

# Transformer

by Chad Oliver

Our town is turned off now, all gray and lazy, so this seems like a good time to begin.

Let's not kid ourselves about it, Clyde—I know what you're thinking. I don't blame you. You're thinking there's nothing from one wall to the other that's as completely and thoroughly boring as some motherly old dame gushing about the One Hundred and One fugitives from Paradise which are to be found in Her Home Town. A real insomnia killer, that's what you're thinking. A one-bell monologue.

Suppose we get things straight, right from the start.

I may look like one of those sweet little old ladies who spend all their time in the kitchen slipping apple preserves to bleary-eyed children, but I can't help what I look like, and neither can you. I never set foot in a kitchen in my life, and of course there aren't any kids in our town—not physically, anyway. I don't say I'm the most interesting gal you ever met, Clyde, but I'll tell you for sure you never yakked with anyone like *me* before.

Now, you take our town. If you want it straight, it's the damndest place you ever heard of. It stinks, but we can't get out. ELM POINT is the name on the station, that's what we have to call it, but it's as crazy as the rest of the place. There's no point in ELM POINT, and the only trees I ever saw are made out of sponge rubber.

You might stick around for a minute and listen, you see—things might get interesting.

One more thing we might as well clear up while we're at it. I can hear you thinking, with that sophisticated mind of yours: "Who's she supposed to be telling the story to? That's the trouble with all these first-person narratives." Well, Clyde, that's a dumb question, if you ask me. Do you worry about where the music comes from when Pinza sings in a lifeboat? I feel sorry for you, I really do. I'll tell you the secret: the music comes from a studio orchestra that's hidden in the worm can just to the left of the Nazi spy. You follow me? The plain, unvarnished truth is that I get restless when the town's turned off for a long time. I can't sleep. I'm talking to myself. I'm bored stiff, and so would you be if you had to live here for your whole life. But I

know you're there, Clyde, or this wouldn't be getting through to you. Don't worry about it, though.

This is strictly for kicks.

Okay, so let's have some details. I live in a town that's part of the background for a model railroad. Maybe you think that's funny, but did you ever live in a subway? I want to be absolutely clear about this—you're a little dense sometimes, Clyde. I don't mean that ELM POINT is a town that's located on a big railroad that's operated in an exemplary, model manner. No. I mean I live on a *model* railroad, a half-baked contraption that's set up in a kid's attic. The kid's name is Willy Roberts, he's thirteen years old, and we don't think he's a god that created our world. In fact, if you want my opinion, Willy is a low-grade moron, and a sadist to boot.

So my world is on a big plywood table in an attic. My town is background atmosphere for a lousy electric train. I don't know what I'm supposed to be. A motherly old soul glimpsed through a house window, I guess. An intimate detail. It gives me a pain.

If you think it's fun to live in a town on a model railroad, you've got rocks in your head.

Look at it from our point of view. In the first place, ELM POINT isn't a town at all—it's a collection of weird buildings that Willy Roberts and his old man took a fancy to and could afford. It isn't even sharp for a model railroad town; the whole thing is disgustingly middle class.

Try to visualize it: there's a well in the middle of the table, a hole for Willy Roberts to get into when he works the transformer and the electric switches. The whole southern end of the table is covered with a sagging mountain made of chicken wire and wet paper towels. The western side has got a bunch of these sponge rubber trees I was telling you about, and just beyond them is an empty area called Texas. There are some real dumb cows there and two objectionable citizens who come to our town every Saturday night and try to shoot up the place. The Ohio River starts in the northwestern corner of the table and flows into the southeast, where I guess it makes a big drop to the floor. (No one has ever gone over to look.) Our town and a mountain take up the northern end of the table and part of the eastern side. That's where I live, as a matter of fact—on the eastern side, between the Ohio River and the water tower.

Now catch this building inventory, Clyde—it'll kill you. We've got a police station and a firehouse in North Flats, at the edge of the mountain where the tunnel comes out. There's a big tin railroad station with a red roof. There's a quaint old frame hotel that was left over from the Chicago Fire, and right behind it there's this diner that was supposed to look like an old streetcar. There's one gas station with three pumps, but no cars. There's a big double spotlight on a tin tower right across from

my house; I have to wear dark glasses all the time. There's seven lower-class frame houses with dirty white curtains in the windows; Humphery and I live in one of them. Humphery—that's my husband, or would be if Willy Roberts had thought to put a preacher in this hole—works in the tin switchman's house up the tracks. Whenever one of those damned trains comes by he has to goose-step out and wave his stupid red lantern. Clyde, he hates it. Then there's a cattle pen on a siding, with no wind to blow the smell away, if you get what I mean.

That's about it—a real Paradise.

Willy's got two trains on the table now. One is a flashy passenger job stashed full of stuck-up aristocrats—you know, the kind who are always reading the *Times* when they go through your town. The other is a freight train that doesn't carry anything; it just grinds around the track like a demented robot, and its only job, as far as *I* can tell, is to shuttle itself onto a siding and look respectful when the passenger train full of city slickers hisses by. As if all this racket weren't enough, Willy's got him a switch engine, too, and he keeps it in our front yard. It's got a bell.

There's more, too, but we'll get to that.

How do you like our town, Clyde? Interesting? I want to tell you something else: our town is planning to commit a murder.

Guess who.

You just stick around awhile.

You know, our town is all gray and lazy when the current isn't on, just like I said. Nobody's got much energy; I must be just about the only one awake in ELM POINT at night. It gets pretty lonesome.

But the door to the attic is opening now, and here comes Willy the Kid. Hang on, Clyde—all hell will pop loose in a minute. You'll have to excuse me for a minute; I have to wake Humphery up and get him down to his tin house. It's terrible—you almost have to dent Humphery to wake him up like this. And for what? Every time he wakes up, he has to go to the damnfool switchman's house and make with the red lantern.

Fine thing. Well, I'll be back later. And say, Clyde, if you ever see this Willy character, tell him not to shake the whole lousy table when he drags his body into the well, will you?

. . . . .

Willy Roberts surveyed his model railroad without pleasure. He could remember the time when it had given him a real hoot, but after all he was thirteen years old now. He felt slightly ashamed that he should want to mess with it at all, but it was better than getting kicked around in football by all the big guys in the neighborhood. And Sally had said she was going to the show with Dave Toney, damn her.

Willy clicked on the transformer rheostat and watched the lights come on.

He knocked with his knuckles on the blue tin roof of the switchman's house. "Let's get with it, Humphery boy," he said. He always called the switchman Humphery—always had, ever since he was a kid and had carried on long, friendly conversations with the switchman. Boy, what a creep he had used to be. "Come on Humph, or I'll tear your arm off. Whaddya want, boy—time and a half for overtime? Union shop? On the ball—here comes the Black Express, full of FBI agents after the atom spies ..."

He pressed the "start" button, and the passenger train slipped its wheels on the tracks and picked up speed. It zipped by the switchman's shack, and out came Humphery with his red lantern, right on schedule. "What a brain you got, Humph," Willy said. "Boy, you're a genius." He speeded up the passenger train and sent it careening through the tunnel into ELM POINT. He blew the whistle. He made artificial black smoke pour out of the locomotive's smokestack.

Willy waited until the Black Express had got by the siding and wavered into the end mountain tunnel, and then he sent his freight chugging out of the cattle pen onto the main line. He sent *that* rattling through ELM POINT, tweaking old Humphery's cap when he jerked out with his lantern, and then stopped it on the bridge over the Ohio River. He clapped his hands together.

The Black Express charged full speed across Texas, knocking a cow off the track, and ploughed full-tilt into the stalled freight on the bridge. Both engines jumped the track and landed in the cellophane of the Ohio River. One little man fell out of the caboose and got caught under a wheel.

Willy grinned.

"Pretty good, hey, Humphery?" he said.

He cut the power for a second, righted the trains, and set them in reverse to see how fast they would go. Then he ran the freight back onto a siding and began to send the Black Express backward and forward over the switch, so he could watch old Humphery dart in and out of his tin shack waving his lantern like a demon.

"Get with it, Humphery," cried Willy. "You only live once!"

Humphery didn't say anything, Willy noticed.

Too busy, probably.

. . . . .

Well, now you've met our lord and master, Clyde. A real All American Junior; I tell you, ELM POINT is a madhouse when that kid is in the attic. It's bad enough on the rest of us, but it's killing Humphery.

Things have settled down a little at the moment. The freight is sitting in the siding by the cow pen, and Willy's got the passenger job on automatic. Once every forty-seven seconds it comes yelling and smoking through my side-yard, and five seconds later poor Humphery has to stagger out and wave his red lantern at the snobs in the club car.

The spotlights are on, too, but Willy hasn't turned off the light in the ceiling yet, so it isn't too bad. Willy's sitting in the well reading a sex magazine, so I guess he won't be wrecking any more trains for a while.

Maybe you wonder what will happen to the man who fell out of the caboose in the wreck. More likely, you don't care. But I'll tell you his name: Carl. None of us have any last names. Carl's too busted up to fix, so Willy will throw him in the wastebasket. Tender, isn't it? It chokes you all up with sentiment. We'll sort of have a funeral for Carl after the town gets turned off again, if we can stay awake, and you know what we'll be thinking? We'll be thinking that's the end of the road for all of us here in ELM POINT—the wastebasket.

It's a great life. You'd love our town, Clyde.

Let me tell you about our town, Clyde. It's different when the current's turned on. You'd hardly know the old dump, believe me.

Everybody has to go through the proper motions, you see? Like poor old Humphery with his lantern. There's Patrick, the cop, out in front of the police station. He just stands there blowing his tin whistle like he was Benny Goodman or somebody. Inside, they've got this one prisoner, name of Lefty. He's never been outside a cell; I don't know what he's supposed to have done. Then there's a joker over at the firehouse. All he's done for the last seven years is slide up and down this silly pole. Maybe you think *he* isn't sore at night.

Everyone that can, rushes around like mad when the current's on. It's the only time we're really active and feeling good, do you see? We can't add anything to what's

already here in ELM POINT, but we can use what we've got as long as Willy can't see us. Some of us, like poor Humphery or the policeman, have to work when the current's on, because that's their job. But some others, the background characters, can sneak off and visit once in a while. The favorite place is inside the hollow mountain. You'd be surprised at what goes on in there, Clyde.

The only restroom in town is in the gas station, and that's all the place is used for. It's ridiculous. They only know how to serve one dish at the diner, because that's all that was on the counter. Bacon and fried eggs and coffee. You think about it, Clyde. Two meals a day, every day for seven years. That's a lot of bacon and eggs. You lose your taste for them after a while.

The train runs right by the side of the hotel, only two inches away. It rattles the whole thing until it's ready to fall apart, and every time it goes by it pours black smoke in through the upstairs window. There's a tenant up there, name of Martin. He looks like he's made out of soot.

The whole town is knee-deep in dust. Did you ever see a kid clean anything that belongs to him? And there's no water, either. That cellophane in the Ohio River may look good from where you stand, but it's about as wet as the gold in Fort Knox. Not only that, but it crinkles all the time where it flows under the bridges. It's enough to drive you bats.

You're beginning to see how it is, Clyde. This town is ripe for one of those lantern-jawed, fearless crusading reporters; you know, the kind that wears the snap-brim hat and the pipe and is always telling the city editor to stop the presses—but Willy forgot to give us a newspaper.

It isn't much of a life, to my way of thinking. You do the best you can, and get up whenever some dumb kid hits a button, and then you get tossed in the wastebasket. It seems sort of pointless.

You can't really blame us for deciding to kill him, can you, Clyde? What else can we do? After we get rid of him, there's no telling what will happen to us. But it's like living in the panther cage, you see—a move in any direction is bound to be an improvement.

Know what we're going to do, Clyde?

We're going to *electrocute* Willy.

With his own electric train.

We think that's pretty sharp.

. . . . .

I don't want you to get the idea that I'm just a sour old woman, Clyde, a kind of juvenile delinquent with arthritis. I'm not, really. You know, a long time ago, when Willy was younger, even ELM POINT wasn't so bad.

Humphery wasn't working so hard then, and at night, when our town was all gray and lazy, I used to try and write poetry. I guess you find that pretty hard to swallow, and I admit that it wasn't very good poetry. Maybe you wonder what I found to write about in this dump. Well, one night they left the attic window open and I heard a *real* train, away off in the distance. I wrote a poem about that. You probably don't care about poetry, Clyde. Anyhow, if you're like the creeps around here, you wouldn't admit it if you did.

I'll tell you, though—it's funny. Sometimes, a long time ago, I'd go and sit down by that silly cellophane river and I'd almost get to where I liked it here.

If it just hadn't been for that damned train every forty-seven seconds whenever the current was on ...

It's too bad Willy had to change, huh, Clyde? He wasn't so bad before—just kinda dumb and goggle-eyed. He and Humphery used to get along pretty good, but like I say, it was a long time ago.

I can see I'm boring you, talking about the past and all. You think it's morbid. I guess you're right; I really shouldn't have mentioned it.

Here comes poor old Humphery, dragging in from the switchman's house. Look at him—man, he's really beat to the socks. He can hardly put one foot in front of the other. He's old before his time, Humphery is.

You'll excuse me for a while, won't you? Humphery and I have to go down to the diner for a cup of coffee. Maybe we'll have some bacon and eggs, too, if we can stand it again. I hadn't noticed how late it was getting.

We'll have to go to work on that transformer tonight, if some of us can stay awake. This stuff has got to go, don't you agree?

I'll see you later, Clyde.

. . . . .

A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since I last had a bull session with you, Clyde—or at least it *would* have if there'd been any water in that lousy Ohio River. All it does is crinkle. You have no idea how that can get on your nerves.

Our town is turned off again, all gray and lazy. I know I use that phrase too much, but I'm afraid I've got kind of a literal mind, if you know what I mean. ELM POINT *is* gray and lazy when the current's turned off, so that's what I say it is.

I guess I'm a realist, Clyde.

I'm not the only one awake tonight, though, I'll tell you that. I swear I've never seen so many people up and around at night in this burg. Even Smoky—he's the guy who has to slide up and down that pole over at the firehouse—is sort of waddling around. He's kind of bowlegged, you know.

To tell you the truth, we're all pretty nervous.

A bunch of the guys have been doing their best on the transformer over in the kid's well. It wasn't easy to get to it, but they managed it by using one of the crane cars from the freight train.

It's awfully quiet here in town tonight, even with all the people up and around. I don't know when I've heard it so quiet. You probably think we've turned chicken or something. You probably think we're scared.

You're right.

I wonder how you would feel. Have you ever been *disconnected*, Clyde?

We've got a chance, the way we figure it. If we can just get rid of Willy, maybe they'll let us alone for a while. We'd have strength enough to send a crew down to plug in the town once in a while, when nobody was around. It would be so wonderful—you have no idea. It isn't asking very much, is it?

Of course, it can't last long. Maybe we'll all get stuffed back in a box after a while. Maybe they'll melt us down. Maybe, if we're lucky, we'll be given away and go to some other town.

But if we can only live a week like human beings, it'll be worth the effort. I guess I'm getting maudlin. Sorry, Clyde. You know how it is when you get old.

Sure, we're scared. Win or lose, though, what are the odds? I ask you. Anything's better than the wastebasket, that's the way we figure it.

The attic door is opening, Clyde. Light is streaming in from the stairs.



I feel terrible.

Here comes Willy.

. . . . .

Willy Roberts wiggled under the table and came up in the control well. The train wasn't a kick like the pinball machine, no argument there, but at least it was cheaper. He hadn't won a free game in a month.

He knocked with his knuckles on the blue tin roof of the switchman's house. "Let's get with it, Humphery boy," he said. "Oil up the old leg and light the red lamp."

Willy surveyed the tabletop with a jaundiced eye. Let's see now, what were the possibilities? If he played his cards right, it just might be *possible* to set the switch engine on the siding down by the cow pen, and then start the Black Express from the gas station and the freight from Texas. That way, he could have a three-way wreck.

It wouldn't be easy, though. It would take some doing.

He swatted the tin roof of the switchman's shack again and drummed on it with his fingernails. "Dig this, Humphery," he said.

The situation, he reflected, had definite possibilities.

Willy took the transformer rheostat between his thumb and index finger and clicked it on.

Then he pressed the red "start" button with the middle finger of his right hand.

There was a small yellow spark and a faint smell of burning insulation. Willy jerked his tingling finger away and stood up straight, staring at his model railroad accusingly.

"Damn it," he said, "that *hurt*."

He reached out quite deliberately and ripped the transformer from its track connection. He pulled out the wall plug with a jerk on the wire. Then he took careful aim and threw the transformer as hard as he could at the spot where the walls converged in the corner of the attic.

The transformer hit with a thud, chipping the wall plaster. It bounced off the wall,

crashed into the top of the mountain, and rebounded off again to land with a squashing smash on the police station. The plastic policeman with his tin whistle was under it when it fell.

Willy socked the tin switchman's house with his fingernail, almost knocking it over. "Think you're pretty cool, don't you, Humphery boy?" he asked, rubbing his smarting finger. "After all I've done for you, too."

He studied his model railroad thoughtfully for a long time. Finally, Willy made his decision. He was getting too old for this junk anyhow, he reasoned. What he needed was something else.

Willy smiled at the railroad. "You know what I'm going to do to you?" he asked loudly. "I'm going to convert you to cash. How do you like that?"

He turned out the light and left the attic.

. . . . .

No current at all is coming through, and our town is black.

How did you like that, Clyde? All that work on the transformer and what do we get? One stinking spark. Like sticking your finger on a lightning bug. Deadly as a water pistol.

I'm not too surprised, to tell you the truth. Patrick the cop warned us; he was in another town before Willy bought him, and they tried the same thing there. Not enough volts for anything but a little shock. Maybe you've been shocked by a model railroad yourself, Clyde. You think about it a little.

Sure, we knew it wouldn't work. So what? You've got to believe in something, Clyde, even when you know you're kidding yourself. What else is there to do? And maybe we could hope that by some chance, just this once ...

But it's over now, been over for a week. This is the first I've felt like talking. You know. There wasn't much left of Patrick when the transformer hit him. I guess Lefty got his inside—nobody's had enough energy to dig in and see.

Poor old Humphery is hardly himself anymore; he got shaken up pretty badly when Willy socked the switchman's shack. I guess the worst part is mental, though. It's hard to see how things can get much worse in ELM POINT.

Do you know a good psychiatrist, Clyde?

I guess I sound like one of those old bats who spend their waking hours giving recitals of their aches and pains and their sleeping hours dreaming about men under their beds. I'm getting to be crummy company. But it *is* hard to talk now. It used to be that when the transformer was turned off, a little current would seep through anyhow, but not anymore. We don't even have a wire into the wall plug. The joint is like a morgue in a coal mine.

I hear footsteps on the stairs.

The door is opening—the light hurts my eyes.

Here they come, Clyde.

A whole *herd* of them.

. . . . .

Willy Roberts rubbed his hands together expectantly. Just about every kid in the neighborhood had showed up, and some of them were fairly well loaded.

"Take it easy, Mac," he said. "One at a time. Let's not mess up the table, guy—this is a valuable set."

Not bad, he told himself. Pretty good in fact. No doubt about it—he had a genius for business.

"Whatcha want for the gas station, Willy?" asked Bruce Golder from down the street.

"What'll you give me?"

"Fifty cents."

"Fifty *cents*?"

"Fifty cents."

"Sold."

Willy pocketed the money. It felt good.

"How about the switchman, Willy?" said Eddie Upman, the rich kid from up the hill.

Willy hesitated, just for a second. He and Humphery had been together for a long time. But what the devil. He wasn't a kid anymore. Humphery had cost five dollars new, and prices had gone up since then.

"Two bucks four bits," Willy announced, crossing his fingers.

"Make it two bucks even," said Eddie Upman, taking out his billfold.

Willy looked around, but no one topped the bid. "Sold," he said, and Eddie Upman took Humphery and put him in a sack.

"Let's get rid of the houses before we start on the track and stuff," Willy said. "Who wants 'em?"

Nobody said anything.

"They're *good* houses," Willy insisted. "People inside and everything. See?"

Silence.

"Aw, come on. A buck for the lot."

No takers.

"Fifty cents. This is the last chance on these, you guys. I'll burn 'em before I'll give 'em away."

Mark Borden slowly fumbled in his pockets and came up with a quarter, four nickels, and five pennies. "I'll take them," he said. "I guess I can use them."

"Sold!" said Willy, pocketing the money. "Now, what am I offered for the good mountain? I'll make it easy on you. Let see, about a buck ought to be right ..."

Willy Roberts felt good. The table was being cleaned quicker than he had hoped, and the table itself ought to bring in some real dough. He smiled broadly when Bruce Golder bought the mountain.

Willy knew that he was a real man now.

.....

I'm back, Clyde.

I guess you saw how they fought over me. Willy almost had to throw me into the fire. I'm a real queen, I am. I drive men mad.

I wish he'd burn me, Clyde. I really do.

I'm determined not to get all morbid and gloomy, so you won't be hearing from me again. I can't hold out much longer, and if I have to make with the blues I'll do it alone.

Maybe you'll be wondering about me—where I am, what I'm doing. Probably you don't give a damn. You're just like all the rest of them, aren't you? But just in case—

Let me tell you about our new town, Clyde. It'll kill you.

You see, I'm it. Or just about.

That's right. ELM POINT looks like Utopia from where I'm sitting. Mark Borden, the one that bought me, can't afford a real model railroad set-up, and his house doesn't even *have* an attic. So about once a week he takes us all out of his dirty closet, sets up his lousy circle of track, and starts up his wheezing four-car freight train. It isn't even a scale model. Big deal.

He's got four houses that he spaces alongside the track when he's running the train; he doesn't much like the other three that he got from Willy, so he leaves them in the closet *all* the time. That's all there is, Clyde. Just me and the train. The other houses aren't even occupied, and the engineer on the freight is so embittered by now that he won't even wave.

I just sit in my stinking rocking chair and look out the window. Oh, it's delightful. I can see an old blue rug, a dresser with initials cut in it, a pile of dirty clothes in the corner, and a bed that's never made.

Once in a while Mark, the little angel, gets out his lead men and plays soldier. The first thing he does, see, is to build him a Lincoln Log fort, about a foot from my house. Then he sticks all these lantern-jawed jokers with broken rifles along the walls, and then he backs off about nine feet and sets up his Coast Defense Gun. You'd love that, Clyde. The Coast Defense Gun is a huge blue job that works on a big spring. Mark puts marbles in the barrel, cocks the spring, and then hollers "Fire!" like a maniac. The whole lousy gun jerks up on two folding stilts and hurls all the marbles at the log fort by my house.

Chaos results, Clyde.

Logs fly all over the place. Marbles swish through the air and roll under the bed like thunder. My house has two big holes in it, and all I can do is sit in this quaint old

rocker and pray. I don't know whether to pray for a hit or a miss. Periodically, one of the marbles hits a soldier square in the face and knocks his head off.

Charming.

And there's one other minor detail. Ants. We have ants. I don't think I'll tell you about them, though. You just think about it awhile.

That's about all. You see how it is, Clyde. I've enjoyed talking to you, but now there doesn't seem to be much to say. I won't bother you anymore.

There's only one thing, Clyde. I wouldn't even ask, but I *am* getting old and corny. It's about Humphery. The one named Eddie Upman bought him, and he's got a lot of money. I heard Willy say so. That probably means a big table and another town and maybe some trees and rivers.

I wouldn't want you to go to any trouble, Clyde. But if you should ever be in Eddie Upman's house, maybe you could go up to the attic for a minute. Maybe you could see Humphery. You wouldn't have to do anything drooley or sentimental; I know you couldn't stand that. But maybe you could sort of accidentally leave the current on low when you leave, without running the trains.

Old Humphery would like that.

Would you do that, Clyde—for me?

The End

© 1954 Fantasy House, Inc.

First published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, November 1954.

Copyright renewed by Chad Oliver in 1982.

Reprinted by permission of the Estate of Chad Oliver.