

Alex Rühle: Zippel, the Little Keyhole Ghost
(OT: Zippel, das wirklich wahre Schlossgespenst)

Sample Translation by Rachel Hildebrandt

Chapter 1

Paul is a latchkey child. Do you know what that is? These are children who have their own house keys even though they're still really small. Their parents work such long days that no one is there when they get home from school or daycare. This means they have to open the door themselves. Paul is just such a child.

At the end of his first day back to school after summer vacation, Paul clattered his key along the balusters. Clong clong cling. Clong clong clang.

On the second floor, he ran into old Mrs. Wilhelm with her flowered shopping bag. Mrs. Wilhelm was quite odd. She often walked up and down the stairs, and would wait around on various people's doormats. Sometimes Mama or Papa would open up the door in the morning, and there she'd be standing, as if she'd just been listening or peering through the keyhole.

"Hello, Mrs. Wilhelm," Paul said.

"Good afternoon, Paul," Mrs. Wilhelm replied, "I haven't seen you in a long time."

She stared at him out of her right eye as she said this. She always kept the other eye squeezed shut. When he'd been younger, this was why Paul had been so frightened of her. As time passed, he'd gotten used to the fact that she only ever looked out of the one eye. However, it was still really creepy whenever she came close and you could see all of the wrinkles around her closed eye.

"Yes," Paul replied. "We just got back last night from our vacation."

"Well? Did you have fun on your trip?" Mrs. Wilhelm asked.

"Lots," Paul said, "but school began again today."

"Are you serious?" Mrs. Wilhelm cried. "Schoooooool! Is it awful?"

"It's okay," Paul remarked, although he actually thought it was quite horrible. Not because of the lessons or his teacher, Mr. Ampermeier, who was very nice. But because of Tim and Tom who picked on him every day. And because most of the time he just stood around by himself during recess, but he didn't feel like explaining all this.

"I have to do my homework," he called. "Goodbye, Mrs. Wilhelm."

"Goodbye, Paul!" Mrs. Wilhelm answered.

Paul continued on his way up two more flights of stairs - clong clong cling, clong clong clang - until he reached the apartment with the sign that read *Fellman*. This was where he lived, along with his Mama and Papa. They were the Fellmans.

Paul stuck his key in the hole and was about to turn it when he heard a very quiet voice: “Ouch! Owowow. Zippelzappel, what was that?”

Paul listened. Was somebody inside? But the voice didn’t sound anything like his parents, more like a child. He looked around. There was nobody on the staircase. He pressed his ear against the door. He jiggled the key in the lock one more time.

“Ouuuuucccchhhh!” the voice cried. “What is this rod doing in here?”

Paul pulled out his key, crouched down low close to the keyhole, and peered into the apartment. He saw the long empty hallway. Two half-unpacked suitcases stood there, and at the end of the hall, the sun umbrella and air mattress were leaning against the bookcase. Everything was completely silent. But wait a second, what was that? Paul gave a start. On the left, in the darkness. Something was moving. Something white. Inside the keyhole! Paul jerked his head back. He stood very still by the door, held his breath, and listened. He wasn’t completely certain, but it sounded like someone was breathing. Inside of the door.

“Is anyone there?” he asked.

“Nooo-o-o,” the voice answered. “No one is here. Nobody at all.”

Paul really should have been scared, but the voice sounded so small and frightened that he didn’t feel afraid. Well, let’s just say: a little afraid.

He asked cautiously: “Really? There’s no one there?”

“Yes yes,” the voice replied. “Nobody at all. Scout’s honor, no one here.”

“But nobody is able to talk,” Paul said.

“Nobody’s doing anything. It’s just the wind.”

“The wind can’t talk,” Paul pointed out.

“That’s true,” the voice answered. “I can’t either. If nobody is what I am called / Then there’s nobody here inside at all.”

“Don’t you want to come out anyway?” Paul asked.

“No,” the voice replied, and then a little quieter: “I’m too scared.”

“I won’t do anything to you,” Paul said. “Cross my heart.”

It looked like a lamp went on inside the keyhole. And then Paul thought briefly that the lock was blowing a glowing bubblegum bubble. The thing that billowed out from the keyhole slowly grew larger. It started out looking like a tiny white pea, but it grew to the size of a ping pong ball and then a tomato and then an orange, before stretching out and softly freeing itself from the door. It then fluttered gently toward Paul, who held his breath and stared mutely at it. The thing was now about the size of a water bottle, like the one he took to school every day. Or about as large as his stuffed tiger. It had big eyes and a mouth, but other than that, it was gleaming white: “Good morning.”

“Oh. Um. It’s a little later than that. It’s 5:00 in the afternoon,” Paul explained. “It’s almost supptime.”

“Oh,” the small creature murmured. “And when is breakfast time?”

“Uh, in the morning,” Paul said. “After you wake up.”

The white creature seemed to be considering this. Then it said: “But I just woke up. Why is it already so late for you?”

“Because I get up in the morning, when the sun comes up. And when it goes down, I go to bed.”

“Aha,” the strange thing declared. “The sun. Aha.” Then it slowly sank towards the floor. “Oh,” it said, “ohohoh.”

It seemed to have little arms. Or wings. Whatever the case, it waved its little nubs in the air, but it really didn’t seem to help much, because it drifted lower and lower until it landed on the floor.

Paul crouched down: “Can I help you?”

“Nooo-o-o. I’ve only just started to learn how to float and fly. I’ll get it eventually.”

“But... What are you doing in our door?” Paul asked, as he sat down with his legs crossed.

“Oh, that’s where I live. But not in the door. I live in the keyhole.”

“Oh, alright,” Paul remarked. “Sorry about that. And how long have you been living in the d... in the keyhole?”

“Only a little while,” the white creature replied.

“Oh,” Paul said. “Were you born there?”

“I don’t bore around in my own keyhole. You are the borer. Everything was so neat and very, very cozy inside, until you stuck that rod into my home and bored all around.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Paul exclaimed. “I didn’t mean to. But why are you living in there?”

“What do you mean why? Where else should I live? I’m a keyhole ghost!”

The little thing said this rather proudly. As it did so, it even bobbed up a little from the floor. It drifted up onto Paul’s knee as it said: “Keyhole ghosts live in keyholes.”

“Like this one?” Paul asked.

“Yes,” the ghost answered. “Just like this one. Honestly.” It studied Paul quizzically: “Where else should they live?”

“Well, in a big old house or castle. Like the ones where the kings lived, and the knights and the princesses.”

“Are you a king?” the ghost asked.

“No, of course not. I’m Paul.”

“Ah, a Paul. Is that something like a knight?”

“That’s my name, silly. It’s what I’m called. What about you?”

The ghost fluttered its right hand a little in the air and said: “Not at all.”

“Your name is *Not At All*?”

“No. I mean I’m not at all cold. I think it’s a little warm out here, actually.”

Paul had to hold back a smile. “I mean, what is your name? Do you have one?”

“I don’t know,” the keyhole ghost replied. “Maybe... Karaputzonogipolatusomau?”

“But that’s not a name,” Paul declared.

“Why not? It sounds big and dangerous,” the ghost insisted, spreading out its little arms as if trying to frighten Paul. With a very grim expression and its arms extended, it floated back and forth across Paul’s leg: “Tremble, all you kings and knights and Pauls and everyone else! Here comes Karaputzo... Uh... what’s my name again?”

“I don’t know,” Paul admitted.

“Zippelzappel,” the ghost said. “I’ve gone and forgotten my own name.”

“Zippel!” Paul cried.

“What?” the ghost asked.

“Zippel,” Paul said. “Your name is Zippel.”

“Really? How do you know that?”

“I don’t. I just think that Zippel suits you.”

“Really?” The ghost looked thoughtful. “Zippel. Aha. Does that sound big and strong and dangerous?”

“Well,” Paul hesitated. “I think it sounds like a keyhole ghost. Like a...” Like a very small keyhole ghost, Paul wanted to say, but instead he said: “Like a keyhole ghost in an apartment building.”

“Good. Very good. That’s exactly what I am: a keyhole ghost in an apartment building. In that case, my name is Zip...,” Zippel suddenly broke off. “Pst. Someone’s coming.”

He was right. A light turned on downstairs, and footsteps could be heard. The stairs creaked.

“Ohohoh,” Zippel moaned. “It’s bound to be a crone-oop.”

“A what?”

“A crone-oop.”

“You mean, a grownup?” Paul asked.

“That’s what I said. Aren’t you listening to me?”

“Are you scared of them?”

“Oh yes, oh yes, oh yes. Crone-oops are bad. All of them. Very bad. Don’t give me away, okay?”

“I promise,” Paul said.

Like a flash of light, the little ghost flitted through the air towards the door. It then looked like the lock sucked it in. The ghost grew smaller and smaller, and after two seconds, it was gone. Light flickered momentarily in the keyhole, but then everything fell dark again.

“Hello, Paul.”

Paul’s Papa was wearing a suit, like he did every time he came home from work. He looked tired.

“Oh, hi, Papa,” Paul replied from where he was still sitting by the door. “Did you get off early today?”

It was still afternoon. Papa never came home from work until evening.

Instead of answering, Papa said: “Why are you sitting here on the staircase?”

“I... Uh, I forgot my key this morning.”

Paul’s Papa rummaged around for the keyring in his pocket. “I’m always telling you to think twice before you leave the house: Do I have everything? The key? Money and...”

“Okay okay,” Paul interrupted, jumping up. “I know already. Key, money and backpack. May I have your key? I’d like to unlock the door.”

“Oh,” Paul’s Papa replied. “Sure.” He handed him the keyring.

Paul quickly peered into the keyhole and whispered: “Be careful.” He slowly pushed in the key.

“What did you say?” Papa asked.

“Nothing,” Paul declared. He whispered again: “I have to turn it now. Watch out.”

“Are you feeling alright?” Papa asked, unsure why Paul was murmuring into the door.

“Yes,” Paul said. “Just fine. And you?”

He carefully turned the key.

“Hmmm,” Papa replied. “I’m okay.”

As it turned in the lock, the key suddenly wiggled a little.

“Oh,” Paul whispered. “Did I hurt you?”

“Are you talking to me?” Papa asked.

“Yes,” Paul replied. “How was work?”

“Work,” Papa repeated. “Yes... well...” Papa seemed to hesitate. He then continued: “The same as usual. A little boring.”

“Ah,” Paul said, without really listening. He had finished turning the key in the lock. The door opened.

“And how was your day?” Papa asked.

“Mine was boring, too.” Paul lied.

An hour later, his Mama delivered another terrible surprise at supper. They were having noodles. More accurately, overcooked noodles. To be completely accurate, it was a pile of noodle mush. Mama’s thoughts had been distracted during the cooking process. They had been focused on her performance next week. Paul’s Mama was a singer. An opera singer. She was part of the chorus, and sometimes she was even allowed to have a solo. Soloists are the singers that sing all by themselves. This means everyone can hear their mistakes. Paul’s Mama was crazy about singing, but she also got crazy excited when she had to sing on her own. That was why she spent the whole time thinking about next week’s performance and not about the noodles, and why they now had to eat relatively sticky, overcooked spaghetti.

Nonetheless, Paul said that it tasted very good. Papa didn’t say anything. He just ate his noodles in silence. And then came the sentence that shocked Paul so badly. Mama asked Papa if he could come home early from work on Friday.

“Uh, what?” Papa said, as if he hadn’t been listening. “Why?”

“I told you about it on phone earlier,” Mama said. “The lock’s being changed out.”

“Whaaaaat?” Paul gasped, as he lowered his fork full of clumpy noodles. “Which lock?”

“The one in the front door,” Mama explained. “We’ve been meaning to have it done for a long time.”

Paul exclaimed: “But that lock is so nice!”

“Since when do you think our lock is nice?” Mama asked.

“It’s my favorite lock.” Paul cried. “It really is. It’s the nicest lock ever. It has such a great hole to look through. And... And it sounds so nice when you turn the key in it. And it smells good, too.”

Mama and Papa stared at each other in confusion.

Then Papa said: “It’s ancient. In terms of technology, it’s a little behind the times. Today there are security locks that...”

“But you love ancient things,” Paul interrupted. “Like the brown chairs in the living room. You’re always telling me to be careful around them since they’re so nice because of how old they are. And Mama’s opera music is really old, and yet she still says that it’s the nicest music ever.”

“True,” Mama said, “but a lock shouldn’t sound nice. It needs to function. And for some time now, it’s been sticking whenever you turn the key. We’ve wanted to change it out for ages, which is why I talked to Mr. Nitzsche about it and we’re finally getting a new one.”

Mr. Nitzsche was the building manager, and he did all the repairs.

“Oh,” Paul said. “Um... When will that be?”

“I already said. On Friday, three days from now.”

“Oh, really? On Friday?” Papa asked.

“Doesn’t anyone listen to me?” Mama snapped, annoyed. “Yes, this Friday!”

Papa gazed at his plate of noodle mush and ketchup puddles, and said nothing.

All three of them stared silently at their plates, until Mama continued: “Hey, Paul, Papa and I have to quickly go to Parents’ Night at school.”

“Huh?” Paul’s Papa replied. “That’s today?”

“Yes, I told you about it twice. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” Paul’s Papa said.

His answer was supposed to sound relaxed, but it came out sounding quite strange. Something wasn’t right with him, but Paul didn’t pick up on it, because he was thinking

about Zippel the whole time. As for Mama, she was put out that nobody was listening to her.

When she asked if it was alright if she left Paul on his own for that long, he said: “Oh sure, that’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, really,” Paul said. “I can put myself to bed when it’s time.”

Mama wavered for a moment, since it was actually her responsibility to put Paul to bed every evening, but then she sighed in relief. “Thank you, Paul. We’ll hurry. I’m sure you won’t have to put yourself to bed.”