



The Aggravation of Elmer

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IT WAS the darnedest traffic jam I'd ever seen in White Plains. For two blocks ahead of me, Main Street was gutter to gutter with stalled cars, trucks and buses.

If I hadn't been in such a hurry to get back to the shop, I might have paid more attention. I might have noticed nobody was leaning on his horn. Or that at least a quarter of the drivers were out peering under their hoods.

But at the time it didn't register. I gave the tie-up a passing glance and was turning up the side street toward Biltom Electronics—Bill-Tom, get it?—when I saw Marge threading her way to the curb. She was leading a small blonde girl of about eight, who clutched a child-size hatbox in her hand. Marge was hot and exasperated, but small fry was as cool and composed as a vanilla cone.

I waited. Even flushed and disheveled, Marge is a treat to look at. She is tall and slender, with brown eyes that match her hair, a smile that first crinkles around her eyes, then sneaks down and becomes a full-fledged grin—

But I'm getting off the subject.

"Honestly, Bill!" Marge said as she saw me. "The traffic nowadays! We've been tied up for fifteen minutes. I finally decided to get off the bus and walk, even though it is about a hundred in the shade."

"Come along to the shop," I suggested. "The reception room is air-conditioned and you can watch the world's first baseball game telecast in color. The Giants versus the Dodgers, Carl Erskine pitching."

Marge brightened. "That'll be more fun than shopping, won't it, Doreen?" she asked, looking down at the kid. "Bill, this is Doreen. She lives across the street from me. Her mother's at the dentist and I said I'd look after her for the day."

"Hello, Doreen," I said. "What have you in the hatbox? Doll clothes?"

Doreen gave me a look of faint disgust. "No," she piped, in a high treble. "An unhappy genii."

"An unhappy—" I did a double take. "Oh, an unhappy genii? Maybe he's unhappy because you won't let him out, ha ha." Even to myself, I sounded idiotic.

Doreen looked at me pityingly. "It's not a he, it's a thing. Elmer made it."

I knew when I was losing, so I quit.

I HURRIED Marge and Doreen along toward our little two-story building. Once we got into the air-conditioned reception room, Marge sank down gratefully onto the settee and I switched on the television set with the big 24-inch tube Tom had built.

Biltom Electronics makes TV components, computer parts, things like that. Tom Kennedy is the brains. Me, Bill Rawlins, I do the legwork, and tend to the business details.

"It's uncanny the way all those cars suddenly stopped when our bus broke down," Marge said as we waited for the picture to come on. "Any day now this civilization of ours will get so complicated a bus breaking down someplace will bring the whole thing to a halt. Then where will we be?"

"Elmer says silly-zation is doomed!" Doreen put in happily.

The way she rolled the word out made me stare at her.

Marge only nodded. "That's what Elmer says, all right," she agreed, a trifle grim.

"Why does Elmer say silly-zation is doomed?" I asked Doreen.

"Because it's getting hotter." The kid gave it to me straight. "All the ice at the North Pole is gonna melt. The ocean is gonna rise two hundred feet. Then everybody who doesn't live on a hill is gonna be drowned. That's what Elmer says and Elmer isn't ever wrong."

Doreen they called her! Why not Cassandra? The stuff kids spout these days!

I gave her a foolish grin. I wanted Marge to get the idea I was really a family man at heart. "That's very interesting, Doreen. Now look, there's the baseball game. Let's watch, shall we?"

We weren't very late after all. It was the top half of the second inning, the score one to one, Erskine in trouble with two men on and only one down. The colors were beautiful. Marge and I were just settling back to watch when Doreen wrinkled her nose.

"I saw that game yesterday!" she announced.

"You couldn't have, sweetheart," I told her. "Because it's only being played today. The world's first ball game ever broadcast in color."

"There was a game on Elmer's TV," Doreen insisted. "The picture was bigger and the colors prettier, too."

"Absolutely impossible." I was a little sore. I hate kids who tell fibs. "There never was a game broadcast in color before. And, anyway, you won't find a color tube this big any place outside of a laboratory."

"But it's true, Bill." Marge looked at me, wide-eyed. "Elmer only has a little seven-inch black and white set his uncle gave him. But he's rigged up some kind of lens in front of it, and it projects a big color picture on a white screen."

I saw that she was serious. My eyes bugged slightly. "Listen," I said, "who is this Elmer character? I want to meet him!"

"He's my cousin from South America," Doreen answered. "He thinks grownups are stupid." She turned to Marge. "I have to go to the bathroom," she said primly.

"Through that door." Marge pointed.

Doreen trotted out, clutching her hat box.

"ELMER thinks grownups are stupid?" I howled. "Listen, how old is this character who says silly-zation is doomed and can convert a black and white broadcast into color?"

"He's thirteen," Marge told me. I goggled at her. "Thirteen," she repeated. "His father is some South American scientist. His mother died ten years ago."

I sat down beside her. I lit a cigarette. My hands were shaking. "Tell me about him. *All* about him."

"Why, I don't know very much," Marge said. "Last year Elmer was sick, some tropic disease. His father sent him up here to recuperate. Now Alice—that's his aunt, Doreen's mother—is at her wits' end, he makes her so nervous."

I lit another cigarette before I realized I already had one. "And he invents things? A boy genius? Young Tom Edison and all that?"

Marge frowned. "I suppose you could say that," she conceded. "He has the garage full of stuff he's made or bought with the allowance his father sends him. And if you come within ten feet of it without permission, you get an electric shock right out of thin air. But that's only part of it. It—" she gave a helpless gesture—"it's Elmer's effect on everybody. Everybody over fifteen, that is. He sits there, a little, dark, squinched-up kid wearing thick glasses and talking about how climatic changes inside fifty years will flood half the world, cause the collapse of civilization—"

"Wait a minute!" I cut in. "Scientists seem to think that's possible in a few thousand years. Not fifty."

"Elmer says fifty," Marge stated flatly. "From the way he talks, I suspect he's figured out a way to speed things up and is going to try it some day just to see if it works. Meanwhile he fools around out there in the garage, sneering about the billions of dollars spent to develop color TV. He says his lens will turn any ordinary broadcast into color for about twenty-five dollars. He says it's typical of the muddled thinking of our so-called scientists—I'm quoting now—to do everything backward and overlook fundamental principles."

"Bro-ther!" I said.

Doreen came trotting back in then, with her hat box. "I'm tired of that game," she said, giving the TV set a bored glance. And as she said it the tube went dark. The sound cut off.

"Damn!" I swore. "Must be a power failure!" I grabbed the phone and jiggled the hook. No dice. The phone was dead, too.

"You're funny," Doreen giggled. "It's just the unhappy genii. See?"

She flicked over the catch on the hatbox.

And the picture came back on. The sound started up. "—swings and misses for strike two!" The air conditioner began to hum.

Marge and I stared. Mouths open. Wide.

"YOU did that, Doreen?" I asked it very carefully. "You made the television stop and start again?"

"The unhappy genii did," Doreen told me. "Like this." She flicked the catch back. The TV picture blacked out. The sound stopped in the middle of a word. The air conditioner whispered into silence.

Then she flipped the catch the other way.

"—fouls the second ball into the screen," the announcer said. Picture okay. Air conditioner operating. Everything normal except my pulse and respiration.

"Doreen, sweetheart—" I took a step toward her—"what's in that box? What *is* an unhappy genii?"

"Not unhappy." You know how scornful an eight-year-old can be? Well, she was. "Unhap-*pen*. It makes things unhappen. Anything that works by electracity, it stops. Elmer calls it his unhappen genii. Just for fun."

"Oh, now I get it," I said brightly. "It makes electricity not work—unhappen. Like television sets and air conditioners and automobiles and bus engines."

Doreen giggled.

Marge sat bolt upright. "Doreen! *You* caused that traffic jam? You and that—that gadget of Elmer's?"

Doreen nodded. "It made all the automobile engines stop, just like Elmer said. Elmer's never wrong."

Marge looked at me. I looked at Marge.

"A field of some kind," I said. "A field that prevents an electric current from flowing. Meaning no combustion motor using an electric spark can operate. No electric motors. No telephones. No radio or TV."

"Is that important?" Marge asked.

"Important?" I yelled. "Think of the possibilities just as a weapon! You could blank out a whole nation's transportation, its communications, its industry—"

I got hold of myself. I smiled my best I-love-children smile. "Doreen," I said, "let me look at Elmer's unhappen genii."

The kid clutched the box.

"Elmer told me not to let anybody look at it. He said he'd statuefy me if I did. He said nobody would understand it anyway. He said he might show it to Mr. Einstein, but not anybody else."

"That's Elmer, all right," Marge muttered.

I found myself breathing hard. I edged toward Doreen and put my hand on the hatbox. "Just one quick look, Doreen," I said. "No one will ever know."

She didn't answer. Just pulled the box away.

I pulled it back.

She pulled.

I pulled.

"Bill—" Marge called warningly. Too late. The lid of the hatbox came off in my hands.

THERE was a bright flash, the smell of insulation burning, and the unhappen genii fell out and scattered all over the floor.

Doreen looked smug. "Now Elmer will be angry at you. Maybe he'll disintegrate you. Or paralyze you and statuefy you. Forever."

"He might at that, Bill," Marge shuddered. "I wouldn't put anything past him."

I wasn't listening. I was scrambling after the mess of tubes, condensers and power packs scattered over the rug. Some of them were still wired together, but most of them had broken loose. Elmer was certainly one heck of a sloppy workman. Hadn't even soldered the connections. Just twisted the wires together.

I looked at the stuff in my hands. It made as much sense as a radio run over by a truck.

"We'll take it back to Elmer," I told Doreen, speaking very carefully. "I'll give him lots of money to build another. He can come down here and use our shop. We have lots of nice equipment he'd like."

Doreen tossed her head. "I don't think he'll wanta. He'll be mad at you. Anyway, Elmer is busy working on aggravation now."

"That's for sure!" Marge said in heartfelt tones.

"Aggravation, eh?" I grinned like an idiot. "Well, well! I'll bet he's good at it. But let's go see him right away."

"Bill!" Marge signaled me to one side. "Maybe you'd better not try to see Elmer," she whispered. "I mean, if he can build a thing like this in his garage, maybe he *can* build a disintegrator or a paralysis ray or something. There's no use taking chances."

"You read too many comics," I laughed it off. "He's only a kid, isn't he? What do you think he is? A superman?"

"Yes," Marge said flatly.

"Look, Marge!" I said in feverish excitement. "I've got to talk to Elmer! I've got to get the rights to that TV color lens and this electricity interruptor and anything else he may have developed!"

Marge kept trying to protest, but I simply grabbed her and Doreen and hustled them out to my car. Doreen lived in a wooded, hilly section a little north of White Plains. I made it in ten minutes.

MARGE had said Elmer worked in the garage. I kept going up the driveway, swung sharp around the big house—and slammed on the brakes.

Marge screamed.

We skidded to a stop with our front end hanging over what looked like a bomb crater in the middle of the driveway.

I swallowed my heart down again, while I backed away fast.

We had almost plunged into a hole forty feet across and twenty feet deep in the middle. The hole was perfectly round, like a half section of a grapefruit.

"What's this?" I asked. "Where's the garage?"

"That's where the garage should be." Marge looked dazed. "But it's gone!"

I took another look at that hole scooped out with geometrical precision, and turned to Doreen. "What did you say Elmer was working on?"

"Agg—" she sobbed, "agg—agg—aggravation." She began to bawl in earnest. "Now he's gone. He's mad. He won't ever come back, I betcha."

"That's a fact," I muttered. "He may not have been mad, but he certainly was aggravated. Marge, listen! This is a mystery. We've just got to let it stay a mystery. We don't know anything, understand? The cops will finally decide Elmer blew himself up, and we'll leave it at that. One thing I'm pretty sure about—he's not coming back."

SO that's how it was. Tom Kennedy keeps trying and trying to put Elmer's unhappen geni back together again. And every time he fails he takes it out on me because I didn't get to Elmer sooner. But you can see perfectly well he's way off base, trying to make out I could have done a thing to prevent what happened.

Is it my fault if the dumb kid didn't know enough to take the proper precautions when he decided to develop anti-gravitation—and got shot off, garage and all, someplace into outer space?

What do they teach kids nowadays, anyway?

—ROBERT ARTHUR

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