

HUSH!

by

Zenna Henderson

June sighed and brushed her hair back from her eyes automatically as she marked her place in her geometry book with one finger and looked through the dining-room door at Dubby lying on the front-room couch.

“Dubby, *please*,” she pleaded. “You promised your mother that you’d be quiet tonight. How can you get over your cold if you bounce around making so much noise?”

Dubby’s fever-bright eyes peered from behind his tented knees where he was holding a tin-truck which he hammered with a toy guitar.

“I am quiet, June. It’s the truck that made the noise. See?” And he banged on it again. The guitar splintered explosively and Dubby blinked in surprise. He was wavering between tears at the destruction and pleased laughter for the awful noise it made. Before he could decide, he began to cough, a deep-chested pounding cough that shook his small body unmercifully.

“That’s just about enough out of you, Dubby,” said June firmly, clearing the couch of toys and twitching the covers straight with a practiced hand. “You have to go to your room in just fifteen minutes anyway – or right now if you don’t settle down. Your mother will be calling at seven to see if you’re okay. I don’t want to have to tell her you’re worse because you wouldn’t be good. Now read your book and keep quiet. I’ve got work to do.”

There was a brief silence broken by Dubby’s sniffing and June’s scurrying pencil. Then Dubby began to chant:

Shrimp boatses running a dancer tonight
Shrimp boatses running a dancer tonight
Shrimp boatses running a dancer tonight
SHRIMP BOATses RUNning a DANcer tonight –

“Dub-by!” called June, frowning over her paper at him.

“That’s not noise,” protested Dubby. “It’s singing. *Shrimp boatses –*” The cough caught him in mid-phrase and June busied herself providing Kleenexes and comfort until the spasm spent itself.

“See?” she said. “Your cough thinks it’s a noise.”

“Well, what can I do then?” fretted Dubby, bored by four days in bed and worn out by the racking cough that still shook him. “I can’t sing and I can’t play. I want something to do.”

“Well,” June searched the fertile pigeonholes of her babysitter’s repertoire and came up with an idea that Dubby had once originated himself and dearly loved.

“Why not play-like? Play-like a zoo. I think a green giraffe with a mop of a tail and roller skates for feet would be nice, don’t you?”

Dubby considered the suggestion solemnly. “If he had egg beaters for ears,” he said, overly conscious as always of ears, because of the trouble he so often had with his own.

“Of course he does,” said June. “Now you play-like one.”

“Mine’s a lion,” said Dubby, after mock consideration. “Only he has a flag for a tail – a pirate flag – and he wears yellow pyjamas and airplane wings sticking out of his back and his ears turn like propellers.”

“That’s a good one,” applauded June. “Now mine is an eagle with rainbow wings and roses growing around his neck. And the only thing he ever eats is the song of birds, but the birds are scared of him and so he’s hungry nearly all the time – pore ol’ iggle!”

Dubby giggled. “Play-like some more,” he said, settling back against the pillows.

“No, it’s your turn. Why don’t you play-like by yourself now? I’ve just got to get my geometry done.”

Dubby’s face shadowed and then he grinned. “Okay.”

June went back to the table, thankful that Dubby was a nice kid and not like some of the brats she had met in her time. She twined both legs around the legs of her chair, running both hands up through her hair. She paused before tackling the next problem to glance in at Dubby. A worry nudged at her heart as she saw how pale and fine-drawn his features were. It seemed, every time she came over, he was more nearly transparent.

She shivered a little as she remembered her mother saying, “Poor child. He’ll never have to worry about old age. Have you noticed his eyes, June? He has wisdom in them now that no child should have. He has looked too often into the Valley.”

June sighed and turned to her work.

The heating system hummed softly and the out-of-joint day settled into a comfortable accustomed evening.

Mrs. Warren rarely ever left Dubby because he was ill so much of the time, and she practically never left him until he was settled for the night. But today when June got home from school, her mother had told her to call Mrs. Warren.

“Oh, June,” Mrs. Warren had appealed over the phone, “could you possibly come over right now?”

“Now?” asked June, dismayed, thinking of her hair and nails she’d planned to do, and the tentative date with Larry-anne to hear her new album.

“I hate to ask it,” said Mrs. Warren. “I have no patience with people who make last minute arrangements, but Mr. Warren’s mother is very ill again and we just have to go over to her house. We wouldn’t trust Dubby with anyone but you. He’s got that nasty bronchitis again, so we can’t take him with us. I’ll get home as soon as I can, even if Orin has to stay. He’s home from work right now, waiting for me. So please come, June!”

“Well,” June melted to the tears in Mrs. Warren’s voice. She could let her hair and nails and album go and she could get her geometry done at the Warren’s place. “Well, okay. I’ll be right over.”

“Oh, bless you, child,” cried Mrs. Warren. Her voice faded away from the phone. “Orin, she’s coming –” and the receiver clicked.

“June!” He must have called several times before June began to swim back up through the gloomy haze of the new theorem.

“Joo-un!” Dubby’s plaintive voice reached down to her and she sighed in exasperation. She had nearly figured out how to work the problem.

“Yes, Dubby.” The exaggerated patience in her voice signalled her displeasure to him.

“Well,” he faltered, “I don’t want to play-like something anymore. I’ve used up all my thinkings. Can I make something now? Something for true?”

“Without getting off the couch?” asked June cautiously, wise from past experience.

“Yes,” grinned Dubby.

“Without my to-ing and fro-ing to bring you stuff?” she questioned, still wary.

“Uh-huh,” giggled Dubby.

“What can you make for true without anything to make it with?” June asked sceptically.

Dubby laughed. “I just thought it up.” Then all in one breath, unable to restrain his delight: “It’s-really-kinda-like-play-like, but-I’m-going-to-make-something-that-isn’t-like-anything-real-so it’ll-be-for-true, cause-it-won’t-be-play-like-anything-that’s-real!”

“Huh? Say that again,” June challenged. “I bet you can’t do it.”

Dubby was squirming with excitement. He coughed tentatively, found it wasn’t a prelude to a full production and said: “I can’t say it again, but I can do it, I betcha. Last time I was sick, I made up some new magic words. They’re real good. I betcha they’ll work real good like anything.”

“Okay, go ahead and make something,” said June. “Just so it’s quiet.”

“Oh, it’s *real* quiet,” said Dubby in a hushed voice. “Exter quiet. I’m going to make a Noise-eater.”

“A Noise-eater?”

“Uh-huh!” Dubby’s eyes were shining. “It’ll eat up all the noises. I can make lotsa racket then, ‘cause it’ll eat it all up and make it real quiet for you so’s you can do your jommety.”

“Now that’s right thankful of you, podner,” drawled June. “Make it a good one, because little boys make a lot of noise.”

“Okay.” And Dubby finally climbed down and settled back against his pillows.

The heating system hummed. The old refrigerator in the kitchen cleared its throat and added its chirking throb to the voice of the house. The mantel clock tocked firmly to itself in the front room. June was absorbed in her homework when a flutter of movement at her elbow jerked her head up.

“Dubby!” she began indignantly.

“Shh!” Dubby pantomimed, finger to lips, his eyes wide with excitement. He leaned against June, his fever radiating like a small stove through his pyjamas and robe. His breath was heavy with the odour of illness as he put his mouth close to her ear and barely whispered:

“I made it. The Noise-eater. He’s asleep now. Don’t make a noise or he’ll get you.”

“I’ll get you, too,” said June. “Play-like is play-like, but you get right back on that couch!”

“I’m too scared,” breathed Dubby. “What if I cough?”

“You will cough if you –” June started in a normal tone, but Dubby threw himself into her lap and muffled her mouth with his small hand. He was trembling.

“Don’t! Don’t!” he begged frantically. “I’m scared. How do you un-play-like? I didn’t know it’d work so good!”

There was a *choonk* and a slither in the front room. June strained her ears, alarm stirring in her chest.

“Don’t be silly,” she whispered. “Play-like isn’t for true. There’s nothing in there to hurt you.”

A sudden succession of musical pings startled June and threw Dubby back into her arms until she recognised Mrs. Warren’s bedroom clock striking seven o’clock – early as usual. There was a sort of drawn-out slither in the front room and then silence.

“Go on, Dubby. Get back on the couch like a nice child. We’ve played long enough.”

“You take me.”

June herded him ahead of her, her knees bumping his reluctant back at every step until he got a good look at the whole front room. Then he sighed and relaxed.

“He’s gone,” he said normally.

“Sure he is,” replied June. “Play-like stuff always goes away.” She tucked him under his covers. Then, as if

hoping to brush his fears – and hers – away, by calmly discussing it, “What did he look like?”

“Well, he had a body like Mother’s vacuum cleaner – the one that lies down on the floor – and his legs were like my sled, so he could slide on the floor, and he had a nose like the hose on the cleaner only he was able to make it long or short when he wanted to.”

Dubby, overstrained, leaned back against his pillows.

The mantel clock began to boom the hour deliberately.

“And he had little eyes like the light inside the refrigerator –”

June heard a *choonk* at the hall door and glanced up. Then with fear-stiffened lips, she continued for him, “And ears like TV antennae because he needs good ears to find the noises.” And watched, stunned, as the round metallic body glided across the floor on shiny runners and paused in front of the clock that was deliberately on the sixth stroke.

The long, wrinkly, trunk-like nose on the front of the thing flashed upward. The end of it shimmered, then melted into the case of the clock. And the seventh stroke never began. There was a soft sucking sound and the nose dropped free. On the mantel, the hands of the clock dropped soundlessly to the bottom of the dial.

In the tight circle of June’s arms, Dubby whimpered. June clapped her hand over his mouth. But his shoulders began to shake and he rolled frantic imploring eyes at her as another coughing spell began. He couldn’t control it.

June tried to muffle the sound with her shoulder, but over the deep, hawking convulsions, she heard the *choonk* and slither of the creature and screamed as she felt it nudge her knee. Then the long snout nuzzled against her shoulder and she heard a soft hiss as it touched the straining throat of the coughing child. She grabbed the horribly vibrating thing and tried to pull it away, but Dubby’s cough cut off in mid-spasm.

In the sudden quiet that followed she heard a gurgle like a straw in the bottom of a soda glass and Dubby folded into himself like an empty laundry bag. June tried to straighten him against the pillows, but he slid laxly down.

June stood up slowly. Her dazed eyes wandered trance-like to the clock, then to the couch, then to the horrible thing that lay beside it. Its glowing eyes were blinking and its ears shifting planes – probably to locate sound.

Her mouth opened to let out the terror that was constricting her lungs, and her frantic scream coincided with the shrill clamour of the telephone. The Eater hesitated, then slid swiftly toward the repeated ring. In the pause after the party line’s four identifying rings, it stopped and June clapped both hands over her mouth, her eyes dilated with paralysed terror.

The ring began again. June caught Dubby up into her arms and backed slowly toward the front door. The Eater’s snout darted out to the telephone and the ring stilled without even an after-resonance.

The latch of the front door gave a rasping click under June’s trembling hand. Behind her, she heard the *choonk* and horrible slither as the Eater lost interest in the silenced telephone. She whirled away from the door, staggering off balance under the limp load of Dubby’s body. She slipped to one knee, spilling the child to the floor with a thump. The Eater slid toward her, pausing at the hall door, its ears tilting and moving.

June crouched on her knees, staring, one hand caught under Dubby. She swallowed convulsively, then cautiously withdrew her hand. She touched Dubby’s bony little chest. There was no movement. She hesitated indecisively, then backed away, eyes intent on the Eater.

Her heart drummed in her burning throat. Her blood roared in her ears. The starchy *krunkle* of her wide skirt rattled in the stillness. The fibres of the rug murmured under her knees and toes. She circled wider, wider, the noise only loud enough to hold the Eater’s attention – not to attract him to her. She backed guardedly into the corner by the radio. Calculatingly, she reached over and clicked it on, turning the volume dial as far as it would go.

The Eater slid tentatively toward her at the click of the switch. June backed slowly away, eyes intent on the creature. The sudden insane blare of the radio hit her an almost physical blow. The Eater glided up close against the vibrating cabinet, its snout lifting and drinking in the horrible cacophony of sound.

June lurched for the front door, wrenching frantically at the door knob. She stumbled outside, slamming the door behind her. Trembling, she sank to the top step, wiping the cold sweat from her face with the underside of her skirt. She shivered in the sharp cold, listening to the raucous outpouring from the radio that boomed so loud it was no longer intelligible.

She dragged herself to her feet, pausing irresolutely, looking around at the huddled houses, each set on its own acre of weeds and lawn. They were all dark in the early winter evening.

June gave a little moan and sank on the step again, hugging herself desperately against the penetrating chill. It seemed an eternity that she crouched there before the radio cut off in mid-note.

Fearfully, she roused and pressed her face to one of the door panes. Dimly through the glass curtains she could see the Eater, sluggish and swollen, lying quietly by the radio. Hysteria was rising for a moment, but she resolutely knuckled the tears from her eyes.

The headlights scythed around the corner, glittering swiftly across the blank windows next door as the car crunched into the Warren’s driveway and came to a gravel-skittering stop.

June pressed her hands to her mouth, sure that even through the closed door she could hear the *choonk* and slither of the thing inside as it slid to and fro, seeking sound.

The car door slammed and hurried footsteps echoed along the path. June made wild shushing motions with her hands as Mrs. Warren scurried around the corner of the house.

“June!” Mrs. Warren’s voice was ragged with worry. “Is Dubby all right? What are you doing out here? What’s wrong with the phone?” She fumbled for the door knob.

“No, no!” June shouldered her roughly aside. “Don’t go in! It’ll get you, too!”

She heard a thud just inside the door. Dimly through the glass she saw the flicker of movement as the snout of the Eater raised and wavered toward them.

“June!” Mrs. Warren jerked her away from the door. “Let me in! What’s the matter? Have you gone crazy?”

Mrs. Warren stopped suddenly, her face whitening. “*What have you done to Dubby, June?*”

The girl gulped with the shock of the accusation. “I haven’t done anything, Mrs. Warren. He made a Noise-eater and it – it –” June winced away from the sudden blaze of Mrs. Warren’s eyes.

“Get away from that door!” Mrs. Warren’s face was that of a stranger, her words icy and clipped. “I trusted you with my child. If anything has happened to him –”

“Don’t go in – oh, don’t go in!” June grabbed at her coat hysterically. “Please, please wait! Let’s get –”

“Let go!” Mrs. Warren’s voice grated between her tightly clenched teeth. “Let me go, you – you –” Her hands flashed out and the crack of her palm against June’s cheek was echoed by a *choonk* inside the house. June was staggered by the blow, but she clung to the coat until Mrs. Warren pushed her sprawling down the front steps and fumbled at the knob, crying, “Dubby! Dubby!”

June, scrambling up the steps on hands and knees, caught a glimpse of a hovering something that lifted and swayed like a waiting cobra. It was slapped aside by the violent opening of the door as Mrs. Warren stumbled into the house, her cries suddenly stilling on her slack lips as she saw her crumpled son by the couch.

She gasped and whispered, “Dubby!” She lifted him into her arms. His head rolled loosely against her shoulder. Her protesting, “No, no, no!” merged into half-articulate screams as she hugged him to her.

And from behind the front door there was a *choonk* and a slither.

June lunged forward and grabbed the reaching thing that was homing in on Mrs. Warren’s hysterical grief. Her hands closed around it convulsively, her whole weight dragging backward, but it had a strength she couldn’t match. Desperately then, her fists clenched, her eyes tight shut, she screamed and screamed and screamed.

The snout looped almost lazily around her straining throat, but she fought her way almost to the front door before the thing held her, feet on the floor, body at an impossible angle, and stilled her frantic screams, quieted her straining lungs and sipped the last of her heartbeats, and let her drop.

Mrs. Warren stared incredulously at June’s crumpled body and the horrible creature that blinked its lights and shifted its antennae questingly. With a muffled gasp, she sagged, knees and waist and neck, and fell soundlessly to the floor.

The refrigerator in the kitchen cleared its throat and the Eater turned from June with a *choonk* and slid away, crossing to the kitchen.

The Eater retracted its snout and slid back from the silent refrigerator. It lay quietly, its ears shifting from quarter to quarter.

The thermostat in the dining room clicked and the hot air furnace began to hum. The Eater slid to the wall under the register that was set just below the ceiling. Its snout extended and lifted and narrowed until the end of it slipped through one of the register openings. The furnace hum choked off abruptly and the snout flipped back into sight.

Then there was quiet, deep and unbroken until the Eater tilted its ears and slid up to Mrs. Warren.

In such silence, even a pulse was noise.

There was a sound like a straw in the bottom of a soda glass.

A stillness was broken by the shrilling of a siren on the main highway four blocks away.

A *choonk* and a slither and the metallic bump of runners down the three front steps.

And a quiet, quiet house on a quiet side street.

Hush.