

ERIC ELECTRON

by Michael Zimmerman

"I'm Eric *Fucking* Electron! Don't they know who I am?!" the children's entertainer yelled from the driver's seat to the highway ahead.

"Yes, I know, dear. Just try to calm down," said Ellen, his wife and assistant.

"No I won't calm down!" He slammed his hand against the steering wheel. The car engine whirred as the dashed yellow lines flew past with increasing quickness.

Ellen sat in the passenger seat. She sat straight up and placed her hands on the dashboard. Her tension increased with the car speed. "It will be okay. It's just one show."

"Those kids. Those fucking kids!" The man bit his lower lip. He took a deep breath. The car slowed. "I told that little bitch to hold the damn beaker. That's it! Hold a beaker. Is that so hard?"

"She's just a kid. She was nervous."

He grunted. "Fucking kids," he said, calmer, as he returned the car to reasonable speed on the desolate country road.

"We still need these shows."

"I know. I know," he said. "Where's the next one?"

She slipped a paper from her bag and unfolded it.

"Brighton Middle School, third grade class."

"Oh, this one's going to be even *worse*. Remember last year?"

"Yes."

"The kids were like deer caught in headlights, for God's sake."

She looked at her watch. "We have plenty of time. You really could've taken that stuff off."

He glanced in the rear view mirror. He wore a spiky multicolored wig that touched the car headliner and glasses with bright-colored frames. He had lately begun wearing it more often, outside shows, in the bedroom even. Ellen always asked him to take it off, politely, after one such request resulted in a lot of screaming about method acting, as if he was the Marlon Brando of midwestern regional children's entertainers.

"Why?! Then I'd just have to change back into it," he said. "I swear if these kids are as annoying as that last group of pricks..."

"It will be fine. Just stay calm."

"Easy for you to say," he mumbled.

She looked out the window at corn fields and grazing cows blurring together into one long scene.

He flicked the right turn signal at the next country road. It was a tiny, cracked, and patched single lane.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

He didn't answer. He slowed the car as he approached an old wooden covered bridge. The Victorian era architecture seemed unsuited for twenty-first century travel. The bridge was in a valley, and the road was surrounded by dense midwestern foliage. He skidded to a stop at one of the gravel patches alongside the bridge entrance. He slammed the shifter into park, and pulled open the center console of the car.

"Oh, Eric. Please don't. Can't we just do this one more show?"

He shook his head, and gave her a stare. It was a look she'd seen more in recent weeks and months, and she broke eye contact quickly.

"Do I tell you how to live your fucking life?" he said. "Fifteen years. Fifteen years I've put up with this."

Her chin wrinkled. She brought her hand up to her mouth and turned to the trees outside.

He retrieved a small metal case from the console. Inside was a small mirror. He untied a ripped, knotted plastic sandwich baggie, and tapped out a few white clumps. He looked at his wife, who still gazed out the window, breathing in short, stuttered breaths. He shook his head as he chopped the clumps into powder with a razor blade, separated it into two perfect lines, and took a cut straw from the metal case.

"You know, you're not so perfect, either," he said. He breathed out, put the straw in his nose, and bent down, pinching one nostril closed. He took a deep breath. He held it for a few moments and tilted his head back. "How's Peter?"

She turned back to him, surprised. She felt her heart sink and her pulse quicken. He switched nostrils, and went back for the second line.

He tied the bag and slipped the contents back into the case. He sat back, pinched his nostrils closed and sucked in big bursts of air, clearing the remnants of the powder. His body shuddered.

"Now, to even out," he said as he pulled a flask from the inside of his cartoonish white lab coat adorned with patches resembling caricatures of actual scientific symbols. He took a long pull from the flask, finishing with a loud "Aaaah." He shoved it back into his entertainment lab coat.

"Peter and I..." she started.

"Not now," he interrupted.

He slammed the car back into gear, and turned back to the main road.

Moments before the show started, his wife wished she'd have looked at him earlier. She cursed herself for her lack of courage to face him, to stand up to him. Her dreams went the way of his drug- and alcohol-fueled face: wrinkled and withered.

It was too late now to point out the white powder residue around his left nostril. The teachers hadn't noticed it, and she could only hope for ignorance in the crowd at the small library. There were a few parents in the back, and up front were seven children: three boys, four girls. A couple more kids sat in the chairs in the back with their parents.

"This is going to be fucking terrible," Eric Electron whispered. His eyes widened, and he

looked at the PA, relieved to find it hadn't been turned on. He didn't want a repeat of that show last year at the school for developmentally disabled children.

He motioned to his wife. She flipped the main switch to "on," and pushed a button. Loud, melodious children's music played. As the music drew to a close, she went into the introduction.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, it's your favorite silly scientist...Eric Electron!"

A new song played, faster than the last, and Eric Electron jumped from behind the black curtain, smiling and dancing and pointing at the children. A little blonde girl in the front crossed her arms and slid back.

Eric Electron went through the show intro: a bunch of pun science jokes like "How does a tree get on the internet? It logs in!"

No one laughed. No one moved.

He flipped out a few more jokes.

"Why do lightning bugs do better in school? Because they're *bright!*"

No reaction.

"How did Benjamin Franklin feel after he discovered electricity? *Shocked!*"

Eric Electron laughed, hoping the audience would follow. They didn't.

He knew it. They were a terrible audience.

He proceeded with the show. A few more jokes, few more songs, and a ventriloquist bit with a puppet monkey were all met with the same lackadaisical reaction.

It was time for the volunteer portion of the show.

"Our first demonstration is the mystery of the egg," he said. "For this one, I'm going to need a volunteer from the crowd."

No one moved for several moments. The children in the front had scooted several feet back since the start of the show. The parents in the back watched, unmoving. The parents who had children next to them in the back chairs now had moved slightly in front of the children.

Eric Electron felt a cold chill in his spine. Panic? Maybe. The cocaine was wearing off. He could go behind the curtain and blow one quick line, he thought. No, it was in the car. Damn.

"No takers... Okay, have it your way." He tossed the props behind the curtain. "For our next trick, we're going to learn about exothermic reactions," he said, pausing for the oohs and aaas, but they never came.

He went behind the curtain, covered the mic with his hand, and looked at Ellen. She handed him two beakers with different colored liquids in them.

"This is it. I'm going to tell these little shits where they can stick these beakers," he said.

She said nothing. He saw the same look on her as the children in the front row.

Ellen saw the tiny blood vessels in his eyes. She didn't see the man she married fifteen years ago, and this frightened her more than anything that happened next.

"That last experiment may have been a little tough for you boys and girls, but this one is going to be fun!" he yelled, and he laughed a booming, fake laugh. "I'll need a volunteer again."

He stood silent as the carnival music played in the background. His eyes darted from child to child, each of whom averted their gaze. He stared, waited. He waited longer than the first request for volunteers. The music faded, then stopped. He hadn't moved. Two children each raised a hand, slowly. Eric Electron turned toward the black curtain and hurled both beakers at the floor. They shattered on the carpet, sending glass shards screaming through the room. He turned back to the crowd.

"Do you know what this is?" he said, motioning in a big wide circle with both hands. "It's a *fucking* show. A show. I come in here, ask for volunteers, and you volunteer. Is that so hard?" he yelled. The children in the front sat, stunned. A chubby boy began to cry.

"Oh, oh, you're crying now?!" Eric Electron leaned in toward the boy, inches from his face. "This is supposed to be fun. You know what you did?" The boy shook his head and wiped tears from his now red face. "You made it not fun. You all ruined the fun. The chubby boy gasped and sucked for air between sobs.

Eric Electron stood. He felt his pulse beating in his temples. With each pound, he felt the anger grow. It could've also been the cocaine and alcohol withdrawal symptoms.

"I hope you're happy with yourselves."

He turned. The parents grabbed their children, and rushed out of the classroom. The door slammed as the last person left.

"Yeah, that's right, leave," he said to no one.

One of the teachers approached.

"Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to..."

"Leave?" he interrupted. "Oh, I'll leave. With pleasure."

Eric Electron didn't return the next year to the Brighton Middle School fifth grade classroom. But his wife...ex-wife was there. Peter Proton was younger and better looking. As a children's performer, he was one of the best. He was even in talks with a major studio for a regional children's show. Ellen had never seen someone so good with kids. Around children, Peter Proton made everyone feel welcome and excited.

The show went well for the first twenty minutes. The kids laughed and cheered and some couldn't even contain themselves in a sitting position. They stood in amazement of the movement, the jokes, the sheer *performance* of Peter Proton.

He was just getting into the meat of the show, a bit on static electricity. It was the standard stuff with balloons and hair, but the way he presented it amazed crowds. His manner of speaking, the way he danced around, it was enthralling. The adults in the room had all moved their chairs from the back to just behind the children. Some even stood alongside the kids, clapping and singing along.

The bell clanged on the front door of the library. A loud crash echoed through the building. The crowd silenced, arching their necks to peek into the main room. There was muffled yelling, arguing. From around the door frame trounced a hermit-looking man. He wore a matted-down wig of multiple washed out colors. His novelty glasses were crooked, held together with multiple bands of white tape, frayed and dirty at the edges. The patches on his stained lab coat hung by threads, bouncing and flapping as he stumbled into the room waving a large, nearly empty bottle of whiskey.

"Heeey boys n grrs," he yelled, words running into one another.

His head bobbed side to side, and splashes misted into the air from the swaying whiskey bottle.

"Iss me, Erck Elktraaaaan!"

Peter Proton moved in between the crowd and the stumbling man. His face flushed red.

"Electron, you're going to have to leave."

"No no no no no. I haaave a show here. Brawtuun Mil, Mil, Mid Skew."

Peter Proton moved in closer as Eric Electron stumbled further into the room. He looked past Peter Proton, squinted his eyes, then looked at Peter Proton.

"Is 'at ma wife? Is yooo steelin'...is you taken ma wife?" He spit as he spoke.

Peter Proton wiped his face, and he put both hands on Eric Electron's chest to steer him back through the door.

Eric Electron swatted his hands away. Peter Proton moved closer, using his body to steer Eric Electron, who stumbled backward and fell to the floor.

The children laughed. Eric Electron looked at them. He saw the joy on their faces. He smiled himself, a crooked, drunken smile, but a smile.

"You dink 'as funny," he said. He took a last swig from the bottle, and worked to raise himself, concentrating on maintaining balance. He rose to his feet, stumbled backward, then forward. "Den you gonna looove dis."

Peter Proton turned and motioned for Ellen to make a phone call. Before he turned around, the bottle thudded against his skull, sending him to the floor. The kids laughed harder. Eric Electron turned to them and smiled a big wide grin. He jumped on top of Peter Proton, who was blinking his eyes and rubbing his head.

Peter Proton kicked him off, sending Eric Electron fumbling backward. He hit the wall with a thud, leaving an imprint in the drywall the size of his back. The loud, singsong music still blared through the room. The kids were still dancing. The parents stood back, glancing at one another, shrugging their shoulders or flashing a quick head shake and an *I-don't-know-what-to-do* glance.

Ellen dialed her phone behind the curtain.

"I've had enough of this," Peter Proton said as he interlocked his fingers and stretched his arms out, cracking knuckles.

He walked to where Eric Electron was struggling to stand, and pushed him back to the ground. Eric Electron fell back down, and Peter Proton approached. Eric Electron kicked at Peter Proton's legs, which sent him tumbling to the ground.. Eric Electron looked at the crowd. The kids were still laughing, pointing at Peter Proton on the ground.

Eric Electron felt it, the adrenaline, the live crowd, and it forced him to his feet. He ran up to the spot where Peter Proton was about to do the static electricity thing, and he started dancing to the children's music. He kicked his feet to the beat, threw his hands in the air and laughed.

The children laughed, too.

He began to clap along to the rhythm. The children clapped along too.

Peter Proton rose to his feet, and bull rushed. He lowered his shoulder and forced Eric Electron to the ground. Electron's head struck the carpet-covered concrete floor with a loud crack. Peter Proton punched and punched. Electron laughed and laughed, and he watched the children between blows to the head. They weren't laughing anymore, but holding their hands to their mouths, emitting only restrained giggles.

Eric Electron saw it. He saw the pleasure in their faces. The chubby boy from last year was back. He didn't bother covering his mouth. He laughed and laughed until he was rolling on the ground, holding his midsection.

The police arrived shortly after, and wrestled the two entertainers to the ground, securing both in handcuffs.

They led Peter Proton out first as Ellen rushed to shower him with hugs.

The police pulled Eric Electron to his feet, and the children applauded.

It was the best show Eric Electron ever had. The cops led him out the door, but he broke away from one cop's grasp, and ran back to center stage. He took a bow, and fell forward, hitting his head on the floor. The children laughed and cheered more.

The judge ordered him to attend treatment for alcoholism.

Peter Proton was arrested for child pornography three months later.