

WHY I NEVER WENT STEADY WITH HEATHER MOON

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It was about the time that the third large fire-spitting demon came spilling out of the bathtub that I decided to capitulate. Dodging the scaly green creature's sticky coiling tentacles, and making a rush past the second demon, who was crouched on the toilet seat and bellowing out noise and sooty yellow smoke, I dashed into the small living room of my apartment.

My neighbor on the left was pounding on the wall with the ferrule of his cane. "Do you know what time it is, young man?"

"Midnight?" I guessed.

These particular supernatural manifestations usually showed up some time around the witching hour.

The initial demon, who was covered with blood-splattered feathers and seemed to have several toothy mouths, was now crouched on the sofa and eating one of the faded cushions.

"C'mon, don't do that. I'm having a hell of a time explaining all this stuff to the landlord as it is."

The demon wolfed down the entire cushion, then made a nasty roaring sound.

My neighbor on the other side smacked the wall with a rolled up magazine. "Turn down that TV show, Harkins."

"In a minute. Sorry."

I made a shushing gesture at the demon and pointed at the phone. "You guys win. I'm calling him now."

The feathery demon snatched a coaster off my lopsided coffee table and ate that.

Taking up the phone, very gingerly since it was resting on the far end of the

same coffee table, I dialed the number of Professor Matthew Krouch.

The telephone rang five times before he, feigning a drowsy voice, answered, "Krouch here."

"Skip the acting, professor," I said, keeping an eye on the nearest demon. The other two had, as far as I could determine, remained in the john. "This is Will Harkins."

"Who? Calling me at such an ungodly hour is --"

"I give up. I quit. I concede," I informed him, sadness, weariness and quite a bit of anger sounding in my voice. "She's all yours."

"Whatever are you babbling about, Harkins?"

"About Sue Smith," I told him. "I'll stop dating her. She's yours exclusively."

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about. Is this some undergraduate prank, my boy?"

"Just call them off- the demons and all the other crap."

"Whatever drug you're on, Harkins, I suggest you make a serious effort to sober up." He slammed down the phone.

The demon on the sofa gave off a faint popping sound before vanishing.

I moved, very carefully, to the bathroom and chanced a look. I was pretty sure those other two would be gone as well and they were. Although the fuzzy pink cover on the toilet seat had a burned spot where the demon had been perched.

I was free, yet far from happy. I had, out of fear and cowardice, just given up the only woman I'd ever truly loved so far in my life.

This was some years back, I was not quite twenty-one, and the idea of losing Sue Smith for good and all seemed enormously important to me.

The next day, an autumn Wednesday, while completely free of demons and other chilling supernatural manifestations, was not especially happy for me. For one thing, because of the psychic occurrences of the night before, I hadn't been able to study for the quiz in Political Theory 22A and my paper on "Tap-dancing in the Movies" for Pop Culture 1 IB came in at just over a page and a half. A good three and a half short of the minimum length. Worst of all I had to phone Sue at the Gamma Epsilon sorority house and tell her I'd decided to devote myself to my studies and couldn't see her anymore. She cried, which almost tempted me to go on defying Professor Krouch and his black magic. But I already knew it would be impossible to go on dating her and so I didn't weaken. I was, however, sniffing slightly when I stepped out of the phone booth in Wally's Pub.

I'd postponed phoning until nearly five in the afternoon. So I was able to walk directly from the phone to a table at the far side of the sawdusted floor and join Nat Weinbaum.

At the time -- this was my senior year at Brimstone University in Brimstone, Connecticut -- Nat was, even though we weren't in the same fraternity, my closest friend. And he knew quite a bit about what I'd been suffering through the past two weeks.

He wasn't at all sympathetic, though. "You're a shmuck," he observed after I'd outlined what I'd done.

"For giving up Sue? It is a hell of a sacrifice, yeah, but --"

"No, she's a typical whey-faced adolescent with a brain the size of a prune pit." Nat picked up his beer glass. "Sue you're well rid of. What I meant was --"

"Wait now, Nat. My relationship with Sue was something special that--"

"Not all that special. You're the third guy she's gone with this semester and it's only October."

"Look, that's because Krouch --"

"The reason you're a shmuck, Will, is that you gave in to him. Now the bastard'll send critters after you every time he --"

"Nope, it had to do with Sue entirely," I said. "He made that clear when he called me into his office at the start of all this."

"There's another thing to contemplate, old buddy. Why, if you two were such an exceptional team, has Sue also been seeing an aging prof of English?"

"I've already explained that to you."

"No, you simply recited her feeble excuse for --"

"She's majoring in English and -- well, Krouch implied that if she didn't date him fairly regularly, she'd find that her grades and her --"

"A word to the dean on her part would halt that."

"Nobody'd believe the guy is practicing sorcery just on her word. I didn't believe it myself when he told me he didn't want anybody else dating her," I said. "Besides, Nat, she's afraid to make a fuss. That's why she keeps going out with him."

"Myself, I'd be extremely ticked off if Bey dated one of her professors."

"Few rational people, in my opinion, would risk all the grief and loss of self

esteem that's involved in dating your girl. Even a fire-breathing demon would think twice before --"

"Did Krouch send more of those after you?"

I held up some fingers. "Three last night."

"That's four."

"I'm rattled." I took a sip of my beer. "This has been a rough day."

"How's it taste?" "Hum?"

"The beer -- how does it taste?"

"Fine, not like brine anymore."

Nat rested both elbows on the table top. "There are, you know, ways to counter the sorts of spells he's been using on you. You could stand up to him, fight him."

"No, nope. Not me. It's over and done. My heart is broken, sure, and my social life's in ruins, but there won't be any more huge foul-smelling, and usually noisy, creatures from the nether regions carousing in my damn apartment at all hours and causing old Mr. Reisberson to whap the wall with his cane. My food will no longer taste like week old garbage, or fraternity chow, and my beers will no longer taste like polluted sea water and every time I try to drink a Coke, there won't be a toad in it or --"

"I still think you should've complained to Coke about the toads. It may not have been part of one of the spells, since a cousin of mine in Philadelphia once found a mouse in his Pepsi."

"Furthermore, my papers won't bum away to ashes before I can turn them in. The pages of my text books won't wither to dust or become so splotched with blood that I can't read them. All in all, Nat, I shall, from now on, lead a normal life." Sighing, I drank some more of my beer. "But, damn it, I'm really going to miss Sue."

When he leaned back in his chair, it creaked. "So who are you going to take to your fraternity dance this Saturday?"

"Hell, I forgot about that," I admitted. "I'm on the cleanup committee, too. Be ironic if I went to the dance alone."

"Maybe you should sign up for one of Krouch's English classes. Find out what irony really is," he advised. "It happens I can fix you up."

"With who? Not that friend of Bev's who's on the fencing team?"

"Someone else entirely."

"No, I don't think so."

"She's very pretty. Has auburn hair and a delicate tracing of freckles across the bridge of her nose."

"Here I've been forced to end, after being dogged by demons and plagued by the machinations of a professor with a command of powerful sorcery, a deep and meaningful relationship with Sue Smith." I frowned at him. "And you attempt to console me with someone who's merely pretty."

Nat gazed up at the ceiling for a moment. "You didn't happen, during your recent supernatural dealings, to sell your sense of humor to the devil or something?"

"No, but there are certain things I'm serious about, Nat. My feelings for Sue are --"

"Sue's over and you need a date," he reminded. "This girl's name is Heather Moon. She's eighteen and --"

"A kid. I don't --"

"She's a junior already."

"Then she'll be too smart. Smart women always try to minimize my...Wait." I sat up straight. "Heather Moon, Heather Moon. I've heard of her. Yeah, she's supposed to be weird and strange, doesn't even belong to a sorority, has few if any friends. A loner and an outcast." I nodded, remembering some of what I'd heard about her. "No, Nat, even auburn hair and freckles and a topseeded brain won't make up for --"

"Who else then?"

After thinking that over for a few seconds, I answered, "Nobody else really."

"Trust me, Heather is the woman for you."

I asked, "Where's she live?"

"Over in New Beckford with her parents."

"Jesus."

Nat hunched his shoulders and looked directly at me. "We're buddies, right?"

"Sure."

"Meet this woman, let her befriend you."

"You make it sound therapeutic."

"It well could be."

I narrowed my left eye and scanned his seemingly innocent face. "There's something about Heather Moon you're not telling me. Isn't there?"

"There's a whole hell of a lot I'm not telling you."

"Oh, what the heck," I said. "Set it up if you can."

He could and he did.

The windshield wipers on my car weren't quite up to the task of keeping my window clear and I was having to drive fairly slowly up the twisting hillside road that led to Heather Moon's family homestead. I'd taken a few wrong turnings, too, and was already about fifteen minutes late.

Back then the town of New Beckford wasn't the thriving commuter community it is today and in the frequent flashes of crackling blue lightning I saw mostly woodlands and wild fields outside in the rainswept night. Off to the right, when I finally reached the crest of the road, I spotted the high wrought iron fence that Heather had described to me when I'd talked to her on the phone a few days earlier.

Up to this point I hadn't seen her in person, although Nat had pointed her out to me in a blurred group photo of the Chess Club in last year's yearbook.

The fence was leaning at odd angles and the gate itself had long since fallen away. The house sat at the end of a long curved white gravel drive. It was an immense Victorian mansion, thick with spires, cupolas and gables. I got the impression, during an especially brilliant smack of lightning, that several large dark birds were roosting, hunch-shouldered, on the apex of one of the steeply slanting shingled roofs.

I parked in front of the three-car garage, nudged my door open and made a dash for the front door. As I sprinted by the garages lightning flashed inside them, a dazzling yellow-green illumination that briefly lit up the tiny dusty windows. There may also have been a series of chugging, thumping sounds.

The big carved-oak door to the house swung open as my foot hit the top step.

"Come in, Mr. Harkins," someone invited.

In the long dimlit hall I encountered a middle-aged woman, blonde, wearing a strawberry-pattern apron over a black cocktail dress. I said, "I'm here to pick up --"

"You should have turned left on Willow Branch Road," she said, smiling. "I'm Heather's mother."

"Left?" I tried to figure out how she knew I'd taken a wrong turning some three miles downhill from here.

"And don't confuse Old Gallows Tree Road with just plain Gallows Tree Road," she added. "Would you like a cup of cocoa?"

"No, I'm sort of late already and --"

"I shouldn't have told Heather you'd be twenty minutes late. She has a habit of dawdling anyway and --"

"How'd you know I was going to --"

"You can wait for her in the parlor." Smiling, Mrs. Moon beckoned me to follow her into a large, cluttered room on the left.

As I crossed the threshold I tripped over something soft, nearly falling. I looked back but didn't spot anything on the floor.

"Buddy!" Mrs. Moon was scowling at a spot near my feet. "What did I tell you about that? Get to your room."

I heard a snort, a giggle, and then light footsteps going away.

"He's eleven," explained Heather's mother. "A difficult age for boys."

"Um," I was able to say.

She came over to me and patted my arm. "I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention Buddy to anyone at your school," she requested. "Heather, through no fault of her own, isn't as popular as I'd like her to be. She won't allow me, because of her stubborn streak, to cast a... Well, enough of our little family problems, Mr. Harkins. Tell me something about yourself."

I glanced over at the doorway. "What exactly is Buddy's problem?"

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with the boy. He's just at an age when he considers it funny to turn invisible."

"A phase, huh?"

"I hope so. I'd be disappointed if he settles on invisibility as his lifetime knack and...oh, my. Here comes Grandpa Plum."

I turned in the direction of her stare and saw a lean old man with a great deal of wispy white hair. He was wearing a rumpled gray suit, had his hands folded across his chest and was floating, face up, about three feet off the floor.

He came drifting slowly into the room and stopped with his polished black pumps nearly touching my midsection.

"One of his trances," explained Heather's mother in a whisper.

"Will Harkins," spoke the floating old man in a strange piping voice. I noticed now that his eyes were tightly shut.

"It's Little Leroy," Mrs. Moon said to me.

"Little who?"

"Little Leroy, his control -- that's who's talking through Gramps now. You're too young to remember Little Leroy, a popular child star in the early days of talking pictures. Died young in a tragic yachting accident, though why anybody would allow an eight-year-old child to have a yacht of his own is something only a Hollywood parent --"

"Will Harkins," came Little Leroy's voice through Grandpa Plum's lips, "you are in dire danger."

"Me?"

"It isn't over, you know," warned the childish voice. "Krouch is committed to the dark powers and the dread teachings of the infamous Count Monstrodamus. Even though you played chickenshit and gave in to --"

"Language, Leroy dear, language," cautioned Mrs. Moon.

"You are still in danger of being consumed by the foul fiends of the netherworld."

"Damn it, Grandfather, what the heck are you up to?" inquired a pleasant female voice from the hallway.

"Eh? What's that, child?" Shaking his head, which made the white hair flutter, he opened his eyes, came out of his trance, and fell to the floor with an impressive thunk.

"You have to waken him gradually from his trances, Heather dear, remember?" Mrs. Moon knelt beside the sprawled old man. "I think he bopped his poor head and passed out cold."

"Boy, what a great start for our first date." Shrugging and then smiling, Heather walked gracefully into the room and held out her hand to me.

She was slim and auburn-haired, with that trace of freckles. And she was -- well, if I hadn't still been mourning the loss of Sue Smith, I would have fallen immediately in love with Heather right there in the Moon parlor.

"I'm Will," I said, shaking hands. "You look great."

"Yes, I know. But thanks for noticing."

"Harkins." Her grandfather was stretched out on the floor, though awake now. "I overheard some of what Little Leroy told you. You'd do well to heed his advice,

lad."

"I'm not certain exactly what he --"

"Lay off Will, Grandfather." Heather caught hold of my nearest hand. "C'mon, we're already late for the dance."

"Nice meeting you, Mrs. Moon," I said. "You as well, sir. If you need any help getting up off the floor, I can --"

"He doesn't." Heather escorted me out into the hall.

"They're right about Professor Krouch," I mentioned as we stepped out into the rainy night.

"Of course," she said, "but I can take care of that for you."

The fraternity dance was held at the Shoreline Country Club in Northport -- that's old Shoreline, the one they tore down about ten years or so ago. A sprawling place that looked like the offspring of a mating between an English inn and a Hollywood mortuary. On the hazardous drive from Heather's hilltop home to the shores of the Sound I refrained from talking about her unusual family. She didn't discuss them either, nor did she repeat her offer to protect me from any possible further assaults from Professor Krouch.

For the most part Heather made a favorable impression on my fraternity brothers and their sorority girl dates. Beyond a few veiled sneers and a scattering of snide whispers, we got through the first hour of the thing with no problems.

And fortunately, nobody witnessed the Doug Mittler incident except me.

I'd gone to the john, leaving Heather alone out on the terrace. There was a canvas awning over it and the rain was slamming down hard.

Doug, a football jock, was a huge blond fellow struggling through his third semester as a senior. I'd noticed him eying Heather a couple of times earlier in the evening and smirking, but I'd assumed he was amused to see me, a fraternity brother he loathed, stuck with a date who, though strikingly pretty, had a reputation for being very odd.

But that wasn't quite how he saw things and, soon as he noticed my leaving her, he ditched his date and attempted to get better acquainted with Heather.

I returned to the terrace just as he was trying to slip his big right hand down into the front of her dress.

Not flinching, she simply snapped her thumb and middle finger together.

There came a strange hollow humming sound and then Doug started to rise up off the flagstones. His arms flapped down to his sides and he shot swiftly upward. Just missing the awning, he sailed out in an arc into the rainy darkness beyond.

Doug fell to the ground about a hundred yards from us, landing on the wet grass just short of the high Sound side hedges.

"I really don't like to be pawed." Heather took hold of my hand. "I think we best leave, before I embarrass you in front of your friends."

"Most of them are fraternity brothers, not friends," I told her as we stepped back inside. "You know, I've always wanted to do that to Doug. Well, not exactly that-- since I'm not really sure what the hell that was."

"Simple telekinesis," she said. "I don't like to do that in public, but he got way too friendly."

I pointed a thumb in the direction he'd gone flying. "He's not seriously bunged up?"

"No, and he won't remember exactly what happened to him."

"What did happen?" We were making our way around the edge of the dance floor.

Heather sighed. "I suppose I'll have to explain this all to you."

"That's what's called for, yeah."

"Too bad, because I sort of like you and --taken with that show Gramps and Buddy put on -- you probably won't want to have anything more to do with me."

"If it's something supernatural --well, it has to be, doesn't it? Anyhow, I'm used to that sort of stuff now, Heather, and you don't have to worry."

She smiled tentatively. "I think I will keep worrying. For a while, Will."

That evening, parked on a dead end street that overlooked the stormy waters of the dark Sound, Heather told me something about herself and her unusual family. On her mother's side she could trace her ancestors back to a clan of sorcerers who had appeared in the mountain country of Hungary, rather abruptly according to certain ancient chronicles, sometime in the late 15th century. Heather's father was descended from a family that had flourished in England for more than a thousand years. They'd exhibited, over the centuries, a wide range of supernatural abilities, wild talents, and affinities for magic and sorcery. Some said the Moons were related in some way to Merlin and more than one of them had been labeled a witch or a warlock.

When the two strains had come together in Heather, Buddy, and an older brother, Andrew, who was away at college in California, they had produced some very exceptional offspring. Heather tried to lead as normal a life as possible but that wasn't particularly easy. Her parents and assorted relatives who lived with them -- I was moderately unsettled to learn that there were still several residents of the hilltop mansion that I had yet to meet -- didn't try as hard to hide their various magical abilities from people. That was one reason Heather

didn't date much and was reluctant to have friends visit her at home.

"I decided to go out with you, originally, because Nat told me you were having some occult troubles," she said.

"Then I'm what to you -- a charity case?"

"Well, I probably can help you," she told me. "And, basically, you're likable, Will."

I listened to the night rain hitting on the roof of my car for a few seconds.

"Did Nat provide you with specifics?"

Heather nodded. "We've known about Matthew Krouch for some time," she answered.

"My father's been kicking around the idea that we ought to do something about him."

"How drastic a something?"

She looked out into the stormy night. "You have to understand that Krouch practices black magic, the worst kind of sorcery," she said. "My family, on both sides, only uses its gifts for -- this sounds corny, I guess, but only for good."

"I'll tell you," I said, "you folks may see this as a conflict between good and evil. But, even though I may have acted in a cowardly fashion, I'm glad I gave in to the professor. A couple weeks of demons and supernatural manifestations persuaded me I don't want to defy him any longer."

She reached over and, for only a moment, took hold of my hand. "Despite the element of carnival hokum involved in my grandfather's trances, most of his predictions are valid," she said. "You may not be free of Krouch yet."

"Why? He's got what he wants."

"What he wants at the moment." She withdrew her hand.

I said, "In the meantime I'd like to see you again."

"You would?"

"Yep, yeah. Is that a possibility?"

"Of course, sure," she answered, smiling. "Next time I can meet you on neutral ground. You won't have to risk coming to my place. Okay?"

The next two weeks came closer to being idyllic than any other stretch of time in my life. I saw Heather every day, not missing a one. We'd meet at the Student Glade -- where the Computer Center stands now -- as soon as our classes were over. We saw each other evenings, too, and did a lot of talking and wandering. We did go to a movie once -- I no longer recall the title but I think it was probably a

Western -- and to a concert. Mostly, though, we were just together.

Eventually, too, there was a physical side to things, but I'd just as well not detail that.

I started to do better in my classes. After the demons laid off bothering me, I was able to pull up most of my grades from Ds and Cs to Bs. All in all, it was turning into a very satisfying and gratifying autumn.

Sue Smith and I shared no classes that semester, so I didn't encounter her. Once, I'm fairly certain, I saw her entering Truett Hall. She looked forlorn and, for only a moment, I thought of running over and comforting her. But I got control of myself in time.

I decided, as October moved toward its finish, to ask Heather to go steady. That was what you did back then -- maybe they still do, I'm out of touch. I was even intending, though she didn't think much of fraternities, to offer her my pin.

To make the occasion more formal, I arranged to call for her at her home on that particular night. If we were going to have an officially permanent relationship, I figured I ought to quit giving the impression I was avoiding her strange family. I hadn't been back to the hilltop in New Beckford since our first date. Heather and I had been meeting in my apartment or on campus. I wasn't certain what means of transportation she used and, for some reason, I hadn't inquired.

It was a crisp, chill night and as I drove away from my apartment I noticed two small goblins and a tiny sheeted ghost moving along the sidewalk. Then I saw a plump woman with a flashlight following them through the growing twilight and remembered it was Halloween.

While I was driving up to the Moon mansion a sharp wind started blowing across the darkening night. Dry leaves came swirling free of the roadside trees and fell down across the beams of my headlights.

I was approximately a quarter mile from the top of the hill when the new demon manifested itself.

Bigger than any of the previous demons who'd visited me, it came rumbling out of a grassy field on my right. At least fifteen feet high, a luminous green in color, it was breathing a pale blue fire out over its multitude of sharp jagged teeth.

The thing planted itself in the night road directly in the path of my car. The wind carried a scatter of dead leaves against its body and each one burst into sparky flame upon touching that glowing green hide.

I swerved my car, drove along in a ditch for several hundred feet and then hopped back on the roadway, barreling past the creature. For a moment I thought I'd gotten myself clear, but then the demon reappeared up a hundred feet ahead of me.

Next my car died. Engine, radio, lights, everything ceased to function.

I assumed it would be my turn next.

The huge demon was, very slowly and deliberately, lumbering downhill toward me. Sparks came sputtering out of its glaring eyes each time it blinked. Halting a few yards from my front bumper, it pointed at me with one taloned hand and struck an Uncle-Sam-Wants-You pose.

I locked all my doors and hunkered low in the seat.

"Okay, leila, that'll be just about enough of that stuff."

I sat up, squinting out into the deepening dusk.

Another figure had materialized on the road near the demon. A human figure, a lean, tall man of about fifty. He wore a dark business suit and tie, but perched atop his head was a sorcerer's cap emblazoned with stars and moons and arcane symbols.

He held an ivory wand in his right hand, which he now aimed at the demon. "What did I just tell you? Scram, hit the road -- begone!"

Scowling at him, the demon sent more sparks and flames shooting out of its eyes and mouth.

The man in the magic hat gestured with the wand, reciting some phrases I couldn't catch.

The creature bellowed in pain, sooty smoke came spiraling out of its ears. Bending over, it clutched at its luminous middle. Then came an enormous fiery explosion and the demon was replaced by darkness.

The man who'd dispatched it walked over to my side of the car. Tipping his sorcerer's hat, he said, "Evening, Will. I'm Heather's dad."

"Nice meeting you, Mr. Moon," I answered as I rolled down my window a few inches.

"That critter was sent to fetch you," he informed me. "It's lucky Grandpa Plum had a warning premonition."

"Sent by Professor Krouch?"

"Afraid so. Seems he's decided he wants to use you in a ritual."

I swallowed. "Oh, so?"

"We'll have to stop him," said Heather's father.

Heather turned to her uncle, giving a negative shake of her head. "Nobody wants

a drink just now, Uncle Elroy."

"I wish you'd remember, my dear, to address me as the Amazing Marvelo in front of company." He was a plump man, clad in tux and turban, and was standing beside the large oaken table the rest of us were seated around. He clutched a large silvery pitcher in both hands. "My think-a-drink illusion is justly famed around the --"

"Sit or scam," advised Heather's father, who occupied the most ornately carved chair.

"I'll have a lemonade," said Mrs. Moon quietly. "And then you'll have to hush up, Marvelo."

Heather, sitting beside me, took my hand. "These family meetings usually get off to a slow start."

Her Aunt Electra, who sat directly across from us, gave a sudden startled yelp. Both of her much-ringed hands were holding a large crystal ball. "Something's coming in," she announced, lifting both palms clear of the globe.

It started to glow with a throbbing deep amber light. Then Professor Krouch appeared within the crystal. It was a full length image and I could see that his squat, broad-shouldered body was decked out in a long purplish robe that was plastered with mystic symbols and devices. On his bald head sat an odd three-cornered hat that sported a large shaggy horn at each corner.

"Looks like he's planning a sacrifice sure enough," observed Mr. Moon.

"Is it me he's intending to sacrificer" I asked Heather quietly.

"That's what Grandfather's premonition told us. And it really looks as though he--"

"I intend to have you, Harkins," shouted Professor Krouch. "Nothing can save you. And most certainly not the feeble white magic of those nitwit Moons."

"Nitwits, are we?" muttered Aunt Electra, tapping the crystal with her forefinger.

I was about to ask Heather another pertinent question, but then I wasn't there any longer.

I rose up off my chair some three or four feet. Then I had the impression I was falling out a window. Not a regular window, but a strange window that had all at once opened in the middle of the air.

Heather cried out and tried to grab at me as I went rising up. But it did no good.

I went tumbling through the window into darkness. I felt as though I was riding

in a very fast elevator, only going sideways rather than up or down.

After that I ceased to experience anything at all.

Someone was sobbing.

There was something familiar about the sound of it.

After swallowing some more smoky, incense-laden air, I opened my eyes. Sitting beside me in a highback, blackwood chair was Sue Smith. She was wearing jeans and a gray sweatshirt; her hands were folded in her lap.

"I'm not supposed to untie you, Will," she said in a small apologetic voice, sniffing. "Nor touch you even."

Unlike her, I was tied securely in my wooden chair, bound with rough shaggy ropes. "That's okay, Sue," I said. "How've you been?"

"Awful." She commenced sobbing again. "This is all my fault really...I've been dating him and trying to pretend I like him...but he suspects that I still...that I continue to be fond of you."

I'd been glancing around the room. It was large, high-ceilinged and stone-walled, and didn't seem to have any doors or windows. A huge pentagram had been scrawled in the middle of the stone floor in powdery greenish chalk and a half dozen five-foot-high brass candle holders circled the pentagram. Each had a thick black candle burning in it. Weighted down by the heavy clawfooted base of each holder was a sheet of ancient parchment. Written on the brittle sheets of old paper were lines in what I guessed was runic script.

But when Sue mentioned that she was still fond of me, I turned to stare at her. "Hey, that's very flattering, Sue."

"It's also pretty stupid, because it annoys the professor. He can sense somehow that I really don't much care for him and that I'm...thinking about you a lot...and it ticks him off considerably."

"What does he intend to do tonight?"

Her sobbing got going again. Finally she managed to say, "It's pretty terrible. I'm really sorry." Bringing both her hands up, she covered her face and cried.

"Um -- can you give me some specifics, Sue?"

She lowered her hands away from her tearstained face. "Well, it's dreadful."

"I figured as much."

"Matt's gone completely around the bend and --"

"Matt?"

"He insists I call him that."

"Go on."

"He's nutty as a fruit salad and --"

"Fruit cake," I corrected.

"That, too. Anyway, he believes if he sacrifices you to some important demon or other, it'll make me love him forever."

"And this sacrifice -- how exactly does that work?"

"It's going to involve that big star he drew on the floor," she explained, snuffling. "He spreadeagles you there, recites all sorts of weird gibberish and then he...this is the terrible part...he plunges a knife into you. I'm really sorry about all this."

"How come you know all the details?"

"He forced me to watch a dress rehearsal."

"Who'd he plunge the knife into during the rehearsal?"

"A watermelon."

"Flattering." Narrowing my left eye, I glanced from the pentagram to Sue's pale pretty face. "He's going to make you watch the real thing?"

My question caused her to sob some more. "Yes."

"You're not tied up," I pointed out.

"No, but I can't leave this chair or help you in any way."

"How come?"

With a very minimal nod of her blonde head she indicated a shadowy corner of the room. A large, heavy-looking wooden chest sat near the wall. "Behind that...there's lurking some kind of...I don't know exactly...a furry thing."

"And he told you it'd hurt you if you moved?"

"Tear me limb from limb."

I shook my head. "Nope, it seems unlikely he'd want to have you torn limb from limb, Sue," I told her. "You are, after all, the object of his ardor."

"That did occur to me, too," she admitted. "But the mood he's been in

lately...I'm afraid to risk it, Will."

"How do you get in and out of this room?"

"There's a concealed door, over next to that chest the creature is squatting behind."

"If I can get over there, you know, maybe --"

"You'll never accomplish that, my boy." The stone door, with much rumbling and grating, had come sliding open and Professor Krouch, wearing the purple robe, crossed the threshold and stood smirking at me.

"Don't you think," I said, "that sacrificing the life of a registered student at the University of Brimstone may draw attention to you and possibly affect your tenure here?"

"Nobody will ever know what happened to you," he informed me as he walked over to stand just outside the large chalked pentagram.

The heavy stone door rolled shut behind him.

"The Moon family -- and it's a large one -- knows," I reminded him.

"Lunatics all," he responded with a chuckle. "No respectable person, least of all no official of this university, will believe the ravings of such disreputable people."

"There'll be the fact that I'm missing to corroborate what they say."

He chuckled again and adjusted his three-horned hat. "Ah, I see that you don't completely understand the sacrifice procedure."

"You're going to stick a knife in me. There's more?"

"The knife thrust doesn't kill you, my boy. It merely frees your spirit and that's what we sacrifice."

"I'm housing a spirit inside me?"

"You were like this when you took *Minor Victorian Novelists 13A* with me, Harkins," he said impatiently. "Slow to catch on. The mystic ritual I'm going to perform lets that spirit loose and that's what the demon I summon up is going to devour."

I relaxed slightly. "I won't be dead?"

"Oh, no. You'll be alive and able to function -- some."

"Some ?"

"When your vital spirit is consumed by a demon, it has a tendency, alas, to do some fairly serious damage to the husk that remains."

"I'm going to be a husk?"

"Yes, you'll be even less bright than you are now," he answered. "You'll be, let's be honest about this, a zombie for all practical purposes. Mindless, docile. Yet no one will ever be able to figure out precisely what happened to you. Eventually you'll simply be found in your shabby apartment and the assumption will be that you're one more unfortunate victim of a drug overdose. Suitable drug paraphernalia will be scattered about, by the way."

"Suppose this ritual doesn't work?"

"It'll work, never fear."

"I meant the other part of it. Suppose Sue still doesn't love you?"

"That can't happen, trust me. This is a foolproof spell, one of Count Monstrodamus' best," he assured me. "But, even assuming it didn't --Susan would still no doubt prefer me to the brainless clunk you'll be."

"She might at that."

Very slowly and deliberately, the professor began rolling up the sleeves of his robe. "Let's get on with this, shall we?"

Just as he said that I felt something tug at my left ear. I turned my head, but there was no one to be seen beside me. The mingled scents of peanut butter and perspiration hit my nostrils. I was thinking that it seemed like an odd way for a demon to smell, when I realized that Buddy, Heather's little brother with a fondness for invisibility, must be in the room.

Less than a minute after he'd jerked my earlobe, I noticed one of the manuscript pages come sliding out from under the base of one of the big candlesticks. It floated up to the flickering flame of a black candle and took fire.

"A little accident, professor," I mentioned, nodding at the burning parchment.

"Good gravy," he exclaimed, turning and seeing the burning page drifting toward the floor. He snatched off his three-horned headgear and swatted at it. But it was completely black ashes when it hit the stones.

Muttering, glowering, he thumped his hat back atop his bald head.

Behind him a candle holder toppled over, falling across the pentagram.

"Who's doing this? Cease at once or the demons will be angered."

"That'll distract him for a few seconds." Heather was standing beside me.

"How'd --"

"A simple materialization." She touched the heavy ropes that were wound around me and they fell away, no longer knotted. "Now get back against the wall. I'm going to have to face him."

"Can't we just materialize out of here?"

"I can -- you can't."

"Ah, the amateur conjuror." Krouch had righted the candlestick and was standing glaring over at Heather. "Come to mystify us with a few simple card tricks, have you, my dear?"

"Actually, prof, I'm here to get Will and this girl out of your clutches."

He laughed, rolling up his right sleeve another notch. "You alone? What's wrong with your dear old dad and the rest of those inbred yahoos you reside with?"

"You're not that important or powerful," she informed him. "I can handle you on my own."

"Oh, really now?"

Sue leaned closer to me to ask, "Can she actually do this? I know she's an oddball, but --"

"Quiet, if you can," Heather said.

The professor raised his right hand to chest level, pointing a stubby forefinger at her. He began an incantation in what I imagined must be a dead, a long dead, language.

Heather unfolded a sheet of yellowed parchment she'd been holding in her hand. "This one was once used to deflect Count Monstrodamus himself," she told the babbling professor.

Pausing to chuckle, he then went on with his spellcasting.

Heather started reading her counterspell, which sounded to be in Latin. In her left hand, I noticed, she was clutching an amulet. The size of a silver dollar, it was made of a greenish coppery metal and had a glowing red stone at its center.

All at once Krouch made a whooping sound and fell over backward. His backside smacked the stone floor inside the pentagram and his horned hat popped clean off his head.

"Your magic's workings" I said encouragingly.

"Nope, that was just Buddy tripping him." She returned to reading the spell

aloud.

Krouch was shivering as he rose up from the floor. His face had turned a bright pink and tiny plumes of white smoke were spilling out of the sleeves of his robe.

An enormous roaring started up, soon filling the room. The flames of the black candles were all snuffed out at once and then a cloud of sooty black engulfed the swaying professor.

"Get clear, Buddy," warned Heather.

"Aw, I'm already parked on the trunk, Sis. Relax."

The cloud of blackness swirled, thinned, and was gone. So was Professor Krouch. His hat and the robe remained, sprawled on the stone floor. There was, however, no trace of Krouch himself.

I asked, "Where is he?"

"Elsewhere," answered Heather.

"Permanently?"

"For all time."

"How do we explain that to people?"

"He'll send in his resignation from Buenos Aires."

"But if--"

"Honestly, Will, if we can do what you just saw us do m we can sure as heck fake a few simple letters, huh?"

The stone door came rattling open and Heather's father stepped into the chamber. "You did a great job, hon," he told his daughter.

"I did, yeah," she agreed.

Mr. Moon bowed in Sue's direction. "Miss Smith, I can drive you home to your sorority house," he offered. "I imagine Heather and Will will want to -- "

"I don't know." She was looking perplexed and fragile. She reached out to touch my hand.

"I'll see her home," I volunteered.

Sue sighed and smiled. "Thanks. I'd really appreciate that, Will, darling."

Heather eyed me. "That's what you really want to do?"

"She's been through a terrific ordeal, Heather," I explained. "And, you know, Sue's not used to this sort of supernatural stuff the way you and-"

"Right. I understand." She snapped her fingers once and then she simply wasn't there.

The way it worked out after that, I ended up going steady with Sue Smith. She was, as I may've mentioned, very attractive. On top of which, she was a great deal more conventional than Heather and when I took her to dances and parties, she fit in just fine.

For the remainder of my senior year I didn't see much of Heather, and nothing at all of her family. Nat and I didn't get together much anymore either. The last time I ran into him he told me I was a first class putz. That was the same week I gave Sue my fraternity pin. Nat added that I'd made a huge mistake and was linking up with the wrong woman.

Exactly a year and a half after we graduated, Sue and I were married.

It took me quite a while to realize that there are worse things in the world than eccentricity or even black magic and sorcery.

Among the worse things are incompatibility, infidelity, and alimony.