

How the Demon Got His Knees

A short story by Rebecca Bartlett

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Bill Zeebub wasn't a very good demon. His crimes weren't impressive by anyone's standards—a little shoplifting at the convenience store, some trespassing, occasionally rifling through Mrs. Ferguson's desk when she went out of the classroom, and peeping. Lots and lots of peeping. Of course Bill Zeebub wasn't a real demon, just the imaginary friend of a twelve-year-old girl, but he thought of himself as a demon and his lack of accomplishments bothered him.

"Maybe we should start a fire," he suggested to Katie as they struggled through the woods. Six inches of snow had fallen the night before and the going was rough. "Not the school, but we could work up to that. How about we start with the Hinkle's toolshed? The thing's falling apart anyway. The neighbors would probably thank us for getting rid of it."

"Maybe," Katie said, not looking at him.

If Bill Zeebub had a choice, he wouldn't look at himself either. He was very squat with short legs, no knees, and a big belly that dragged across the snow. At the moment he was orange, but his color would change with Katie's moods.

"How about letting all the air out of Mr. Fitzwaller's tires? We've been trying to do that for months, remember?"

"I remember," Katie said, panting with the effort of cutting the trail.

Bill ignored the strange wheezing sound coming from her chest. "He yelled at us for no reason at all on Thanksgiving, remember that? We were minding our own business in the park, when he rolled down his car window and screamed at us to go home."

"I remember, Bill." Katie sounded as if she were trying not to recall that particular incident.

"You remember how mean he sounded? How hateful?" he pressed. Mr. Fitzwaller was the town crank. He hated all children in general, but Katie most particular. Probably because she was always alone, so he didn't have to deal with an offended adult whenever he yelled at her.

"I know things didn't work out when we tried to set off the fireworks in his trashcan, but I'm sure we could flatten his tires today and there'd be no one to notice, not in weather like this." Demons couldn't feel the cold, but Bill assumed it was chilly considering all the clothes Katie had on—mismatched wool mittens and a mangy fur hat.

"Here we are." Katie stopped at the edge of the woods.

Before them lay a group of homes in a cul-de-sac—big houses with nice yards and expensive playground equipment. Katie got down on her hands and knees and crawled under a large bush. Bill followed her, grunting with effort. He was sure this kind of movement would be easier with knees, but Katie refused to give him any. She said a demon should be able to do without. He joined her under the snow-laden branches. Katie sat on a patch of bare ground, holding a pair of binoculars up to her face.

"So we're peeping again." They'd been doing a lot of this recently. Bill found the peeping boring, a passive form of mischief. He thought a demon should be more active about causing trouble—cutting the power to traffic lights, for instance, or switching people's mail. They'd done that last October, redirecting Mr. Farik's boat bill to the separated Mrs. Farik's apartment. Mrs. Farik had taken it right to her lawyer, setting off another round of ugly divorce proceedings. It had been fun to watch the shouting.

He struggled into a sitting position, causing snow to fall down Katie's back.

"Bill!"

Being a demon meant never having to say you're sorry. Bill frowned at his legs with no knees and tried to close his arms around his huge stomach. He failed. "So, who are these people?" he asked, not caring in the slightest.

"The Theorets." Katie brushed snow off the back of her parka. Once it had been sky blue, but had faded to an ugly powder color. "They just moved here last month. Lila Theoret is in sixth grade."

Katie was in fifth grade. "You don't have any classes with Lila, so why are we spying on her?"

Katie glanced at him then quickly looked away. His under bite was probably getting worse.

"I just think she's interesting, that's all." She trained her binoculars on the back window of the house. Inside someone turned on a Christmas tree. "I overheard her talking at lunch. Lila said she was adopted."

Ah, now it made sense. Katie didn't have parents, at least not any around. She lived with Grandma Betty, but didn't seem to like it much. Bill didn't understand it, he thought Grandma Betty was fine company. "Is it Christmas? I shouldn't be topside on Christmas day. Why isn't Harold here?"

Harold was Katie's other imaginary friend—a cherub with golden hair, bright blue eyes, and a prissy demeanor which always sent Bill into a rage. When Katie was nine, she'd tried to make Bill and Harold be friends. There'd been some very uncomfortable tea parties before she'd given it up.

"I don't know," she said, breaking into his thoughts. "I haven't seen Harold for a while."

"You mean you haven't called him?" Whenever Katie called, he had to come. Bill gave the base of the shrub another little shake, making more snow fall down Katie's neck.

She ignored it. "He doesn't come when I call anymore."

"Really?" Bill showed up whenever Katie called, thinking that was something an imaginary friend had to do. But he was also a demon. Maybe he didn't have to be bossed around by a kid, maybe...

"Shhh," Katie ordered. "I want to see this."

"See what?" He got to his feet with great effort. That lack of knees again!

"They're going to open presents."

Bill didn't need binoculars. He squinted his eyes and took in a scene of four adults and two children in pajamas clustered around a Christmas tree. Someone lit a fire in the fireplace and a man, he assumed it was the dad, held a camera. "Grandma Betty gave you some presents. She left them in the kitchen."

"She didn't wrap them. She never wraps them."

Did the wrapping on a present make a difference? Bill watched the humans inside the house hand out boxes and exclaim in excitement as they opened them. "Why are we watching this? You can see this kind of thing on any television special."

Katie shot him a look of annoyance. This might have bothered most people (Harold, for instance) but it gave Bill a thrill. Part of a demon's job was to stir up anger.

"The stuff on TV is just pretend."

"I know that."

"And I might have a family of my own one day, you know? It could happen."

"I never said it couldn't." There was rage in Katie's blue eyes. Rage was fine when directed at others. Not so much when she focused it on him.

“When I have a family—a real family—I’m going to have to know how to act, and that’s not something I can learn from television.”

“Oh.” Bill sat back down. “I guess that’s why we have to watch the Lobbs have dinner every Tuesday night, and why we have to watch Celia Parker get ready for dance class on Thursday afternoons, and why we follow Jen Phillips every Saturday on her way to piano lessons.”

“Yes,” Katie said shortly, “that’s why.”

Boring. He poked at the frozen ground with a twig. It took the family a long time to open their presents. Katie’s lips were blue by the time Mr. Theoret started bagging up the wrapping paper and Mrs. Theoret went to get lunch started. The grandparents sat around the tree with the children and played games.

“Come on, we can go now.” Katie never wanted to watch anything that had to do with grandmothers.

Bill heaved himself up and trudged along after her. When they passed Mr. Fitzwaller’s house he asked, “Are you sure you don’t want to deflate his tires? It would only take a second.”

“Later,” she said through chattering teeth.

In the past few months they’d become quite good at messing with the old crank’s car. Once Katie had swiped his windshield wipers during an ice storm leaving Fitzwaller to walk home in his good shoes. In September they’d taken a parking ticket from another car and put it on his, nearly provoking a heart attack until the old crab calmed down enough to actually read the thing. In their best revenge so far they’d stuck gum in the locks while Fitzwaller had been boozing it up at the local bar, complaining about the prankster who kept vandalizing his car.

But messing with his beloved automobile while it was parked in his driveway was a risk Katie wasn’t prepared to take, not yet anyway, much to Bill’s disappointment. As they walked by the old man’s home, a curtain twitched.

At Grandma Betty’s place Katie went upstairs while Bill wandered over to the sitting room where Grandma Betty sat on a faded couch, covered in crumbs.

“Sloth”, he said happily, “and Gluttony.”

“Katie,” Grandma Betty’s voice boomed, making Bill jump a little, “I made a TV dinner for you.”

Upstairs a vacuum cleaner revved.

“Stupid girl. The floor’s just going to get dirty again.”

It was certainly dirty in here, wonderfully so. Bill lay down and rolled around in discarded candy wrappers and dust bunnies. On the couch above him, Grandma Betty picked up the remote and changed channels. “Katie,” she yelled, “there’s a Christmas parade on.”

No response from the second floor, but something on the patio caught Bill’s eye—Harold Angel sitting in the oak tree. Curious, Bill waddled through the back door, completely unnoticed by Grandma Betty, who switched over to a football game to marvel at the players in their tight pants.

“Why aren’t you hanging out with Katie?” Bill demanded. “Do you know how embarrassing it is for me to be topside on Christmas? What will my friends think?”

“Demons don’t have friends,” Harold said, an insufferably pious look on his face.

“Why aren’t you upstairs vacuuming?” There was no point in taking a swipe at the angel. His arm would pass right through the little goody-goody.

“Because Katie no longer wants me.” Harold’s tiny white hands were clasped as if in prayer. “She wants you.”

“No, she doesn’t.” Katie barely listened to him anymore. They did too have time to deflate Mr. Fitzwallner’s tires. Or, better yet, scratch up his paint job. Last week, watching TV with Grandma Betty, he’d seen someone shove a banana up the tailpipe of a pickup truck and—

“Katie needs a Christmas moment,” Harold said, his blue eyes lifted in saintly repose. “She needs to be filled once again with the inspiration to do good.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” Bill picked up an ice ball and hurled it at Bruce, the green and purple dragon cavorting next door. Danny Tompkins was three and had horrible taste in imaginary friends. “You know I’m a demon, right?”

“A demon who is topside on Christmas morning,” Harold said serenely. “A truly miraculous event.”

Bill rolled his eyes and let fly with another ice ball. It caught the simpering dragon right between the eyes, passing through him harmlessly, but getting his attention. A bellow of fire came blasting towards them.

“Would you stop fooling around with that stupid dragon?” Harold snapped.

Ah, the sweet sound of success. He’d been trying to irritate the simpering do-gooder for years.

“Katie is in a dangerous place right now.”

Bill glanced at the filthy parlor, lit only by the flickering light from the television.

“Nothing’s on fire.”

“Not physical danger, emotional danger.” Harold was back to his calm lecturing tone.

“Katie has been deprived of much in her life. Now her anger is flaring. Soon it will burn out of control.”

“Sounds good to me. I’m tired of stealing gum from the convenience store and cheating on math tests. I’m ready for some real action.”

“Christmas,” Harold said with great solemnity, “is a time for doing good deeds.”

“Not for demons.”

“Especially for demons,” Harold insisted, “or do you want your under bite to get worse?”

“What?”

“You’ve gotten uglier this past month, or haven’t you noticed?”

Every demon had his weakness, Bill’s was Vanity. When Katie wasn’t looking he liked to study himself in the mirror. Back when she was ten, he’d been almost cute. Not handsome, but adorable in a spiky sort of way but now... he looked down at his overhanging belly hiding legs with no knees. “What’s in it for me?”

Harold heaved a sigh of long-suffering. “Virtue is its own reward.”

“Not for me, I want payment.”

“Fine,” Harold snapped. “Give Katie a Christmas moment, and I’ll help you chain up that overstuffed dinosaur next door.”

In the Tompkins’s backyard, Bruce the dragon pushed Danny in the swing, while the three-year-old sang loudly and off key.

“Promise,” Bill demanded.

“An angel always keeps his ... fine, I promise. Are you happy now?”

“Demons are never happy,” Bill reminded him. “So what do I need to do to give Katie a Christmas moment?”

“I’m not sure and I can’t help you. I’m bound to this tree.”

Now that he’d mentioned it, Harold did look a little stiff in there among the branches.

“This tree bears Katie’s last unselfish act. She made some bird feeders last month with peanut butter and suet.”

Bill looked doubtfully at the frayed pinecones hanging on the tree.

“I suggest you work quickly. I know this isn’t your area of expertise, but you need to find something to restore Katie’s feelings of hope.”

“She got presents this morning,” Bill said sulkily.

“Grandma Betty is a lost cause.” Harold looked sad. “You need to find something else.”

This day just kept getting worse. First he was pulled topside on Christmas day and now he had to do a good deed. “Nobody better find out about this,” he muttered darkly, as he headed back indoors.

Katie sat at the kitchen table, stirring canned chicken soup around in her bowl. An uneaten TV dinner sat on top of the garbage.

“Katie, come in here,” Grandma Betty shouted. “They’re showing *Miracle on 34th Street*.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” Bill said. “I think there’s some more snow coming.”

There wasn’t, but Katie liked snow. At least she had in the past. Bill noticed a distinct lack of enthusiasm as she buttoned up her frayed winter coat and put on her mismatched mittens. Once outside, he found himself at a loss for ideas. Demons, even imaginary ones, had no instinct for doing acts of kindness.

“Let’s go to the cemetery.” Bill liked the cemetery. All those humans buried deep underground, where they couldn’t lecture anybody anymore.

“Okay.”

He probably could have suggested walking off a cliff and Katie would have gone along with it. Bill led the way, trying to keep up a one-sided conversation, but it wasn’t easy. He couldn’t talk about the usual stuff he liked (swearing, vandalism, mischief) so he was stuck commenting on stupid things like how the Blakes had interesting rocks in their yard.

Katie didn’t appreciate how hard he was trying either. She trudged along with her head down and her hands shoved deep in her pockets.

When they passed Silas Fitzwallor’s house, the curtain twitched.

Bill Zeebub suddenly found himself in a foul mood. First of all, he was topside on Christmas day, something that no respectable demon ... wait a minute, there were no respectable demons. Scratch that thought. Not only was he topside on Christmas day he’d just been talked into doing a good deed. “Insufferable goody-goody.”

“What did you say?” Katie asked him.

“Nothing,” he muttered.

“May I remind you this walk was your idea?” Katie pointed out in an icy tone.

“Sure, rub it in.” Bill trotted through the snow, cursing his lack of knees and his low hanging belly. “So, seeing how it’s Christmas and all, how about giving me some knees?”

Katie snorted loudly and pushed past him at the cemetery gates.

Bill had to waddle quickly to catch up to where she’d taken a seat by an ugly mausoleum. He bent over panting. “About the knees—”

“Would it kill you to think about somebody else for a little while?” Katie demanded.

“It might. I’m a demon, remember?”

“It’s Christmas!”

“Which, being a demon, means nothing to me.”

“You’re so selfish!”

“You’re so stupid!”

They glared at each other across a frozen gravestone. To Bill's everlasting embarrassment, he broke first. "I could tell you things about the people buried here. Their sins and stuff. All the bad things they did in life."

Katie rolled her eyes. "This is your big idea to cheer me up."

"Actually it was Harold's idea."

"To bring me to a cemetery and tell me nasty stories about dead people?"

"Well, no," Bill admitted slowly. "He just told me to cheer you up. He left the planning up to me."

Katie threw her hands in frustration.

"Why didn't you call Harold?" Bill demanded. "Christmas is his thing, not mine."

"I don't know." Katie wouldn't meet his eyes. "Harold annoys me lately."

"Harold annoys everyone. It's part of an angel's job description—be irritating and self-righteous at every opportunity." He shuffled over to a stone bench, brushed some snow off, and hopped up, his spindly arms doing most of the work. "This sort of thing would be much easier if I had knees."

"Give me a Christmas moment and I'll give you your knees."

"Really!" Bill's bat-like ears perked up. "Okay, tell me what a Christmas moment is, and I'll give you one. Is it like what they show on television? Is it uncontrolled greed and gluttony?"

"A Christmas moment is like nothing they show on television," Katie informed him in a serious voice. "It's about sharing joy. It's about wanting to make another person happy. It isn't about wrapping something up in a box. A Christmas moment is real."

"Oooo, a Christmas moment is real," Bill mimicked in a high voice. "Reality is overrated."

"Is not!"

"Says the girl who only talks to imaginary friends."

That did it. Katie stood up, her blue eyes blazing in the gathering gloom. "You can forget about getting knees, Bill. In fact, I'm beginning to think you don't need elbows either."

"What?" She couldn't do that to him, could she?

"As a matter of fact, let's see how you get along without any of your joints. Think of all the trouble you'll avoid with arthritis. Think—" But Katie never got any further with her plans to strip him of vital bodily functions. A car turned into the cemetery—an old brown sedan with tinted windows and dented bumpers. "It's Mr. Fitzwaller. Quick. Hide."

Bill didn't need to be told twice. Silas Fitzwaller wasn't the type you launched a frontal attack on, not unless you were looking to get the stuffing kicked out of you. He joined Katie behind the mausoleum. They held their breaths until the car passed by.

"What's he doing here?" Katie wanted to know.

"Dancing on someone's grave?" Bill guessed. "The dude has a lot of enemies."

"Let's go find out." Katie never passed up an opportunity to spy, even if the subject was Silas Fitzwaller. Her argument with Bill forgotten, she clambered up the hill, Bill chuffing along behind her, grateful his arms could still bend at the elbow.

"Stop making so much noise," she ordered when he caught up. Katie had found a hiding place behind a large crypt. "He's down there with a bottle."

This sounded interesting. Bill squinted his eyes, turning them into binoculars. "It's whiskey."

"I thought Mr. Fitzwaller only drank beer." Katie knew what everyone drank from spying at Mike's Tavern. There was a dumbwaiter in back of the bar, and she would hide there when it was too cold to walk the streets.

“He’s not drinking it.” Bill watched as the old crank unscrewed the cap and poured the contents onto a grave. “Looks like he brought a drink for the dead.”

“Weird.” Katie risked popping her head up to take a peek. “I’ve never seen anyone do that.”

Fitzwaller brushed the snow off the gravestone, propped the empty bottle up on top, then got in his car, and drove away.

“He’s lucky they plowed in here today,” Bill observed, but Katie wasn’t listening to him. She was headed down the hill at a fast clip. “Hurry up, the sun is going down.”

Bill waddled after her, debating if he should bring up the topic of knees again. After all, Katie was always telling him to hurry, if she gave him knees ...

“Would you stop whining?” she snapped, standing before a dark brown spot in the snow. “Get down there and tell me who this Marcus Waller person is.”

“Your wish is my command.”

“It is? Good, then you can drop the sarcasm.”

Grumbling, Bill sank beneath the snow into a pine coffin lined with cheap material. It didn’t take long to find what he needed. “Marcus Waller was a mean drunk,” he told her when he surfaced. “He worked construction all day and drank all night. The booze gave him fits of rage and he wasn’t too particular about who he hit. He beat one of his buddies half to death once and spent two weeks in jail.”

“How did Mr. Fitzwaller know him?” Katie pointed to the date on the gravestone. Marcus Waller had been dead for almost fifty years.

“This was his dad,” Bill explained. “His mom’s not buried here, Mr. Fitzwallers’ mom I mean. They planted her in a potter’s field.”

“What’s that?”

“A place they bury poor people. It’s not a nice place like this,” Bill told her. “It’s kind of a—”

“Dumping ground for people no one cares about,” Katie finished for him. “So why was Mr. Fitzwaller pouring whiskey on his dad’s grave and why is he Mr. Fitzwaller anyway if his dad’s name was Waller?”

Bill wondered how much of this he should explain. Katie was only twelve after all. “Fitz means false. So—”

“Oh I get it. Mr. Fitzwaller’s mother wasn’t Mr. Waller’s wife. She was a girlfriend or something.”

“Yeah. When his mom died, old Silas had to move in with his dad. His wife wasn’t too happy about it. She wouldn’t let him use the name Waller.”

Katie said nothing for a moment, just stared at the grave. The sun was going down, it was going to get dark in here soon. “Was his dad nice to him when he was growing up?”

“Marcus Waller wasn’t nice to anybody. Silas had to sleep in an unheated cellar and wear his father’s cast offs to school. The shoes never fit so he had to stuff newspapers in the toes.”

Katie sat down and listened as Bill told stories about the worst beatings the boy had suffered. He didn’t know what she looked so sad about, this was standard stuff really. Hardly worth mentioning for a demon.

“It’s Christmas,” she said finally. “I think we should give Mr. Fitzwaller a present.”

“We should give Mr. Fitzwaller a present?” Bill repeated, indignant. “What about me? What about my knees?”

Katie ignored him. “I think our present will be that we’ll stop messing with Mr. Fitzwaller’s car.”

“But—” They were going to flatten his tires. They’d been planning that for weeks. And Bill really wanted to try that trick where you stuffed a potato in the tailpipe. If they were lucky, the car would stall out in the middle of an intersection and cause a huge accident.

“We can do those things to Mrs. Ferguson’s car,” she assured him. Mrs. Ferguson was her homeroom teacher.

“Promise?” Bill asked.

“Yes, I promise. She parks outside most nights. It’ll be easy.” Katie stood up and brushed the snow off her jeans. “Come on, let’s go back to that house where we sleep.”

“Okay, but I still think—” But Bill never got to say what he thought because he fell face down in the snow.

Katie grinned at him. “Have fun getting used to those knees.”

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by Rebecca Bartlett

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