

Bubby's Favorite Demon

by Fred Schepartz

Bubby sat at the kitchen table, playing solitaire, a plate of chubs beside her. She wore her faded, frayed lavender apron covered with little blue *chai's*—chet, yod in the Hebrew alphabet, number 18, the Jewish sign for life. She played all the cards in her hand, grabbed a piece of chub, munched it down, and then dutifully wiped her hands with a damp cloth before resuming the game.

My older brother, Steven, his friends call her “Blubbo.” Jerks! Sure, Bubby's a big woman, a good 200 pounds, but I prefer to think of her as strong, not fat, with a body hard from her own hard life as an immigrant who'd arrived with little more than the clothes on her back.

Bubby's built like a linebacker, maybe five-feet tall, but just about as wide, broad-shouldered and thickly boned. She has short arms and big hands, with thick, stubby fingers. Mom often talks about how Bubby drove the family's tank-like Oldsmobile when she was a kid. No power steering, no problem. Mom says the neighborhood milk-and-egg man used to joke that with arms like Bubby's, she could have easily driven his delivery truck.

Bubby drove the family car and drove the household, doing all the cooking and cleaning, paying the bills and pretty much making all the major decisions. Zeyda mostly sat back and admired her horse sense; this was a quality Zeyda was the first to admit he lacked.

I sat across from her and watched as she moved unsuccessfully through the cards. Bubby looked up from the table. Our eyes met and for a moment I thought I detected a hint of annoyance, probably because she knew the game was over because *I* knew the game was over. She gathered up the cards then reached for another piece of chub, this time the prize piece—the head.

“Chub?” She pointed to the plate.

I shook my head.

“Nu? So you don't like chubs?”

“They're gross.”

“Ach, you don't know what good is.”

Bubby sucked hard on the chub head, then probed the little skull with her tongue and fingers, which, as always, were decorated with pale pink nail polish. She finally spat out the head and again wiped her hands until they were clean, though her lips and cheeks shined with fish grease.

I dealt a couple hands of gin. That was our game. Right away, I noticed something weird. The face cards showed creatures with human faces, but wings instead of arms and talons instead of feet. Except one neat thing, the queens looked like they ran things. The kings were merely older versions of the jacks.

After Bubby got gin, I laid the Queen of Hearts face up on the table.

“Bubby, where'd you get these cards?”

She ignored my question. “Isn't she beautiful?”

“She's scary.”

“Nah, she's beautiful. She thinks her feet are ugly, but they're beautiful. So strong she could hold the world on a tether. And sharp too. She could slice the world in two if she wanted, but she would never do that.”

Bubby was really starting to freak me out, talking about the Queen of Hearts as if she were real, but then again, Mom says she talks about soap operas like they're real, and while I thought the Queen was scary, I could also see that Bubby was right. She had fine skin, the color of honey, and long, curly black hair. Her nose was long and hooked, like the proudest eagle. Her expression was stern, but she looked wise.

“Who is she, Bubby?”

“Who would you say she is?” Bubby smiled slyly. In an annoyingly Jewish way, she loved answering a question with a question.

“I have no idea.”

“Well, just call her ‘Bubby’s Favorite Demon.’”

“Bubby! Demons are evil. How can you have a favorite demon?”

She chuckled as she shuffled and dealt the cards. “Your rabbi, he would say your Bubby couldn’t have a favorite demon. But, you know what? Your Bubby *does* have a favorite demon, so it must be okay for your Bubby to have a favorite demon.”

I decided not to ask any more questions.

Bubby sang a Yiddish song in a thick, muscular voice.

“A mother feels like she’s losing her son to something or someone, she don’t know what,” Bubby translated. “She follows him to the graveyard where he talks to the air. She runs up to him and asks, ‘Are you a Dibbik?’”

“What’s a Dibbik? Hey! I saw that! You laid that card down. You can’t pick it back up.”

“It’s like in *The Exorcist*,” Mom said, sneaking up on me from behind. “Another thing they stole from us and pretended was theirs all along, just like when Mary Shelley stole from “The Golem” and pretended she really invented Frankenstein. And she couldn’t even come up with a *goy* name for it!”

Mom grabbed a tall glass from the cupboard above the sink and pressed it against one of the two dispenser arms built into the refrigerator door. Ice tumbled into the glass. Mom pressed the glass against the other arm, filling it with water.

“Polly,” Bubby said, staring at the fridge as if elves tossed ice boulders and buckets of water down a chute to Mom’s glass, “when God created the heavens and the Earth and all the plants and animals, he started to make these other creatures, but Shabbas came and he had to rest, so he never got around to giving them bodies, so they sometimes have to borrow from—”

“What is this *narishkeit*?” Mom yelled. She then spotted Bubby’s odd deck of cards and snatched the Queen of Hearts right out of my hand. “Jesus Christ—”

“Don’t say that!”

“Ma, you’re gonna to give the girl nightmares with this *drek*. For God’s sake, this is the Twentieth Century. You don’t need to spit three times to protect against the evil eye. You don’t have to worry about black cats crossing your path. Walking under a ladder won’t cause a disaster. And the children would’ve been able to walk just fine, even if you didn’t follow them with a scissors, cutting their strings as they crawled.”

Mom laid the Queen of Hearts face down on the table and patted me gently on the back. “You don’t need to be scared of her, Polly. She only exists in the hearts of backward people and when they’re gone, she’ll be

gone.”

Except I was just starting to decide that I wasn’t scared of her, and well, Bubby did cut my strings and I was able to walk. I reached across the table and gave Bubby’s hand a quick squeeze. She grinned at me.

“C’mon, Ma, it’s time to start dinner. You’ll help me?”

“First we make banana bread.”

I perked up quickly. I loved Bubby’s banana bread. “Can I watch? I wanna learn how to make Bubby’s banana bread.”

Mom laughed dryly. “That’ll be the day! You can watch, but you’ll never learn how she does it. Polly, you know how I write everything down? How I’ve always told you that when you learn a new recipe, you’ve got to write everything down?”

Overstuffed file card boxes danced before my eyes.

“I do that because she never writes anything down. *Never*. So many times I’d ask, ‘How do you make your chicken soup? How do you make your banana bread? How do you make your fried smelts?’ She’d reply, ‘*a bisel* of this, *a bisel* of that.’ I try it, it never comes out quite right. Right, Ma?”

Bubby shrugged.

Watching Bubby probe the batter with her fingertips, I realized that there’s an *art* and a science to making banana bread. The ingredients, that’s one thing, but how she gets it so dense, yet so moist, that’s something else. I tried asking questions, but Mom told me not to be a *nudje* and said something about having to learn through osmosis. I asked what osmosis was and she replied it’s like banging your head against a wall.

Gai shlog dein kup en vant!

Or did she tell me to go bang *my* head against a wall?

Then I asked what’s for dinner.

“Poison! *Hak mir nicht in tchainik*.”

Whenever Mom tells me to stop banging the teakettle, I know it’s time to leave. But later, once I got a whiff of the hearty aroma, I realized that tonight’s poison was as good as poison gets. Brisket! Cooked at a low heat, until it’s so tender you don’t even need teeth to eat it. When Mom sent me to get Dad and my brothers, I practically jumped for joy. Dad was in the den reading dental journals—he’s an orthodontist. Steven and Alan, as usual, were playing ball with the neighborhood boys.

We crowded around the kitchen table. Sunday dinner wasn’t enough to get Mom and Dad to clean off the dining room table. That was pretty much just for High Holy Days, Cedar, Thanksgiving or any time we had