

# A Bad Bargain

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by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*I have a soul the devil wouldn't buy.*

*Ashley McBryde*

Archibald Gordon McManus (“Archie” to his friends) had watched the séance with uncharacteristic equanimity. He had hidden his disgust at having to sit in darkness on the dirt floor of this hovel, surrounded by peons, his hands joined to theirs in a circle around a table, under the flickering light of four red candles. His mouth curled with barely concealed contempt as Princess’ last barks were lost in the distance, accompanied by the sighs of the old mistress who had summoned her spirit.

Seeing that the beggar to his right was clearing the throat to speak, Archie waited no longer. He knitted his brows in concentration and called out:

“Win ... Win ... dear Winifred, come to me! Come to me, Win!!” As the seconds ticked on, his voice became more imperious, in the manner of one used to commanding. Only his rigid body and the tightness with which his hands squeezed those of his neighbors betrayed his anxiety.

At the other side of the circle the spirit medium, a Shona matron with a round ebon face covered in white powder, continued to gaze with unseen eyes at the hut’s roof. After a while, however, her jaw started raising and falling, as if she was chewing. Her lips trembled, and her ample body began shaking in random convulsions. Finally, the medium stopped shaking and responded in a hollow voice: “Archie! Please get me out of here! I can’t stand the agony! Please rescue me from this horror!!”

Annoyance was a frequent companion to Archie when he dealt with his wife, dead or alive. This emotion was now magnified by the torrent of pleas that issued from the medium’s mouth. He was

barely able to insert a calming reply into the stream:

“Win, please, get a hold of yourself. If you keep bawling, we won’t be able to have a conversation.”

The voice took on a familiar nagging tone:

“Sure, it’s easy for you to tell me to calm down, because you aren’t suffering the way I am. Archie, I’m in Hell! Me! The Treasurer of the League of Christian Women! Me, in Hell! What a disgrace! What an injustice! ...”

“I was expecting that, Win. That’s why I summoned you!”

“You were expecting it? Why? Wasn’t I always a faithful wife, a good mother, a devout Christian?”

“I had a hunch. Maybe it was just your way of being... But in any case, I need your help.”

“/help *you*?... I’m the one who needs help! Go talk to your friend the bishop and see if he can intercede on my behalf, or maybe give donations to the Pope and the Dalai Lama, see if any of them can do something!” ... I beg you, Archie, please get me out of here!!!”

There was a long series of incoherent phrases, pleas and whimpers that rose from the lips of the medium, who had broken away from the chain and was wringing her hands desperately.

*What can I do to shut this woman up?* Archie asked himself. *I could never do it when she was alive.* He barked an order: “That’s enough, Win. Listen up!” ... “I’ll see what I can do. But now you must pay attention.” There was a brief silence, and he took advantage of it to continue:

“I need to speak with Satan.” He uttered those words very carefully, stressing each one. “I’ve tried getting his attention by all means, including sitting in meetings like this one. He doesn’t answer. So, I need you to get him for me. We need to talk.”

“Archie, you’ve gone mad!” shrieked the voice. “How can I ....”

This time, Archie was the one who interrupted. He replied sternly: “You always got your way. Nobody could ever stop you. If there is anyone in this world or the next who can get the devil to come to this stinking hovel, it’s you. Please do it for our sick daughter as well as for me, because I need to talk to him about her.” He said that last bit in a tender tone, feigning love and parental

concern. “After I’m done speaking with him, I’ll get you help right away.” Of course, he didn’t mean to do such a thing, but it sounded good.

There was a deep sigh .... A timorous “Alright” ... and then deep silence. Everyone turned to the medium, who was slumped on an armchair, barely breathing.

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Much, much later, when everyone but Archie had left the hut, the Shona spirit medium jumped to her feet as if hit by lightning, making her multicolor cape twirl in the air. There was an acrid smell that commingled with the stench of the tallow candles dying out on the table. A deep inhuman voice then broke the silence:

“So, what do you want, Archie?”

“Why did you take so long to answer my calls?” replied Archie sullenly.

“Because I know what you are going to propose, and am not interested.”

“I doubt that. I want to sell you my soul. I will give it to you if you extend my life and restore my fortune. How about it?”

“Why would I want to bargain for your soul? To have a deal, you need two interested parties. And I am not interested in buying your soul.”

“Why would you not want my soul? I bet it’s as desirable as any of the others in which you trade.”

“Your memory seems to have suffered with age,” was the sarcastic reply. “Do you remember, for instance, when you used an armed militia to shift the boundaries of your tobacco farm and steal most of the land of your Ndebele neighbor Isaki Myedziwa? He became despondent and committed suicide; has been with me for years. And how about the deal you made in ’71 with the large chromium mining companies to drive ore prices down and ruin the small miners? I gained many of them thanks to that maneuver. And how about that teenage daughter of your tenant Ian Campbell? Not only did you rape her, but you disgraced her by telling everyone about it at your New Years’ party in ’73? And your role in the electoral fraud of ...”

“Enough,” pleaded Archie. “Perhaps I’ve committed some minor sins, but I’ve also suffered much. Since Mugabe came into power in Zimbabwe, all I owned has been confiscated by the government and given to the natives. It has been ten years of exile in my own land, living in poverty, enduring

the derision or the familiarity of the riff-raff, people that in earlier times wouldn't have dared stare me in the face."

"Suffering confers no rights, Archie. You have suffered as much as you have because you deserved it. Anyhow, what would you do if I granted you your wishes? Would you forgive those who occupied your lands, those who now live in your mansion?"

"That bastard Mtukudzi who appropriated my estate, I will kill him with my own hands! The others... well, I'll evict everyone and have the dogs sicced on them if they give me trouble... I'll forgive nobody, except maybe those who agree to become my land tenants again."

"I'm starting to think that perhaps I could use you after all."

"How is that?"

"As you know, my tools are the forces of revenge, ambition, envy, thirst for power, chaos. So, you might serve as a good agent of mine."

"Do we have a deal, then?"

"I don't need to bargain to get your soul. Why should I pay for something that's already mine, something that I will be collecting soon?"

"So, you *won't* accept my offer?" asked Archie, incredulous and frightened.

"Actually, I think I will deal with you, but not because your soul is worth much to me, since it is doomed already. I will extend your life *gratis* and provide you with the means to regain what you had. You can then help me pull in scores of souls that I might lose otherwise."

"So, we *do* have a deal!" shouted Archie, beaming with satisfaction.

"Yes. I will extend your life and provide you with a little help to get back on your feet. At midnight on a day like today, fifty years from now, I will come to collect. Until then..." Satan punctuated these words with a long, sardonic burst of laughter that slid, like a finger of ice, down Archie's spine.



From that moment on, Archie's life became a whirlwind of activity. The first step was the recovery of his lands from the interlopers. There was unexpected resistance by the farmers and others who had trespassed on his holdings, but he paid off mercenaries to quell the protests. Recovery was accomplished swiftly, though with a significant loss of life on both sides. Archie's reputation as a ruthless colonialist expanded to all corners of the land.

Two years after his rise from poverty back to wealth, Archie ran for Zimbabwe's House of Assembly and was elected by a wide margin. Two years later, he became a member of the Senate, thanks to secret donations to tribal chiefs who were persuaded to support an old, bloodthirsty white landowner if the price was right. Then came the presidential elections of '98, when he ran as a dark horse and prevailed over two more popular, better known opponents who cancelled each other out in the vote.

As President, Archie implemented an expansionist policy that got him in bloody wars with three neighboring countries. He was no Napoleon, but luck seemed to shine on him. Zimbabwe's forces were victorious in all wars, although the number of dead, injured and dispossessed was estimated by outside observers to be in the millions. At the conclusion of the last of these wars, a boot-licking Parliament elected him President for life. He had started his political career at age 74 and was now 87. His longevity was attributed by many to his dabbling in the black arts.

As his political fortunes rose and he became stupendously wealthy, his health declined steadily. When he sold his soul to the Devil, he was 71 and in reasonably good shape for an elderly man whose life had been punctuated by excesses – he was suffering from gout, a touchy liver, a coating of tar on his lungs, arthritis. He expected, not unreasonably, that if he was to live fifty more years Satan would see to it that he was kept healthy. This, however, proved a miscalculation.

The first signs of trouble came when his severe arthritis condition required replacement surgery for his hips and knees. He went through those and recovered, though his body now felt weak and vulnerable.

More severe ailments started to manifest themselves on the date the last interlopers were driven from his lands. He threw himself a big party, for which he imported white hookers from Cape Town and offered the best in food, liquor and weed to his guests. After dinner, he rose to toast to his victory, tumbled, and collapsed, victim of a heart attack. This was the first of numerous cardiac problems, which over the years required a heart transplant, coronary bypass surgery, and the

insertion of a pacemaker. Those problems might have caused another person to die; Archie surmounted them, but was left in a debilitated condition.

Severe emphysema caused by decades of heavy smoking was another problem that needed to be treated with a cocktail of drugs and diminished the quality of Archie's life. Likewise, at age 82 Archie was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes and was haunted by frequent urination, fatigue, blurred vision and headaches that made him dependent on medications just to function. Diabetes led to kidney failure, such that by age 88 he started requiring dialysis three times a week.

His first bout with cancer affected his prostate, which had to be removed. This reduced his already waning sexual performance and aggravated the urinary problems caused by his diabetes. Afterward, he developed colon cancer, which required surgery, and liver cancer, which launched a frantic search for a compatible liver for transplant. The search was successful, but the transplant operation left Archie on the verge of death. Like with all the other ailments, he suffered greatly but survived.

But disease and aging were not the only threats to Archie's health. After he became Zimbabwe's President, there were three attempts on his life. All failed to achieve their purpose, but the last two had adverse effects on him: a bomb that exploded under his bullet-proof Mercedes left him with inoperable shrapnel fragments throughout the body; and a suicide attempt by a knife thrower caused him to almost lose an eye and gifted him with an ugly scar running down the left side of his face that left it paralyzed.

It is little wonder that people started to believe he was immortal. Some even suspected the truth, charging that a malevolent deity was protecting him. His doctors had to contrive explanations for his durability: a homeopathic diet; rigorous exercise; meditation; a unique genetic makeup. These excuses were all false and nobody believed them, but that was the official explanation and people had to live with it.

His fading physical condition did not diminish his ability to wreak destruction on his country and throughout Eastern Africa. His slash and burn raids destroyed the livelihood of thousands of farming families and caused hunger, despair, and suicide as far north as Tanzania. He was ruthless in rooting out dissenters, and even his most sycophantic supporters lived in constant fear of his violent moods. He was compared (in whispers) to Attila, Genghis Khan, Ivan the Terrible, Hitler, Stalin. When his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday came around in 2019, the official celebrations had a macabre undertone: Zimbabwe had the dubious honor of hosting the world's first eternal tyrant.

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Right after his first heart attack, Archie became concerned and tried to reach Satan to find out what was going on. He made frequent visits to séances and brought well-known spiritualists to the Presidential Palace for private sessions. All attempts at contact failed.

Despair grew as the ravages of disease and old age took their toll on his body. Why did he have to suffer so much? What was the point of great power and wealth if his daily life was one continued agony?

He was 116 in 2035 when he had a major stroke that left the right side of his body paralyzed. He could still think clearly, but his speech was slurred and almost unintelligible. Zimbabwe's Vice President was forced to declare that Archie was temporarily unable to discharge his duties and had him confined to a private clinic for "rest and recuperation."

As he lay unconscious during the early stages of his stroke, Archie had a strange vision. His wife Winifred appeared before his bed and remonstrated with him about his dishonesty. "You promised you would do something to get me out of Hell and you did nothing! And you also did nothing to help our daughter!! You're a liar and a cheat and deserve your punishment!!"

Archie was too weak to respond, but formed a vague apology in his mind: "I was busy with other things."

Winifred continued, relentlessly: "And I trusted you and debased myself before Satan to get Him to pay attention to you. That deal you made with Him, you owe it to me!"

Even in a coma, Archie was incensed: "It was not a deal but a gift, and it was lousy! What good is to live fifty more years if you are going to suffer every minute of them?"

Winifred's spectral mouth opened in a smile of grim satisfaction. "You didn't specify that you wanted to stay in good health, and I suggested to Him that he let you suffer. I argued that you would be more effective in your hatred of the world if you were driven by pain in your insides. He liked the idea."

"So, this is just your revenge playing itself out." Archie sighed, resignedly. "What do I do now? I have five years left on this "life" before he takes me. Five more years of torment?"



“You could kill yourself, but that would not help. He owns you, and will take you either now or in five years, and then the real torment will begin.” With that, the ghost vanished.

As he sunk back into unconsciousness, a single thought crystallized in Archie’s mind: “While there is life there is hope. I have five years left. I’ll try to make the best of this bad deal.”

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Archie never fully recovered from the stroke, but when he was well enough to speak in public, he asked for a press conference to be scheduled, and his frightened underlings rushed to accommodate his wishes. A meeting with the press on the grounds of the clinic was hastily arranged.

Archie was spectrally thin and ill-looking as he came to the microphone. He felt even weaker than he appeared, so he made only three brief announcements and took no questions. First, he said that he was resigning from his office as Zimbabwe’s President and giving up politics altogether. Second, he was liquidating his assets and would donate his entire fortune to charity. And third, as his health allowed, he would spend his remaining days caring for the sick and poor, and was joining the international army of volunteers that was fighting the Ebola epidemic in western Africa.

Weeks later, a somewhat recovered but still frail Archie took off for the Congo. He spent the rest of his life doing good deeds. He died in his sleep in the summer of 2040, at age 121. Those who witnessed his death reported that he had a smile on his withered face as he passed away. Perhaps he had managed to improve his deal.

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Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in anthologies and paying magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, “The Satchel and Other Terrors” has recently been released and is available on Amazon and other book outlets.