

## IT

Ernie Bromberg had a very unusual attraction in his basement. Everyone in town had heard of it or seen it at one time or another, but it was still shrouded in mystery. No one knew what it was or how it got there. Ernie said even he didn't know. For as long as he could remember, it had always been there. He assumed it belonged to his father (who had died many years before) but his mother, now well into her eighties, didn't know its origin either.

To some the mystery was frustrating - they wanted answers; but to others it was intriguing, even amusing. It was often the subject of conversation at the barbershop or the coffee house, and people loved to exchange theories about what it could be. And just when people became bored with the subject, someone who had never seen it before would come up with some fresh opinions sparking a new debate.

Ellen and Ernie Bromberg thrived on visitors and they welcomed the curious and eager townspeople with open arms. Every Sunday afternoon would find Ellen brewing a pot of tea and putting out assorted pastries for their guests. Ernie would engage them in trivial conversations intentionally stalling, for suspense, the moment when he would escort them into the basement and show them the thing they had come to see. Most guests politely waited (enduring Ernie's lifeless rambling), then suppressed a sigh of relief when their host rose from his chair. Then Ernie would lead

his entourage down the stairs at an aggravating slow pace. The younger guests would often peer over his stooped shoulders hoping to catch an early glimpse of the thing. Ernie, however, (being the showman he was) kept the basement in darkness until he reached the switch by his work-bench. Then, with a flash of light and a wave of his hand, he was able to reveal the object majestically.

Eyes squinted and necks stretched as the visitors tried to visually analyze every part of the thing. Most were filled with a confused wonderment rather than awe. Some, of course, were disappointed. After all, it didn't do anything. But then the whole idea was to find out what it was supposed to do.

Ernie had begun showing it off many years ago, quite by accident. He first showed it to a friend when he was clearing out the attic, wondering if he should discard it along with the many other useless things his father had collected over the years. His friend, Jack, suggested they keep it until they found out exactly what it was. Jack and Ernie invited another friend to look it over, but he too was mystified. As more people came to see it, the thing took on an element of wonder and became the great puzzle of the town. Who could solve the mystery of the thing in Ernie's basement?

Once, an elderly man who had been close to Ernie's father thought he had seen another one somewhere else, but he couldn't remember where or when. Another time, a carpenter offered to take it to his shop to tinker with it, but Ernie refused to let anyone tamper with it or take it out of the house. Several people wanted to open it up and examine the inside but again Ernie refused. He

feared someone would break it or destroy it trying to move parts that were not supposed to move.

As one might expect, the novelty of the thing did wear off over time, but the Brombergs persistently kept the mystery alive by referring to it whenever public interest waned, coming up with new theories and insisting that those who had never seen it come for a visit. Many were encouraged to bring their children when they became old enough to form an interesting theory of their own.

In fact, it became a "rite-of-passage" for young teenagers to see the thing in Ernie's basement and try to solve the "adult" mystery.

Most of the discussion that followed someone's first encounter with the object was similar, but Ernie never tired of hearing the reactions. He generally listened quietly and proudly as people commented on the enigma.

"It's obviously a machine of some sort."

"Good going, genius. You going to tell us it's brown, too?"

"If it's a machine, then it must do something. It's got to have a purpose."

"It's quite old, though. It could be two hundred years old, judging from the style. So maybe it isn't used for anything anymore. I mean maybe whatever it was used for doesn't exist anymore."

"It could be a gag item like those dancing teeth that used to chatter when you wound them up. Remember those?"

"This is obviously more sophisticated. It's got a polished finish and it's mechanical. To me that means it was a useful

machine that was put on display somewhere. It certainly doesn't look like a toy."

"That piece on the side looks like it should move."

"It does," Ernie would reply. "But it just slides back and forth without doing anything. I'll show you."

"What's that hanging on the back there? It looks like a weight of some kind."

"Why would it have a weight? Besides, it's so small I can't see how it would make any difference. Did you put that there to confuse us, Ernie?"

"Maybe it's some kind of tray for weighing fruits and vegetables."

"Then what's that long thing on the side?"

"It could be a handle."

"It's not strong enough to be a handle. Are there no other parts to it, Ernie? It looks like it needs something else."

"Not as far as I know. Dad always took good care of his things and never broke anything. And he never collected anything that wasn't complete and in good working order."

"He could've lost some of the pieces."

"Marion Grimsby thinks it's an automatic cake slicer and those numbers on the left are for how thick you want your slice to be."

"How could it slice cakes, for God's sake!"

"She says this thing on the side would have a knife attached to it."

"I don't think so. It would be too messy and hard to clean."

Besides, I don't see how the knife could slide from the centre of the cake to the outside."

"It's got some kind of ventilation thing underneath. I never noticed that before. That means it probably heats up when it's working."

"It must be an indoor machine then."

"Of course it is. Judging from the stuff at the back, it's supposed to connect with something. Isn't there anything else up in the attic that went with this?"

"Nothing that looked like a machine."

"Well, I think it's missing something crucial. If you wanna get this thing to work by itself - whatever it is - you'll have a long wait."

"I just want to know what it is," Ernie would smile, undeterred by the negative prophecy.

"Well, it's got four feet."

"Right, Bill. It's a quadruped. Maybe it walks around the basement when no one's looking."

"That's not what I was trying to say. It's elevated for ventilation, like Larry said."

"Yeah, so?"

"So that's a clue."

"Some clue."

"What about that thing on the end of the handle there? That comes off, doesn't it?"

"It sure does. Look."

"It's got wires inside. It's got to be electrical. But you

said it doesn't do anything when you plug it in, didn't you Ernie?"

"Yep. I'll even show you," he demonstrated.

"Let me take off the bottom and have a look inside."

"No, no. I can't risk breaking anything."

Given his reluctance to let others examine the object closely or attempt to do anything with it, some of the townspeople speculated that Ernie didn't really want the mysterious object identified. Ernie vehemently denied this and was always ready to explain how he had tried something new (when he was alone) to see what parts moved or what effect electricity had on the object. Once when he had plugged it in, he would tell others, nothing had happened. And besides, there was no power switch on it or any other switch to monitor electrical activity. No doubt it needed another attachment that, perhaps, Ernie's father had never been able to find. If only they knew what that was.

One time, about five years ago, it looked like the mystery was about to be solved. A city man passing through town was urged to visit the Brombergs and have a look at their renowned attraction. He was an older scholarly gentleman with a stone-faced appearance, but when he saw the object in Ernie's basement he burst out laughing.

"This is the thing that has had you people stumped for years?!" he cried.

When no one answered, he stopped laughing and added, "You don't know what this is?"

He looked into the expectant faces of the other visitors

eagerly awaiting the solution to their mystery. He peered at each of them in turn, his eyes finally coming to rest on his host, the object's owner. For a long time, no one spoke. All eyes were on this educated outsider, and their respect for the man was clear. This was his moment. When he remained silent, a teenage boy finally burst out, "Well, what is it?"

The gentleman walked up to the object, ran his hand along its smooth wooden finish and tapped it here and there. He looked back at his anxious audience and observed the expression on Ernie Bromberg's face. Then he laughed again.

"Damned if I know! But it's the funniest thing I've ever seen, I swear."

With that, he reached for his coat and bid the others goodbye.

Ernie, trying to remain cool, breathed a deep sigh of relief as the gentleman left. You see, Ernie really *did* know what the object was.

In fact, every now and then, late at night, he would take the thing up to the attic where he would plug it in and attach it to several other machines that he kept ready to go. Then, from one of the dusty boxes nearby he would pull out a large disc called a record and place it on the platter of the mysterious machine. Then from a shelf above the discs, he would take out a small box with a diamond stylus inside and attach this to what his visitors called the handle. Plugging in the machine, Ernie would slip into the past as he relaxed and listened to the booming, scratchy sounds of old rock and roll.

Yes, Ernie Bromberg had learned what the machine was long ago and he could have solved the "mystery of the turntable" any time in the last thirty years. But then he would've missed having all those visitors.