**Copyright On My Soul**

I decided to take out a copyright on my soul. When I walked into Barney’s office to tell him he frowned for a while and then a grin grew across and up his face until his little eyes were nearly closed. Barney is my lawyer and he’s seen me through two divorces, an insurance claim for house subsidence and a malicious damage charge, all related. Barney’s a good lawyer and I’ve paid him well, but with this one he had the look of man trying to restrain himself from shouting ‘jackpot’.

 “Intellectual property. Tricky game but if you’ve got the patience to see it through it’s free money forever. Forever.”

 Barney’s face now had that brightness that normally only medication can bring. He said ‘forever’ softly but ferociously, like he was discovering a recipe for eternal life; he probably thought he was.

 “So what makes it your soul? We need to define the characteristics…”

 So we defined them- simple. This was a lawyer so there was nothing in the way of radical philosophy, metaphysics and whatever, just a simple matrix with headings like ‘positivity’, ‘capacity for love’, ‘fear of death’ and marks against them. At the end we decided on a summary word. In my case ‘disillusion’, that was my soul type. In two hours we had created a pretty good system, one which could cater for all the people in the world. They would all fit into one of a dozen types.

 Copyright is a long and detailed process, so Barney set to work right away. He said he’d need to hire other lawyers, specialists, and he’d need a good chunk of money up front.

 “But what you’ll get back at the end you won’t believe Jim. You will not believe.”

 He leant back in his big office chair for a second, stared at the ceiling and looked like he was dreaming about something beautiful, like fees. Another grin- not a smile, a grin, a massive one again, like I’d opened up his face with one of those crescent-shaped cleavers. Then he catapulted himself back to the desk and set to work immediately, presenting me with a glossy head and barely taking time to say goodbye.

 I got home and Fran was just back from the gym, glowing and smelling of gels, perfumes, the dull mystery of women’s changing rooms. I married Fran for her intelligence and her breasts and the breasts were still doing really well; she took tremendous care of them.

 “Hi. How was the gym?” I kissed her and smelt her.

 “Good. I’m feeling supple as a schoolgirl.”

 Now this was a chance to flirt, I knew that, I’d been around women. But I had to stick with ‘disillusion’ now for copyright purposes, because if I was going to get myself past the patent office I needed to be one hundred percent bona fide miserable bastard. So I deflected the flirtation.

 “I’ve been to see Barney.”

 “Oh, right.”

 She couldn’t stand Barney. It was fair enough, I didn’t like Barney either, but he really was a good lawyer and at this moment he was just the name to use as an anti-aphrodisiac.

 “Are you going to ring up about that re-pointing this afternoon?” said Fran.

 This was more like it. Saturday afternoon discussing re-pointing, how much more wasteful could life seem, how much more soul-draining, how much more ‘disillusioning’. Should I write these things down and present them to the patent office as proof?

 “Yes, I’ll do that.”

 “Great.”

 She sounded surprised, pleased. Now here was a thing- if I could see disillusion coming my way, there was the risk that it might make me happy thinking about the good it was going to do my case. But if I became happy, then I’d lose the disillusion and if Fran responded to my enthusiasm and forced her breasts on me or something, then more happiness, even less disillusion, goodbye copyright. This was what they called irony and irony I did not do; I genuinely doubted whether Barney would have ever heard of the word. It was going to be trickier than I thought.

 I went outside to look at the walls and scraped away at the mortar with a key like I knew what I was doing.

 “Hey-ho.”

 Andy, the neighbour. ‘Hey-ho’, as we referred to him, without fondness. He came over and told me his pointing stories, looked at the walls and nodded meaninglessly, wrote down the name of a builder he’d used.

 When his stories had dried up, I threw away his recommendation and phoned three other builders. None of them could start for at least a month, all were expensive and of course they all thought that they were doing me a favour. This really was getting me down, this was irritation beyond irony. Maybe I should arrange to get a lot of building work done while the patent was pending, hire a whole bunch of unrecommended tradesman, the kind who advertised in the post-office window.

 Jenny walked in at tea-time. Jenny is my fifteen year-old daughter and I could see that she was the main danger.

 “Hi dad.”

 She smiled her lovely smile. Why was it so much better than Barney’s? She held my gaze for a few seconds, artlessly.

 “Hi Jen.”

 “What’s for tea?”

 This was better. Kids’ selfishness, that could get me down. Maybe she’d ask for money or go on about the holiday to Ibiza at some point as well. And the more I refused, at least the Ibiza thing, the more nasty she’d get, the more “I hate you’s” there would be and the whole house would go to hell, copyright in the bag. But for the moment she was pretty sweet, sweet and dangerous.

 The copyright came through within six months. Six months is so fast for a copyright that you would think it was illegal; in fact the copyright itself was perfectly legal, but the means Barney had used to reach that end were not. Barney got from A to B in a straight line and for him the dreadful human damage was always justified by the result.

 “You’ve got your copyright. So now take your matrix, find guys who fit your type and sue them.”

 He tried a friendly smile but it immediately turned into a ravenous grin, because he knew he was in for ten per cent of every claim.

 Where to start? I did house to house leafleting, pretending I was doing some kind of market research, offering thirty pounds for an hour of your time and all you needed to do was fill in a form. Jenny came with me and amused herself acting as my assistant. She didn’t know what it was about but she liked carrying her clipboard and scribbling away while I was making my pitch. When we went outside she’d show me the cartoons she’d done.

 “That’s evil Jen. I didn’t notice the zit.”

 “There was dad. Right on the edge of his mouth.”

 She had a talent and I laughed a lot with her. Dangerous. She didn’t ask to be paid either and said she was glad I was out getting some fresh air.

 Thirty quid buys an hour of most people’s time and I had a stack of two hundred forms to compute. Thirty-eight came out as disillusioned, a big chunk out of two hundred, but then this was suburbia with a lot of men in their forties and fifties, men with families and growing fears, men like me.

 I knew some of them and they weren’t happy being sued for infringing the copyright on my soul, but as Barney reassuringly said to me when the judge gave the first verdict in our favour: “Who gives a shit?” Once we started winning, the papers all started with their articles on the nature of the soul and whether this really was the soul we had copyrighted and whether in fact there was such a thing as a soul, but as usual they were too late. It was a done deal, precedents had been set and the money was rolling in.

 “We’ve got to market wider,” said Barney. “And we’ve got to get court orders allowing us to question people. They’re catching on and they’ll try to avoid us if they know what we’re looking for.”

 So he did some more of his terrible deals and we got hard men in with lie detectors and weeded out all the disillusionals we could find. We went international- France, obviously, was great; America, obviously, not so great. We thought the Celts would be good, but we had another type on the matrix- ‘deep-rooted melancholy’- and that was more common there. Barney of course was collecting other archetypes and helping them to sue their copyists. Twelve of us, walking the wide world spreading the word, Barney’s bad news, the gospel of greed.

 “We’re like the Christ and the apostles in a weird way, aren’t we?” I said to Barney, eating a late supper one night.”

 “Who?” said Barney.

 We got rich and Barney got richer and people reluctantly paid their copyright dues like an extra tax. It was tiresome but it was accepted. Then Fran spoilt things.

 “Do I irritate you?” she said, sitting up in bed, doing her make-up, irritating me.

 “No.”

 “I do, don’t I?”

 I breathed out through my nostrils. I could never help doing that.

 “See,” she said. “I knew I did.”

 “Okay. Sometimes you irritate me.”

 “Good.”

 She didn’t say it nastily, but with a sense of satisfaction.

 “Everybody irritates each other sometimes. I’m sure I irritate you…”

 “No, it’s okay Jim. Night sweetheart.”

 Weird. Fran was sparky, bright, a lot of good and bad things, but never weird. It turned out she wasn’t being weird, just smart, because two days later I was being sued myself for a percentage of my copyright earnings, by my wife. She had contributed manifestly to my disillusionment, as evidenced by the recording she had made of me stating clearly that I found her irritating, and therefore was entitled to five per cent.

 We took each other to court. I was represented by a lawyer working for Barney; Fran was represented by a lawyer who turned out also to be working for Barney. Barney, it seemed, was now more God than Christ, because that’s what God was, the lawyer of the universe. Not the judge- we had freewill so you didn’t have a judge- just a lawyer, representing everyone whenever they asked. God was prosecution and defence in every case, just like Barney. No wonder the world had never got anywhere.

 Fran won. I didn’t hate her for it, in fact I kind of admired her. I’d tried to argue that irritation and disillusion were two different things but she ran rings round me. In private I pointed out that she shared my earnings anyway so what did the five per cent matter.

 “It’s principle Jim. And a certain amount of pride. Nothing personal sweetheart.”

 I definitely liked her better now. But I didn’t like the family and friends who came along in her wake trying the same trick. Some of them won- I mean how can you reasonably deny that your ex-wives have contributed to your disillusion- others didn’t. Even Hey-ho, the jolly neighbour, tried it.

 “Hey-ho, hey-ho,” he sang, standing in the porch.

 “It won’t work.”

 “I do make your life a misery.”

 “You don’t, you’re just a pest. Now go.”

 “You think I’m worthless, that I just take up space in the world. Oh you’re definitely disillusioned, I can see.”

 He’d been briefed by his own lawyer, one of Barney’s obviously, but he didn’t have the depth to carry it off. He lost a packet and that did make me happy. But now I could be happy. I had the copyright so I didn’t need to be disillusioned all the time, though I still was for most of it.

 I was sitting at my desk, surrounded by case notes and smirking at Hey-ho’s bankruptcy, when Jenny came in.

 “Can I have some money for the cinema dad?”

 “How much?”

 “Tenner?”

 I gave her ten. She looked at me.

 “Twenty then?” I said.

 “Thanks. Do you mind giving me money?”

 “Of course not Jen. You’re my daughter, you’re here to bleed me dry.”

 “It does annoy you though, doesn’t it?”

 “Oh not you as well.” I was shouting and standing up, hands against the sides of my head. “Christ!”

 “What?”

 “You’re going to sue your own father? Was it your mother’s idea? Or have you just inherited all the bad genes?”

 I went on for several minutes, pacing around the room, talking at the walls, cursing Barney, cursing the plaintiffs and defendants and witnesses whose notes were piled on my desk.

 “This is way out of control. This shouldn’t have been started. Jesus, this is wrong.”

 But Jenny, who had wrapped her arms around herself and who was crying softly as she stared at me, had no idea what I was talking about. I went to the window for a moment and looked out at a world of souls which would fit into a matrix; then I looked back at Jenny, who wouldn’t fit, not yet. I bowed my head and for the first time in months stopped thinking about percentages.