

HOW HEATHER MOON KEPT MY LIFE FROM GETTING COMPLETELY FOULED UP AGAIN

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THE MORNING AFTER THE imps invaded the mansion for the second time, I went in and tried to get my copy chief at the advertising agency to switch me immediately to a different project.

“Impossible, inconceivable,” Leon Gruskin told me without even looking up from the trade ad proofs atop his wide, cluttered desk top. “We need your unique copywriting capabilities on our upcoming pitch to get the Sunnyland Cigarettes account here at the shop, Harkins. We’re talking about a potential billing of \$12,000,000 a year.”

“Even so, Leon, I have some personal reasons why-“

“Exactly. Exactly, now get back to your office and get cracking on some fresh ideas for a Sunnyland TV campaign. We have to make the damn presentation to the Sunnyland people in just ten days, remember?”

This all happened some years ago, when I was a young advertising copywriter with sufficient hair and a lot of potential and they still allowed cigarette advertising on television.

Instead of returning to my cubicle, I wandered into the Art Department to talk to Andy Lenzman. From his single narrow window you could, if you pressed against the pane, hunched and tilted somewhat to the left, actually get a glimpse of Madison Avenue far below. A lot of Manhattan ad agencies had their offices on Madison Avenue in those days. Maybe they still do, I don’t keep up.

Lenzman was a small, lean man in his early thirties with crinkly, short-cropped dark hair. He later became, I think, a moderately successful gallery painter. I’m pretty sure I read someplace about ten years ago that they showed some of his work at the Museum of Modern Art. I haven’t stayed in touch with him, but at the time he was my closest friend at the ad agency.

He pushed back from his drawing board, where he was roughing out a newspaper ad for Hopps Bros. Beer. “What’s happening?”

“I’m doomed.” I shut the door and sat in his only other chair after moving a tumble of empty Oat Bursts Cereal boxes.

“Alimony trouble again?”

“No, nope, I got my lawyer to make a deal with Sue’s shyster out in California.” Sue Smith had been my

college sweetheart and I'd made the mistake of marrying her. I told you about that once.

"Then it must be Marny Olmstead," he said, tapping absently on his board with his charcoal pencil. "I believe I warned you about having anything to do with a lady who copywrites for a rival agency. If memory serves, there's a law against it. Something to do with cross-pollination and the basic laws of—"

"It's not Marny. Fact is, I'm seeing her this Saturday."

He made the sort of face you make when you taste something sour. "Was Typhoid Mary busy?"

I leaned forward in the chair. "It's imps, far as I can tell."

"Hum?" He dropped the charcoal pencil into the trough at the bottom of his board. "Imps?"

I replied, "Right, imps. They're attacking the mansion, plaguing me, eating all the Sunnyland Cigarettes ad copy I type up, making rude and threatening remarks."

"C'mon, Will, you're supposed to be the top copywriter here at Hannigan, Arnold & Bolderwood,"

Andy told me. "You can come up with a better excuse than that for missing a deadline—'The imps ate my homework.'" He shook his head, indicating disappointment in me. "What, by the way, are imps?"

"Well, the ones who materialize at my Cousin Phil's mansion in Southport, Connecticut, are sort of—"

"Materialize?"

"Yeah, these things appear out of the air with a sort of popping sound," I explained. "All over the house, but the biggest flock of them frequents the den where I'm trying to work at night. They make mildly explosive noises, coming and going."

"That figures, I guess," he said, nodding slowly. "I mean, you wouldn't expect imps to ring the doorbell, tip their hats and say, 'Hi, we're the imps come to eat us some advertising copy.' What did you say imps were?"

"I looked them up at the library, after they told me who they were -imps are sort of junior grade demons who hang out in the netherworld," I explained. "Mine are about the size and shape of piglets. Except not at all cuddly."

"Right, you wouldn't expect an imp to be cuddly."

"They're a sort of sooty gray in color and have a lot of extra teeth, sharp and spiky."

"The better to eat your copy."

"The problem is I don't have time to do all my regular copy assignments here at the office plus the extra stuff for the Sunnyland pitch," I went on. "So I have to work at home, too, until we make the presentation."

Andy glanced at his closed door. "They haven't followed you to work, far as you know?"

"Not yet, nope. Of course, they only started manifesting themselves night before last for the first time."

He nodded again, even more slowly. "Well, since they haven't popped up at the agency, why not work late here? That is, if you're really seeing imps and haven't simply come down with a severe case of advanced heebie-jeebies."

"I think they only come out at night. So they might show up here, too, if—"

"Fine then. You could drag Gruskin—your esteemed copy chief works until the wee hours most nights—into your office and point at them," he suggested. "'Here, sir, is why my copy is coming in late and with teeth marks all over it.'

About how many show up of an evening?"

I shrugged and it turned into a small shudder. "Not sure, Andy," I admitted.

"It's tough to get an accurate count, since they move around a lot, making threats and all and—"

"Your imps can talk?" There was something in his tone now that indicated he was still not quite sure that I hadn't simply gone stark raving honkers.

"In little piping voices, sort of falsetto, yeah. With Swedish accents."

"Is that standard operating procedure for imps?" He inquired, eyeing me. "The Swedish accent part?"

"No, I suspect they're just doing that to annoy me," I told my friend. "Hearing dozens of porcine imps warning you not to write any copy about Sunnyland Cigarettes can be pretty unsettling. The fact that they

start most sentences with ‘Yumpin’ yimminy’ just adds to the horror.” I gave a forlorn shake of my head. “Wait now—it’s only the Sunnyland account these little dorks are ticked off about? They don’t care if you keep writing about OatBursts and Terry’s Permanent-in-a-Box?” He was tapping his board with his pencil again. “There are, you know, a whole stewpot of other agencies going after the Sunnyland Cigarettes account. Maybe someone at one of our rivals has put a hex on you.”

“That’s what I suspect, sure, because the imps imply they’ll depart if I quit working on the Sunnyland pitch,” I said. “Thing is, Andy, who the hell is behind it? I haven’t got any idea.”

“Isn’t Helfant & Associates also trying for that account?”

“Marny’s ad agency? No, not that I know of.”

“You certain?”

“She would’ve told me. We are, after all, pretty close.”

He watched me for a few silent seconds. “You don’t seem goofy, Will,” he conceded finally.

“I’m not nuts,” I assured him. “I’ve had experience with supernatural stuff before, so I’m damn sure this—“

“When was that, old buddy?”

“Nine years ago, when I was going to Brimstone University,” I answered. “A professor sent some demons to persuade me to stay away from Sue, because he was trying to court her and—“

“Sounds like a splendid guy. You should’ve heeded his—“

“I’m trying to convey to you that I know something about occult matters.”

“Okay, so how did you get away from those other demons? These were full-size demons, not the piglet versions?”

I held my right hand as high above my head as I could stretch. “Tall guys. Mean-minded and, in most cases, fire-breathing.”

“And you shook them off how?”

I walked over to his window, trying to get a glimpse of the morning Madison Avenue. “A friend helped me.” “How?”

“Well, she had quite a few supernatural powers herself, but in a white magic sort of way,” I answered quietly. “Whole family, on both sides, was magical in one way or other.”

“She? Was she cute?”

I kept facing the window. “She was, yes. In fact, if I’d had any sense back then...” I let the sentence trail off.

“You’re still pining for her.”

I turned toward him. “No, I got over that,” I assured him. “She went up against this professor and, with some help from her family, defeated him. I haven’t seen her since I graduated.”

“But, look, old buddy, you’re house-sitting in that mansion in Connecticut while your cousin frolics in Paris and—“

“Phil is frolicking in Majorca for a year.”

“Be that as it may, you’re residing in Southport and that’s less than a hour drive from Brimstone,” Andy continued. “Therefore, just get your butt over to Brimstone and look up this—what did you say her name was?”

“Heather Moon.”

“Okay, you go and talk to Heather Moon. Apologize for not keeping in touch, then mention that you’re mixed up with demons again,” he advised. “Emphasize that it’s only just small demons this time. Would she, for old times’ sake, mind helping you shoo them out of your life? That’s what old friends are for and—“

“I can’t do that,” I told him. “Chiefly because I don’t have any notion where the hell Heather is. She left Connecticut right after college—and her family moved to Maine or Vermont four five years back.”

“Shouldn’t be too tough to track her down. That’s what I’d—“ The phone sitting on his taboret started to ring. He picked up the receiver. “Louvre City. How can we help youse?” Andy listened for half a minute and handed the phone toward me. “For you. Sounds like a Swede.”

I took it, swallowed and spoke. “Yeah?”

“You bane better not bring Heather Moon into this, by yingo,” warned an imp and hung up.

BY THE TIME I got home to the Southport mansion that night, darkness had fallen and it was raining. I parked my Nash in Cousin Phil’s big, shadowy three-car garage and went sprinting along the white gravel drive and up the wide steps to the front door.

Hesitating before I inserted the key, I glanced back at the Sound, which you could glimpse over the top of the high stone wall my absent cousin had built around his acre and a half of tree-filled property. The foam on the dark water glowed faintly. Taking a slow deep breath in and out, I opened the front door of the sprawling Victorian mansion.

There was only silence and darkness beyond the threshold. No sound of imp activity. I inhaled and exhaled again, then entered.

Gingerly, I clicked on the overhead lights in the long, paneled hallway.

No imps.

There was a vinegar smell that I noticed now, strong enough to overpower the strong antiseptic odor of the furniture polish Cousin Phil had made me promise to apply to every single stick of furniture in the whole damn twenty-one room mansion at least once a week. I didn’t recall the imps smelling vinegary, but I, nevertheless, scanned the corridor for any sign of them.

From the kitchen came a forlorn meowing. “Those assholes,” I observed.

Part of my house-sitting duties involved looking after two resident cats. They were fat and lazy, disdainful toward me. Since the invasion of the imps two nights earlier, they spent most of their time in seclusion, behind furniture, under beds, and hunkered in closets and cabinets.

“George? Ira?” I called, my voice sounding a little quivery.

More mewling from the kitchen.

Making my way there, I located George, who was the color of stale peanut butter, cowering under the sink. “C’mon, fella,” I urged, squatting and reaching for him. “I’ll feed you and, if we can locate him, your accomplice.”

Hissing George slapped at my extended hand with his clawed forepaw.

“Yow,” I remarked, yanking my hand out of range and standing. “Okay, I’ll put some cat food in a dish. You emerge when you’re in the mood, schmuck.”

They’d only eat Kittytonic Kat Banquet #2, an expensive concoction that cost thirty-five cents a can. We had a cat food account at Hannigan, Arnold & Bolderwood and I could’ve gotten sacks of it free, but Phil had insisted that George and Ira be fed only Kittytonic Kat Banquet #2 and, once a week, Kittytonic Kat Banquet #3. Both cats, for some reason, loathed Kittytonic Kat Banquet # 1, even though it contained tuna. Under the deal I’d made with my cousin, I had to pay for all the pet food.

I opened the immense refrigerator and took out an opened tin of cat food. I was spooning it into the special pewter dish that had George engraved on the side in Gothic script when the telephone rang. That sudden shrilling in the rainswept mansion made me straighten up and stiffen, causing me to plop a spoonful of Kittytonic Kat Banquet #2 on the spotless white linoleum.

I walked over to where the phone was supposed to be and noticed that it didn’t seem to be there. That is, I couldn’t see it but I could still hear it ringing.

“Very funny,” I said aloud, assuming this was another imp stunt. “Invisible telephone. Clever.”

I prodded the air with my hand until I connected with the receiver. My first attempt to answer wasn’t successful since I was apparently talking into the wrong end.

“Hello?” I said when I finally got it right side up.

“Working away, are we?” asked Leon Gruskin, my copy chief.

“Just got home.”

“Speak up, Will. You’re talking too far from the mouthpiece.”

“I am? Sorry.” I tried to get the invisible phone closer to my face, giving myself a hard smack in the teeth.

“Ow. That better?”

“I just had a brainstorm,” he announced.

People who worked in the Creative Departments of advertising agencies back then had frequent

brainstorms. Maybe they still do. I have no idea what they call them now.

“Which is?” I inquired.

George had emerged from under the sink. After giving me an intense evil-eye scowl, he waddled over to the glob of spilled food and began nibbling at it.

“How does this line hit you, Will? ‘Sunnyland Cigarettes—There’s magic in every puff.’ Well?”

I was watching the cat and listening to the heavy night rain slam at the high, wide windows. “Magic?”

“Makes them forget about tar and irritation.”

“Yeah, Leon, but it doesn’t especially fit with the ‘Let Sunnyland put some sunshine in your life’ theme I’m working with.”

“This supplements that. We use it in some separate television spots that you’ll write,” he explained.

“Have you seen Harry Firedrake, Jr., yet?”

“I don’t think so. Who the hell is he?”

“The famous magician.”

“Not that famous. I’ve never heard—“

“He’s playing at the Gotham Theatre on West 43rd. Show is called Oh, What A Magical Night! And it’s terrific,” continued Gruskin. “He does a Floating Lady variation that’s sensational and would look great in a commercial. This cute little assistant he works with would be floating there with a cigarette in her hand. Firedrake, Jr., gestures with his wand and the cigarette lights up. She starts puffing, expresses contentment. We dolly in on the magician and he says, ‘Sunnyland Cigarettes—There’s magic in every puff.’ What do you think, my boy?”

“Golly, I’m sold. Rush me a carton of Sunnyland Cigarettes and put it on my tab.”

“Let’s be serious. I’m not busting my ass after office hours just so you can be inspired to make wiseass remarks.”

“Sorry, sir.” Probably talking into an invisible phone was making me uneasy and even more flippant than usual.

“You’re going to see the Firedrake show tomorrow night,” I was informed. “Angelica and I saw him Saturday night and I’ve been kicking around this magic idea ever since.”

“Who’s Angelica?”

“My wife.”

“I thought your wife was named Georgine.”

“That was my first wife, two years ago. We’ll have to have lunch more often, Will,” he said. “There’ll be a pair of tickets for you at the box office. Bring your wife.”

“I’ve been divorced for several years, Leon,” I mentioned. “But I’ll get a date. And maybe tomorrow you can fill me in a little more on the magic angle of this campaign.”

“Happy to, my boy. Good night.”

It only took me two tries to get the phone hung up.

All the telephones were invisible. After very carefully entering my den and typing myself a memo about Leon Gruskin’s half-witted magician notion, I decided to phone Marny.

That meant feeling around my desk top for nearly five minutes before I located the phone. The imps had also made my coffee cup invisible, which caused me to spill cold coffee all across my desk blotter. You couldn’t see the stuff, but there was a wide splotch of invisible sogginess.

“Hello, love,” answered Marny in that throaty voice of hers.

“How’d you know it was me?”

“That greeting would fit any one of eight other guys, Will.”

I laughed, fairly sure she was kidding. “Listen, Marny, the agency is interested in a magician named Harry Firedrake, Jr. I’ve got two tickets to see his show tomorrow night in Manhattan and—“

“Already saw him, darling. He is marvelous, although the skinny girl he’s got assisting him is abysmal.”

“Care to see him yet again? We could meet after work, have an early dinner and

--“

“Oh, that sounds great, Will,” she said, sounding sincerely regretful, “but my masters at Helfant & Associates have me booked to go to dinner with a client. I can’t duck it, darling. A real shame, too, since I just bought some new frilly black lingerie I was anxious to have you see.”

I swallowed once. “That is a pity, yeah,” I agreed. “By the way, sweetheart, I heard a rumor that your agency was going to pitch the Sunnyland account, too.”

“Bullshit, darling,” she said. “Wouldn’t I have confided in you if we were competing? Sure, I would, since I’m the tobacco expert there and I’d be the one doing the sample stuff. Or don’t you trust me anymore?”

“I do, forget it. Just a rumor,” I assured her.

“I’ve got to ring off now, love. I brought a ton of crap home to work on. Maybe we can squeeze in lunch tomorrow?”

“Not tomorrow. I’ve got to go over to Newark to the Oat-Bursts plant to see their new—“

“Soon then. And we’re still going to the Connecticut Ad Club banquet on Saturday, aren’t we?”

“Absolutely.”

“The undies will keep until then, don’t worry. Night, darling.”

Ira had come lumbering into the office while I was hanging up the unseen phone. Giving a disgruntled meow, the heavy cat leaped up on the desk, avoided the unseen damp spot, and sat down on his haunches.

“I’ll feed you in a minute,” I promised.

The furry orange cat said, “What I really wanted to see you about, by yimminy, was your refusal to quit the Sunnyland project. We aren’t kidding, you know.”

“A goddamned imp.” I grabbed up a wooden three-foot ruler and tried to swat him.

Chuckling, the imp made a popping noise and vanished.

“Damn, now they’re doing impersonations.”

When I leaped up out of my theater seat, Andy Lenzman grabbed my arm and managed to get me back in a seated position.

“I told you you shouldn’t have had curry for dinner,” he said.

I pointed, vigorously, at the stage. “That’s her,” I said, excited.

“I know, it’s the Floating Lady,” said my friend. “Which isn’t all that surprising since Firedrake just announced he was going to perform his astounding version of the Floating Lady Illusion.”

“Hush up,” suggested someone behind us.

After turning to scowl at all the occupants of the seats immediately behind us, I hunched down and told Andy, “What I mean is, that’s Heather up there.”

“Heather Moon?”

“That Heather, yeah.”

“Well, that’s sort of uncanny, Will.”

“I wonder if it is.”

“Be quiet, will you?”

I turned again, glaring. “You don’t need to hear magic, putz.”

“Don’t call my wife a putz, peckerhead.”

“Sorry, I thought I was addressing you. If your wife didn’t have a bass voice, people might not confuse her with a stevedore or—“

“She’s a soprano, you ninny.”

“Folks,” put in Andy, “let’s call a truce and watch this incredible illusion, huh?”

It was such an impressive trick that I suspected Heather was contributing some real magic to it.

Harry Firedrake, Jr., an overly handsome bearded man in his early forties, had begun his magic show with the Floating Lady. The moment he mentioned that he did the trick in an unconventional way, Heather, looking absolutely terrific in a flowing white gown, had materialized high above the stage of the Gotham Theatre.

She was in a horizontal position, arms at her side, her long auburn hair fluttering slightly as she slowly descended. That was the point where I recognized her and shot up out of my seat.

By the time I was paying attention again, she had reached the level of the tailcoated magician's top-hatted head. Firedrake passed a golden hoop over her body to demonstrate that there were no wires holding her. I would've believed that without any demonstration. I knew Heather didn't need any help in levitating.

What I didn't understand, though, was why she was working with a stage magician, a guy who specialized in tricks and fake magic.

We were in the twenty-first row of the orchestra section and I wanted a better look at Heather. "Opera glasses," I requested, holding out my palm toward my friend.

"Didn't bring any, old buddy."

"See if you can borrow a pair. I want—"

"Here, peckerhead." The guy behind me was whapping me on the shoulder with a pair of binoculars.

"Use mine and, in the name of God, keep your mouth tight shut."

Making a surly noise, I yanked the proffered glasses from his hand.

Heather, who was standing beside Firedrake now, was as slim and pretty as I'd remembered her. She did look a few years older, but not very different from the girl I'd known back in college.

"Jesus," I murmured.

"What?" asked Andy.

"Nothing." I shook my head. I'd all at once realized how much I missed Heather and how supremely dumb I'd been to marry Sue Smith and abandon Heather.

Up on the stage Heather turned to the audience and bowed. There was considerable applause.

Firedrake took her hand, bent and kissed it.

She curtsied, smiled, then her body began to shimmer. In less than thirty seconds she had vanished from the stage.

Dropping the opera glasses into my jacket pocket, I stood up again. "Be back in a while," I whispered to Andy and started down the aisle toward the stage.

"Hey, jerk, my glasses."

"You'll get them back, don't fret."

Crouched low, I hurried for the exit door next to the bright-lit stage. I pushed it open as unobtrusively as possible, strode down the dim-lit corridor beyond and through a door that led backstage.

In the wings, sitting on a fat wardrobe trunk, was a teenage boy wearing a turban and a star-studded robe.

"I'd like to see Heather Moon," I told him.

"I know," he replied. "We've been expecting you, Will."

She smiled, but it wasn't much more than a polite smile. "It's nice to see you again after all this time," said Heather, glancing at the small black alarm clock ticking on her dressing room table.

"Yeah, it's nice seeing you, too," I said. "When do you have to get back on stage?"

"Fifteen minutes, for the Chinese Cabinet Illusion." She was sitting in a wooden chair, her slim back to the mirror, wearing a pale terrycloth robe and looking very pretty.

Even though I was with her again, I was feeling a sense of loss. Mostly I was regretting the years away from her. "The kid out there mentioned that you were expecting me, Heather."

"Didn't you recognize my brother Buddy?"

"That was him? As I recall, I never actually saw Buddy."

"Oh, yes, that's right. He was going through that phase where he thought it was cute to remain invisible."

I sat, uneasy, in the small room's only other chair. It was a lumpy green armchair and it produced a mournful twang. "Did you rig this somehow, so that I'd come here?"

Heather nodded. "Yes, I planted the idea in your copychief's mind -I don't know why you let him browbeat you, he's got a very easy brain to control. Well, anyway, I planted the notion that he ought to use Harry in some commercials."

I made a relieved noise. "Then I won't really have to write some godawful spots about Sunnyland Cigarettes being magical?"

"He'll not even remember the idea by tomorrow." Heather looked again at the

clock. “I hesitated about intruding in your life again, Will, considering what happened after—“

“It wasn’t you who screwed up my life. You saved it. What I did afterward was what screwed everything up.”

“My grandfather—do you remember Grandpa Plum? He had one of his visions and contacted me. That’s how I got interested in your problem in the first place,” Heather explained, standing and moving toward a screen.

“Sure, he’s the one who levitates a lot.”

“Gramps doesn’t do that much anymore. He’s getting old and his sense of direction is futzed up.” She stepped behind the screen. “He keeps bumping into walls and furniture all the time now. Excuse me while I get into my next costume.”

“Your grandfather got one of those messages from the spirit world, did he?”

“His main contact on the other side these days is a very gabby woman named Mrs. Rasmussen. She was a chiropractor in this world but she’s proved to be very reliable.” I saw the yellow robe drop to the floor beneath the screen. “She alerted him to the fact you were in trouble again.”

“This time it isn’t my fault that I’m being plagued by demons, Heather.” When I left the armchair it made another mournful wang. “They’re small demons, by the way. Technically, you’d call them imps.”

“I know, Will. I had my mother summon up some background material.”

“Your mother’s okay?”

“Fine, yes. They’re living in Quincy, Massachusetts—Mom and my dad and assorted relatives.”

“I thought it was Maine.” I eased nearer the screen. Heather was still apparently using that sandalwood scent she’d worn in college. “Or possibly Vermont.”

“Massachusetts.” Heather, wearing a spangled crimson bathing suit, stepped free of the screen. “I arranged for there to be two tickets available for you and then used some telepathic persuasion on your boss. Did you bring your lady friend?”

“She had something else to do tonight. I persuaded a friend of mine guy who’s an Art Director at the agency—to come along.”

“I don’t want to intrude,” she said again. “But I told myself that if you came back to see me—then it would mean you could use a little help.”

“Right now I could use an unlimited quantity of help, serious help,” I assured her. “For some reason I have these imps overflowing my—“

“It’s because of the work you’re doing on the Sunnyland Cigarettes presentation.”

“It is, huh? Yeah, that’s what Andy—Andy Lenzman, the Art Director --suggested, too. But why?”

“You have a reputation as a crackerjack copywriter, Will,” she told me, taking a spangled crimson cape off a hook on the wall. “One of your rival agencies, using some black magic, has learned that as long as you’re turning out the copy, your agency is going to get the account. So they’re working to sideline you.”

“Which agency?”

She handed me the cape, turned away from me. I placed it on her shoulders and she fastened it with a golden cord. “I don’t have all the details on that yet,” she said finally. “I can, however, get rid of your imps for you. Unless you’d rather tackle the job yourself?”

“No, nope, not at all.” Realizing I still had my hands on her shoulders, I swallowed and stepped back.

“I’d really appreciate it, Heather. They’re messing up my work. And I’m not sleeping very well and the cats—my halfwit cousin named them George and Ira—are spending most of their days cringing.”

She faced me. “I can come out to your place tonight,” she offered. “A little shy of midnight.”

I noticed she still had freckles, a faint scattering of them. “That would be great,” I told her. “I can pick you up after the show. We can get a train at Grand Central, ride out to Southport together.”

She shook her head. “I don’t like to travel by train,” she said. “You just go on home to the mansion. I’ll meet you there. Okay?”

I nodded. “Fine,” I said. “Oh, one other thing—how come somebody with real magic powers is working in a fake magic show like this one?”

“I have to go on now.” She tilted and kissed me, very lightly and briefly, on the cheek. She left her

dressing room.

I lingered there for a moment, reflecting, yet again, on how dimwitted I'd been back in college.

THE IMPS SHOWED UP promptly at 11:30 P.M., just as the big grandfather clock in the hall of my cousin's mansion was bonging for the half hour.

I was in the kitchen, attempting once again to figure out how Cousin Phil's coffee maker worked. I'd stopped at the little grocery store near the Southport train station on the way home and picked up a couple packages of fancy cookies. Those I'd arranged on one of my Cousin Phil's silver serving dishes on the kitchen table.

Maybe Heather wouldn't have time for coffee and cookies, but I decided I ought to make some effort to play the host.

"By yingo, why'd you bane buy these stale cookies, yunior?"

Turning my attention from the cryptic coffee machine, I saw a single imp sprawled in the midst of the plate of cookies, nibbling on a macaroon.

"Shoo, you son of a bitch." Grabbing up a spatula, I started toward the butcher block table to swat him. But before I reached my goal, a flock of piglike little imps appeared suddenly on the kitchen floor. They succeeded in tripping me up and I fell, with an oofing exclamation, on the white linoleum.

A bunch of them hopped on my back, started tap-dancing.

"You know what these crappy cookies need to pep them up, Olaf?"

"What, Sven?"

"Kittytonic Kat Banquet #1 spread atop them."

"By yingo, you bane be right."

As I struggled to rise, I heard the refrigerator being opened.

"I don't see no Kittytonic Kat Banquet #1, Oley," piped one of the imps. "But there sure bane a whole shitpot of Kittytonic Kat Banquet #2." An opened can of cat food was tossed out of the refrigerator.

"Hey, you porkish little schmucks," I shouted, halfway to my feet, "we don't have any goddamned Kittytonic Kat Banquet #1."

"Let's settle for Kittytonic Kat Banquet #9, Sven."

"It doesn't have the right tang, Olaf."

Growling, I pushed all the way upright, shedding imps.

"Hot dog, this bane be lots of fun," cried several of them as they started bouncing, in a rubber ball sort of way, on the wide white floor.

I eased over toward the doorway, trying to avoid smacking into a bouncing imp.

Making a sudden dash, I dived out into the hall. I slammed the door.

I started running along the shadowy hallway. Maybe I could make it to the porch and wait for Heather there.

The door of my den came flapping open and a dozen or more of the two-foot-high imps came dancing out, Rockette style. Each was dressed as a package of Sunnyland Cigarettes.

"If you know what for you bane good," they sang in off key unison, "you'll move your ass from the neighborhood. The Sunnyland account ain't for you and to pursue it will fill your life with rue."

"Christ, it's not bad enough you intrude on me," I said, glaring down at the cluster of them, "now you inflict godawful jingles."

Another batch of them danced into view, porky legs kicking in sync. "You better quit the Sunnyland job, chump," all the imps chorused. "Otherwise it gives..." They all made a slicing noise together and a throat-cutting gesture. I couldn't see their actual throats because of the mockup cigarette packages they were wearing.

"Listen, guys, you're in for some big trouble," I warned. "I'm having you exorcised shortly. If you scoot while you can, you can avoid getting incinerated or having to spend the rest of your days in Limbo or someplace worse."

One of the imps was shedding his package, wriggling out of it, grunting. Tossing it aside finally, he glared up at me with his piggy little eyes, snout wrinkled disdainfully. "We warned you not to drag Heather Moon into this," he said in his chirping voice. "Now her sad fate is on your hands, yunior."

“What the hell do you mean?” I squatted, eyeing him.

“Show him, gang.”

Another wave of them, fifteen at least, came tumbling out of the den, collaborating on the carrying of a large funeral wreath. The black ribbon that stretched across its blend of withered flowers and limp ferns said, in gilt letters, Rest in Peace—Heather Moon.

“If you little bastards have—“

“Relax, Will. Don’t let them flimflam you.” Heather had simply appeared in the paneled hall.

She was wearing a plaid skirt and a cardigan sweater, her auburn hair was tied back with a twist of green ribbon. Carried in her right hand was a battered attache case.

“Woe betide.” The imp who’d been trying to con me now pointed a fat warning finger at her. “Flee this cursed place before you, too, meet your doom.”

“Oh, shush,” advised Heather, kneeling beside the case.

The imps, despite the bluster of their spokesman, were uneasy. Little pig feet shuffling, they backed toward the open door of the den. They’d abandoned the wreath and some of the ones wearing cigarette boxes were stumbling over it.

Heather produced a squat orange candle that rested in a heavy brass candle holder, set it on the hardwood floor with a confident snap of her wrist. “Light it, Will,” she suggested as she fetched a thick, leather-bound old book out of the case.

“You don’t want to risk that, yunior,” warned the imp.

Patting my pockets, I located a lighter. Until I’d been stuck on the Sunnyland project three weeks earlier, I hadn’t smoked in nearly five years. My hand was shaking some as I crouched and got the candle going.

“Easy, Will, nothing bad’s going to happen.”

“That’s what you think, you freckle-faced slut,” said a familiar voice.

I straightened up, blinking. “What the hell are you doing here, Marny?”

“Oh, be still, you nitwit,” Marny advised. She was a very attractive dark-haired woman in her late twenties. Tonight, when she materialized out of a cloud of deep gray smoke in my Cousin Phil’s hallway, she was wearing a long black cloak and her face seemed exceptionally white.

“Boy, I am a nitwit,” I admitted, having been hit with a sudden, and rather late coming, insight. “You’re the one behind all these imps. You’re the one who wants me off the Sunnyland pitch. And your ad agency is going after that account, too.”

“Obviously, asshole.” She took two steps closer to Heather. “That’ll be enough of that spell, Little Miss Magic.”

“What are you?” I inquired. “A sorceress or a—“

“She’s a witch, a traditional witch,” supplied Heather, rising up and opening her book to a place that had been marked with a faded strip of crimson cloth. “There are at least three other advertising agencies in Manhattan who employ one.”

“Dating me,” I said, angry, “was just so you could spy for Helfant & Associates.

All these weeks you’ve been—“

“Silence.” Marny rose up on tiptoe. She was wearing glistening black boots and her cape began to flutter, as though she was standing in a strong wind.

Raising her arms to breast level, she stretched them out straight and pointed all ten of her red-tipped fingers at Heather.

Smiling, Heather ignored her and started reading, slowly and deliberately, a spell from the ancient book. This one sounded like it was in Spanish, with a few Latin phrases thrown in.

“Yumping yimminy,” muttered the now-frightened imps. They then started producing unpleasant popping noises as they exploded away into nothing.

Heather nodded and turned to another page in her book.

There were no more imps to be seen.

But Marny, her eyes glowing an intense glittering green, was still there and murmuring a spell of her own.

“Watch it, Heather,” I warned. “She’s trying to—“

“Don’t fret, I was expecting she’d show up here.” Heather started reciting the new spell.

The whole damned house was shaking now, walls rattling, lamps jangling.

“You won’t live to finish that,” warned Marny. From her fingertips came thin, crackling lines of intense yellowish light.

They never reached Heather or the book, though.

Because all at once Marny turned into thousands of flickering specks of deep black. The dark flecks swirled around the place where she’d been standing, flickering before they fell into the shadows and were gone.

“Is she permanently destroyed?” I asked in a very small voice.

“Nope, she’s just relocated to elsewhere.”

I leaned back against the wall. A few particles of black had landed on the clawfooted mail table.

Absently I started to brush them away, until I remembered what they were. “Thanks, Heather. The ad game can get pretty intense and competitive sometimes.”

After extinguishing the candle, she packed it away in the attache case and shut the book in with it. “You really have to be more careful about the women you keep company with.”

“I’ve been...” Then I noticed that she had a dark bruise on her left cheek.

“They hurt you. Let me get a—“

“It’s nothing, didn’t happen here,” she said, touching at her cheek. “I just had a little accident at the theater.”

Reaching out, I took hold of her hand. “What I wanted to say,” I said, “is that I made a mistake back there in college. But after seeing you again, Heather, I know what the smart thing to do is.”

I tightened my grip on her hand.

“We all of us make mistakes, Will. Mine was marrying Harry Firedrake three years ago,” Heather said quietly.

Then she wasn’t there anymore.

For quite a while I just stood there, watching the place where Heather had been. Then, after muttering “Well, yumpin’ yiminy,” I went to find the cats and tell them it was safe to come out of hiding.