

# *The Town Drunk*

*Presents*

## What Does It Profit a Man

*Rebecca Day*

Copyright © 2007 Rebecca Day

“Sing unto the Lord a new *song*.” Pastor Zeke Brown enunciated the words into the half-cracked mirror hanging on the inside of his office closet. “Song. Song, song, *SONG*.” How on earth had he managed to mess up the psalm? It was bad enough that his sermons never went as planned; notes got out of order, jokes fell flat, and serious points returned Hollywood-sized laugh tracks. Now he was messing up the psalms, where all he had to do was *read*, for goodness sake. Where was his mind, anyway, that during an act of worship he’d say *that*?

Where was his mind? With Dana, of course. Endlessly replaying the argument they’d had last night as he stared at the front pew where his young wife sat, gazing up at him encouragingly. It had been her lifelong dream to be a pastor’s wife, to run the ladies’ prayer circles and Bible studies, to collect funds for unfortunate pagan babies, and above all, to be a helpmeet to her husband. To serve the Lord through him, like a proper Christian wife. And instead of a young Billy Graham, a firebrand burning bright for the Lord, she had a man who said “schlong” in front of two hundred people while wearing a microphone, for the love of Pete!

But honestly, it wasn’t the two hundred people. Two hundred, two thousand, two million. What did it matter? Oh, he didn’t want to disappoint his flock—he was their shepherd, after all, and they deserved better than a shepherd with a broken crook. But the deacons’ horrified gasps, Mrs. Babbage clapping her hands over her granddaughter’s ears, those were lessons in humility, or at least humiliation. Mascara-black tears spilling down Dana’s cheeks as she fumbled in her lap, frantically turning the pages of her Bible and fiddling with her leaflet just so she didn’t have to meet his gaze. That was hell.

It was a miracle of biblical proportions that he’d gotten this church in the first place, a matter of being in the right place at the right time. This was his one and probably only chance to prove himself, and he was screwing up royally.

“Help me,” he prayed softly into the mirror, not sure if he was speaking to God or to himself. “Please, help me?”

“You rang?”

Zeke turned to see a man sitting at his desk, playing with the plaster statuette of Jesus “suffering the little children to come unto him” in a way that was more than a tad disturbing. The man, with slicked-back ebony hair and a pencil-thin moustache, reminded him of Joe-Bob Caldwell who kept the books for the church—same weasely face, same rumpled suit—though this fellow exuded a rangy confidence that Joe-Bob lacked. You would buy a used car from this fellow, definitely.

“Where did you come from?” The office door was opposite the closet. If the man had come through the door, Zeke would have seen him.

“You called for help, I answered.”

No wings, no halo, but could it be? Hope fluttered like a snow-white dove in his chest. “Are you an angel?”

The man pulled at the collar of his white oxford shirt, cleared his throat. “Well, yes. In a manner of speaking. I’m Lucifer.”

The snow-white dove smashed into a window and died. “Excuse me?”

“Lucifer, Belial, Beelzebub, the Morning Star, Satan, the Devil. You know, the Bad Guy.” The man idly leafed through Zeke’s sermon notebook. “Hmmm. Interesting, but I think you’re missing the point of the parable of the sower.”

Zeke held onto his patience with both hands. This was all he needed today, some mental patient off his meds wandering around his office. “Look, I don’t know how you got in here, and I don’t for one minute think you’re actually the Devil, so please leave before I call the police.”

The man sighed, closed the notebook, and rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “They never believe me without the fucking costume. Fine.” He snapped his fingers. The rumpled navy blue suit turned fire red, horns sprouted from the top of his head, and a long tail swished out behind him.

Zeke stumbled backwards, fumbling for the carved wooden cross that sat on his bookshelf. He thrust it into the Devil’s face. “Back, fiend!”

The Devil brushed it aside and turned back into the accountant. “Not a vampire, sorry, so that doesn’t do anything but tickle. And I’m not here to hurt you. You called for help, and I’m ready to give it. Sit down, Zeke.”

The Devil—for Zeke, a rational man, had to accept the proof of his senses—pointed to the spare chair, the one Zeke used to counsel hysterical wives and insecure teenagers. He collapsed into it, legs shaking as if he’d run the mile.

“I heard your sermon today. Not exactly the type of stuff to bring down the house, though I liked that somebody finally got that stupid psalm right. Anyway, I heard you, and I have a proposition to make.”

“I’ll have no truck with the devil,” Zeke said, trying to sound brave.

“Truck? No, 1955 Vincent D Series Black Shadow. Hell of a bike, too.” The Devil leaned back, sighing, then shook his head as if to clear his mind. “Just hear me out. I won’t force you, but I’m willing to give you the gift of preaching, the ability to reach hundreds of thousands of souls with your sermons. Whole nations will go winging to heaven with your name on their lips, thanking you for saving them from an eternity in hell.”

“And what do I give you?”

“Oh, come on, Zeke, you know how this goes. You give me your soul.”

So. He was being tested, that was it. God was allowing Satan to tempt him as he had Job. As he had Jesus. He bet Billy Graham had never entertained the Devil in *his* office. Well, Ezekiel D. Brown was up for the challenge. “That seems like an unfair trade for you. One measly soul in exchange for hundreds of thousands?”

“Let you in on a little secret. For me, it’s about quality, not quantity. Oh, don’t worry. For the man upstairs, it’s all about numbers on the big board, but then, he doesn’t come down here, does he?”

“He came to earth as Jesus...”

“Two thousand plus years ago. Been a lot of water under that bridge.” The Devil smirked. “No, you won’t see him down here in the trenches. He’s a bit like a lazy Jehovah’s Witless, just leaves his literature stuffed in your door and moves on. Me, now, I like to get to know the souls I take. It gives the whole process meaning. So where he’d rather the great unwashed masses throng his gates, my tastes are more rarified. A single flute of Dom Pérignon, as opposed to a keg of Michelob.”

“I don’t drink.” When had this conversation slipped out of his control?

“Pick another analogy, then.” The Devil waved his hand. “The point is, you can have everything you’ve ever wanted.”

“But I’ll be damned!”

“Well, yes, that’s true. But here on earth, you’ll be remembered as one of the greats, your name spoken in the same breath as Calvin, Wesley, Graham.”

Zeke closed his eyes. He’d been saved by Billy Graham, through a film a local church had sponsored. Ever since that day, he’d dreamed of passing on what he’d gained. Salvation. God’s kingdom. “But the price! My soul—it’s just too much!”

“It’s all about what’s important to you, I guess. ‘Greater love than this hath no man...’”

It really was true; the Devil could quote scripture for his purposes. “That was about laying down your life, not giving up your soul.”

“If you’re immortal—which you are, by the way—it’s pretty much the same thing.”

There was something wrong with that logic, but Zeke couldn’t wrap his brain around it, and the Devil was still talking, smooth, just like the used car salesman whose mien he had adopted.

“You know, Ezekiel, your ancient ancestors used to believe that true immortality came from being remembered after death, and there’s a lot to be said for that admittedly pagan point of view. Let me give you a hint of things to come, okay? See if that helps you decide. If you refuse my deal, you’ll live out your life and die in obscurity. In one hundred years, nobody will know or care that you walked this earth.”

“But I’ll live on forever in eternity with the Lord!”

“And thousands upon thousands will be damned who might otherwise have been saved. And living with the Lord, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be. Believe me, I know. He’s a lousy landlord, and when he doesn’t fix the plumbing, what are you going to do, sue? Not likely. All the good lawyers are in hell. Look, I don’t expect you to choose right now. Think about it overnight, but as you walk around town today, look at each person you pass. Their souls are in your hands, Zeke.”

He already felt that burden as a pastor, but this was just too much. “That’s not fair!”

“Fair? Excuse me. I *am* the Devil, you know. What do you expect, the Marquis of Queensbury Rules? My way, you’ll be a martyr to your faith. Isn’t that the highest accolade a Christian can aspire to?” The Devil walked to the closet mirror, where he started picking his teeth with a feather-quill pen that materialized from nowhere.

“Martyrs wear crowns and sit at Jesus’ right hand in heaven. They don’t burn in hell.”

“How do you know that? You believe all that church propaganda? Besides, a true martyr gives up everything for the Lord, and that’s exactly what you’d be doing.”

This insanity had gone on long enough. “Get thee behind me, Satan!”

“Hey, standing right here. But yeah, I’ll go. Hasta mañana, Reverend.”

A flash of crimson smoke filled his office, and Zeke found himself alone.

---

Dana was still angry, though if Zeke asked, she’d say she was disappointed, as anger was a sin, especially directed from a wife to a husband. But however you sliced it, he was left with no pie at all.

She had her flannel nightgown on, a sure sign that she wasn't interested in anything he had to offer. She sat primly on her side of the bed painting her toenails a delicate shell pink. Zeke paged through his Bible, not really reading, though he'd set out to review what the scripture said about his demonic visitor.

"Zeke?" The pink-tipped brush kept stroking.

"Yes, darling?" Pages turned diffidently.

"Zeke, I've been praying about our argument."

He closed the Bible. "So have I, and I was thinking—"

"Zeke, please just let me say this. I grew up in a godly home, knowing the Lord, with Daddy preaching every Sunday, and all I ever wanted was to marry a man just like him. The Lord brought me you, and I just don't understand why God hasn't blessed you with a gift of preaching."

"Neither do I, sweetheart. But the gifts of the Spirit don't always come as we expect. I'll keep praying, keep trying, and maybe someday—"

"But honey, you're going to lose this church, I just know it. I expect they're already organizing the search committee for your replacement."

"Oh, Dana, you just need to give me time."

"It isn't you. It's me." The words seemed to stick in her throat, caught on sobs that shuddered through her slender shoulders. "I'm losing my faith—in you, in God. It's got me so shaken. I've prayed and prayed over this. I've asked the Lord to inspire your heart, but He doesn't answer." The brush kept moving over the same minute toenail again and again as Dana's back trembled. "What if He's not there, Zeke? What if it's all lies? I feel like I'm losing my soul!"

He sat down beside her and caressed her back. "Dana, sweetheart, surely you've prayed for things that God has denied you before. Sometimes the answer to a prayer is—"

"Don't you tell me the answer is 'no!'" She flinched and pulled away. "Not for something this important, it can't be no, it just can't!"

He took the polish out of her hands and put his arms around her, held her while she cried out her doubts and fears. Zeke knew there was a way to restore his beloved wife's faith, to restore her soul.

Greater love than this... not for the unknown masses, but for one soul. One precious soul.

“And sign here, and here, and initial on this line here, and again here.” The Devil turned the pages of the contract with practiced finesse. “Feel free to read it, if you like, though most of it is just standard legal boilerplate.”

“No,” Zeke said. “I don’t need to read it. But I want to make a...” He searched for the word. “...an addendum. Or correction, maybe.”

“Correction?”

“Yes. I don’t care about the hundreds of thousands of souls. I just want to save one—my wife, Dana.” Zeke had assumed Dana would be among the hundred thousand, but upon further reflection, he concluded that assuming with Satan would likely, as the saying sort of went, make a damned ass of you and me.

“One soul over a hundred thousand? Are you sure you want to do that?”

“It’s good enough for you,” Zeke said. “‘It’s about quality, not quantity,’ right?”

“Well played, Ezekiel Brown. So the rest of the world will hear you as you are, but to your wife, you’ll be Billy Graham and Billy Sunday and Jonathan Edwards all rolled into one pint-sized package.” He pointed his quill pen at the contract. It shimmered briefly, then floated down onto the desk. “Done.”

“She wouldn’t have been one of the hundred thousand, would she?”

The Devil smiled. “Nope.”

He’d done right, then. He took the quill from the Devil’s outstretched hand. “Before I sign, can you show me hell? Let me see what’s in store for me.”

The Devil looked almost sad. “Can’t, my friend. It’s different for everybody; you create it for yourself. It’s a big mystical thing—you’ll just have to see when you get there.”

---

The years passed. One dirt-poor church followed hard upon the heels of the last. Zeke and Dana wanted children, and sure tried hard over the years on that account, but the Lord didn’t bless them. He didn’t bless Zeke’s ministry much, either. Stewardship drives that produced nothing but empty I.O.U.s, tent revivals where the tents leaked and the only thing being revived was the income of the tent rental company, and sermons littered with enough Freudian slips to fill the lingerie department at Sears.

Zeke couldn’t have been happier. It was a good life, though not, Zeke figured, as the world would reckon it. From Tulsa to Flagstaff to Chattanooga to towns so small their names had more letters than his churches had members, Dana was there beside him. She ran the women’s Bible studies. Their modest homes were always open to the young, the old, the homeless. She spent

forty years spearheading the Angel Tree toy drives, even though Zeke and Dana were poorer than any of the unfortunates receiving their charity.

Every time they had to move on, she smiled that smile that never faded, never grew stale or old, even when it came from a face lined and wrinkled.

“So good of the board to let you go, Zeke. I guess they know your talents are too large to be contained in any one parish too long. You belong to the world, darling.” Then she’d pull the suitcases out from under the bed. Dana loved him passionately, she loved God with her whole heart, and she never doubted again.

Not once, not even on the day he stood over his beloved’s coffin and clumsily read the funeral service (I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord), did Zeke Brown ever regret his choice.

---

Hell was a church, a pulpit. Well, that was ironic, Zeke supposed, and he was grateful that so far there was no sign of pitchforks, brimstone, or lakes of fire. Though there could be brimstone. Zeke didn’t quite know what brimstone was, but he sure knew what a pulpit was for. He mounted the steps, looked out upon the blank faces seated in the pews, wondering briefly whose version of hell involved sitting in endless church, and began to speak.

“I would like to read today from Psalm Ninety-Eight. ‘Sing unto the Lord a new schlong’—no, that’s not right. ‘S...s...sing unto the Lord the whole thong’... oh, God, what’s the word? Why can’t I remember the word? What’s the word? Where are my notes? Oh, sweet Jesus, what do I say?”

But beneath the rising panic was a sort of sweet relief. Hell wasn’t strange or even very frightening. Hell was his life on Earth, and he’d stood that for seventy-four years, malaproping his way through thousands of sermons in a dozen small churches. He could stand a few more. An eternity more. For Dana.

---

**Rebecca Day** has been writing since she figured out which end of her crayon was “up.” She’s had about a dozen stories published or accepted for publication in magazines and anthologies. Her first novel, *A Strong and Sudden Thaw*, was shortlisted for the Lambda Literary Award in the SF/Fantasy/Horror category.

In addition to writing, Becky works the reference desk at a Virginia public law library, and in her non-existent spare time participates in historical re-enactment with the Society for Creative Anachronism. You can find out more at her website, <http://www.rwday.net>.