### The Smile That Loses

Isaac Asimov

I said to my friend George over a beer recently *(his* beer; I was having a ginger ale), “How's your implet these days?”

George claims he has a two-centimeter-tall demon at his beck and call. I can never get him to admit he's lying. Neither can anyone else.

He glared at me balefully, then said, “Oh, yes, you're the one who knows about it! I hope you haven't told anyone else!”

“Not a word,” I said. “It's quite sufficient that I think you're crazy. I don't need anyone thinking the same of me.” (Besides, he had told at least half a dozen people about the demon, to my personal knowledge, so there's no necessity of *my* being indis­creet.)

George said, “I wouldn't have your unlovely inability to be­lieve anything you don't understand — and you don't understand so much — for the worth of a pound of plutonium. And what would be left of you, if my demon ever found out you called him an implet, wouldn't be worth an atom of plutonium.”

“Have you figured out his real name?” I asked, unperturbed by this dire warning.

“Can't! It's unpronounceable by any earthly pair of lips. The translation is, I am given to understand, something like: ‘I am the King of Kings; look upon my works, ye mighty, and de­spair.”

“It's a lie, of course,” said George, staring moodily at his beer. “He's small potatoes in his world. That's why he's so coop­erative here. In *our* world, with our primitive technology, he can show off.”

“Has he shown off lately?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact,” said George, heaving an enormous sigh and raising his bleak blue eyes to mine. His ragged white mustache settled down only slowly from the typhoon of that forced exhalation of breath.

It started with Rosie O'Donnell [said George], a friend of a niece of mine, and a fetching little thing altogether.

She had blue eyes, almost as brilliant as my own; russet hair, long and lustrous; a delightful little nose, powdered with freckles in the manner approved of by all who write romances; a graceful neck, a slender figure that wasn't opulent in any disproportion­ate way, but was utterly delightful in its promise of ecstasy.

Of course, all of this was of purely intellectual interest to me, since I reached the age of discretion years ago, and now engage in the consequences of physical affection only when women in­sist upon it, which, thank the fates, is not oftener than an occa­sional weekend or so.

Besides which, Rosie had recently married — and, for some reason, adored in the most aggravating manner — a large Irish­man who does not attempt to hide the fact that he is a very muscular and, possibly, bad-tempered person. While I had no doubt that I would have been able to handle him in my younger days, the sad fact was that I was no longer in my younger days — by a short margin.

It was therefore with a certain reluctance that I accepted Rosie's tendency to mistake me for some close friend of her own sex and her own time of life, and to make me the object of her girlish confidences.

Not that I blame her, you understand. My natural dignity, and the fact that I inevitably remind people of one or more of the nobler of the Roman emperors in appearance, automatically attracts beautiful young women to me. Nevertheless, I never allowed it to go too far. I always made sure there was plenty of space between Rosie and myself, for I wanted no fables or distor­tions to reach the undoubtedly large, and possibly bad-tempered, Kevin O'Donnell.

“Oh, George,” said Rosie one day, clapping her little hands with glee, “you have no idea what a *darling* my Kevin is, and how happy he makes me. Do you know what he does?”

“I'm not sure,” I began, cautiously, naturally expecting indeli­cate disclosures, “that you ought to —”

She paid no attention. “He has a way of crinkling up his nose and making his eyes twinkle, and smiling brightly, till everything about him looks so happy. It's as though the whole world turns into golden sunshine. Oh, if I only had a photograph of him exactly like that. I've tried to take one, but I never catch him quite right.”

I said, “Why not be satisfied with the real thing, my dear?”

“Oh, well!” She hesitated, then said, with the most charming blush, “he's not *always* like that, you know. He's got a *very* difficult job at the airport and sometimes he comes home just worn out and exhausted, and then he becomes just a little touchy, and scowls at me a bit. If I had a photograph of him, as he really is, it would be such a comfort to me. — *Such* a com­fort.” And her blue eyes misted over with unshed tears.

I must admit that I had the merest trifle of an impulse to tell her of Azazel (that's what I call him, because I'm not going to call him by what he tells me the translation of his real name is) and to explain what he might do for her.

However, I'm unutterably discreet — I haven't the faintest no­tion how *you* managed to find out about my demon.

Besides, it was easy for me to fight off the impulse for I am a hard-shelled, realistic human being, not given to silly sentiment. I admit I have a semisoft spot in my rugged heart for sweet young women of extraordinary beauty — in a dignified and avun­cular manner — mostly. And it occurred to me that, after all, I could oblige her without actually telling her about Azazel. — Not that she would have disbelieved me, of course, for I am a man whose words carry conviction with all but those who, like you, are psychotic.

I referred the matter to Azazel, who was by no means pleased. He said, “You keep asking for abstractions.”

I said, “Not at all. I ask for a simple photograph. All you have to do is materialize it.”

“Oh, is that all I have to do? If it's that simple, *you* do it. I trust you understand the nature of mass-energy equivalence.”

“Just *one* photograph.”

“Yes, and with an expression of something you can't even define or describe.”

“I've never seen him look at me the way he would look at his wife, naturally. But I have infinite faith in your ability.”

I rather expected that a helping of sickening praise would fetch him round. He said, sulkily, “You'll have to take the pho­tograph.”

“I couldn't get the proper —”

“You don't have to. I'll take care of that, but it would be much easier if I had a material object on which to focus the abstraction. A photograph, in other words; one of the most inad­equate kind, even; the sort I would expect of you. And only *one* copy, of course. I cannot manage more than that and I will not sprain my subjunctival muscle for you or for any other pin-headed being in your world.”

Oh, well, he's frequently crotchety. I expect that's simply to establish the importance of his role and impress you with the fact that you must not take him for granted.

I met the O'Donnells the next Sunday, on their way back from Mass. (I lay in wait for them actually.) They were willing to let me snap a picture of them in their Sunday finery. She was de­lighted and he looked a bit grumpy about it. After that, just as unobtrusively as possible, I took a head shot of Kevin. There was no way I could get him to smile or dimple or crinkle or whatever it was that Rosie found so attractive, but I didn't feel that mattered. I wasn't even sure that the camera was focused correctly. After all, I'm not one of your great photographers.

I then visited a friend of mine who was a photography wiz. He developed both snaps and enlarged the head shot to an eight by eleven.

He did it rather grumpily, muttering something about how busy he was, though I paid no attention to that. After all, what possible value can his foolish activities have in comparison to the important matters that occupied me? I'm always surprised at the number of people who don't understand this.

When he completed the enlargement, however, he changed his attitude entirely. He stared at it and said, in what I can only describe as a completely offensive tone, “Don't tell me you man­aged to take a photo like this.”

“Why not?” I said, and held out my hand for it, but he made no move to give it to me.

“You'll want more copies,” he said.

“No, I won't,” I said, looking over his shoulder. It was a remarkably clear photograph in brilliant color. Kevin O'Donnell was smiling, though I didn't remember such a smile at the time I snapped it. He seemed good-looking and cheerful, but I was rather indifferent to that. Perhaps a woman might observe more, or a man like my photographer friend — who, as it happened, did not have my firm grasp on masculinity — might do so.

He said, “Just one more — for me.”

“No,” I said firmly, and took the picture, grasping his wrist to make sure he would not withdraw it. “*And* the negative, please. You can keep the other one — the distance shot.”

“I don't want *that,*” he said, petulantly, and was looking quite woebegone as I left.

I framed the picture, put in on my mantelpiece, and stepped back to look at it. There was, indeed, a remarkable glow about it. Azazel had done a good job.

What would Rosie's reaction be, I wondered. I phoned her and asked if I could drop by. It turned out that she was going shopping but if I could be there within the hour —

I could, and I was. I had the photo gift-wrapped, and handed it to her without a word.

“My goodness!” she said, even as she cut the string and tore off the wrapping. “What is this? Is there some celebration, or —”

By then she had it out, and her voice died away. Her eyes widened and her breath became shorter and more rapid. Finally, she whispered, “Oh, my!”

She looked up at me. “Did you take this photograph last Sun­day?”

I nodded.

“But you caught him exactly. He's adorable. That's *just* the look. Oh, may I *please* keep it?”

“I brought it for you,” I said, simply.

She threw her arms about me and kissed me hard on the lips. Unpleasant, of course, for a person like myself who detests senti­ment, and I had to wipe my mustache afterward, but I could understand her inability to resist the gesture.

I didn't see Rosie for about a week afterward.

Then I met her outside the butcher shop one afternoon, and it would have been impolite not to offer to carry the shopping bag home for her. Naturally, I wondered whether that would mean another kiss and I decided it would be rude to refuse if the dear little thing insisted. She looked somewhat downcast, however.

“How's the photograph?” I asked, wondering whether, per­haps, it had not worn well.

She cheered up at once. “Perfect! I have it on my record player stand, at an angle such that I can see it when I'm at my chair at the dining room table. His eyes just look at me a little slantwise, so *roguishly* and his nose had *just* the right crinkle. Honestly, you'd swear he was alive. And some of my friends can't keep their eyes off it. I'm thinking I should hide it when they come, or they'll steal it.”

“They might steal *him,”* I said, jokingly.

The glumness returned. She shook her head and said, “I don't think so.”

I tried another tack. “What does Kevin think of the photo?”

“He hasn't said a word. Not a word. He's not a visual person, you know. I wonder if he sees it at all.”

“Why don't you point it out and ask him what he thinks?”

She was silent while I trudged along beside her for half a block, carrying that heavy shopping bag and wondering if she'd expect a kiss in addition.

“Actually,” she said, suddenly, “he's having a lot of tension at work so it wouldn't be a good time to ask him. He gets home late and hardly talks to me. Well, you know how men are.” She tried to put a tinkle in her laughter, but failed.

We had reached her apartment house and I turned the bag over to her. She said, wistfully, “But thank you once again, and over and over, for the photograph.”

Off she went. She didn't ask for a kiss, and I was so lost in thought that I didn't notice that fact till I was halfway home and it seemed silly to return merely to keep her from being disap­pointed.

About ten more days passed, and then she called me one morning. Could I drop in and have lunch with her? I held back and pointed out that it would be indiscreet. What would the neighbors think?

“Oh, that's silly,” she said. “You're so incredibly old — I mean, you're such an incredibly old friend, that they couldn't possibly — Besides, I want your advice.” It seemed to me she was suppressing a sob as she said that.

Well, one must be a gentleman, so I was in her sunny little apartment at lunch time. She had prepared ham and cheese sandwiches and slivers of apple pie, and there was the photo­graph on the record player as she had said.

She shook hands with me and made no attempt to kiss me, which would have relieved me were it not for the fact that I was too disturbed at her appearance to feel any relief. She looked absolutely haggard. I ate half a sandwich waiting for her to speak and when she didn't, I was forced to ask outright for the reason, there was such a heavy atmosphere of gloom about her.

I said, “Is it Kevin?” I was sure it was.

She nodded and burst into tears. I patted her hand and won­dered if that was enough. I stroked her shoulder abstractedly and she finally said, “I'm afraid he's going to lose his job.”

“Surely not. Why?”

“Well, he's so *savage;* even at work, apparently. He hasn't smiled for ages. He hasn't kissed me, or said a kind word, since I don't remember when. He quarrels with *everyone,* and *all* the time. He won't tell me what's wrong, and he gets furious if I ask. A friend of ours who works at the airport with Kevin called up yesterday. He says that Kevin is acting so sullen and unhappy at the job that the higher-ups are noticing. I'm *sure* he'll lose his job, but what can I *do?”*

I had been expecting something like this ever since our last meeting, actually, and I knew I would simply have to tell her the truth — damn that Azazel. I cleared my throat. “Rosie — the pho­tograph —”

“Yes, I know,” she said, snatching it up and hugging it to her breasts. “It's what keeps me going. This is the *real* Kevin, and I'll always have him, *always,* no matter what happens.” She be­gan to sob.

I found it very hard to say what had to be said, but there was not way out. I said, “You don't understand, Rosie. It's the pho­tograph that's the problem. I'm sure of it. All that charm and cheerfulness in the photograph had to come from somewhere. It had to be scraped off Kevin himself. Don't you understand?”

Rosie stopped sobbing. “What are you *talking* about? A pho­tograph is just the light being focused, and film, and things like that.”

“Ordinarily, yes, but *this* photograph —” I gave up. I knew Azazel's shortcomings. He couldn't create the magic of the pho­tograph out of nothing, but I wasn't sure I could explain the science of it, the law of conservation of merriment, to Rosie.

“Let me put it this way,” I said. “As long as that photograph sits there, Kevin will be unhappy, angry and bad-tempered.”

“But it certainly *will* sit there,” said Rosie, putting it firmly back in its place, “and I can't see why you're saying such crazy things about the one wonderful object — Here, I'll make some coffee.” She flounced off to the kitchen and I could see she was in a most offended state of mind.

I did the only thing I could possibly do. After all, I had been the one who had snapped the photograph. I was responsible — through Azazel — for its arcane properties. I snatched up the frame quickly, carefully removed the backing, the the photo it­self. I tore the photograph across into two pieces — four — eight — sixteen, and placed the final scraps of paper in my pocket.

The telephone rang just as I finished, and Rosie bustled into the living room to answer. I restored the backing and set the frame back in place. It sat there, blankly empty.

I heard Rosie's voice squealing with excitement and happi­ness. “Oh, Kevin,” I heard her say, “how wonderful! Oh, I'm so glad! But why didn't you tell me? Don't you *ever* do that again!”

She came back, pretty face glowing. “Do you know what that terrible Kevin did? He's had a kidney stone for nearly three weeks now — seeing a doctor and all — and in terrible, nagging pain, and facing possible surgery — and he wouldn't tell me for fear it would cause me worry. The idiot! No wonder he was so miserable, and it never once occurred to him that his misery made me far more unhappy than knowing about it would have. Honestly! A man shouldn't be allowed out without a keeper.”

“But why are you so happy now?”

“Because he passed the stone. He just passed it a little while ago and the first thing he did was to call me, which was very thoughtful of him — and about time. He sounded *so* happy and cheerful. It was just as though my old Kevin had come back to me. It was as though he had become exactly like the photograph that —”

Then, in half a shriek, “*Where's the photograph?”*

I was on my feet, preparing to leave. I was walking rather briskly toward the door, saying, “I destroyed it. That's why he passed the stone. Otherwise —”

“You *destroyed* it? You —”

I was outside the door. I didn't expect gratitude, of course, but what I*was* expecting was murder. I didn't wait for the elevator but hastened down the stairs as quickly as I reasonably could, the sound of her long wail penetrating the door and reaching my ears for a full two flights.

I burned the scraps of the photograph when I got home.

I have never seen her since. From what I have been told, Kevin has been a delightful and loving husband and they are most happy together, but the one letter I received from her — seven pages of small writing, and nearly incoherent — made it plain that she was of the opinion that the kidney stone was the full explanation of Kevin's ill humor, and that its arrival and departure in exact synchronization with the photograph was sheer coincidence.

She made some rather injudicious threats against my life and, quite anticlimactically, against certain portions of my body, making use of words and phrases I would have sworn she had never heard, much less employed.

And I suppose she will never kiss me again, something I find, for some odd reason, disappointing.