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Emil Einstein · Vol. 1

The Top-Secret Animal Chat Machine

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Today was the day when Emil Einstein's life was to change forever. But Emil didn't know that yet, as he threw off the checked duvet, folded his arms behind his head and yawned heartily. What he did know for sure, however, was that today was his birthday! A delicious smell of cocoa and cake was already wafting into his room through the crack in the door.

Emil leapt out of bed and shuffled into his slippers. He didn't need to get dressed yet: for one thing, it was the summer holidays, and for another, it was Sunday. Pyjamas were always allowed at the breakfast table on Sundays.

"Woohoo, it's my birthday!" Emil cried delightedly to himself and the world at large, and marched out into the hall.

Crockery was clattering downstairs. A man called out, "Are you ready, Emil Sunday?" and a woman sang joyfully: "Happy Birthday to you..."

Emil hopped energetically out onto the landing and raced down the stairs. Despite his rather too large slippers, he came to a halt in front of his parents with a leap – very elegantly, he thought.

"There you are at last," his mother said, putting her arms around him. "A very happy birthday to you."

His father clapped him on the back. "It's Sunday today! Just like it was six years ago, when you were born!"

"I know, Papa." Emil grinned.

His parents loved the fact that their son was a Sunday's child. That was also why his middle name was Sunday. But he'd never told any of his friends that, because somehow it sounded a bit odd. His parents were firmly convinced that Sunday's children were especially lucky. They were kissed by the wise fairy, so people said. People who were as old as his parents, that is, or even older! Emil always had to shake himself when people talked about it in front of him. It brought a picture to his mind of all these ancient, wrinkly women standing around his cradle, wanting to smother him with kisses. YUCK!

In any case, the luck thing wasn't true at all. He had just as much and just as little luck as every other child he knew. And sometimes, much less – in PE, for instance.

“Your present from us!” Mr Einstein said, pointing to a huge parcel in the middle of the living room. “Go on, open it!”

Emil stood in front of it, his arms folded.

Unlike him, his best friends Tom and Mira had gone away on holiday with their parents and their brothers and sisters. For several weeks, this time! Emil’s parents didn’t have time for that sort of thing right now. There were only two vet’s surgeries in the area, and they always took it in turns to go on holiday. At the moment, it was the other surgery’s turn. And in order to stop his summer holidays becoming horribly boring, at the last moment Emil had asked for a dog for his birthday.

He had his inventor’s laboratory, of course – but with a doggy friend in tow, his adventures would be much more fun. But could there really be a dog inside this parcel, waiting silently to be unwrapped?

“Hurry up, darling, or your cocoa will go cold,” his mother urged him.

“Is it a dog?” Emil asked quietly.

“Why don’t you have a look?” his father said with a smile, sliding the parcel closer to him.

The present was so tall that it almost came up to his chest. Most children would surely be excited by such a massive present.

“Alright,” Emil sighed, and tore open the wrapping paper. There was a lot of wrapping paper. But unfortunately, there was no dog underneath. Instead, he found a pile of...
WOODEN PLANKS!

Emil stared at the heap of wood in disappointment.

“Well, what do you think?” his mother asked, expectantly.

And his father cried: “I always wanted something like this when I was a boy!”

“Well, then it’s your present now,” Emil sniffed. He turned around and ran out of the living room, down the hall, through the kitchen and out into the garden. From there, he went straight across the lawn, past the nut tree, to the summerhouse. He stopped at the bright red door with the sign that said: “No entry! Danger of death!” The warning didn’t bother him. After all, he had written it himself. Emil pulled open the door and slammed it behind him.

His eyes wandered past an old wing-back chair to the workbench with all its screwdrivers, cogs and metal plates. In the middle of it there was a black box with different coloured cables showing inside it.

His latest achievement.

Emil sighed and pushed his glasses back up his nose. A few weeks ago, his mother had even let him have three little radio microphones for the box. “For your tinkering,” she had said. Tinkering? Pah! This here was an INVENTOR’S LABORATORY! But Emil wasn’t planning to invent anything right now. His eyes moved on through the room, until they lit on a dolls’ house. A mouse was sitting in one of the downstairs rooms, its eyes flashing and the hair on its back standing up. It squeaked indignantly.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you!” Emil went over to a shelf and pulled out a paper bag. The furry face with the big eyes and ears changed at once. It almost looked like the little girl-mouse was smiling.

Emil carefully laid a small piece of cheesy cracker in front of the dolls-house resident's paws. Then he bent down and picked up a bundle of wood shavings. It had probably fallen out when Bertha had shot out of her bedroom in fright. And her annoyance must have been because her nest now looked a bit of a mess. Bertha loved everything to be neat and tidy. She never left a crumb lying around or accidentally made a mess of something. The dolls' house had belonged to Emil's late grandmother. Now it was in the summerhouse, and over the years, it had got very dusty. Then last week, the little girl-mouse had moved in. And Emil hadn't been the least bit disgusted, like a lot of people might. On the contrary: he and the girl-mouse had quickly made friends, and he had named her Bertha. Bertha Benz. After the world's first female car driver.

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Emil snuggled down in the armchair and watched his mouse friend feasting. She had settled down on the roof of the dolls' house for the purpose.

"It's my birthday today."

Bertha stopped chewing and stared at him with her dark button eyes.

"Usually, when it's your birthday, you get presents that make you really happy. But not me." Emil let out a loud sigh. "I got WOODEN PLANKS!"

From the roof of the house there came a squeak that sounded as if Bertha was laughing.

"It's not funny!" Emil grumbled, rolling his eyes.

There was a knock on the door and he heard Mrs Einstein's voice saying: "Darling, we're sorry, could you come out please? We want to celebrate your birthday with you!"

Emil really wanted to shout: "I'm not celebrating any more!" but instead he said: "I'll be there in a minute."

Why was life sometimes so unfair to him? When his friend Tom wanted something, he got it. His mountain-bike wish turned into a mountain bike, and not something like a desk lamp or a pile of wood!

There was another knock.

"I said I'd be there in a minute!" Emil groaned, getting up from the armchair.

But this time, the door opened anyway. A woman came in. She was wearing blue overalls and her grey hair was tied up in a bun. "Is there any danger of death involved in wishing you a happy birthday?"

"Hello, Mrs Pypecapp!" Emil ran an embarrassed hand through his tousled blonde hair and added, "No, of course not."

Mrs Pypecapp lived next door to the Einsteins.

She used to own a car garage with her brother. But a year ago her brother had retired and emigrated to South America. She still repaired cars and all kinds of other machines, but now it was only for her friends.

Mrs Pypecapp laughed. “Now then, what’s a birthday boy doing with such a sad face? Especially a birthday boy who was born on a Sunday and is turning SIX today.” She shook her head as if she just couldn’t understand it, and went on: “And then, after the holidays, you’ll be in Class Two!” The older lady winked at him. “Your surname suits you perfectly!”

A long time ago, there had been a famous scientist called Einstein: Albert Einstein. But they weren’t related to that Einstein, his father was certain of it.

Emil looked at the floor sheepishly. He was always embarrassed when adults marvelled at him starting school when he was just five years and six weeks old. But he’d already been able to read, write and do maths then – that was all.

All the same, he hadn’t been bored in Class One – he’d made new friends and had a whole lot of fun. School was very different from nursery. Much more exciting!

“So, where is she then?” Mrs Pypecapp asked, looking around inquisitively.

“In her dolls’ house,” Emil said.

Mrs Pypecapp giggled. “I didn’t mean Bertha; I meant your latest invention.”

Emil pointed at the black box. “It isn’t an invention yet. I got stuck. Transforming the voices doesn’t work.”

The box, which his mother had given him, was a translation machine. She had bought it specially for the World Congress of Vets – in case she wanted to speak to someone who didn’t understand English. Her words would be translated straight into other languages. But when his mother tried the machine out, all it produced was nonsense. She had laughed when she told him that.

[...]

Mrs Pypecapp handed him the cloth bag that she had been holding all this time.

“Happy birthday! Careful, it’s heavy.”

Nothing was wriggling inside the bag; there was only a clinking sound, so Emil assumed there wasn’t a dog inside. All the same, he said politely: “Thank you, Mrs Pypecapp!”

“Mmm, the amazing apple juice!” He carefully pulled three bottles out of the bag and stood them on the small table beside the armchair. “That’s so great!”

And it was true, because Mrs Pypecapp’s apple juice was the best in the whole world! His neighbour might be very generous in other ways, but she very rarely gave away a bottle of juice.

Mrs Pypecapp smiled. “I hope it helps you with your thinking and inventing and all kinds of other things.” She put an arm around his shoulders. “And now, the two of us should go indoors. I’m sure your parents will be waiting to cut your birthday cake.”

[...]

Emil marched towards the house with the mouse and the neighbour in tow. Just then, the kitchen door opened and his mother stuck her head out. "There you are at last, Emil!" she cried in relief. Then she spotted Mrs Pypecapp at his side. "A birthday guest, how lovely! Hurry up and come inside, both of you, so we can finally start celebrating!"

They all gathered in the living room. Bertha didn't show herself, but Emil could feel her little body quaking excitedly under his pyjamas. He was sure she was pricking her ears up eagerly.

"How wonderful," Mrs Pypecapp said, as she gazed at the half-unwrapped present. Emil stared at her in astonishment. "Really? What's so special about a pile of planks?" Mr Einstein tore off the rest of the wrapping paper.

Four wheels and a steering wheel rolled out. "Keep guessing, Emil!" he laughed. "It's not so difficult now, though."

Emil picked up the steering wheel and turned it this way and that, lost in thought. Oh, it was...

"...a soapbox car!" Mrs Pypecapp cried, clapping her hands.

"It was another thing you wanted for quite a long time," his mother said, quietly.

A short squeak told Emil that Bertha thought it was a brilliant present, too.

"We'll build it together, later," his father promised.

"Really?" Emil could hardly believe his ears. His parents never usually had time for things like that. But that was okay, because they were helping poor, sick animals. Delight slowly crept through his body. He could already see himself zooming around the village in his wooden racing car. Tom and Mira would be amazed when they got back from holiday!

Emil hugged his parents. "Thank you!" He gave them a lopsided grin. "That actually *is* a great present!" He could always ask for a dog for his next birthday.

Finally, they all sat down at the dining table, where a delicious birthday breakfast had been laid out, and munched happily. Bertha had whisked away under Emil's chair and was gathering up all the crumbs that fell on the floor. Emil hoped his parents wouldn't look under the table while they were eating. As Mrs Pypecapp chatted to Mr and Mrs Einstein about their new patients, Emil was already putting together the soapbox car in his head.

[...]

A little while later, Emil and Mrs Pypecapp carried one plank after another into the neighbour's workshop. They went the back way, because beside the inventor's laboratory was a gate that connected their gardens to one another.

On the last trip from the house to the car garage, Emil stopped for a moment and thought about the dog he had wanted, which could have been romping about at his side now. At first he had been a bit sad, but now he was really excited about the soapbox car. Would they allow him to ride it to school? He could already see himself racing around the place. Although... Emil stared up at the sky and scratched his head. Of course, the soapbox car mustn't look like a normal car made of wood, but a really cool wooden racing car! Maybe silver? Or black? Or, better still, bright red? The sun came out from behind the clouds and shone straight down onto Emil's tousled blonde hair.

[...]

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Emil spent days hammering, sawing, drilling and screwing together the soapbox car, under Mrs Pypecapp's watchful eye. Now and then, his father would turn up in the evenings to help. Emil was very happy about that. Though admittedly, Mrs Pypecapp knew much more about cars, and about soapbox cars for inventors.

One plank after another slotted into place. But then, on the fifth day of work, Mrs Pypecapp suddenly came in lugging something strange and heavy, and placed it in the nose of the car.

Emil bent over the opening and stared in.

"Is that... an engine?"

"A lawnmower engine," Mrs Pypecapp explained. "It will get you up any mountain you like."

"Brilliant!" Emil whispered in surprise.

Mrs Pypecapp connected the engine to the foot pedals.

Then the pair of them rigged up a small battery and ran cables from it to the headlights and the horn.