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DADDY FIX?

By AL SEVCIK

ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

*Here's a harmless-looking
little short-short you'll
read in ten minutes or less.
But we promise you'll re-
member it for a long,
long time.*

FROWNING through his headache, Marlin Read pushed tentatively at the front gate. "Damn," he muttered, "it's sticking."

Hesitating, as he did every afternoon, Marlin gazed briefly at the shimmering sterility of his neighbors' force-fields, comparing them with the small blue

gate and trim, white picket fence that encircled his own home. As usual, the fence won out. "It may be anachronistic and inefficient compared to a field, but, homemade or not, it's mighty pretty." He let the pride glow in him for a few seconds; then shoved open the gate, gritting his teeth at the sudden squeak that bounced across his brain.

"I'll grab some tools and fix that right after dinner," Marlin promised himself. He stepped through, gently closing the gate behind him.

"Daddy! Daddy's home!" His two sons exploded from the front door, followed immediately by a little, bouncy canine that yapped its way up the front walk after them. The four-year-old reached him first and held up a thin, square shaped box. "Daddy fix?"

Marlin smiled and lifted his eldest son. "So this is how you greet your old man?" The box, he saw, was Ronny's electronic space flight game which flashed, rang, and buzzed appropriate lights, bells and buzzers as one moved a space ship from Pluto to Mars. A handful of wires hanging dejectedly from one corner testified to the unit's inoperativeness.

Holding Ronny in his left arm, he knelt down as Davy, uncertainly trying his first steps, came stumbling up waving a small metal space man, one leg of which dangled awkwardly. Marlin guessed what was coming.

"Daddy fix!"

DADDY FIX?

Laughing, his headache forgotten, Marlin straightened his youngest's drooping diapers and lifted him in his other arm. Then, scowling in mock anger, "Every day there's something broken around here. You know, I think you kids wreck your toys on purpose just to watch me fix them again."

Ronny's quick, "Oh, no, Daddy!" convinced Marlin that he had hit close to the truth. But he laughed again, hugged his sons, and said, "Okay, daddy fix. Let's get all the things together."

Sliding his feet to avoid stepping on the excited dog that bounced about his legs, Marlin carried the boys, the disconnected rocket game, and the fractured spaceman into the house.

"Honey, I'm home!" He set down his passengers and disengaged the dog's teeth from his sock. "Darn mutt, always in the way."

Alice was in the kitchen. "Hi, lover." She kissed him. "Can you take a look at the food processor? It doesn't seem to be working right."

Marlin sniffed. A slight odor of burning hung in the kitchen. "I see what you mean," he said, ambling over to the electronic oven and poking at some of the multi-colored knobs. "It's probably the timer R-C circuit. I'll bring up some new condensers from the shop and have a go at it after dinner. Okay?"

"You're wonderful," she said.

"Yeah," he admitted, and smiled.

"Come on, kids. Down to the work shop!" As he started across the kitchen the dog barked suddenly and jumped at his feet. Marlin stumbled, nearly falling. "Dammit!" He kicked at the dog which leaped backwards out of range and started yapping at him.

Trying to ignore the barks and the first slow throbs of a returning headache, Marlin picked up Davy and carried him downstairs to the work shop. Ronny ran ahead with the broken toys.

The spaceman's leg was easily repaired with a molecular welder, and after Marlin gave it a slight polish the patch couldn't even be seen. Rewiring the rocket game took a little more time but wasn't difficult.

"How do you always know what to do, Daddy?"

"Well, son, I guess it's because I've been repairing gadgets and toys ever since I can remember."

Ronny watched the tools and the work with wide-eyed attention. He hardly breathed until Marlin was finished, then he grabbed the rocket game and ran up to the kitchen. Marlin heard his high, excited voice, "Mommy, dad can fix *anything*!"

Smiling to himself, Marlin laid the tools aside, picked up Davy and carried him into the living room. Then he went upstairs to wash.

Yap, yap, yap! The dog ran up the stairs after him, snapping

at his heels. "One of these days," Marlin growled, "I'm going to disconnect your blasted yapper." The dog darted between his legs, nearly tripping him. "Damn mutt!"

The dog cried and whined at the bathroom door. When Marlin opened the door the dog barked. Cursing, he took a quick pill, his headache had bloomed and each bark was a jagged hurt.

As he walked to the head of the stairs the little canine barked again and jumped at his leg. Marlin stumbled and grabbed wildly at the railing, catching it just as he started to fall. A muscle stabbed pain through his shoulder.

"That does it!" Enraged, he grabbed the mutt in one hand and hurled it down the stairs. It yelped once, thumped on the bottom steps, twitched, and lay still.

Ronny, across the room, stared in horror. Davy screamed and started to run, but fell, sobbing. Ronny stood paralyzed, tears rolled across his cheeks.

Immediately sorry, ashamed of his temper, Marlin ran down to them. "It's all right, kids. It's okay. Daddy will fix it." Picking up a screwdriver, he approached the still form of the dog.

Marlin unscrewed a plate in the dog's side and inspected the apparatus in its interior. The fall, he saw had dislodged the control gearing, which he pressed back into place with his finger. Tears flowing, Ronny watched him, open mouthed.

Replacing the plate, Marlin pressed a small stud on the dog's side and the animal bounded instantly into action, yapping, if anything, louder than before. Tears turned to smiles.

Marlin went out to the kitchen. Alice handed him a martini. As they talked he could hear the boys playing in the other room.

"Come to dinner, kids!"

They heard Ronny's voice. "Davy, come!"

Alice and Marlin traded smiles. "I think," she said, "big brother is a little bit bossy."

Ronny's voice rose in exasperation. "Come, Davy!"

"No."

"Come or I'll . . . That does it!"

Sounds of scuffling.

Frowning, Marlin stood. "I'd better see . . ."

"No, Ronny!"

A child's scream. A crash.

Panicked, Marlin lunged into the room. Davy lay at the foot of the stairs, still, in an ever-widening pool of blood.

White faced, Ronny looked up at his father. "Daddy fix?"

THE END