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Cover illustration by Chesley Bonestell

(Space ship in trouble with meteor swarm; Europa and Jupiter in background)

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The Invisible Playmate of childhood is understandably one of the great themes of fantasy fiction: it presents an impossibility that still seems in retrospect disturbingly real to many of us, and it gives the author a natural opportunity to go beyond simple entertainment into serious psychological implications. After such masterpieces as John Collier's Thus I Refute Beelzy and Ray Bradbury's Zero Hour, it might seem that the Playmate theme was exhausted; but Garrett Oppenheim has come up with a fine fresh variant in this story from "Liberty," May 1950 — a surprisingly bitter and tragic story to have appeared in a mass-circulation slick, and a beautiful example of eerie skill in treading the precise borderline between everyday reality and the unknown terror of the impossible.

The Punishing of Eddie Jungle-Spit

by GARRETT OPPENHEIM

EDDIE THE ARROW MAN was four years old when Eddie Jungle-Spit came to live with him. The rain was loud outside; and inside, spilt water on the tablecloth was creeping softly toward the edges when the second Eddie arrived. He sprang full-blown from the fragments of a Bohemian glass fruit bowl.

Their mother had filled the bowl with white chrysanthemums from the yard. It was her last act before dressing and the first act in a long, rainy afternoon she had really enjoyed. Level lamplight pierced the red glass, diffusing color over the white cloth. Silver and crystal flashed with ruby pin points. Color — that was what Lynn Gabriel wanted so much.

The dress she chose was wine-colored. You are so beautiful, she whispered into the mirror; so beautiful it's a shame. Her gray eyes drank in the lovely reflection, the pale gold hair, the fragile mouth, then peered into their own depths, filling with sympathy. No one would ever value her so truly as the one lover from whom she was forever separated by the thickness of a mirror. She touched the cold glass and thought of her husband.

Leonard, looking at her tonight through the eyes of his guests, would be proud, awed, and afraid to touch. As if he could preserve this loveliness by keeping it under a glass bell, bringing it out only for display. Too

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scared to care for her as a person. There was little he did care for these days beyond the quantities of sore feet on which he was trudging to a dreary success in chiropody. And soon it would be too late.

It would have been too late long ago if it hadn't been for Eddie. She smiled, listening to the rhythmic babble downstairs, where he was playing with his archery set. The child had eyes, beautiful flecked eyes, that saw her almost as she saw herself. But not quite. Every now and then his father looked at her out of those eyes with an expression of — was it fear? Whatever it was, she must drive that look away, drive away everything but the happiness she wanted to give him.

Downstairs the play grew more boisterous. "I'm Eddie the Arrow Man," he bragged. "I'm bigger than a tiger and I'm gonna shoot you full of holes."

There was a ringing crash, a moment of stunned silence.

The Bohemian glass bowl lay in four pieces. An arrow tipped with blunt brass rested among the chrysanthemums.

"Oh, damnation!" she said softly. She did not even notice the small boy at her side until his frightened whisper stabbed through her irritation: "Don't spank me, Mommy. Please don't spank me."

She glanced at him and her lips curled slightly. He had a hangdog look that made him seem for a moment his father's child. Then his wide flecked eyes met hers, and it was unbearable that he should be afraid of her.

Lynn disliked being reminded of the one time she had spanked her child. Ordinarily she didn't believe in spankings, but — well, the music box was a special case. They had bought it in Zurich on their honeymoon, and it played *Ich Liebe Dich* with a sad tinkle that brought back the dark, unhappy man she had wed and was losing.

"Spank you?" she laughed, crowding him into her arms. "Of course not! It wasn't *my* little boy who broke the glass. It was *another* little boy — another Eddie."

"Yes," he agreed quickly. "Another Eddie broke the glass — on purpose."

Lynn wagged her head. "Wasn't that wicked of him! I think we'll have to give *him* a spanking."

She set her own child down, reached for the imaginary one and thrashed him so convincingly she almost expected to hear his screams. The absolved boy joined in, scolding:

"Bad Eddie, bad Eddie! You broke the glass on purpose."

Bad Eddie made a good anecdote. The guests were amused, and Leonard's pleased smile had said she was making the right impression. That was im-

portant, of course, because it might bring in more sore feet to Leonard.

Leonard was such a hovering host, particularly with doctors. He called them "Doc," and the word had a glossy, toadying sound. "You can forgive a child anything," he announced, "if only it makes good telling. Isn't that so, Doc?"

At that point Lynn excused herself.

It was time for a story, but tonight the request was: "Mommy, tell me about bad Eddie."

Lynn sat on the edge of the bed. "Him? Oh, he's just a disgusting little boy who's always doing hateful things."

"Where does he come from?"

"Why, the jungle, I suppose."

"Like a tiger," the child decided. "But he looks like me," he added.

A face, illuminated from within, took shape in the darkness. First the blurred gold touse of hair, then one by one the features — the bright flecked eyes, the laughing mouth, the eager uptilted head.

"Very much like you," she mused aloud. "Almost the spittin' image of you." There was a difference, though. The eyes were narrowed and hostile. The mouth, too. There was just the hint of a sneer in its laughter.

"Yes," the boy said. "And his name is Eddie Jungle-Spit, 'cause he spits like a tiger."

The face in the dark bared its teeth and spat at her. With a mental push she thrust it back.

"But *my* name is Eddie the Arrow Man," the child rambled on, "'cause I'm good and I'm bigger than a tiger."

"Are you now? Well, in that case you better give Mommy a great big kiss good night."

He hugged her close.

"I love you, Eddie the Arrow Man," she whispered fiercely.

The rain stopped before morning, leaving a limpid fall sky. Lynn was up early, feeling curiously taut and alert. Something was different this morning — teasingly but pleasantly different. As she passed the door of the nursery it became a tingling certainty: Somebody else was in the house.

"His name's Eddie Jungle-Spit," she told Leonard at breakfast, "and he spits like a tiger."

Leonard's narrow flecked eyes quizzed her through tortoise-shell-rimmed glasses. He seemed about to say something. Instead, he smiled, folded his napkin, and rose to go. She went with him as far as the front door, but when he stooped to kiss her, she drew back from the eye-level close-up of his nose. It was too heavy for the small, still boyish head.

"Pretty please," she demanded.

"Pretty please," he said docilely, and she offered a cool cheek.

As she mounted the stairs she heard Eddie's voice in the nursery.

"When you wind it here it goes by itself and the bell rings like this." The toy fire engine clanged as it rolled over the linoleum. "No, you can't play with it, 'cause you're bad and you might break it."

Lynn paused at the open door. "Who's your friend?"

"He's not my friend," the child answered promptly. "Mommy, look. He broke my shovel."

Lynn examined the two pieces. The handle had been worked loose and the red metal was doubled up. It was a small enough shovel. But Lynn seriously doubted that Eddie the Arrow Man had the strength to bend it. Not unless he had first wedged it in the closed doorway, which seemed a little beyond his ingenuity. But of course he must have done exactly that. Otherwise — She laughed it off brightly.

"Just for that," she said, "we won't take him out shopping with us, darling."

The boy turned sharply on his invisible playmate. "You can't come along, see? You broke my shovel. You stay right here!"

Eddie Jungle-Spit stayed. And after days and weeks Lynn got used to his being there. She got used to — even enjoyed — the illusion of four feet romping in the nursery, or the sound of two voices (always merging into one as soon as she came close).

Eddie Jungle-Spit broke things and was spanked. He repeated nasty words he heard on the street and went supperless to bed.

It was Eddie Jungle-Spit who found Leonard's office scissors and stripped the piano of nearly a square foot of veneer before Eddie the Arrow Man was caught with the scissors in his hand. But Lynn knew whom to blame, and it was Eddie Jungle-Spit who went to the basement and stood with his face to the wall for three hours.

It was he who knocked Jane Carroll off her tricycle, cutting her eye so severely it required stitches. This time Lynn took a real cane to Eddie Jungle-Spit, beat him violently, and locked him in the basement for a whole day with nothing to eat or drink. She wanted to make sure that Eddie the Arrow Man was impressed.

Later the Gabriels paid an uncomfortable call on the Carrolls, and Leonard, making amends, looked particularly stoop-shouldered.

"Still," she argued when they were home, "the two Eddies put together aren't any worse than one normal child." She hadn't discussed the new Eddie with Leonard lately. It had become a kind of secret between her

and Eddie the Arrow Man. But Leonard was attacking, talking of punishment, and Lynn for once found herself on the defensive.

"Aren't you afraid it'll kick back?" he asked. She looked at him in astonishment.

"Kick back?"

"This fairy tale you've rigged up. All this make-believe. Aren't you afraid —"

"Afraid of what, Leonard?"

He shot a quick look at her, but reflected lamplight made his glasses into bright opacities. Her own gaze, calmly demanding, never wavered. As he looked down again he seemed to shrink in his chair.

"Don't you think I'm a fit mother?"

"Of course you are, Lynn." He frowned miserably. "Only — oh well, I guess you know what you're doing."

She moved through those days with a sure step, conscious that imaginary feet rushed through the house at her bidding and a voice from another world spoke at her command. She gave more and more rein to Eddie Jungle-Spit.

It was only when she actually saw him that she felt shaken. But these glimpses were at first so rare, so fleeting that she had only to will the apparition out of existence. As she mastered the trick of it, she began to enjoy this too.

She always knew when she was going to see him. Walking on the driveway from the garage she would have a sudden clutching certainty that he was watching her from the nursery window. Then she would look up to meet for an instant those familiar flecked eyes, bright with hate, set in the beautiful face of her son. But something was happening to that face since the rainy night she had conjured it out of the darkness. The mouth was twisted into a fixed sneer now. The features were somehow malignant beyond their years.

But she never saw it long enough to analyze it. Her will lashed at it and it vanished.

The drawn-taut feeling in her body told her it was there that winter afternoon. The tension had increased by such imperceptible degrees she could not say how long she had known it was behind her. She was reading in Leonard's big chair, stopping now and then to watch the steady snow pile up in the twilight and wondering if he was going to be late.

Each time she herded her thoughts back to the book it cost her a greater effort. It was no use. Her whole body was listening for something in back of her, and a thrill of anger told her what it was. Don't look at him, she

warned herself. Don't even give him the satisfaction of turning around.

She read a paragraph again, and then again. The words spun round in a senseless abracadabra.

She had played this game too long. Eddie Jungle-Spit must go. Tonight. Before he became too real. She nailed her attention to the book. To look around, to make any move now, would be a surrender to — yes, madness.

But the muscles at the back of her neck ached with the strain. She could not wait much longer.

It came at last, as she had known it would, in complete silence. It sped past her cheek (if she had turned, it would have struck her), making a slight current of air and jarring the book in her hand. She felt the blood drain from her head, and for a long moment she sat there, white and still, gazing at the arrow that rested on her lap. It was a very real arrow, even if it was a toy, and there could be no doubt what it meant.

The silence was broken by the sound of the bow clattering to the rugless floor of the foyer. She rose from the chair and turned to face him. Eddie the Arrow Man was staring at her from the doorway, his eyes wide with fright.

"I didn't do it, Mommy," he said.

"I know, Eddie, I know." Lynn knelt down and held the boy firmly by both arms. "Now I want you to tell Mommy exactly what happened."

"*He* did it. Bad Eddie did it."

"Don't you know you're not to bring your bow and arrow downstairs?"

"I didn't. Eddie Jungle-Spit brought it down. He said you can't spank me, 'cause *he* did it. And he doesn't care if you spank *him*."

"Why did he bring it down?"

"We were playing Indians. He said to come down the stairs on tiptoe, like real Indians."

That, then, was the sound that had alerted her while she was reading — the sound of Eddie the Arrow Man tiptoeing down the stairs while the invisible Eddie led the way, silently and purposefully.

"And then?"

Eddie's troubled eyes were fixed on a point of air behind her. Lynn repeated her question.

"He just shot you," Eddie said without shifting his gaze. "Are you gonna spank him?"

"No, Eddie, I'm not going to spank him. It doesn't do any good. I'm going to send him away." She rose to her feet and called out, "Did you hear that, Eddie Jungle-Spit?"

"He's laughing at you, Mommy, 'cause you're talking to him over here and he's really behind you."

"It doesn't matter," Lynn snapped. "He hears me and he knows what I mean. He'd better not let me catch him in this house again."

"He says he doesn't care." There was a note of defiance in the child's voice as he fell into his habitual role of translator. "He says he can take care of himself and he hates this house anyway."

Lynn opened the front door. Beyond the porch the white flakes drifted quietly in the gathering darkness. The street lamps were haloed in blue. The icy air swept in, and she drew herself erect.

"Out you go, Eddie Jungle-Spit!" With all her might she willed him away. "And don't you ever come back here as long as you live."

Something did indeed go out of the house. She could almost trace its progress across the trackless snow down the walk to the street.

A car rolled up through the snow, its skid chains clanking softly, and turned into the driveway. Eddie the Arrow Man began to jump up and down. "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!"

It was as if a blight had passed. Lynn saw her child with new eyes — or was it he who was changing? The scared look was gone. He seemed all bounce and sparkle, and the weeks went by without breakage or a naughty word. It was as if she had separated the boy into his good and bad components and then cast out the bad.

The two of them threw themselves joyfully into the pre-Christmas whirl of shopping and planning. Lynn was determined to make the most wonderful Christmas he had ever known. Eddie caught the spirit and dictated four letters to Santa Claus, revising to the last excited hour.

Christmas morning Eddie rushed downstairs to shout at a giant tree that towered gaudily over a pyramid of gifts. Lynn helped him unwrap the packages, drinking up the contagion of his delight. There was everything he had asked for, and a mountain more. For Lynn there was a brooch of gold shaped like a butterfly, its wings and eye sockets set with emeralds.

"Oh!" she gasped (as if it weren't in abominable taste). "Oh, Leonard, you shouldn't have!"

Fortunately a college president broke his toenail, and Leonard was summoned away. Lynn said it was a shame, but reveled in the thought of spending the afternoon alone with Eddie. He was such fun any time that his father wasn't around.

All day the phones were ringing, the old one and the new one. It seemed as if the whole world wanted to wish the Gabriels a Merry Christmas. One of the callers was Eddie Jungle-Spit.

He didn't use the big phone, of course. He called on the new one, which belonged exclusively to Eddie the Arrow Man. It was a copy of the larger

one, with a dial and a realistic bell that worked by turning a crank.

The toy phone rang more persistently than the real one, and Lynn saw herself burlesqued in the child.

"Hello? Oh, hello, hello, how are you?" he inquired chattily. "I'm fine. Yes. Merry Christmas. Happy New Year. The same to you. We have a great big Christmas tree. And lots and lots of presents. Yes. No, I can't come Wednesday. I have to go to a wedding announcement. No, you can't come here. Mommy won't let you. Because you're bad and you break things. G'by."

This conversation was different from Eddie's other calls. Mostly he babbled without interruption. But this time his pauses and replies gave an uncanny illusion that someone was actually talking at the other end of the line — which was absurd, of course, because there was no line, just a short piece of colored cord connecting the receiver with the base.

A fragment of memory was teasing her. Something had happened — somewhere, yesterday.

"If that's Eddie Jungle-Spit," she said, "we don't want him to call here any more."

Eddie the Arrow Man looked up at her with clear eyes in which there was a trace of pain. "He wants to see the Christmas tree. I told him he can't come in 'cause he's bad and he has to stay in the tool shed."

Lynn pressed her palms against her eyes. It was piecing itself together now. Yes, it was yesterday afternoon. She had come home in the car, laden with the makings of Christmas dinner and last minute gifts. As she lifted her bundles from the trunk she was aware of a disagreeable oppression in the air, and her body tensed with a familiar sensation. It seemed to emanate from behind her, in the storage room of the garage which the Gabriels called the tool shed.

She gathered up her packages and hurried into the house, resolutely thrusting the feeling away. What she had willed into being she could will back into oblivion.

She tried to sound matter-of-fact. "How long has he been in the tool shed?"

"Oh, he came there yesterday."

"Did you see him there?"

"Yes."

"You talked to him?"

"Yes."

"Who gave him permission to live in the tool shed?"

Eddie the Arrow Man shrugged. "I don't know," he said. And the one

admission of ignorance lent a weird veracity to the rest of his story.

She tried to force her thoughts into some kind of order. Her memory was playing tricks on her. That recollection of yesterday was a fraud — it had to be. Very likely the thought of Eddie Jungle-Spit had come into her mind without her realizing it and had subtly depressed her. To believe more was to lean over the edge of reason.

One thing was clear. There must be no Eddie Jungle-Spit. Eddie the Arrow Man must face it.

“Eddie, I want to tell you something.”

The boy put down his telephone, came to her and leaned against her knees while his hands examined the butterfly brooch she was wearing. She drew him closer, smiled into his eyes for a long moment.

“There isn’t any Eddie Jungle-Spit,” she said slowly, and caressed his beautiful perplexed face. “It was all make-believe, you see. Just a little game we were playing.”

The wide flecked eyes stared at her with earnest disbelief. “But, Mommy, I *saw* him.”

Lynn groped for words. “Do you know what imagination is?”

He shook his head vaguely.

“Imagination makes us think things which aren’t real. Imagination made you think you saw Eddie Jungle-Spit in the tool shed. But he wasn’t really there. Because there really isn’t any Eddie Jungle-Spit. Now do you see?”

Eddie the Arrow Man did not see. He looked distressed, angry. “There is, too!” he blurted. “I don’t want you to talk to me like that.”

“You only *think* there is,” Lynn fought on, almost pleadingly. “If he were real, you could touch him and he could touch you and pick up things and do things, just like you and me.”

“But he *does!* I did touch him. And he did pick up things. And he broke things too. And he tried to shoot you with my bow and arrow.”

“He didn’t, he didn’t!” Lynn cried. “We only made believe he did. It was really just you all the time. There is no other Eddie.”

She knew that a note of hysteria was creeping into her voice. Her hands gripped his fragile shoulders as if her strength would force him to believe. He burst into tears.

“Mommy, don’t talk to me like that! I don’t like you when you t-talk like that!” He tried to wrench himself free, but she held on to him.

“Don’t cry, Eddie darling! Mommy’s only telling you this because she loves you.”

“No, you don’t!” he shouted. “You hate me. You said I t-tried to shoot you!”

A great white light snapped on inside her, and suddenly she saw what she was saying to the child. She was telling him that he, Eddie the Arrow Man, had done all the terrible things they had blamed on Eddie Jungle-Spit, that this monstrous creature was none other than himself.

The white light snapped off, leaving only darkness and failure. She let go of the child and sank back in the chair. Daylight ebbed from the windows too, but she did not get up to switch on the lamps, or even the tree lights. Eddie the Arrow Man stood by the tree among his toys, quiet as on the day she had spanked him.

She heard his phone ring, but the sound came to her from worlds away. She was only dimly aware of the muffled conversation that went on in the dark. But presently he slammed the receiver back into its cradle and spoke to her:

"He says he hates you and he's gonna come over and kill you."

Lynn started. Was this her son's voice? He spoke not as if he were translating for the other one, but as if the fury were his own. For a frozen moment the words hung in the air, a menace without sense.

Then, slowly, their meaning unfolded. It stretched through her until every part of her was trembling with a strange new emotion.

It was mortal fear.

So Eddie Jungle-Spit was going to kill her. She knew it was no childish threat. This monster, this caricature of the child she loved, was quite capable of making good his word. That is, if she let him.

He must die. It was that simple. And Eddie the Arrow Man must know, once and for all, that this nightmare was dead. He must see it with his own eyes. It must be real — real.

She knew what she had to do now. The sound of Leonard's car on the driveway was a signal. She sprang from the chair, grasped her son by the wrist and half dragged him to the front door, flicking on lights as she went.

"What are you doing, Mommy?" he asked in a terrified whisper.

"You'll see." She threw the door open for her husband and spoke rapidly, before he set foot in the house. "Leonard, you've got to help me."

"What goes on here? Trying to catch a cold, you two?"

"Listen, will you?" Lynn said. "Eddie Jungle-Spit's out in the tool shed."

She could have struck him for the way he laughed. "Well, well! That's fine on Christmas Day. I didn't know he was still —"

"Don't be a fool!" she interrupted. "Do as I tell you. I'll explain later."

Leonard searched her face, and what he saw there sobered him a little. "What are we going to do?"

"Drown him," Lynn said. "Drown him in the bathtub."

Eddie the Arrow Man started to cry. "Don't drown me in the bathtub, Mommy. Please don't drown me in the bathtub."

She turned on him in exasperation. "Don't be stupid! You're a good boy and we love you. But we hate Eddie Jungle-Spit. And we're going to drown him. You can watch him die."

"Lynn," Leonard laid a cold hand on her arm. "Hadn't we better talk this over?"

"Oh, shut up, you imbecile!" She flung his hand down. "Can't you see this is a matter of life and death?"

He seemed to shrink before her eyes.

Without pausing for coats or boots, she led the way across the snow to the garage. Eddie Jungle-Spit was there all right. Lynn could feel the evilness of him seeping through the door of the tool shed. She braced herself as Leonard opened the padlock.

The door had hardly creaked on its hinges when the invisible thing inside tried to rush past her, but she blocked its way and held it firmly. She knew, exultantly, that she was still the stronger one.

They marched it back to the house and upstairs to the bathroom. Lynn locked the door from the inside and gave the key to Leonard. Eddie the Arrow Man watched in frightened fascination while the tub filled from an angry spout of water. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes wild.

"Will it hurt?" he asked softly.

"Yes," Lynn said; "but only until he's dead." She turned to the invisible Eddie and addressed him solemnly:

"Eddie Jungle-Spit, you have been a bad, hateful boy ever since you first came into this house. You broke things. You harmed people. You had a wicked tongue. You even threatened to kill me. So now we're going to drown you. Then you'll be dead and nobody will ever see you again."

That, she felt, was clear enough for even a four-year-old to understand. She reached for her prey with both hands and lifted him off the floor. She could feel the weight of him and the hot struggle in her arms. But she was strong now.

"Mommy," her own child whimpered, "I'm afraid."

"You'll never be afraid any more," Lynn said. She hoisted the thing over the tub, plunged it under.

"Don't stand there, Leonard. We'll hold him down and count to a hundred. And that'll be the last of Eddie Jungle-Spit."

Leonard leaned over the tub, acting out the execution with an odd realism, the way Lynn wanted it. She counted steadily, deliberately, slowing down for effect as she neared the end.

"Ninety-eight — ninety-nine — one hundred!"

There was a sharp outcry behind her and Eddie was pounding on the locked door with his fists. Leonard opened it, and the boy raced for the stairs.

"Get him back," Lynn ordered. "Don't let him get out."

Leonard bounded down the steps and caught hold of the child at the front door. Eddie squirmed loose and darted back up. He ducked past his mother, dashed into the nursery, and slammed the door. Next instant Leonard and Lynn were in after him.

In the dim light from the hall they could make out the huddled shape on the bed. Leonard went to it. "There," he said gently. He laid a hand on the small heaving shoulder and turned the boy around. There was a sharp hiss.

The man took a quick step backward.

"He spat at me," Leonard said.

Lynn reached for the toggle switch. The room leaped into being under the naked white light. In that light she saw what was on the bed. Every nerve of her body shrieked out for help, but not a sound came from her throat.

She clutched blindly at her husband.

The face was not a human one. In the bright deadly eyes, in the twisted mouth and contorted features she could read every beating, every starving, every brutally thought-out punishment and death sentence she had inflicted on it. Yet somehow, somewhere in that criminal malformity she could still recognize the face of her son. It glared at her from under a gold touse of hair with a malignance in which she could fathom only one sure, clear meaning.

"What is it, Lynn? What's the matter?" The alarmed eyes of her husband were peering at her. "For pity's sake, what's happened — what's wrong?"

"Happened!" she breathed. "Can't you see it?" Her voice broke. "It's *him* — the *other* one. It was the wrong one we drowned!"

