

Retribution

Bill lifted the family Christmas tree upright, prepared to follow the imprecise assembly procedure taught to him as a child. *Assemble the branches, fight with the small lights, add in big lights, save ornaments and garland for the kids; wait—forgot the star!*

Boxes of Christmas decorations and lights, just brought down from the leaky attic, sat perched on the light-colored cloth couch situated against the far wall in the area adjacent to the front room, where an afternoon fire crackled over aging backyard wood. Bill toiled near the main bay window in this small room, hoping to compete with the brilliant holiday displays assembled in other neighborhood homes.

“Make the lights blink, Dad!” Billy, now thirteen years old, challenged, just arriving from his arduous day at junior high school, dragging his encased French horn into the house. He shook his head with an accommodating grin, for his father was at it again.

He had grown into a tall and lanky boy, a natural runner. The school’s track team depended on his help to get them into springtime downstate competition. Billy’s race times were fast enough for last year’s big meet, qualifying him in three separate events.

“I need to find the blinker. It went out again,” Bill bewailed in holiday frustration, tossing a spare bulb into a ragged box of miniature lights, over-used through many years.

Billy laughed, his unruly hair curls shaking. “You can never make those things work!” he chided in the changing tone of puberty, earning a fatherly sneer from Bill.

“The tree is up!” Lou, the nine-year-old daughter, cried out as she entered the house. Her young, faultless eyes, brown just like her mother’s, were aglow with the scant number of working lights in their half-decorated holiday tree.

“I saved you the ornaments,” Bill offered. “We can do the garland after that.”

Lou smiled through rounded lips, turning to reveal the dark locks of hair atop her head, which Linda maintained in tight braids. She started to pour through the collection of last year’s ornaments, old enough now to handle the glass ones in shiny silver, gold, red, yellow, and blue. Carefully, she filled her capable hands and began to adorn the tree in several different places.

“Can I do the special ornaments too?” Lou asked in her assertive innocence. A unique collection sat nearby in a separate box: the ones made by the children from some past day care or school project, the special “Baby’s First Christmas” ornaments, or the cool-looking Santa and Frosty the Snowman figurines.

As her churning Chevy Cavalier rolled to a stop, Linda softly repeated the angry words prepared for her husband. No detrimental scorn would avert this announcement, for it was long overdue, and he had it sorely coming to him.

The front door flew open in a noisy clatter as she stormed in, cradling weekend supplies in her arms.

“Making sure you have enough booze for the kids’ vacation?” scolded Bill, his affectionate smile dissipating.

Lou just continued hanging her ornaments. *Dad was always complaining about Mom, and it was best for her to remain silent when he expressed his disdain.*

Linda said nothing as she made her way to their bedroom in the back of the house, unloading herself quickly. She returned to the front room to hang her coat, turning to confront her sardonic husband.

“I’m divorcing you!” she courageously declared. She then fell silent, awaiting his typical reaction of contempt.

Bill huffed. *How many times had he heard that one?*

“You are not!” he challenged, employing the usual impertinent tenor that controlled these intolerant situations.

Linda continued her assailment. “I’ve seen a lawyer! You should have my papers in a couple of weeks!”

Bill’s face flushed, eyes opening wider in disbelief. “I don’t believe you would do this around Christmas!” he cried in confusion, his arms shaking.

“It’s because of what you did last winter, remember?” she scoffed, quashing his steaming tone with the recollection of the police at his door.

Bill turned away from Lou and fiercely pushed past his gloating wife, out to the refuge of his two-year-old tan Ford Taurus.

Despite the rapidly approaching holidays, Bill tracked down his old attorney, who by now had relocated to a larger building, expanding his practice. The demand for his cunning services had greatly increased over the years.

Bill found himself emphatically describing what Linda had presented to him. He attempted to discuss the pushing incident in their home, and the resulting police report filed last winter.

The lawyer shrugged it all off. Abruptly shifting the discussion, he began to lay down some ground rules, as if what Bill was telling him was nothing distinctive from anyone else’s divorce.

“The court will need this Statement of Assets from you,” he instructed as Bill nodded, “In addition to that, the last five years of your paychecks need to be accounted for. If you do spend money now, make sure it is for family expenses only!”

Bill wondered how to account for the upcoming attorney’s fees in all these records.

“Talk to nobody else about this, not under any circumstances at all!” the lawyer emphasized. “You do not know who you will be able to trust!”

Grudgingly, Bill had to write a check to retain the attorney’s services, after he expressed all the conditions for the case. This payment was the final arrangement before departure.

As Bill rose from the leather client’s chair, the counselor methodically started into a humorous dissertation, as if he were distributing a lollipop after a pediatrician’s visit. He shared the tale about the guy who could not figure it out; always introducing his significant other at parties with “I’d like you to meet my first spouse...” while they were still married.

Christmas still approached. As always, the children expected a multitude of presents underneath the tree: games, books, racing toys, dolls. As he had always done, Bill found time to put together their holiday, even with the added task this year of locating and retaining an attorney.

The last few years the Christmas holidays at his house had been the same.

Feeling exclusion from Bill's generosity, Linda found refuge with her private indulgences.

For Bill, this became the most depressing part of it all. The situation seemed hopeless.

Attempting to escape the malaise, he would lose himself in the contentment of the children and their gifts, the sound of their merriment lasting well into the frosty late December evenings.

He spent the cold mornings of the early days of the year speculating by the coffee machine at their large oak dinner table, staring for countless hours at nothing in particular, committing to the same New Year's resolution every single year; to pursue the divorce.

Several days after Christmas, Bill received a visitor from the sheriff's office. Unlike the petition for legal separation served to him years before, these reprisals resurrected frightful childhood memories of panic from the deep recesses of Bill's mind, emotions assumed buried many decades ago.

The large framed officer displayed an air of intolerance as he started promptly into the order of protection, as Linda listened intently from the hall by the bedroom. It stated that Bill was guilty of continuous acts of mental cruelty towards Linda, including the domestic incident eleven months prior. This was the basis for the order and the petition for divorce accompanying it.

Bill stirred very little as the seriousness of the matter settled slowly into him, overwhelming in its consequence.

"Do you own any firearms?" interrogated the officer. He peered at Bill over his dark sunglasses, searching for any signs of threatening behavior.

"I don't do guns ...," Bill answered with a slightly defiant tone, holding back his rage and the ensuing alarm.

"I don't do guns either," responded the officer, his service revolver bulging from its black leather holster. Bill felt that there was no need for this official to act like such a sarcastic son of a bitch.

"Let's see," mumbled the officer, as he paged through the order, indifferent to his failure to produce any useful reactions to his cynicism. "I cannot figure out if you are supposed to leave the house. It is not really clear about that."

The credibility of the situation started to wane with Bill.

He decided to test the trooper. "If you think I'm a threat, I'll go," he volunteered deceptively. "But you'll need to decide who is best to be here with the kids. Go in there and look at what she's drinking right now ..."

Linda moved into the bedroom, and the indisputable clanging of glass liquor bottles presented itself to the officer.

"That's for a judge to decide!" the trooper declared, abruptly breaking from Bill's psychological trap. Hastily he placed the papers back together in their original order, handing them to Linda's husband as she returned to their unkempt living room.

The petitions were amazingly unprofessional. They contained sections crossed out, notes written over some of the spaces around the text, and in all, they seemed like extremely poor rough drafts of the final documents.

"I see your lawyer did a bang-up job with this!" Bill scoffed at his frowning wife, "You had better know what you are doing."

“That can be viewed as harassment!” Linda issued her warning, wasting no time in asserting newfound control. “You had better watch it!”

“So I should leave?” Bill challenged, testing this latest affirmation of her independence.

“You can do what ever you damn well please!” Linda shrieked as she stomped away, refusing to deal further with her husband’s condescending manipulations.

“I’ll leave all this then. It is up to you where to go,” resigned the officer, backing his way out of the front doorway, pointing at Bill with a condemning gloved finger.

“But be forewarned,” he emphasized. “That is an order of protection, and I do not want to have to come back here!”

Two days later, Bill reluctantly faced his attorney.

“This is bullshit . . .”

“What you consider bullshit,” the counselor warned in the most somber tone, “may not be what a judge would consider bullshit. Now let us talk about this ‘pushing’ incident. It says here that you choked her. Can you explain this?”

“That’s wrong!” Bill argued desperately, his eyes open wide in terror, hands shifting forward. “She flew out of the bedroom, and I pushed her away from me and told her to back off!”

“You mean to tell me,” returned the lawyer, leaning forward and pointing, “that you did not come after her - it was she that came after you?”

“I was joking with my son by his bedroom,” Bill continued, assembling his thoughts with mechanical precision, “and she came out, yelling and screaming at me to be quiet. I didn’t know what the hell she was going to do!”

“Wait, wait, and slow down!” the attorney commanded, struggling to grasp the situation Bill presented. “Let’s start from the beginning. What time was it? What is the location of the bedrooms?”

“When I came home from work,” Bill stated further, “The kids are still up, she was not watching them, and the house smells like booze!”

“Smells like booze?” the counselor pressed, enticed by this new opportunity, “Was it a heavy odor?”

“It always smelled like that when she drank!” Bill sadly acknowledged, shaking off the threat of looming depression. “It’s like she spills it all over or something....”

“So the house reeked of liquor!” the attorney assembled Bill’s words, building up their defense.

As always when Bill found his children in this unpleasant situation, he started preparing food for them in the kitchen. Leaving it to simmer on the stove, he joined Billy outside his room. That was when she bolted out of the bedroom.

“Had she ever jumped at you this way before?” the attorney questioned.

“No.” Bill solemnly declared.

“So this was the first time you ever saw her do something like this?” the attorney continued. “You had no idea what she was about to do to you—or to your son? So then what did you do?”

“My hand went up to push her back,” Bill explained, “and it landed around her neck.”

Bill placed his hand on his chest right below his own neck, to demonstrate where he made contact.

“It landed -around- her neck?” the attorney lurched at Bill’s careless words, his eyes opening wide with accusation.

“It landed in the location by her neck!” Bill quickly altered his statements, “I pushed her away from us, against the wall!”

“And then you let go?” the attorney offered.

“Yes!” Bill hollered, growing ever angrier. “And I told her to back off!”

After the confrontation, Linda called the police. Aware of her own state of mind, she felt uncertain about removing Bill from the house and being entirely responsible for the children’s care. Not concerned that he could be of any real threat, she instead settled for filing the police report.

The counselor could build some credible defense for Bill, who plainly denied choking his wife. Wife-beaters were always apologizing, the attorney explained, or looked unconcerned about the accusations, but Bill was angry about the heinous claim.

“And if I am such a threat,” Bill challenged further, “why did it take so long to file these papers?”

The attorney looked again at the order, searching for the date of the police report. Suddenly his eyes flashed as his grave expression evolved into a taunting grin. “Eleven months! This is bullshit with a capital B!” he roared in triumphant conclusion.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you!” Bill shouted. Had the attorney not heard him say this?

Allowing no further reaction to the documents, the lawyer peered up at Bill in the commanding manner he used to align his clients with his thinking. “Now I want you to stay away from the house until we get to court,” he ordered firmly.

“I’ll need to get my suit and clothes out of there.” Bill resisted, disregarding the jeopardy.

“I’d suggest you go buy a new suit instead,” the attorney rebuffed as his tone elevated. “How do you know she’s not going to run into the wall and say that you did it? She claimed that you choked her, right?”

Bill huffed, shrugging away the attorney’s last pejorative point, for there was still one more piece to this complicated equation that the counselor needed to consider.

“What about the kids?” Bill countered, “Can’t I wait for them outside the house?”

The attorney crashed his arm loudly to the desk. “You want to sit waiting in your car outside your house?” he scolded. “Let’s take this one thing at a time! Right now we need to go up against this Order of Protection.”

The attorney paused, waiting for any additional dispute.

“Either we get an earlier court date or argue this at their court date”, he continued, sensing no more complaints from his client.

“Let’s go after this as soon as possible!” Bill demanded, all too eager to move past these wretched claims of abuse and expose his wife’s weaknesses in a theater of marital separation.

The attorney nodded, turning to his computer, concerned that Bill was so willing to enter into such a path of detestation.

Don and his wife Tony, neighborhood friends for years, invited Bill to celebrate the last day of

the year with them, concerned he might slip into the self-destructive state known to prevail over recipients of divorce petitions.

Bill was reluctant to partake in their celebration. He was extremely concerned that his estranged wife could show up to disrupt their party, looking to deface his name even further. Besides, he needed to flee from his quandary, as the devil was in watch, patiently awaiting access to his troubled soul, now so critically exposed.

Perhaps a journey into the frigid metropolis would relieve him of this miserable burden. Bill decided to start his New Years Eve on a city-bound train, seated amongst a young, celebratory crowd.

“Too bad Dad couldn’t come with us,” Lou sadly said to her mother, who pulled her Chevy into the darkened main road of their town. Billy sat motionless; absorbed in the small mp3 player that Bill gave him as a present for good grades.

“Your father chose it that way!” Linda rebuffed, maneuvering around a New Year’s drunk whose driving was too slow. “We’ll do just fine without him,” she stated unemotionally.

Linda would have to get used to taking care of these children by herself. *Why worry that Bill left her alone on New Years? It was just another nail in his coffin. After all, the mother was always the best choice for the kids, was she not?*

“Billy, are you all right?” Linda probed, concerned about his defiant silence.

“Yeah, whatever ...” Billy mumbled his reply. Sometimes it was hard to understand the incoherent sounds coming from the young man.

“When we get to the show, I want that music player!” Linda demanded; weary of his lack of attention. Her son seemed to be in another world.

Billy just sighed. *Why couldn’t he be with his father right now? Mom had no right to drive him away. When was this ridiculous fight going to be over so Dad could come home?*

Linda recognized his disconcert and felt extremely annoyed. *This was all Bill’s fault! He made her the culprit in the house. Was she not the victim here, for all the times Bill yelled and screamed at her? What about the police report she had? When she could finally get him to court, he was in for a bloody massacre! So what if he paid for the home! It was his house anyway, at least until now. Her lawyer demanded he continue the financing of the domicile, even if forced to live elsewhere.*

Bill made her feel so lonely the last couple of years. He complained about her drinking, but that was no reason to ignore her. He always had something else to do, such as take care of his job, work on the house, or take the kids somewhere. They had grown apart, isolated, destitute, and distant.

Granted, her full day at work made her sleepy, serving to numb the pain of this marriage. She was available for him just as little as he was for her.

There was just no talking to him. Mary at the family counselor’s office told her and the kids it was not her fault that Bill was upset all the time. It was his problem. The other women at the office suggested that she get away from him, that she may not have any choice.

They were shocked at what Linda was telling them, listening to her complain in the waiting room of the family counselor’s office one evening. *How dare he choke her? Linda should divorce this clown and leave him penniless in the street! If she did not, one woman speculated, perhaps she would manipulate her own estranged husband’s adamant temperament to rein justice upon this beast!*

A wide-eyed Jamie listened to these other women rant, suspiciously glaring at Linda. *How*

could this be the same man who walked his children to the Little Folks Day Care every morning for all those years?

He quit his job, Linda lamented. Was he crazy? Did he sense she was about to serve him again? That was the final straw! She would not allow Bill to pay for this house with the funds in her bank account! The court petitions put him right where she wanted him, wrapped up in a nice neat little package.

Linda continued with the drive, looking down at her daughter.

“Mary says she likes the green dinosaurs best.” Lou responded to Linda’s gaze. She had quite a talent with clay. For a nine-year-old child, Lou was quite handy at shaping it to resemble the cartoons she watched on the TV. Her father said he just loved the way that she finished the eyes with different colors; to make it look like it was a real toy from China.

“You think Dad will buy me some more?” Lou asked her mother, “I’m almost out of yellow.”

“You’ve got enough damn clay for now!” His influence on them was unrelenting. She needed him away from them for a while. The previous week, with Bill driven away, she had ultimate say and control over the household. He had only been around twice: once when Billy needed the computer for a school assignment and it needed fixing, and once when she demanded groceries.

“You’re really not supposed to be here,” she told him when he was at the house, looking for a reason to invite the police. *He would be made to father them from a distance.*

“I need some more rap music,” Billy finally broke his silence. “I’ve listened to this whole disc. Can we stop somewhere?”

“We’ve all got to learn to live without this stuff!” Linda shrieked.

This junk was destined for the trash.

Billy retreated to his shielding silence. When Dad came around again, he would get him some more music. Even though he complained about Billy’s choice of music, he still gave in and bought it for him, laughing as he did so with a “Yo, yo! Yo, yo ...” while dancing in a goofy trot, mocking his son’s preferences with two fingers pointed upwards in the air.

For as long as Billy could remember, Dad had always been there. *Mom was in and out all the time. She always complained about something. The counseling she dragged he and his sister to was a big waste of time. His skateboard friends recommended he resist that crap; it was useless. Those guys knew all about life. What did he need all that family advice for, and why did anyone else have to know what his dad was like?*

There was another boy he knew in this crowd whose parents were also in an estranged situation. “My father says I only have to listen to him,” he told Billy. *He was right. Dad was right.*

Linda pushed her driving glasses closer to her face. The temple for tonight’s show was finally in view. It was good to take the kids away from it all for a while. *They would learn to appreciate her.*

A bumpy train, riding over screeching rails, recoiled jarringly as it pulled into the historical confines of Union Station.

A swarming crowd departed the steely train through the pillared station and poured into the warming light of Adams Street. It was more people than Bill had seen passing through a single thoroughfare in decades. They were mostly young, vibrant kids, on their way to gather with friends to party well into the early morning darkness. *Could Bill convince them that he was younger and single,*

or even convince himself of that?

As he crossed the bridge, which provided passage over the identifying waterway of the city, the chilly night air cleared his thoughts and quickened his pace. It was good to be out, far away from his mounting problems.

He turned away from the crowd onto Clark Street. The tall buildings to his east lit the embracing sky, blanketing the darkness in his immediate path. Perhaps he could find refuge in the towering YMCA building in the distance. *Did they rent rooms, and could he afford it?*

He hoped not to confront the city's scores of hazards. Bill was all too aware that Satan lurked in the troubled soles of those who chose to make their home the city's streets, waiting for any opportunity for violent retribution for their troubled affairs. *Would he lose it all and become one of them? Was this all that his life had come to?* For the first time, he felt alone and truly, utterly terrified.

It was good that he was no longer amongst the crowd, for the panic had converged on his mind. *Just keep walking*, he told himself. The problems were far away. A multi-mile walk in the frigid December air was nothing compared to what he faced in the heartless courtrooms of his future.

As a harried mother frantically ushered her small, sad-eyed children into a brown brick apartment building, his mind escaped to thoughts of his own fickle son. He should someday see the city. Raised in a small town, Billy remained isolated from the world, from reality. There was more to this world. Perhaps Bill should squander any money left over from his broken marriage, sell the house, steal away the kids, and just start over.

Was this his reward for holding it all together over the years, for sticking it out in the face of anguishing pain? Why had he done it?

Why did he not go through with the divorce ten years ago, when he had the chance?

How could he have given this woman such a beautiful second child?

If Satan truly did overtake him, perhaps he would burn his house to the ground! Then neither he nor his wife could make claims on the shelter. *No*, he shuddered, shaking away the thought, *that was not his way*.

Disenchanted and weary from his long journey, Bill turned towards the city's festive area on the lakeside known as Navy Pier. He would make a final attempt at finding New Years Eve there, and then just head back to Union Station. The long walk served its purpose. Panic and depression had threatened, but not consumed him, thus far.

Here was where the city was! There were scores of people shuffling through stone-embedded concrete sidewalks, some with baby strollers. There were groups of friends, all races and genders, some blue-jean clad, some in T-shirts decorated with various slogans and band names, and some in conservative button-up shirts.

Bill passed under a massive entrance sign, engraved with the words "Welcome to Navy Pier." The moonlight shimmer of Lake Michigan sparkled to his right as he joined the quick-moving swarm of New Year's party-goers.

A set of black-stained oak doors embossed in glass enclosed a vibrant crowd at a polished saloon. Outside the bar, a dark-haired woman, smelling of beguiling perfume, proudly stirred a shapely posterior to the rhythm of the evening, assembling a system of rounded steel beer kegs for the ensuing fireworks show.

"Corona?" she offered, sensing Bill's presence and turning to him, her warm welcome smile refusing to miss the sale.

Bill acknowledged her pleasing features with the purchase, happy to have finally reached a point of respite from his long, wayward journey. Just then, his cell phone began to chime demandingly. His celebrating neighbors wanted to know if he was still safely walking this Earth.

Many hours later, Bill claimed his frayed seat on the departing train. He had a remarkable time yelling and shouting cheers for the new year with the rest of the animated city, enjoying the numbness of their consumptions. Lovers embraced in displayable passions while others sopped up their pleasures in bounties of wine and ale. Bill's ears still rang from some slightly overweight girl who hollered all night in drunken tones while the sky showcased its splendid fireworks glory over the serene, reflective water.

The young crowd traveling with him wallowed in their own issues. One kid just approaching twenty years of age could not get to his train stop fast enough, for his allotment of the evening's alcohol had been grossly exceeded and the jerky ride was spinning his world much too quickly. A young girl wearing black leather punk clothes and rings through her nose gently rubbed her lifeless boyfriend's back, preventing his gaze from falling upon other female prey lurking through the caboose.

A thin gray-bearded man of older years seated in front of Bill joked with the other passengers, trying to instill upon them a memorable impression. As the train pulled out of the yards of Union Station into the darkness of the early morning, his seat buckled a number of times, and twice he turned back to Bill.

The second time he spoke. "If you don't stop pushing my seat, I'm going to have to come back there ..."

His steely dark eyes demanded fear with his acrid statements.

As the crowd dwindled down, the once angry elder found himself to be isolated and alone. "Hey!" Bill shouted to gain his attention. "What was your problem? I had nothing to do with the bumps on your ride."

The elderly man pondered this new debate. He would have to fall back upon a little street philosophy, justifying his actions as correct, planting doubt in Bill's mind to sway him from aggression.

"That's just what I felt I had to do at the time!" he explained, his thinly aged face peering straight ahead, avoiding having to turn back to the challenge he earlier issued. "It's just the way it is, and it has to be accepted as such."

"You should admit you were making a fuss over bullshit," Bill argued, exposed to these types of street manipulations many times before, not wishing to play this stranger's psychological con game.

The stranger decided to confuse Bill with a twist of contradiction, relying on his experiences with the demons of his past.

"Never admit to something which cannot be proven," he declared solemnly, despite the many witnesses to his statements.

What genius! Bill fell silent, overwhelmed by this stranger's declaration of experience. It was so true! How many people had indicted themselves for things they did not do or would like to forget they had done, simply by not recognizing the overwhelming burden of proof?

After departing the train, Bill's car fought with him to start in the cold early morning air. He needed to take the chance of returning to his house, to switch to his old truck.

It felt awkward, sneaking around outside his front door, moving the truck into the street and replacing it with the car. He glimpsed up at the home made for his family over the last decade, and spotted the lit Christmas tree he and his daughter so meticulously assembled by the front bay window. Remorse seared through him as the emotional side of his mind assumed control. He could not let them force him away like this.

No, remaining there now was trouble. He did not see anybody by the windows, so perhaps he had not been spotted by his wayward children and fuming wife.

He made sure he had his tire iron in the truck, a single socket instrument, the only remnant of a 1973 Impala once owned. Driven from his home into the hostile streets, the iron could serve as a useful weapon to defend himself with, if he needed it, a fortification against the torrid world now closing in around him.

Tapping the cold black iron twice against the truck's seat and then releasing it, Bill turned to drive into the street, away from the family so blatantly barred from him.