

A Christmas Surprise

by Kevin Myrick

Bobby sat on the living room floor under the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree and inspected toy after toy, as if they were fresh off the assembly line and he wanted to give them one more good look before they were shipped off to stores. Kelly asked him to wrap the gifts for the babies. The baby doll he held in his hands, still in its box, then spoke.

"Mama?" It asked.

"I'm not your mother," he told the robotic voice. Then it started up a game of peek-a-boo and suddenly Bobby wondered who the hell thought up a baby doll that talked. He wondered if a summary execution for the jerk was needed. Bobby decided no, whoever created this doll couldn't be blamed for trying to make a buck, even off of something so annoying.

He sat the doll down on the paper across from where his wife folded a fresh load of laundry from the dryer and began wrapping the doll. The doll began to giggle as if it knew something fun was about to happen.

"That doll is kind of creepy," Kelly said.

"Says here on the box it can sing and also pees in its diaper when you fill it's back up with water."

"It pees?" Kelly asked, her face covered with a look of astonishment. Bobby suddenly realized that when she bought the gifts last week at Wal-Mart, she hadn't really looked at the box. She knew it talked, and that was all that mattered to her. She saw the gift as a cute form of revenge against her sister, whose children would wreak havoc upon their house on Christmas afternoon. The three-year-old blond-haired terror of the family, Mylie, would love that doll for sure, and it would be a struggle for Kelly's brother-in-law to figure out how to kill the batteries.

"John is going to love it when he finds out that it pees," Bobby said. Kelly laughed and dropped a towel on the floor.

The doll sang "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" as Bobby made the last fold over the box and taped it up. He slapped a sticker on the top of the box and put Mylie's name on it, added his own and Kelly's, then slid it under the tree.

As soon as she was under the tree, the doll spoke again. Then it cried, cried out for Mama again and again. It wouldn't have cried for it's mother if it knew what Mylie had in store for the doll, the tortures of having its arms and legs pulled out of their sockets. It's head would spin around again and again like in the Exorcist. Bobby was even fairly sure that one of her brother's would eventually get it and tape a firecracker to it's belly, destroying it.

"Why did you buy this thing again?" he asked.

"Revenge," she said. "For everything."

Bobby moved onto other chores without giving the doll much more thought. There were other things to do before the in-laws showed up on Friday for Christmas. The bathroom needed scrubbing, carpets needed to be cleaned. When all the work was finally done, Bobby climbed the stairs to their room and collapsed on the bed next to his wife.

"Relatives coming to visit is hard work," Bobby said. "If I knew it was going to involve all of this effort, I would have never agreed to let them come this year."

"You liar, you know you like seeing my family," she said. Kelly turned out the light and tucked herself underneath the covers. In the darkness, Bobby smiled. He enjoyed family time, but what he really wanted out of life was right next to him. He slid his hand down the outside of her bare leg and he felt a shiver cascade through her body. Then the couple heard it, from all the way downstairs underneath the Christmas tree in the quiet of the house at night.

"Mama?"

It was as if the doll were in the room with them, all night long. Playing games of peek-a-boo, singing and giggling from downstairs under the tree. It completely killed any good mood they had, and

neither of them could close their eyes and drift off into dreamland for long before it would call out again.

"Will it ever shut up?" Kelly asked sometime around three in the morning.

"Do you want me to go unwrap it and see if I can find a off switch?"

"Not really. I don't want to have to spend anymore time wrapping gifts than I have to at this point."

Bobby hoped that the doll would finally give it a rest, but when the sun rose through the blinds into their bedroom that dream was well past dead. Bobby and Kelly had actually spent the night listening to a baby doll. And now it was only Wednesday.

The doll kept it up throughout the day and played its mind games well into the next evening.

"You think the batteries would die at some point, wouldn't you?" Kelly asked.

"Maybe it has a nuclear reactor inside of it," Bobby said. "Only way I can think of it still going on like this."

As the sun rose the next morning through the darkened window of their room, Bobby had changed his mind. The inventor of this demon-possessed toy did indeed deserve a bullet in the back of the brain. He pulled himself from under the covers, his body worn out from another night without sleep.

"I'm going to take that baby out back and hack it up with my chain saw if it doesn't shut up," he told his wife over coffee on the morning of Christmas eve.

"Don't make threats that you know will cost you," she said with a wink. Even with being kept up for a good part of two nights in a row, she still had a sense of humor about the whole thing. "Beside, you know it will be worth it to see the look on my sister's face when Mylie opens that thing tomorrow."

"I just don't know if I can take another night of this," Bobby said. "I haven't slept for two nights now. C'mon Kelly, let's kill this thing once and for all."

They tried to ignore it with music at first, a surf rock Christmas collection that Bobby liked to listen to on the holidays. He imagined Christmas in Hawaii being nothing but surfing, a luau and a surf rock band playing "Santa Claus is coming to town." The baby broke his daydreams of enjoying Christmas on Christmas Island under a great big coconut tree with a giggle, as if his dream was silly.

Bobby tried watching the 24-hour A Christmas Story marathon, but that didn't work well either. He couldn't relax, couldn't get comfortable on the couch. Every time the doll cried or spoke from behind its wrapping under the tree, he jumped in panic. As it went on through the afternoon, his mind slowly unraveled and his body gave way to the utter exhaustion. Finally his eyes shut and he went to sleep, beautiful relaxing sleep. It lasted around 15 minutes, because as soon as he heard "Peek-a-boo!" his eyes shot open.

When he got up, Kelly asked him where he was going.

"I'm going to chop that toy up and bury it in the back yard," Bobby said as got up, grabbed the box and headed toward the sliding glass door.

"Bobby, you put that present back under the tree right now. This is not in the spirit of Christmas!"

"Spirit of Christmas be damned," he said. "It's me or the doll, and the doll can't fight back."

Kelly folded her arms across her chest and coolly stared her husband down as he stood in the door, the box under his arm. She waited for him to move. He imagined that he looked silly as he stood there in front of the open sliding glass door, a Christmas present tucked against his body like a football. After a few more moments of the standoff, he finally decided that he had lost the battle and walked back over to the tree. He dropped the present under the floor and gave the box a soft kick so it would slide back into place. The doll giggled.

"Liked that, did you? Plenty more where that came from."

"Bobby!"

He didn't turn around as he climbed the stairs to their room. "I'm going to try and knock myself out for a few hours."

Thank god, Bobby thought, that Benadryl had been invented. There was one person he believed who deserved a medal for valuable service to humanity. Not like the creator of the damned doll that had become his new existence. If he could name the thing, he would have called it Satan.

Kelly's family blew into their house like a wicked twister on Christmas. After finally getting a drug-induced good night's sleep despite the doll still giggling like clockwork, Bobby was in the full spirit of the holiday. He hugged relatives as they came in the door. He and his father-in-law and his sister-in-law's husband sat in the living room with drinks and talked football and work. After everyone ate the Christmas feast Kelly spent the day slaving over, the family sat down and exchanged gifts.

"Oh isn't that wonderful!" Kelly's sister Jamie said when Mylie ripped open the paper and saw the doll. Bobby and Kelly looked at one another and smirked. Even though they'd gone through hell to make it happen, they kept it together long enough to give the doll to Kelly's niece for Christmas. Mylie immediately gave the doll a name: Denali.

"Why did you name it that?" Bobby asked the little girl.

"I don't know, I just like it."

He nodded, still exasperated at the name for the doll. If the doll had been a human, he was sure it would have grown up to become a stripper with a name like that. He thought better of saying that punch line aloud.

Throughout the afternoon, Denali and Mylie went everywhere with one another. When the kids struck up a game of hide and seek, the doll went along with her. That was the last time Bobby and Kelly saw the doll in Mylie's hands. And no one thought to ask, what with all the activity going on in the house, where it was.

The whirlwind of relatives blew back out with hugs exchanged and waving goodbye in the cold from the porch. Bobby poured himself a stiff one and collapsed next to his wife on the couch. He draped his arm around her shoulders and she cuddled up next to him.

"See? Wasn't that a nice Christmas?"

"Absolutely perfect. Could have been a scene in a Hallmark movie."

Kelly poked him in the ribs, and he jumped and laughed.

"So was it a nice Christmas?" she asked again with another hard poke in the ribs.

"It wasn't half-bad," Bobby said.

As if on cue, the doll let out a giggle at the comment, as if she knew it had been a pretty good Christmas too. The couple looked around the room, searched for the doll with their eyes for a moment before they turned back to one another.

"At least, it wasn't that bad of a Christmas until now," he said.

