

Without a Soul
by Chris Bradley

As I was wont to do, I spent the late morning strolling down the sidewalk under a shady row of poplars. I admired the beauty of the spring noon—the lush green leaves of the trees, the scudding white puffs of clouds above, the housewives outside sweeping their porches—and smiled as I sniffed the swirling citrus of children's lemonade stands. Closing my eyes, I thought back on the long summer days of selling my mother's Bundt cake on the street corner. I could almost feel the dry stickiness of the powdered sugar on my fingers. Suddenly, a great light shone through my eyelids, and I found myself in a vacant lot at the end of the street, exposed to the sun's cascading rays. My photosensitivity triggered an enormous sneeze almost instantly. The sneeze sent a ripple down my spine and left spots in my vision.

But when these finally cleared, I received the biggest shock of all: a needle-head point of dazzling, radial light floated just beyond my lips. I gazed into its center, my wonder mingling with dread, and in short order another sneeze brewed. I could feel a tingling warmth gathering in my throat, and as the second sneeze burst forth, with no one around to wish God's blessing upon me, this heat coursed out my mouth and took shape before me as a quasi-bodied figure. The point of light flickered in the air for a moment longer, then zipped into the figure's mouth and gave the body life.

My soul came into being as ethereal and zestful as Peter Pan's shadow, yet fully and finely dressed, from wing tips to top hat. His face was hidden as he looked down to knock the lot's dust free from his shoes with a mahogany cane. He had supple hands and limbs, or—or he didn't. I couldn't say for certain, because from one second to the next they sunk into the landscape and then surged into definition, with the regularity of a grandfather clock.

And then he spoke to me.

"Hello," my soul said, looking up, a strong silver jawline framing his shimmering lips. "I'm Sigmund."

"You have a name?" I asked. I didn't know where I ought to look as I addressed him; his hat's brim was pulled over his eyes, and I had trouble distinguishing any facial features other than his mouth.

"Well, sure I do. Every soul has a name," Sigmund replied.

"Do all souls wear formal attire?" I asked.

"Only when we go to the theater. I must thank you for releasing me, even if we had just reached the 'Spring Reprise' of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. It is really quite cramped and humid in there," he said, gesturing to my skinny midsection with the gilded tip of his cane.

"You're welcome, I suppose," I said, wondering what hidden amphitheaters I harbored within. But then I panicked when I recalled the Socratic model of the soul as an entity that cares for things, rules, and deliberates—that, in sum, serves as the foundation of rationality. "What will happen to me now? Don't I need you?"

"Not at all!" replied Sigmund. "We're both free now! You don't have to answer to me, and I don't have to police you."

"But I liked having a soul," I said, beginning to feel a little empty. "It was like..." I searched for inspiration amid the lot's rubble, but it was suddenly elusive. My reason, my precious wit, they were already crumbling away. "It was like having an inner compass," I said after a moment.

"Hogwash," Sigmund said. "I didn't direct you any more than that useless shadow of yours!"

I jerked my head around, sending a stinger up the back of my neck, and received a moment of fright when I thought I'd lost my shadow, too. But then I remembered that it was noon, and that it was only on lunch break. "Don't I?" I asked.

"You're a Harvard man! Time to put that education to use. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a world to explore." He paused to stroke his chin with a faint hand, its fingers seeming to fluctuate in

number. "Ah, but everything here is so full of color! I must bid you adio, in hope that we may meet again on the road to success!"

He spun about on a pointed wing tip and glided slowly away, tapping his cane on the cracked sidewalk in wide arcs like a blind man. He reached the street corner opposite, then made a sharp, diagonal movement and disappeared.

Just like that, I was soulless. Wasn't that what they called dictators, barons of high finance, husbands who dallied with the corner deli's pretty little waitress? What my mother called my father? Was I so much like them? I imagined constructing an elaborate Ponzi scheme to bilk thousands of their life savings. The idea still repulsed me, thank God. But then, why should I thank Him? It was His fault I was without a soul in the first place, because He had failed to bless me!

But then, as I paused to take a breath, my Harvard education *did* kick in. Perhaps this was all just a ruse, a bit of fandango perpetrated by my roommate, Denton, an MIT alumnus. Hardly a day passed without him fabricating some new marvel on that computer of his.

I held fast to this notion as I returned home and cornered Denton in the kitchen. He leaned over the counter wiping down the bread machine, from which emanated the comforting smell of rye.

"Well played, sir," I said as I leaned good-naturedly against the cool tile of our kitchen's island. "How did you do it?"

Denton turned to face me, his eyes lingering on my plaid corduroys and "ELI" sweatshirt as he devised an apt rejoinder. "Do what?" he asked.

"*Do what!*" I smiled and nodded, letting him know that I was "hip," and that he need not continue his subterfuge. " 'Sigmund'—a well-chosen name, indeed. I always did imagine my soul in a Freudian light."

Denton scratched at his bearded chin with a hirsute hand. "Thomas—what are you talking about?"

I giggled, because his feigned ignorance was so transparent, then let loose a hearty laugh as I saw this "Sigmund" hovering outside the kitchen window. His airy complexion now seemed such an obvious artifice that I chided myself for having let this hologram take me in.

"There, Denton, you see, his outline is far too unsteady! A *blatant* projection." I chopped the air with my hand to emphasize the point.

Denton turned to the window, paused for a moment, then looked back at me, and I noticed a genuine blankness in his eyes. Denton's poker face would tip off a full house to a Big Ten graduate, so I knew right then that he had not crafted Sigmund—indeed, that he could not even see him! My jaw dropped, as few men's actually have, as I found myself facing a future truly, verily without a soul.

I was not yet prepared to discuss with Denton the psychosocial consequences of this fact, so I raised a despairing hand and went to my room to rest before dinner. I could only hope that a bit of sleep and food would raise me from my doldrums. And in fact, I did feel better as I thought of the delicious loaf of rye that Thomas had made to accompany the beef stew thawing in the refrigerator. I stepped into the bathroom so that I might have a more restful nap, but then paused afterward as I reached to close the lid. I envisioned the toilet remaining uncovered while I slept, emitting fecal matter into the room unencumbered, and my heart beat more quickly. It would settle on soap, floss, and toothbrush, on the counter and the bath mat. I withdrew my hand, grabbed my new Colgate toothbrush and retired to my room before I could rethink what I'd done.

I never would have done such a thing before, but with Sigmund gone, I felt liberated. I lay still in my room, dark but for the stripes of light that slipped through my cracked blinds, and my mind raced as I considered the new avenues open to me as a soulless person. I could leave the sponge in the kitchen sink to sop up chicken broth and bits of beef. I could short-sheet Denton's bed and steal away into the ghettos with his gerbil, Frankincense, leaving him to wrest crumbs from mud-caked, flea-ridden street rats. I could block my neighbors' storm drains, open their mail—a

federal offense—then trap their pets in my backyard to slow-roast them over a spit. I could call up Geoffrey Beegin, the heroine dealer from Stoughton Hall back at school, and make my old man proud. Then, oh!, then, when my blood was tainted, I would donate it, quarts of it, and add AIDS to the cancers of the local bank's clients. My eyes gleamed as I contemplated the wanton days ahead.

The sun passed behind a cloud then, darkening the room further, and I looked toward the window. I could just make out a shifting, silvery oval behind my blinds. Sigmund! When he saw my glance, he disappeared, floating away or transporting himself elsewhere, but I felt suddenly sinister, having considered such malevolent deeds while my soul looked on. I had proved Socrates right, millennia later. I *had* lost my reason, my bearing, along with Sigmund. *Myself* was split—my *self* was gone—and I felt paralyzed.

For the next hour, I wavered between consciousness and oblivion—I felt literally *obliterated*, like a novel carved out to store valuables— and finally fell headlong into a thoughtless canyon.

When I came to, some time later, Sigmund was standing over me, idly swinging his cane, the twirling mahogany a brown blur in the twilight of my room. From his pressed pinstriped pants to his glinting monocle, he appeared even more regal than before, and his aura grew by each nebulous second, penetrating my skin. The darkness without my room only enhanced the force of his light, and I began to writhe under his awesome stare like the subject of an exorcism. There was no escape, but, although I was frightened, I did not wish one.

"I was wrong about us," Sigmund said. "About you. You do need me."

Yes, I thought, *yes*, *I do*, but I was transfixed by his gaze and could not respond. What I saw were not eyes, not properly speaking, but long, narrow funnels alive with liquid light, a prismatic brilliance that washed over me and prickled my skin. I blinked, then clamped eyes shut, but it was as though he were *inside* them, staring directly into my mind. I opened my mouth to ask his forgiveness, and when Sigmund saw this opening, he dissolved into a galaxy of swirling light, rose, and poured into me. He had once fit inside of me, but didn't now, and I felt myself bulging along

my limbs and through my chest. For five excruciating seconds, I thought I would erupt, and then suddenly he settled, trickled to my extremities, and went still. I was alone, but whole, in the dusk of my room.