

Words: 2250

END USER AGREEMENT

Bernard put the framed print on the nail. He had just picked it up at a discount store. The solitude of his small Tudor home seemed complete with the hand of God on his wall, the smooth American blues coming out of his iPod helping center him. This was going to be a good Saturday, he thought, as he stood back and looked over his handiwork.

Still, something seemed off.

“A little to the right I think,” offered the man standing behind him.

“Oh, I didn’t see you there. It looks more to the left I think.”

“That’s what I mean. Its hanging low on the left, it needs to go to the right. I’ve always liked Michelangelo’s ‘Creation.’ No one else draws God’s finger properly.”

The man was right, Bernard saw, and centered the glass framed print on the nail to the right, Adam and God’s finger touching in a more level way now, “By the way....who are you?”

“Oh, I’m very sorry,” the man extended his hand to shake Bernard’s, “I forgot my matters. Hello, I’m Satan.”

Bernard leaned in a bit, “Sorry, a little hard of hearing... who?”

The man said, "Satan."

"Sorry, but did you say Satan, or Bateman?"

Satan asked, "Why would I introduce myself with a last name?"

"You might be in the military. You look fit."

"No, just Satan," confirmed Satan.

Bernard looked at the man, "All right, clear off. No time for nonsense."

"Sorry, I can't do that. I've come for the soul you've sold me."

Bernard shook his head and walked into the next room.

"Hey, wait..." said Satan, following Bernard.

Bernard was at the fridge, just opening a cold beer, "Look mate, get out my house before I call the police. I'm sorry that you're mental, but leave me out of it."

"Hmmm," Satan said as he pulled his iPad out of nowhere, "No, it's right here. This is the place. I don't understand why you're acting this way. My assistant gave you the standard thirty day warning."

"You give a warning when you are about to collect a soul? That's rubbish."

"Thirty days' notice, it's in the contract. No one ever reads the contract, but that's not my fault."

"Aha. You see, right there, I never signed any contract," Bernard took another gulp of beer and walked away to the bathroom.

Satan said, “Why do you keep walking away?” and followed Bernard. The bathroom door was shut and locked before Satan could object. Satan used his touchscreen and said through the door, “Bernard, you have sold your soul 237 times.”

Bernard flushed. Satan patiently waited while he heard the sound of running water. Bernard finally came out, “How is that possible?”

“End user agreements. God never saw it coming. All those online contracts you so absent-mindedly clicked ‘accept terms?’ Many of them have a provision where you agree to sell your soul to me.”

“You’re joking.”

Satan said, “Actually, I’m quite serious. You should always read every contract. My hackers have accelerated soul procurement tenfold in the last few years. It’s quite exciting.”

“Why am I still talking to you? Get out. I’m phoning the police now,” Bernard said as he went back for his cell phone on the table, just under God’s finger.

Satan swished his own finger in the air. Bernard’s phone flew across the room and smashed on the far wall.

Satan began reading, “Quid pro quo, etc. etc. blah, blah, Latin terms... ‘and do agree to willingly (in exchange for services rendered) give up my immortal living soul to my friendly agent of evil upon’... blah, blah etc. etc. You clicked alright. I’m here to collect.”

“You’re buying me a new phone,” said Bernard.

“Sorry, not in the deal,” Satan said.

“So, what *was* in the supposed deal? I’m a pleasant sort of bloke, I don’t want for much. What did I sell my soul for, then?” Bernard crossed his arms.

Satan consulted his iPad, “For fame, of course. In fact I don’t always make pick up calls like this... but you being a celebrity, I try to handle those personally when I can.”

“Celebrity? I’m no celebrity...”

“Please, I’m the king of lies, I can’t be tricked. Bernie Walcott, music producer of ‘80’s pop hits ‘I’m not the doctor’ and ‘he went that way, Reuben.’ Oh, I liked that song...” Satan pressed his iPad and the song started to play.

“Sorry mate, wrong Bernard.”

Satan was done arguing, he stopped the song, “That’s enough Bernard. Time is short, and I have a few more pick-ups today. Death will be along in a few minutes...”

“Just hold on. Death? What will be left for that lot?”

“I take the essence of your immortal soul, he takes the physical part. Separate departments.”

“This is silly,” Bernard said, when they heard knocking at the door. Bernard shook his head again disapprovingly at Satan, and went to the door, “Oh, hello Mary, come in... if you dare.”

Mary gave him a quizzical look as she said, “I brought you some fish stew. I made too much again.”

“Mary, you spoil your neighbors,” Bernard said, taking the covered pot to the fridge.

“No worries. I like to share when I can. Oh, hello. Who’s this then?” asked Mary.

Bernard came back into the room, “Some nutter that broke my phone. Ask him what his name is.”

Mary went to shake his hand, “Hello I’m Mary from next door.”

“Hello, my dear, I’m Satan.”

“Oh, sorry. Did you say Shelton?”

“No... is everyone in London hard of hearing? I’m Satan.”

“Well, sorry Mr. Satan, but you’re a long way from London. This is Otley.”

Satan looked around, then back to his iPad.

“I told you, wrong Bernard. No one calls me Bernie by the way.”

Satan’s expression darkened as he checked his iPad again, “I’ll kill him... again.”

“Who?” said Mary and Bernard together.

“My new assistant Geoffrey, the sniveling kiss-ass. He convinced me to use this new technology. Obviously there has been a mistake.”

Mary said, “I think I’m confused...”

Bernard clarified, “Big bad Satan here was about to take the wrong soul.”

“It was an honest mistake. I’m sure I’ll be back. Nearly everyone clicks before they read online contracts. I’m sure you both will too... and soon.”

Mary looked questioningly at Bernard. Bernard offered, “Apparently when you click to ‘accept the terms’ online you might sell your soul to the devil.”

Mary bit her lip, “Oh my, I never read those...”

Satan was deep in his iPad, fingers working quickly, “You should always read your contracts.... Oh, I see. Looks like the other Bernie has verbal consecration.” Satan could feel the questions in their eyes, “It means he actually said out loud that he would sell his soul.”

Mary chimed in, “Wait, now, that’s just an expression...”

“Not to me,” replied Satan.

“Obviously,” Mary continued unflustered, “but everyone says something silly like ‘I’ll kill that guy’ or ‘I would sell my soul to...’”

Satan leaned in a bit, “...Yes?”

“I think you’re being too literal is all. We all say dumb things sometimes. It’s just... not fair, is all.” said Mary.

“A contract is a contract, my dear. If you would both excuse me. Deepest apologies, but I must be going.” Satan began to leave.

“Wait now. I can’t let you walk out of here and... just kill someone. Bernie produced awful pop songs, but...”

Satan said, “Killing is a nasty word. Anyway, there’s really nothing you can do to stop me. Goodbye, and pardon me once more for the mistake,” said Satan, bowing to Bernard and Mary in turn.

Mary said, “But it’s wrong. I mean... You just can’t go around taking people’s souls, even if they did sell them to you. Where is God in all this?”

Satan, stopping, said, “Oh now wait a minute, since I’m here already, there may be something here after all. Mary, you said that you would sell your soul at some point?” Satan looked back at his iPad, searching for her name.

Mary said, “Well of course not.”

Satan continued, “But you said that you...”

Mary clarified, “No, if you recall I said I’d probably said something *like that* at some time or another. But that doesn’t mean that I meant it.”

Satan pursued, “Do you usually go around saying what you don’t mean?”

“Well, of course not,” offered Mary.

Satan pressed, “Especially things of such dire importance? A soul is not something to be taken lightly.”

Bernard said, “That’s just the funny thing about all this, you really came to the wrong house. I don’t believe in God, or the devil and souls and all that.”

Satan was clearly stunned, “Now you’re just putting me on...”

Bernard replied, “No, no. I’m quite serious.”

Satan asked, “What happens when you die then?”

“Decomposition,” said Bernard.

Satan replied, “Yes, yes but before that...”

Bernard said, “Listen mate, the whole thing is just not logical.”

Satan smiled, “Logic is the matter of observing and putting pieces of information together to make a cohesive conclusion; a measurable train of thought, based on observation and thorough deliberation. Correct?”

“Well, yes... pretty much...”

Satan smiled, “Then you’re forgetting one logical point: I’m standing here, right now.”

Bernard argued, “True, but I still pretty much feel like you’re just a crazy person.”

“That’s not very nice,” said Satan.

“Sorry. I mean if you really are Satan, you wouldn’t be nearly as... I don’t know, polite as you are. That is if there were such a thing as Satan. Plus it seems to me that the devil himself wouldn’t wear a suit as cheap as yours. Sorry, I’m just telling it like it is.”

Some of the lights went out in Bernard’s house.

Mary offered, “Whoops, another power outage.”

Satan said, “No, no. I did that.”

Bernard tries to turn a lamp on, but to no effect, “You did not.”

“I most certainly did. You wanted proof. What do you call it then, if not a dark miracle? Pun intended.”

“A nuisance,” offered Bernard.

Satan was getting angry, “All right, you’re not on the list. I’m leaving.” But he couldn’t. His feet felt like they were glued to the floor.

Bernard said, “You know what Goethe said in Faust: ‘...who holds the devil, let him hold him well, he hardly will be caught a second time.’”

Satan eyes flared red, he turned on them, “Do not test me, human. I am Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, The Lord of Flies. I eat maggots for breakfast. I don’t need rules! I will tear your soul apart!”

Mary and Bernard burst out laughing.

“Really, maggots? That’s disgusting,” said Bernard through his laughter.

Mary asked, “I will tear your soul apart? Isn’t that from an old horror movie?”

Bernard’s laughter trailed off, “Lighten up, Satan. I had to get your attention somehow. Everyone needs a little fun now and again.”

Satan’s red eyes narrowed, “What is this? What is happening?”

“I just had to pull you aside to let you know I’m ending your End User Agreement Program. It violates *our* original agreement,” offered Bernard; who wasn’t Bernard.

The devil looked confused, his mouth agape. Mary elaborated, “Really Satan? Could it be more obvious? This house is on Crossroads Lane. There is a picture of the finger of God on the wall. Robert Johnson is playing in the background...”

“Maybe I should have played that country western song about fiddles and Georgia to make it more obvious. Do you get it now, buddy?”

“Oh good lord...”

“That’s me. Look Satan, nice try, but you can’t click your way to collecting souls.”

“No, that’s not fair! It’s not my fault that people don’t read the contract.”

“True enough, but it has to be an affirmative action. Like you said, selling your soul is not a small matter. I know you like tricks, but I’m taking back all the souls you acquired this way.”

“No! You can’t renege! Damn you, I knew you would welsh on our deal!”

God said, “How racist, even for you.”

Mary chimed in, “Actually ‘reneged’ comes from Latin roots, meaning ‘to deny or take back.’”

Satan offered, “Ok, the Welsh thing is probably racist...”

God wouldn’t let it go, “I suppose you feel ‘gyped’ and want to ‘Jew me down’ on this deal, because I’m an ‘Indian giver’... you are terrible. There is nothing more evil than being a racist nowadays.”

Satan flared, “You’re just jealous that I’m smarter than you.”

God asked, “Now who’s being mean? Look, it’s over, my friend.”

Satan stood there, still not able to move, “Fine,” he finally said. Satan tapped on his iPad, “But I’m still winning. I’ll transfer the souls back. Is your digital network up yet?”

“No. They’re having a hard time with the interface, we’re still mostly analog. You do invest in all the newest technology, I’ll give you that. I’ll send Michael to collect the souls physically.”

“Oh no, I’m not letting that jerk across my river. I’ll have them waiting on the bank of the Styx. It’s going to take a little time, my minions are going to be a pain in my ass about the extra work... this still isn’t fair.”

God offered, “Who ever said life and death are fair? You’ll get over it.”

“May I go now? I have a lot of work to do. Next time, just call me on my cell. Goodbye,
Mary. Goodbye Lord... Bernard.”

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