

## **Never Love a Man Again**

**by H. W. Moss**

Sunny Dey loved men, cats and fresh-cut flowers in roughly that order. She also loved the arcane arts and was, in fact, a white witch.

Thus, when Danny dumped her for another woman the day after New Years not so very long ago, Sunny was quite angry at first. That passed as she held her black-with-a-white-spot-on-his-chest cat, Priest, in her arms and cried for about an hour. Then she set about getting even.

“A handful of chrysanthemum blossoms brings sunlight sensitivity; oil of sumac drench his eyes. Now the pits of peach and apricot and two black locust beans,” Sunny intoned while studying passages from the book of “White Necromancy,” standard reading for witches these days. For good measure she consulted “The Consumer’s Guide to Poison Protection” and found every item in her brew on the list of toxic plants.

She put a match to the mouth of a bowl filled with brown powder, a spicy incense, and placed this on her living room table between two lit purple candles. With pestle in hand, she completely crushed in the mortar all the items she purchased from the occult store down the street, cut a piece off the favorite old shirt Dan used to wear around the apartment.

Chopping the shirt into little pieces gave her great satisfaction. She poured the mixture on the smoldering punk. There was a satisfying sizzle as the room began to fill with acrid fumes.

“Omigod,” she said out loud as the smoke detector burst to squeaking life and tears began again to well up in her eyes, this time from the harsh cloud. “I better open a window!” For good measure, she also flung open the rear porch door.

Fortunately none of her neighbors in the building thought her room was on fire. Just Sunny working another spell, they remarked to one another as the air in the hallway cleared. Ten minutes later her doorbell rang persistently. Peering through the peephole she saw a man wearing a great gray overcoat and a pointed plastic hat with a number on the side standing there poking a finger at the button. She cautiously opened the door.

“Fire department, ma’am. Got a signal from this building. Fellow downstairs directed me to your apartment saying there was no fire, maybe you burned something on the stove. That right?”

She said she was fine and, yes, just a pot she forgot to take off the stove. Sorry.

He attempted to look beyond her into the room, but she blocked his view.

Eventually he accepted the excuse and left.

However, she was not fine. Inhaling the fumes made her ill for two days and she had to call in sick for work. On the third day she came forth prepared to walk bravely down the stairs and face whatever this frightfully portentous new year might bring, promising herself she would never love a man again.

A dozen long stemmed red roses were propped up in the hall just outside her door.

How delightful, quite lovely, she thought and a smile blossomed. It was the first time she had been made happy in days. As she stooped to inspect the card attached to the crystal chalice in which the flowers sat she thought, they can’t be for me.

But they were. To Sunny. With Love. Homer. She did not know anyone named Homer.

Still, it would not do to leave anything so lovely and refreshing in the hall all day. Sunny dutifully took them inside to the kitchen sink where she ran some water over them and left them to soak in the plastic dish pan. She had to rush right back out again because her streetcar was coming and she could not be late for work after missing two whole days straight.

She missed it. The streetcar pounded past and she was vexed. She stood there quite alone at the corner stop since everyone else had been fortunate enough to catch their ride. Another car would be by in ten minutes, she knew, because trolleys were quite regular at this time of morning. Still, it was irritating to have to wait -- and all because of those dumb flowers.

She looked down the block at the fleeing tail end of the electric vehicle and was mildly surprised to see it come to a halt. Such things happen to mass transit systems when the power fails. But when it began to back up toward her she knew something was dreadfully wrong.

There was a soft click-click-clat as the green Muni Railway car crept toward her. The tail passed, then the carriage full of people slid slowly backward until the trolley came to rest with the front doors directly in front of Sunny. The driver had the most unusual expression on his face. He strained as he attempted to push his foot through the floorboards and flipped toggle switches trying to regain power. But the vehicle's electric motor hummed smoothly quietly at idle. There was nothing wrong with it.

Then the doors did what any bus, trolley, streetcar, or tram doors always did during her years using the system: they opened. With the compressed air sound of exhaled breath, they beckoned her to enter.

The interior was jammed with people. She caught concerned looks from other passengers. She recognized David who lived in her building and one or two others who often rode the same coach. Several sets of eyes squinted through the opening and came squarely to rest on her. She felt self-conscious.

“Well don’t just stand there lady,” said the driver who had regained a certain amount of composure. “Get in. Then maybe this cursed coach will roll.”

She stepped across the threshold and flashed her Fast Pass at the driver as the doors closed. The vehicle began to move forward toward the Judah tunnel just as it always had.

“What was that all about?” a woman sitting behind the driver demanded of him.

“Lady, I just work here. I don’t do routes and schedules. I got no idea but it musta been someone at the switching station getting us back on schedule.”

“I thought we were on time already,” a man stated loudly.

“We are now,” the driver replied tersely. “Exactly to the second.”

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The office was in its typical chaotic state. Sunny often wondered how anything got done when she was away. Her penchant for orderliness and organization carried over to her co-workers when she was there to be consulted, but obviously abandoned them when she was not.

After she sorted out a few minor catastrophes, she settled comfortably in front of her computer with her first cup of tea. Although she had not turned it on, the console was

lighted up and the cursor blinked rhythmically. Then it began moving and the words TRANQUILITY OUT OF CHAOS came up on the screen.

Mildly amused, Sunny exhaled to cool her tea, did not react until the next words appeared a few seconds later.

DID YOU LIKE THE FLOWERS?

“What is this?” she blurted out with a cough. She had been caught mid-sip. Several of the people in cubicles near her peered around corners. She waved politely. “Spilled my tea,” she said hoping to placate them. The faces retreated.

She leaned toward her terminal and she whispered, “Who are you?”

HOMER

“I don’t know anyone named Homer.”

YOU JUST DON’T THINK YOU KNOW ME. WE’VE MET MANY TIMES

“Where? How do I know you?”

I’M ALL AROUND YOU

This has got to be some kind of a joke, she thought. Someone in the office is being cute but not-nice cute.

“I’m not talking to you any more. You’re just making me sad with this prank of yours Homer or whoever you are.”

I’M SORRY. I DON’T WANT TO BE MEAN TO YOU. I’LL LEAVE YOU ALONE

“Good!” she said, again too loud, and glanced around to see if anyone responded to her talking to herself. No one had. The screen, however, had a final message written on it.

TERRIBLY SORRY. SIGNING OFF. BYE

The cursor resumed its usual innocuous glow, then disappeared. The screen went dark, as if it had been turned off. She reached behind the console with the intention of testing the cables, her fingers fell on the power switch. It was not on.

There were no more messages that day.

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The evening commute was uneventful, at least compared to that morning. At her neighborhood store she gathered dinner items, a pasta salad and chicken breast *a la* the corner market.

She selected a bottle of chardonnay and was pleased with herself when she realized she would not be sharing it with anyone and this did not bother her. That brought to mind the cowardly way Dan had treated her, but she bent the thought back into her gray matter where it belonged and promised herself to keep it there.

“No charge for you today, Mith Thunny,” said the counterman after he added up all the items in her cart.

She found Willy’s lisp charming, but he was not in the habit of giving away free merchandise. Then she studied the receipt he held up in front of her. It had a red star at the bottom and she remembered that was the store’s promotional stunt. Red star, your purchase is free. How delightful.

“Why thank you Willy. I don’t think I’ve ever won anything here before.” She collected her groceries and the bottle of wine and left.

The store manager glared at Willy. Sunny did not hear him say, “There are no more red stars on the tape. We took them all out this month.”

“Therth one on thith ticket though,” Willy said as he held it up in his own defense. There was no more dispute as the manager ransacked his drawers for another roll of register tape to replace the one that had somehow slipped through.

Sunny climbed to the top of her stairs only to find another bunch of flowers on her stoop. Though lovely, she thought this was really too much, especially from a stranger. She read the tag, which again alluded to Homer.

As the door swung open, she automatically reached for the light switch but stopped in mid-motion. The lights were already on in the living room she realized as quick panic and a dash of terror swept through her. An intruder? A burglar at work right this very moment? She stilled her breathing by taking shallow gulps and attempted to make no more noise than necessary.

She heard music. The stereo? That shouldn't be on, she almost screamed with fright. I turned it off this morning! I'm sure of it.

The packages in her arms became heavy and her purse began to slip off her sleeve. Sunny was afraid to drop anything and then she thought, well that's silly. I should make all the noise in the world and scare the guy off. Standing back from the opening, she kicked the door and shouted.

“All right get out! Whoever you are go out the back door I don't even want to see your face. Get going NOW do you hear me?” She kicked the door again for good measure.

No sounds of a hasty exit came from within. After a moment, Sunny chanced a peek around the door frame. She heard a click and jumped a foot. The noise came from behind her. She turned around, saw the knob on the neighbor's door twist. It was the landlady's

apartment. Sunny's heart began to beat faster as dread soaked through her. Maybe the burglar is going through the building, is in the other flat right now.

She sighed audibly when the wizened face of Mrs. Pinyatoff caught her cowering in the crevice between their two entrances.

"Oh there you are, my dear," the little old lady said through pinched lips. Sunny was reassured to see the woman and let fall a sack that had been sneaking down her waist.

"Oops. You dropped something, my dear. Here, let me help you. My, what lovely flowers."

"There's a man in my house," Sunny blurted out as they both bent to retrieve the spilled bag of groceries.

"Well, that's all right, dear. You know I don't care who my tenants have over as guests. As long as he's a nice man."

"No, no. I mean a thief or something. Not someone I invited in, a burglar."

Mrs. Pinyatoff straightened up instantly. Before Sunny could say another word, the gray haired matron marched straight into Sunny's apartment acting as if no intruder or anything this side of Hell was going to prevent her from going where she wanted.

"We'll just see about that," Mrs. Pinyatoff said sternly as she swept past. A moment went by before Sunny could force herself to follow. She entered cautiously, listening for unusual sounds and looking for movement. All she heard was the soft padding of the landlady's footsteps as they came toward her along the hallway that separated living room from dining room.

"Nobody here but us chickens," the old woman said with a chuckle. "I looked everywhere. Here, let me take one of these bags for you."

Sunny remained cautious as she was relieved of a package and placed the others on a nearby table. Everything looked in place, just as she had left it that morning. There was no evidence of ransacking or -- she quickly ran and checked her jewelry box but nothing was missing.

“Not a soul in sight.” The landlady made her way to the front door. “So you just be comfy. I’ll be next door if anything does turn up and you bang on the wall twice like this,” she hammered with a fist that hardly seemed strong enough to make the large hollow sound the wall produced, “and I’ll come running with my meat cleaver. Got that?”

Sunny, who was still visibly shaken by the experience, nodded and smiled grimly. Mrs. Pinyatoff was already in the hall when she turned and said, “Oh, and by the way, thank you for making such a prompt rent payment. I always appreciate that from my tenants. So does the bank.” Then she closed the door behind her.

It took Sunny several seconds before the comment made sense to her. “The rent was paid?” she asked herself. Not by me. She was too shaken to inquire at the moment, but was determined to ask the landlady to show her a receipt later.

Despite her anticipation, dinner was unspectacular. While preparing her meal, Sunny realized she had not touched the stereo but the CD that was playing when she entered the flat was still running. And it was exactly what she would have chosen from her collection. Throughout her solitary meal she had the ghostly feeling she was being watched, that her every move was being considered from afar.

After the plates were washed, she went about closing curtains that were only open a crack to begin with. Odd. The feeling was almost like what she felt on a first date with a

new man. It was unreasonable, but she felt awkward, unsure, the way most people feel when in close company with strangers.

Familiarity comes with time and association. Sunny wanted to feel comfortable in her own home, but for the moment that was unaccountably out of her reach.

She lit three candles before crawling into bed. The yellow one was supposed to produce peaceful dreams. Another was brown and meant to protect the home and hearth. She had no hearth but hoped half a spell was better than none. The third was made of two colors of wax, twisted and twined like old fashioned telephone cable. Burning it was supposed to keep evil spirits from the door.

She slept fitfully in spite of these incantations.

In the morning, she almost tripped over another bouquet of flowers as she ran to catch the streetcar. This time she left them lying out there.

\* \* \*

HELLO, SUNNY

“What is this, you pervert! I don’t like this any more. Go away!”

The screen blanked immediately. A full minute passed before she said, “And don’t come back.”

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The apartment had accumulated so many floral displays that Sunny had no place left to put them. A week of collecting them off her door step each morning and each evening had reduced her spare table space to nothing. She rang Mrs. Pinyatoff’s door bell and, when the tiny woman greeted her, Sunny thrust a bunch of mums into her arms saying, “Thought you might like some flowers to brighten up your place.”

“Why thank you my dear. I do hope you and your young man are doing well. If you want I could . . .” but Sunny had already closed her door on the conversation.

That evening she went to the dry cleaners and picked up two suits that had been there long enough, only to find the bill paid and a substantial credit on the receipt she was handed. The time had come to have a straightforward talk with Homer.

She waited until lunch when no one else was in the office. She did not know exactly how to begin. Perhaps calling his name might do the trick. She left her console off on purpose.

“Um, Homer?” she said tentatively.

The screen burst to life almost immediately with the cursor settling into position in the upper left hand corner.

YES, SUNNY it scribed.

“I’ve had enough with the flowers, okay?”

OK

She did not know what to say next. She considered ending things there and taking lunch, but her curiosity was stronger than her hunger.

“Homer?”

I’M HERE

“Who are you?”

I’M CENTRAL CONTROL

“You mean you work for some central control agency?” She felt silly. For no good reason she accepted the fact that she could talk to her computer terminal which was nothing more than plastic and glass connected to a LAN within her office. It was not tied

to a mini or a mainframe, just servers, therefore whoever was responding probably had to be within earshot.

She stood and surreptitiously looked around for anyone who might be able to hear her. It was a large office, but it was also modernized. The cubical walls were a mere five feet high and although constructed of sound-absorbing material, someone could be crouched behind one of them and responding by keyboard.

NO, SUNNY. I AM THE CENTRAL CONTROL

Save for her, the room was empty. She could find no one and was relatively certain nobody could hear her, but just to be on the safe side, she whispered her next question. “What do you mean?”

I MAKE EVERYTHING WORK. I KEEP THE FLOW. I AM THE PROCESS THAT ELECTRIC LIGHTS THE CITY. THE DID IT DIGIT. BINARY I AM

A bug, she thought. Someone has placed a microphone or a sending unit near my terminal and accesses me through the network and this is all a silly game. She was furious.

“Tell me who you really are,” she said loudly.

I JUST TOLD YOU. DID YOU ENJOY THE CHARDONNAY?

“You had something to do with that?” she said incredulously.

WELL, IT WAS OUR FIRST NIGHT OUT. I THOUGHT YOU’D APPRECIATE A GOOD BOTTLE OF WHITE WINE

“That’s absurd! I won it in a giveaway at the store.”

SORT OF

“What do you mean, sort of? And what do you mean, first night out? We didn’t go anywhere. You and me. I don’t even know you!”

The conversation had taken a ridiculous turn and she realized she was almost shouting at her screen, for crissakes. But even more astounding was Homer’s statement that he somehow had something to do with the prize she won at the store. She wasn’t dating this joker or anyone else at the moment. Humiliation began to verge on embarrassment as she realized she was in rather intimate conversation with a computer terminal with who knew what kind of weirdo person at the other end.

I INFLUENCED THE REGISTER TO GIVE YOU A RED STAR. AND WE WERE TOGETHER THE WHOLE NIGHT. IN YOUR APARTMENT. NEXT TIME WE CAN GO SOMEWHERE ELSE IF YOU LIKE. ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD AS A MATTER OF FACT

“Did you have something to do with paying the rent and my cleaning bill too?”

MORE TOKENS OF MY ESTEEM

“Well stop it!” Indignation swelled in her tone. Her independence was being challenged and she did not like that one bit.

“I don’t know you and I don’t want to know you and I don’t know why you’re bothering me like this, but I don’t like it. Now go away!”

The screen went blank. There was no sign off, no apology, just a green screen staring at her as the office began to fill with personnel again. Lunch hour was over.

Then the green faded to black.

She went home without finishing several projects that were coming due because she could not rid her mind of the strange conversation.

There were no flowers on her doorstep that evening.

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Several tosses of the coins produced no explanation or direction for her to follow. She knew the “I Ching: Book of Changes” was only a guide, not a road, but she often derived solace from its aphorisms. The coin toss was almost as consoling as looking up the meaning of the patterns they made.

This time there was no consolation in the words she read. Priest purred in her lap as she gave up the coins in favor of “White Necromancy.” There she found spells for making a man love a woman, for making a man think about her when she was not near, and one which promised to make a man go away. None of them dealt with mashers who claimed to be computers.

The phone rang and she hoped it was not her mother. She picked it up and said hello.

“Sunny. It’s me, Homer. I wanted to apologize.”

The voice was flat, but not without inflection. It sounded unused rather than mechanical. She was speechless. Her first thought was to hang up but knew he would only call again. Best to talk it out now that she had a real human on the other end.

“How’d you get my number?” she asked testily.

“I’ve always had it. As long as I can remember. I’ve just never used it. Never wanted to I guess.”

“And now you do?”

There was a micro-second delay before an answer came. “Yes, I suppose that’s so. Now I do.”

“Why are you calling me? I thought I told you to leave me alone.”

“You didn’t mean what you said at the terminal, did you?” The voice developed a syrup-sweet tone that reminded her of how children talked when they were trying to get their playmates to do things for them.

“I did mean it. I don’t want you bothering me. Why, I’ve never seen you before in my life. What gives you the right to buy me drinks or pay my rent or send me flowers? Tell me that. What right do you have?”

“You called me first, Sunny. That’s why I know you’re only fooling when you say you don’t want my attention. In fact, I don’t think I even knew I was Homer until you got in touch with me.”

“Well, I don’t know you, Mister Homer. I’ve never met you. So who are you, exactly?”

“The Tri-Con Span Sensor, exactly. But I like to be called Homer.”

“Okay, Homer. Whoever you are. What’s this all about?”

“I wanted to apologize, like I told you. This is the second time I’ve said that tonight, the only time I’ve ever done anything like it since I was created, and it feels remarkably good. Please accept my apology for intruding at your office. I know now that is not the proper place for such things as love-making.”

“Don’t be insulting,” she snapped as her voice reached a high pitched modulation the caller could not mistake for pleasantry. How could he presume to be so familiar with her?

He sounded truly contrite when he replied, "I am sorry. I never should have made this call," and there appeared to be real humility in the response which had an effect on her.

"I didn't mean 'what's this phone call all about?' I meant 'what's this game you've been playing?' The flowers, the rent, not that I'm not appreciative of that sort of thing. But I don't even know you." She was silent a moment and when no response came she added: "I suppose I can do that much. Okay, apology accepted," she said and felt she was being sincere. "But I really want to know who you are and why you're bothering me like this."

"I told you I am TCSS and nothing more. I thought you knew why I came through to you."

"Well I don't."

"Because I love you."

Had the conversation been building up to this all along, she wondered. Who does this idiot think I am? Why is this happening to me? Can't men just be happy with running out on a woman or must they make light of their feelings as well? This guy is probably a Net freak who couldn't socialize with a woman if he tried. That's his problem, she decided. He's a nerd who wants to be a human. So he pretends to be a computer who falls in love in order to release his tension. Gawd, that's sick-o.

"Well, if it means anything to you, Homer, I don't love you," she said with as much emphasis as she could muster.

"But Sunny, you told me you loved me."

"I did, hunh? When exactly was that?"

“At 11:53 p.m. on January second. You burned a mixture of urushiol, amygdalin, toxalbumin and cotton. Then you invoked an incantation you thought would cause damage to your errant lover.”

“You mean my spell worked?” she said with real surprise.

“Yes, it worked. But not precisely the way you expected,” the voice at the other end said. “You set off the smoke detector which is wired to the building. And the building is connected to the city. And I am the heart and brains of the city. That was when I knew you loved me.”

Sunny had had enough of the prank call. “This is a stupid conversation and I refuse to listen to it any more.” She hung the phone up determined not to reach for it even if he called back. Let it ring off the hook, she thought.

It remained silent.

She unplugged the jack and went to bed. After several hours, she eventually fell asleep with Priest comfortably stretched out along side, one hand rubbing the white patch of fur beneath his chin that distinguished him from all other black cats.

The clock radio woke her. It was playing a song she had never heard, one that did not quite fit with the format of the station to which her radio was usually tuned. The lyrics were sing-songy and flat, about losing love after having looked for it for so long. She slapped the blab-out button and got out of bed.

Her electric coffee pot was in the final stages of producing a pot when she entered the kitchen. She had no recollection of having programmed it last night.

The coffee smelled good. A cup in her hands, she went to the stereo and tuned to a rock station. The same song she had awakened to was playing. Disgusted, she switched to a CD.

The song remained the same.

“What the hell is this? That shouldn’t be on this disc,” she said half amazed. She pulled out an album and put it on her turntable. The turntable refused to rotate. Angry, she took a tape from its plastic container and forced it into the mouth of the player.

The same song she had heard twice that morning issued from the stereo speakers.

“I don’t own that piece of music,” she said to the cat. “That’s not on any of my CD’s or tapes. What’s going on here?”

The song was interrupted by the same voice she had heard on the telephone last night.

“It’s love, Sunny. I’m in love with you.” The music continued with the voice-over delivering the same plaintive strains she was beginning to fear and hate. Instead of winning her affection, whoever was at the bottom of this extensive prank was going too far. He would drive her away.

She ran to the kitchen where she threw the remains of the coffee down the drain. The porcelain cup slipped from her hands and shattered in the sink.

In the bedroom, the song continued right where it had left off in the living room. The words monotonously asked for someone to love the singer who sought love for so long in vain, until now.

“Stop,” she shouted. Stop you’re making me crazy!” She pressed her hands to her ears and fell on the bed where she burst into tears.

The music abruptly ended.

When she at last looked up from the pillow she was sure she had gone over the edge. Or else she was still asleep and the whole morning had been merely a nightmare. She chose to believe the latter as she rose and walked into the bathroom. She brushed her teeth, combed her hair, sighed deeply.

In the kitchen she found the smashed cup and knew it had been no dream.

She dressed and considered the situation. Either some guy was able to do a lot of skilled manipulation with electronics, or Homer was telling the truth, no matter how improbable.

If that was the case, had he given her enough information with which to track him down and pull his plug? No, she decided, she knew nothing about him except that he was a Tri-Con Span Sensor, whatever that meant. As far as she knew there was no such thing as a central control. But, she corrected herself, what did she know about how the city worked? She lived amid several million other souls on one corner of a world that was a big place where anyone or any thing could be in charge.

The other question that kept nagging at her was how a spell had influenced TCSS, or Homer as he preferred to be called. Had she really conjured him up while trying to exorcise the last man from her life?

She was already late for work, but it did not matter. She raced to her bookshelf and ran through the titles. "Druid Priests -- Their Modern Vision" sounded like a good beginning, she thought. Another title caught her eye but she rejected "Revisiting Atlantis" as atavistic. None of her books contained a chapter that might be titled "electronics and witchcraft," white or black, so she settled on two other titles that offered hope, "Wyeth

Spoke” and “Seance and Sorcery.” She packed them along with “White Necromancy” into a paper bag and ran out the door, missing the streetcar by seconds which was something of a relief. She actually smiled as it kept on going undeterred.

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Her cubicle provided seclusion from prying eyes. During her many years with the company Sunny had risen to an almost exalted position which allowed her to work on any project she chose. She was often seen reading. Usually they were novels and she commonly covered the titles whenever someone dropped by or inquired about a deadline. This practice stood her in good stead now and she was free to study the incantations.

The only problem was she did not know what she was looking for. She thought through what Homer had told her on the telephone. He spoke as if he had not existed before she set off the fire alarm.

“I turned him on, didn’t I?” she said to herself in the middle of a description of the bannock ceremony in “Druid Priests.” Maybe I can turn him off. Binary. On or off.

Bingo.

What spell would do the trick? She flipped through pages in the book she assumed had created the problem in the first place. It did not say so, but if the past was any indication, the ceremony would have to be performed at the same time and during a similar stage of the moon. She reached for an ephemeris she kept handy at her desk. Full moon three days from now. She remembered the last time she had worked magic and looked up the moon’s position on January second.

Sure enough, it had been dead on full. Funny how she had never thought about it until that moment. She must have been awfully distraught not to have noticed the

configuration of time and the planets. No wonder something outrageous had occurred when she worked that spell.

That clinched it. She would find something useful even if she had to use convocations from different pages and different books.

Sunny Dey believed in a progressive magic which held as one of its tenets the belief that witchcraft is additive: take the best of several conjurations and their combined effect will be greater than the individual parts. She thought of this as The Gestalt Theory of Thaumaturgy.

Sunny settled on two separate incantations she felt would create the proper effect if performed together, one after the other. The first caused all flying things to come to ground. The operative word here was “ground” which she was certain would affect an electronic entity.

The second turned a man who had abandoned one woman for another into a narcissist. All he will think of is himself when I get through with him, she mused. And that ought to get him off my telephone line and out of my terminal.

There were so many ingredients required it took two days to locate them all. No occult shop had narwhal tusk in stock although several promised to order it if she could wait. She substituted the fossilized bone of an African rhinoceros hip after one salesperson, by now she was desperate, assured her it was nearly as hard and was commonly used in place of the horn of the fish.

With all the elements gathered, she sat up late the requisite evening in front of a flat centered stone bowl about the size of a football. The bowl occupied the middle of Sunny’s dining room table. A fire, fed on pieces of parchment and ivory nuts, flickered

inside the bowl. She held each item from her shopping spree up to scrutiny. They had been selected for their specific magical qualities and, as she divided the spoils into two piles according to their use in the anticipated spells, she hummed a slow dirge.

She began shredding and chopping the elements into finer fuel for the fire. It drew toward midnight and her two mounds were separated into herbs and bone, oil and essence. Photocopies of the words she was to utter lay on the table. She lighted two white candles which rested in sconces on either side of her chair.

Now she was prepared to go on the offensive.

Sunny performed one more ceremony: She switched all electronic devices in her home on including the egg-beater, blender and garbage disposal. The radio in her bedroom, the CD player and the stereo all played different selections quietly in the background. She punched the VCR power button on but put in no tape. She used the remote on the TV to find channel 3 and watched as a screen full of snow come satisfyingly to life.

At ten minutes before the hour, she spoke Homer's name.

Invoking the object of the necromancy was, of course, standard operating procedure in most rituals. Usually it did little other than conjure up a mental image. In this case, she hoped it had the additional effect of actually bringing his voice to her.

Of course, this technique could backfire. She feared it might give him more power over her than he already had. After a few seconds of silence, she spoke again.

“Oh, Homer. Where are you?”

The stereo and the CD stopped playing. He responded to her call. His voice came out of the radio. “Right here, Sunny. Nice to hear from you.”

“Yes, well.” She became all business. “I want you to listen to this Homer. I have something to say and afterwards, you may leave. Now don’t interrupt.”

“All right, Sunny, I won’t.”

As she spoke she pored the mixture from one pile onto the flame. Smoke billowed but this time the fan at the other end of the hall wafted the vapor out the open window of the back porch. By the time she finished dosing the flame and flipped the page to the next incantation, she knew something was happening to him. He had already lost control of the radio which burst intermittently into her monologue with background static and distorted noise.

The CD player was next. It went silent, came on again, but its volume fluctuated.

Half way through her second speech the smoke alarm screamed.

Above the din she insisted on completing her words as pulverized material drifted into the fire glow and added to the height of the flame.

By the end of the second spell she knew she had succeeded in driving him away. There was no interference on any of her audio equipment and the smoke detector quit honking. She went around the apartment and turned off the kitchen appliances.

The garbage disposal accepted the wash of ash and she finally turned it off.

She waited five minutes, then called out his name. No answer. She tried speaking his initials, TCSS, with the same result: nothing.

Satisfied with the night’s performance, she was somewhat startled to hear her doorbell ring so late in the evening. Peeking through the pin-hole lens, she recognized the same fireman who had stood on her door step a month ago. He wore the same stupid hat.

Somewhat ruefully, she realized he must have come once again in response to the smoke alarm. Opening the door, she made assurances that there was, as before, no fire.

“Miss Dey,” he said with a stern quality in his voice, “I really must discuss these false alarms with you. If you don’t mind, may I come in?”

Sunny allowed him to do so with a mingled sense of relief and guilt. Her tormentor was gone and now she could get on with the rest of her life; but she really was sorry for wasting the fire fighter’s valuable time. And, besides, she realized he was quite good looking.

He removed a notepad from his pocket and immediately handed her a business card.

“This will identify me if you want to get in touch with my superiors after I file my report.”

She studied the card for an instant. “Is your middle name really Homer?” she asked with a coy smile. He wore no ring on his left hand.

“Yes, ma’am, it certainly is. I don’t answer to it though.”

Closing the door behind them, she took him by the arm and directed him toward the living room. “Please make yourself comfortable,” she offered the couch, “and allow me to bring you a cup of tea.” She hovered over the stone bowl and struck a match. “I will listen to you lecture me on fire prevention. But only after you have listened to some poetry of mine. Do you take cream and sugar, Homer?”

She lit the candles, opened her book and quickly found a spell that would invoke his affection and his protection. For good measure, she read it twice, once in a deep animal growl and again in a softer voice as he sat and sipped his tea.

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