



Writers and Deadlines:
The Devil at the Crossroads

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FOR A GOOD FRIEND of mine – we'll call him Frank – the only deadline that counts is the referee's final whistle. Frank is a football journalist. As soon as the official-in-the-middle puffs out their cheeks and points to the tunnel, it is time for Frank to submit his copy.

As a young man, jinking his way through the crowded (not to say, smoky) field of sports journalism, Frank realised the only way to make a living was to cover every football match simultaneously for as many different newspapers as possible.

His record stands at five.

Each newspaper has its particular readership. It has its own house style, its lexicon and its format. In some cases, a newspaper has its own favourite team, requiring in-depth knowledge of squad players, past players and local favourites. And every sports editor wants *their* copy the moment the final whistle blows. So, as this particular match wound down to the ninetieth minute, then crept into stoppage time, the pressure on Frank was mounting.

There, on a very hefty laptop, were five separate accounts of the match, each viewed from a discrete angle, and structured to suit a particular outlet. Some reports began with the final result before a balanced unfolding of the highs and lows of the afternoon's events; others reviewed one team's



current woes, before telling the glorious tale of the local heroes' ultimate escape from relegation.

And then it happened. In the final minute of extra time, a last-gasp goal dramatically changed the result of the match and the season — the future of the local team was altered forever.

Five frantic, simultaneous rewrites ensued, with Frank shamelessly blaming a dodgy phone line for the copy's tardy despatch.

Deadlines in the theatre, in my experience, are more negotiable. But they are vital. Their effect is best summed up by that old dictum: *Nothing concentrates the mind like the hangman's noose.*

That phrase may date from a deplorable period in the UK's judicial history, but it pins the greatest value of a deadline to me; it makes the writer write — to commit to one particular vision, and forces me to be decisive.

Without a deadline, that balmy period – when all in a script is mutable, all eventualities open, when the piece may yet turn out to be brilliant – would live eternally. A deadline ends all that.

But there are other, even more positive upshots of the deadline. Not least, is the prospect of freedom. One day the (figurative) whistle will blow, copy will be submitted, and provided the right draft is sent to the right person, the writer is marvellously released from the iron grip of the present project.

Because of the deadline, for good or ill, the fate of the script will now be determined. Like Robert Johnson, the blues singer who met the devil at the crossroads and traded his soul for the gift of the blues, the deadline forces a trade to be offered. From here, the future can unfold in very different ways.