogged through to the lift, and once inside began coughing. It had seemed so very vivid.

Vivid.

Allen found it almost impossible to focus on his work after that. He sat in his office staring out of the window most of the morning. Had he been a bad man? It was so idiotic a thought. You couldn't spend your life wondering about that sort of thing.

His secretary, Natalie, came through to give him a copy of the Kaufmann report. Natalie with her bad skin and her twitchy manner. How old was

Natalie? In her fifties, certainly.

'Thank you Natalie,' he said. And then, on a whim: 'Natalie, would you like to go for lunch today?'

'Lunch?' she replied.

Allen smiled at her. She had been working for him for years. How many years? He couldn't say. But hadn't he been a good boss for her? Been polite, considerate? Or, on the other hand, surely a good boss would know exactly how long she had worked. Maybe he had been a bad boss, neglectful, aloof. Maybe she hated him.

'Yes, I just wondered. Just a light lunch.'

'That's nice,' she said, looking a little worried. 'But I had arranged to meet my boyfriend for lunch today. Of course, if it's important I could always put him off...'

Natalie had a boyfriend? 'No, no, it's nothing important.' He smiled, and opened the report. Natalie, looking a little startled, went out of his office. Wouldn't a good boss (he thought) have known that she had a boyfriend?

That evening, as he lay in bed with Moira's arm crooked into his armpit and his hand stroking her arm, he asked her: 'When you were hanging around with your revolutionary friends...'

'What?' she asked.

'Well, I don't know.'

'That was years ago,' she said, mumbly. 'Years and years.'

'I know, but it's just a question of seeing the world. You know, the way you used to see the world.'

She shifted, and looked up at his face. 'What are you going on about?'

'It's a question of whether we, you know, the west are guilty, just guilty by virtue of who we are. Guilty by virtue of having the affluent lifestyle. I'm thinking, you know, of all the starving millions. The poverty and the shitty life in the third world. Do you think we should take responsibility for that?'

'What are you on about?' she said. But she was only half awake and her words were losing coherence.

Looking down at her creased face, with its puzzled expression, Allen felt the urge to tell her everything about Lou, to finally broach it. Pain? Ignorance is hardly pain. He fought the urge down, and turned on his side. But Lou's face was in his mind now. Her smile. The way she smiled but tried to hide her teeth, as if she were ashamed of them. The little cheloid scar at the coign of her arm where she had spilt hot tea over herself as a girl. The sweetness of the smell of her skin.

The next day was Friday, and he got to work telling himself he was going to really apply himself to his work. But after half an hour's hurried shuffling of papers he found himself staring out of the window again. He had not seen Louise in over a year; had not really thought about her at all for the last three months. Didn't know where she was. She had said: 'Allen, I shall make love to you one more time, and that will be everything finished between us.' He had said: 'Louise, one more time will round everything off.' And he had believed it, thought that it could be that way, a perfect inviolate round that didn't touch his marriage, his friends, his job. Just the bubble of pleasure, and afterwards the occasional sweet memory. But after it had finished he had started obsessing about it, thinking about it, wanting to start it up again. Moira

noticed something was wrong, but had nothing to accuse him of because he never saw Lou again. A half dozen agonised phone-calls, rambling ill-written letters, and in reply on a typed postcard in a clean envelope telling him she was moving jobs abroad, and not saying where.

But in what sense did that count? Whom had he hurt? Only himself. Only himself, really. Maybe Louise had been a bit discomforted by the way he had acted after the affair was over, by his intensity, but hadn't she enjoyed herself too? Didn't her orgasms in the bed, on the stairs, in the bath, didn't they outweigh that? With a jolt he realised that this was what really itched in his mind. The thought of the possible pleasure: all of it, simultaneously, a great rising wave of pure physical ecstasy. All the women he had loved, all the pleasure he had caused, paid back to him in one supreme moment.

And Moria had not been hurt. How could she have been hurt? She had never known. He was certain she had never known.

He spent about an hour on the phone to various clients in Texas and Mexico. Two paint firms who had subsidiary relationships with British companies, and some tangled accounting circumstances. Conversations were in English, but there was a photocopied sheet on the desk in front of him, which displayed a few wheel-greasing politenesses in Spanish, to drop in at the end of the conversation with the contact at Guillhelm et Sancho.

Obligado. Allen found his mind wandering. His voice was skittering down electrical cables laid in the ocean bed. The men who had done that wearying work, who had laid the cables, struggling through mountainous oceans and freezing weather; who had broken bones and chapped skin off fingers in the wintriness of the work; who had condemned themselves to months in a seaquaking boat, rattling around like flakes of fake snow in a glass globe. Was all their suffering to be added to his account? He was using the fruits of their labour, used it every day. And the worst of it was that he never even gave their sacrifice a second thought, he had in effect erased them from the universe. Taken them, and their work, for granted. Perhaps he was complicit in their misery.

Adios, senor Sancho.

He fetched himself a coffee, and the little chemical burst of it hitting his blood pushed him over the lip. Maybe it wasn't so bad. The men who had laid the cable -- how did he know? Maybe they had loved the work. Maybe they had been paid handsomely, had made friends and comrades. Maybe the fact that firms like Allen's required the phone line had brought joy to hundreds of people, and he was due a share in their pleasure. It wasn't so bad.

Without even realising that he had made the decision, Allen found himself back at his desk calling a commercial registry. 'Yes,' he was saying, the coffee still lifting him, 'I'm trying to find a particular marine affairs expert, Louise Winterton. She did some work for us, and there are some things we'd like to clear up. If you could just check amongst firms specialising in marine work. That's right. If you could call my secretary when you have the contact details.'

He put the phone down and stared out of the window. One time they had lied to their respective partners, he to his wife, she to her then boyfriend, and had taken the light railway to the airport for a night in Denmark. Allen could no longer remember why they had chosen Denmark. Tulips, Lou had said. That's Holland, Allen had insisted, and they had swapped

positions in a hilarious lover's mock-quarrel of oh no it isn't and oh yes it is round and round. Allen had been struck suddenly, as if he had been taken out of the situation and given the chance to see from outside, that he was actually enjoying himself. He could not remember having had so much fun in many years. The two of them had got drunk on the free airplane alcohol, and had booked into a towering business-man hotel in Groningen giggling at the check-in desk like adolescents. They had gone straight upstairs and made love. Outside it was sleeting, grey and grainy like a badly tuned-in TV. But Allen had felt a delicious pleasure in the core of his chest, a happy that was so alien it was almost painful. A bath, food in the hotel restaurant, and back upstairs to make love again. And then, only then, lying naked on the bed curled up like John Lennon with Yoko Ono, had the grit of conscience started to work on him. He should have phoned Moira. He'd told her he had to fly away at short notice, but she'd surely expect him to phone. Then all the thoughts of her at home with the baby, and him away behind her back, had begun to sting. He had got up and walked naked through, carrying the phone in the crook of his elbow into the bathroom; then he had sat on the toilet with the lid down and called London. Yes, yes, boring meetings. Back tomorrow though. Miss you. Love you.

Obligado. A month's special course on Business Spanish and he still needed a cheat-sheet to speak to their Mexican clients. Allen pushed the piece of paper around the desk with his thumb. Mi corazón se ha dormido.

Natalie came through. 'Sorry to bother, Allen,' she said. 'But this came through from Harvard Registry.' She put the leathery fax paper on the desk. Lou's business number. Allen stared at it for a moment before realising what it was.

'Thank you, Natalie.'

And she went out.

The Friday crush on the tube was worse than usual. So many people. Hemming him in. How could you avoid hurting some of them? Just one or two? From time to time? Surely the important thing was intention.

Emma was waiting for him when he came in, hurrying along the hall to greet him, calling out daddy daddy. As he picked her up he thought to himself:

I've been a good man, haven't I? A good father? Would Emma, put in the celestial dock, accuse him of causing more pain in the world than

pleasure?

'Is your elephant finished now, sweet pea?' he asked her.

'Daddy!' she rebuked him. 'I told you, next week.'

'Oh yes,' he said. 'Next week.' He put her down and her tiny feet pattered like drizzle as she ran over the floorboards.

Moira was sitting in the front room reading a wedge-sized novel, folding the covers back over and cracking the spine. 'Late,' she said, without looking up. There was a glass of wine on the low table in front of her. In the corner the TV was on, and Emma was settling herself down in front of it again. Some minimal white environment, animated penguins sliding back and forth.

'Don't sit so close, Em, love,' he said. 'You'll hurt your eyes.' Were his daughter's eyes part of the equation too? 'Sorry I'm late, love,' he said, leaning over Moira. Her lips had the tang of red wine.

'The bottle's open,' she said, going back to her book. 'Kitchen table.'

'Thanks,' he said. 'Oh God, that Mexican account will kill me. You can

tell them I said so, when you deliver the eulogy at my funeral.'

'Mmm,' said Moira.

He went through to the kitchen and filled a wine glass.

: 4 :

It was Saturday morning. He was lying with his eyes wide open, watching the patterns made by the backlit curtains against the ceiling. The bedside clock said ten past eight. This was the day; the Devil himself had said so. He thought to himself: I'll know today whether this has any basis in reality. But as he sat up he found himself scoffing. Reality?

He wondered whether the Devil would appear in the morning or the afternoon. Afternoon seemed more the proper time for the languid, slightly fey gentleman in brown that Allen had imagined meeting. Or not imagined. A lazy afternoon, in the heat and the dust. But the Devil had first appeared to him in the morning. Some Mick Jagger figure of elegance, dressed in sixties' crushed velvet, the Devil Comes in the Morning. Suddenly, with a cold-splash sense of being suddenly fully awake, Allen remembered that Satan had appeared to him before in the early morning, before his day of work, just before eight thirty am. If his three days meant precisely three days, then he would appear at eight thirty this morning. It was already gone quarter past. The thought of the Devil appearing in his bedroom in a few minutes, of Moira being present, put a forceful pressure of panic onto Allen's heart. He didn't want that. It was stupid of course, but he didn't want that. He sat up abruptly.

'I'm going to go get a paper,' he told Moira. She made some non-specific grunting noise, possibly containing a degree of surprise. Allen never got up to buy a Saturday paper. He had specifically instructed the newsagent not to deliver a paper on Saturday, to keep his weekend free from contamination by the outside world.

But he was up and out of the bedroom, carrying a bundle of clothes in his arms. He washed rapidly in the bathroom, sponging under his arms and towelling himself roughly, before dressing in jeans and a sweater.

Twenty-five minutes past. Would the Devil appear here, in his bathroom, if he simply waited another five minutes? But the thought of summoning him into the house at all was unsettling to Allen. Better to meet him on neutral territory. You don't really believe that nonsense, do you, said his scoffing inner-voice. As if you're really going to meet the Devil.

Nonetheless, he was down the stairs and letting the door snick gently shut behind him before the half hour. The air was clean, the sky a fresh blue-colour. Cars hummed past.

As he walked along the road, in the general direction of the shops, he saw a smudge of brown in the middle distance. Should have put in his contacts, perhaps. But as he approached the figure resolved itself in vision into a man in a long brown coat, with a small woollen cap, sitting on a bench at the roadside. Behind him, in the blurred green of the park, birds whirred and scurried through the air. Bluebirds were perched on the railings behind the bench.

'Good morning,' said Allen, suddenly feeling very nervous.

The Devil was on his feet in his instantaneous, rather disconcerting fashion. 'And good morning to you,' he said, sweeping his hand in front of him. 'So nice to see that the ordinary politenesses have not completely perished from the earth.'

Allen stood in front of him. Seeing him again, there was something

intensely familiar about his long pale face, his serious sleepy-looking eyes.

'So,' said the Devil. 'Have you made up your mind?'

'Yes,' said Allen, his heart suddenly trotting and his head going queerly light. He thought again of the pleasure. Of being the conduit for the greatest of pleasures. 'I have decided,' he said in a clear, small voice, 'to accept your offer.'

'I'm so pleased,' said the Devil.

He seemed to be smiling. Is that good? thought Allen. Should he be so pleased? Had Allen let himself into a world of pain, was that why the Devil was smiling? Or was he smiling only because his offer had been accepted? It would presumably have been galling to have had his offer simply rebuffed, after going to all this trouble. And the voice still nagged: why had he gone to so much trouble in the first place?

Allen's mouth was dry. He ran his fingers nervously through his hair. Now it was going to happen. It was going to happen right here, right now.

'Should I sit down for this?' he asked, indicating the park bench.

'Oh yes,' said the Devil carefully. 'I think you should sit down for this.'

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