

UP IN SMOKE

(FOR BL--)

The phone rang over and over again, constituting something of a harassment of the dying man.

"Personnel Collection Solutions, is Bob Lam-bretched there?"

"Yeah, what do you want?"

"I'm calling you today sir, to inform you that you owe over \$7,000 on your Visa Aluminum Card."

"What's your name, honey?"

"My name is Shalinda."

"Shalinda, is that Swahili or something?"

"It's not important sir. How would you like to resolve this debt situation, sir? We can accept either a money order or certified check."

"Debt situation?"

"Yes sir. You owe over \$7,000 on your Visa Aluminum Preferred Client Rewards credit card account."

"Look, Shalinda. If I was able to write you a check for \$7,000 wouldn't I have done it already? Do you think I've enjoyed getting calls from you guys once a Luciferian hour for the past six months?"

"Sir, that is not pertaining to me. If you would like to get on a payment plan, though, I can transfer you to our Credit Resurrection Department."

"Look Shalinda. I've been instructed by the Legal Aid bureau to tell you to cease and desist these calls. This is harassment."

"Sir, please remain calm. If you don't make a payment in the amount of \$7,346 by this Friday, the 28th, we will be forced to notify your credit reporting agency with a negative account, and we may be forced to repossess some of your [she skimmed through a sheaf of papers] some of your DVD's."

"Over my dead body," said the dying man.

"Sir, it was a pleasure to speak with you today. Can I help you with anything else?"

"Yeah, I'm going to need a hand getting off the toilet in about ten minutes. You have my address."

Bob hung up.

He smiled in his exasperated all-knowing yet all-the-same-not-believing manner. It suited him, the loveable deadbeat. Soon to expire on the shelf, like a forgotten carton of milk.

The fatigue of smoking forty or fifty cigarettes a day for decades was overtaking him, rotting his flabby yummy body from the inside out.

He'd be forced to quit smoking soon. He figured Heaven probably wouldn't have a smoking section, but Hell might.

He opened his Black Magick manual.

"Hell is a hotbed of scandal and sensual delights for the young sorcerer novice," he read. Smoke curled around his tousled grey hair like little horns of winter heat.

The phone rang again.

He turned to the chapter on curses and hexes.

"Hi, this is Bruce from Hennepin Data Surveying."

"Hi Bruce."

"Bob?"

"Yes."

"Bob Lambert?"

"Close enough."

"Okay. According to our records, you are in arrears on a [shuffling papers] home gym equipment purchase: Rowmaster 9000; and a medical equipment purchase: Vapolung 5000. Are you aware of this?"

"Bruce, what are you most afraid of in this world?"

So I can curse you good.

"Sir, I don't see how that's relevant to this proceeding."

"Come on. Tell me."

"I don't know, but I'll tell you what I hate most, though. Deadbeat jerk-offs like yourself. You're a drain on the whole system."

Bob swallowed his breath. The manual fell from his clammy hands and straddled the floor. His weak heart constricted in whip-snaps of pain.

"Bruce, I just put a curse on you," he said, slamming the phone on its cradle and collapsing in a heap on the couch.

When he had recovered sufficiently from his cardiopulmonary episode, he resumed watching his *Avatar* DVD.

The phone rang again. Straight to the machine.

Some woman named Tina inquiring about the aquarium he was selling. Then his mother called, to see if he was still alive.

He went up and got the Black Magick manual where it sat astride the floor in a very undignified manner. He flipped it open to the chapter on traveling to the astral plane.

He spent the next half hour pretending his couch was a transdimensional vessel whereby he explored the cosmos like his hero Stephen Hawking. He imagined himself as a crippled explorer on a gorgeous moon populated by enormous blue devils. He felt as if the universe was becoming more aware of him, and he of it, and that perhaps there was a Pandora-like place waiting to welcome him home—without judgment—with love and large friendly eyes. My how nice that sounded.

The next day the phone rang and rang but Bob was gone. That morning he'd smoked his last cigarette.

END.