

Arlo's War

by Frank Brennan

The snake's world was a silent one. Its world was a box with a glass front. It was staring at its next meal. Its meal, a rat, was staring back.

The rat sat frozen with fear in the corner of the large box. It heard a soft shaking sound and answered with a few high sounds of terror. The snake was hungry and moved quickly. It was a big North American diamond-backed rattlesnake, almost two metres long with enough poison in its bite to kill several men. The rat was soon dead and the snake stretched its jaws to begin the business of swallowing its meal.

Arlo Penton sat and watched through the glass as Susie ate her rat. The sight made him feel a little uncomfortable – it always did – but that, he thought, was the way of Nature. And he did admire snakes. He admired their smooth beauty and their beautiful patterned skins. But most of all he admired their deafness.

Arlo had discovered some years before that snakes were completely deaf. They depended mostly on their highly developed sense of smell, and their tongues could actually *taste* smells from the air. As well as this, their expressionless eyes could see the heat given off by the bodies of other animals. Arlo watched with feelings of deep respect as the rat slowly disappeared down Susie's throat.

The snake lived in a world without annoying continuous noise. A silent world. To Arlo, snakes stood for beauty and perfection. He loved to watch them and admire them. If only his own world could be as silent as theirs! That was why he had caught Susie. More correctly, he had Chico – a local gardener – catch her for him. Susie had been caught in the rocky dry land that bordered Tucson, Arizona, where Arlo lived. Chico was most casual in the way he touched dangerous snakes. Sometimes he would even eat them. 'They're good to eat and they're free,' he would say. This disgusted Arlo, not because he didn't like the idea of snakes being used as food, but because he thought it failed to give the snake enough respect. Nevertheless, he was glad Chico had found Susie. She was a beauty.

Arlo liked living at the edge of town. He had to drive to work and it took him over an hour each way. It was noisy and hot, but at least he had quiet when he got home. Quiet was very important to Arlo. As a young man he had been a soldier and had fought in a war. His mind had been damaged by the noise of loud and terrible explosions and he had to be sent to a hospital at home to recover. He had met his wife, Maria, there. She was one of the nurses who had looked after him.

He still hated noise. 'Everybody talks about pollution,' Arlo would say to

anybody who would listen. ‘The way we poison our environment with this and that, yet the one thing which *really* poisons the quality of our lives is noise. Everywhere you go you hear people making noise, noise, noise. Where can you hear the birds sing these days? Not in the city, my friend. All you hear is traffic, loud radios and people with noisy machinery. Twenty-four hours a day it’s noise, noise, noise. It’s enough to drive you crazy.’

Too much noise took Arlo back, in his mind, to the war with its loud explosions that had brought death and suffering. Maria had saved him from madness. Maria and his work and his pills.

To look at, Arlo was like many other fifty-nine-year-old men: he was of average height and his once-dark hair was now grey. He was neither fat nor thin and dressed casually – usually in black trousers, a blue shirt and his favourite cowboy hat. His thin face had taken on a more troubled look since Maria had died of cancer one year before. She had helped him through the bad times and made sure he took the pills he needed to keep him calm.

But now Maria was gone.

They had no children. Most of Arlo’s time was now given to his work. Even when he was at home he would be thinking about work, putting new ideas down onto his computer. His work was his life.

Arlo had a job in a company called Teckno-Toys, which made electronic toys for children. He was the company’s chief designer of radio-controlled toys, such as cars and aeroplanes. These toys were so clever and amazing that many fathers bought them at Christmas for their children, only to play with them themselves. The cries of ‘Aw, Dad, can I have a go now?’ were often heard in many homes where Dad had bought one of Arlo’s marvellous toys.

His toys were indeed wonderful. The cars were tough but fast, while the aeroplanes were like magical birds that would fly up or down and turn in the air whenever you told them to. They could be guided from great distances with the powerful electronic controls that Arlo designed.

What Arlo liked best about his work was the electrical side. He would leave the design of the toy’s body to others, but design the electronic controls himself. By the time the toy was finished it would be the best that money could buy. Arlo had a garage full of small model planes, boats and cars he had made. He often used them to help test out new designs at home – that was why he had been allowed to keep them.

The Teckno-Toys factory was quite separate from the place where Arlo worked. He needed quiet so that he could concentrate and did not want loud upsetting noises to remind him of the war. He could never do this next to a noisy factory. He did his work in an old large house in the centre of the city called The Havens, which was owned by the company. The house was unusual in having its own spacious grounds that protected it from the loud noises of the city. Arlo worked there with a few other favoured employees. They would send their designs to the factory, which would build the models then return them to Arlo and his colleagues to be checked. This arrangement suited Arlo: he had a quiet place to work in, while Teckno-Toys got top-quality new toys that were sure to sell well. Keeping Arlo happy at The Havens had been worth it to them. So far.

Arlo had made enough money from his work to buy a spacious house outside the city and away from the noisy traffic. He built a large wooden tower in the garden so that he could control his models from great distances. He loved that. But he missed Maria and his sleep was sometimes troubled, especially when he forgot to take his pills. But, at least he had his work to take his mind off the war. Work was all he had left.

Bernie Dimaggio, Vice President of Teckno-Toys, held a towel as he watched his boss on her exercise cycle. She often spoke to him while doing her early morning exercises in the private gym she had next to her office. She got off the machine and he handed her the towel.

'He's not going to like it, Miss De Cruz. You know how he feels about the place!'

Bernie's suntan could not hide the way his face turned red as he spoke.

'You seem to forget who you are talking to, Mr Dimaggio: *I* am now the head of Teckno-Toys. My father was old-fashioned in his ways. He made this company but if we are to become the market leader we must change with the times.'

'But Miss De Cruz ...' began Bernie.

'Enough, Mr Dimaggio. You may be Vice President and your concern for one of our ... er ... senior employees is understandable. But we have a business to run. We have to progress; we have money to consider. We can't afford *not* to sell a valuable property like The Havens just because an old man close to retirement likes a bit of quiet, not when we need the money for building up the factory. It's just not good business sense, Mr Dimaggio, and we both know it.'

'But Arlo has been working at The Havens for twenty years! He couldn't work anywhere else now. You knew him when you were just a kid, Miss De Cruz ...'

'I'm not a 'kid' any more, Mr Dimaggio, in case you haven't noticed. And I have a business to run. The property will be sold. If Mr Penton wants to continue to work for Teckno-Toys, he will have to work at the factory, like the rest of us. Or he can go. I trust you will let him know of this development at the appropriate time.'

'You mean after he's completed the designs for the new season's models?'

'Exactly. No sense in upsetting him just now. Not while he's doing useful work. It's not good business, Mr Dimaggio, you ought to know that,' said Eva De Cruz firmly.

Bernie Dimaggio had been with the company since Eva De Cruz had been a child. He had seen the business grow as Eva grew. It was a successful business, though not yet the biggest of its kind. He looked at his new boss, the twenty-five-year-old daughter of Diego De Cruz, his former boss and friend. Eva had studied at the best business school and she wanted to show the world that she was going to be better than her father had ever been. Better and richer.

After Diego's wife, Eva's mother, had died fifteen years before, Diego De Cruz had put all of his energies into the business. The education of his daughter and

only child was left to private boarding schools, where she had lived for most of the time. She had been educated from a distance, like one of Diego's toys.

And Eva was the result. Everything about her was businesslike, from her usual dark blue suit to her electronic organiser. Bernie sometimes wondered if her brain had become electronic, too.

And what would happen to Arlo once he was told about the sale of The Havens? Both he and Diego had been in the army with Arlo during the war and had become friends. After the war they had given Arlo work he could do in peace. They wanted to help him put his broken mind back together. Diego had promised Arlo that there would always be a peaceful place for him to work at Teckno-Toys. What would this news do to him?

'Couldn't you find somewhere else quiet for him, Miss De Cruz,' Bernie asked, 'where he can carry on his work? Diego . . . I mean, your father . . . promised Arlo somewhere quiet a long time ago!'

'That was then, this is now. We can't afford to treat him any differently from the rest of us, Mr Dimaggio,' she said after drying her face with the towel and throwing it back to him. 'Now excuse me, but I have another appointment in twenty minutes.'

Eva left him with the damp towel. Bernie was close to retirement age himself. He felt sorry for Arlo. Diego would have done something to help, but not Eva. He might lose his own job if he didn't do as she told him.

Bernie felt older and weaker as he walked out of the gym.

While Eva and Bernie were talking, Arlo was getting into his car to go to work. He had forgotten to take his pill again. His face was already sweating. It was a bright sunny morning and the roads would be hot. He was glad he had completed the new designs and was looking forward to handing them in personally, as usual, to Bernie Dimaggio. They lay on the seat next to him as he drove to the city centre. The road was already busy with the morning rush of traffic.

Arlo had to stop at a set of traffic lights. The car next to him was a sports car with an open top. The man at the wheel was young and wore dark glasses. He was listening to loud rock music and was nodding his head to the rhythm as he listened. Arlo could not understand how anybody could listen to such a loud noise without damaging their ears. He could feel the noise hitting his own head in solid waves. It was painful. He shouted to the man to turn the sound down. The man saw him and laughed, then turned the sound up even more. Fortunately, the lights changed at that moment and they both drove away. Arlo let the sports car speed ahead, taking its noise with it.

Everything seemed to be noisy on that journey. Other cars had noisy radios. Arlo swore at the Tucson rock music radio station as he passed it by. Then he heard some loud machines at some new building works. Car horns sounded at every pause in the stream of traffic, and everywhere people seemed to be shouting, shouting, shouting.

At last, the turning for The Havens came into view. He could hardly wait to enter the peaceful building! As he drove through the private grounds all the awful noises disappeared into the distance. When Arlo stopped the car his body

was shaking and covered in sweat. Echoes of loud noises were still in his head, some of them terrible memories of the war. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself, then picked up his designs and walked into the big house.

It was nine o'clock at The Havens. Bernie Dimaggio was early. He was waiting in the office as Arlo walked in. He noticed that Arlo was holding the envelope containing the new designs. He also noticed how upset Arlo looked.

'Hi Arlo! Hey, are you OK? You don't look so good, if you don't mind me saying so. Are you still sleeping OK? Hey, if you need anything just say the word.'

Arlo smiled. Bernie was always concerned about him when it was time to hand in his designs. Did he think he would finally go crazy before completing them? Probably. Bernie had always been a worrier. Arlo looked into the familiar suntanned face and answered, 'I'm fine, Bernie. At least, I would be if I walked around with my ears closed. I swear this town is getting noisier every day'

'Oh no,' thought Bernie. 'I hope he's not going to give me another long talk about noise pollution!' Bernie decided to change the subject quickly.

'You have the designs I see, Arlo. All ready for production?'

Arlo handed over the envelope, giving it a firm tap with his hand on the way.

'You bet, Bernie. This one is going to be a winner, I'm telling you. The kids are going to love it! It's easy to control, yet it's as quiet as a baby asleep in its mother's arms!'

'Everything's checked?' asked Bernie.

'Checked and double-checked,' Arlo answered. 'You ought to know me by now.'

Bernie did know. If Arlo said something was ready, it was ready. He put the designs in his briefcase and began to walk towards the door as he thanked Arlo. Then he stopped and turned to him, pulling another smaller envelope from his jacket pocket.

'Oh, I almost forgot ...' said Bernie, though he had done no such thing. 'Here's some mail from the factory for you.'

'What is it?' Arlo asked as he took the envelope.

Bernie looked at his watch. He wasn't brave enough to face Arlo's reaction to the sale of The Havens. 'Hey, I've got to go to a meeting right now. See you later, OK?'

'OK,' said Arlo as Bernie smiled nervously and left. 'He sure was in a rush,' he thought. 'Maybe the noise has been getting to that guy, too. I wouldn't be surprised. Nothing surprises me anymore.'

Arlo sat down with a sigh and opened the envelope.

Eva De Cruz tested her coffee. It was black with no sugar, just as she liked it. As she sat at her office desk she thought that things, on the whole, could be a lot worse. It had been a month since the old man had left them. She had expected him to make a lot more fuss about the whole business. She knew he would never work in the factory grounds, not with his unreasonable attitude towards perfectly normal noise levels. All the other designers had agreed to the

new arrangements. She couldn't change the world just because one employee had had some unfortunate experiences in the war. That wasn't her problem. Besides, The Havens had been knocked down by the new owners. They had already started to build a new radio station on the grounds. It was going to be the biggest rock music radio station in Arizona. Teckno-Toys had made a lot of money out of the sale. And if the old man didn't like it . . . well, that was just too bad.

Eva De Cruz had known Arlo for most of her life. She had even played with some of the toys he had designed while they were in the testing stage. She had loved the toys but the man who designed them was, to her, just a strange old man who hated noises. She had never been close to him, though she had liked his wife. Maria was nice. It was true that the old man had been a first class designer but nobody is so good that he can't be replaced – especially if they're half crazy and more trouble than they're worth. Besides, the company had already made a lot of money from his designs. There were plenty of excellent young designers already applying for his job – they weren't troubled by noise at all. They were cheaper, too.

'No, there will be no problem replacing Arlo Penton,' Eva thought to herself as she poured out a second cup of coffee. 'No problem at all.'

Arlo had given up his job as soon as he had read the letter. There was no way he was going to work in that noisy factory! He had enough money saved. He could take care of himself all right. He didn't need false friends who broke their promises. He could manage alone. That's what he kept telling himself.

But it was a month since he had left his job and the noises in Arlo's head were getting worse. He often forgot to take his pills now. Sometimes he would wake up in the early hours of the morning covered in sweat and screaming at the ceiling. Only now there was no Maria to help him get over the nightmare. His memories of the war had returned and he was alone in the middle of them. To Arlo, it seemed that the guns were firing again. The guns in his head and the sounds outside were joining together. The difference between memories and reality was breaking down in his mind. When he went out in the car for his groceries he would hear the guns. Every loud radio, every noisy machine seemed like an exploding bomb to his ears.

He wondered why something wasn't done about it but nothing ever was. And all the time the noise was there. Why didn't people notice what was going on? Were they all deaf? *He* could hear the enemy. His enemy was noise.

He had to do something or he would go crazy. Nobody else seemed to be doing a thing about it. It was all up to him. He would have to stop the noise.

But how?

'That ought to be enough,' said Arlo. It was one week later and he had decided what he would do. He had been making the tower he had next to his house higher and stronger so that he could increase the range of the radio signals to his models. He placed his electronic equipment on top of the tower and the higher he built it the better his electronic equipment worked. He now had more

control over his wonderful models than ever before with a range that allowed him to fly them high over the city.

Arlo had a wide variety of models to choose from. He had, over the years, collected over a hundred models in his garage. They were all in perfect working order. Teckno-Toys had let him keep them. He had tiny television cameras fitted to his models. This allowed him to see on his computer screen indoors where his models were while they were in use, even when it was cloudy or too hot for him to go outside. Arlo had learned a lot about how to make explosives during the war. He could attach a small but powerful explosive onto a model and then, from the comfort of his own home, direct it to a target. The video cameras would show him exactly where his target was; all he had to do was aim the model (usually an aeroplane) towards the target and BOOM! – the target was destroyed.

Nobody suspected anything. Arlo, after all, was just working on his models like he always did. No-one knew that he was making bombs as well. Chico called by with more rats for Susie. He saw Arlo working in his garage where Susie lay sleeping in her glass-fronted box. Chico liked Arlo, even if he didn't eat snakes. He stopped to watch in admiration while Arlo flew one of his wonderful models high into the sky.

He had no idea that Arlo's campaign against the enemy had begun.

Arlo's first bombing campaign was against the old Tucson rock music radio station. It was successful. Just one small model aeroplane had delivered enough home-made explosives to bring down the radio station's tower. It was easy. They wouldn't be playing loud music from that station for some while.

Tucson's local papers all published stories about a strange explosion that had blown up essential equipment at the local rock radio station. Nobody had been hurt in the explosion, they said, but the station would be out of action for a long time. The police could see no motive for the crime but did not reject the idea of some individual playing around with explosives for fun. This was worrying.

They were right to be worried. Over the next week there were several more explosions: large noisy machines on building areas were destroyed and a fireworks factory was seriously damaged. But nobody had been hurt. Not yet.

It was a few days after the explosion in the fireworks factory and Sheriff Calhoun was in the office of the Vice President of Teckno-Toys. He badly wanted a cigarette. He was trying to give up again and had not brought any cigarettes with him. Worse still, none of the other officers smoked so he couldn't even get a cigarette from one of them. This was making him bad-tempered, but he had a job to do. He stuck another piece of chewing gum into his mouth.

'Tell me again, Mr Dimaggio . . . ' The Sheriff paused as he softened the fresh gum in his mouth. 'You told me when you rang me on the telephone earlier that this guy – what was his name . . . ?'

'Arlo Penton, Sheriff.'

'Yeah, Arlo Penton. You said he had been one of the top designers at Teckno-Toys?'

'The best we had. That's him in that picture on the wall just there. He's the one holding the model Mustang fighter plane. That's our biggest selling model and he designed it.'

Sheriff Calhoun looked at the picture in Bernie Dimaggio's office. Bernie liked to keep photographs of all of Teckno-Toys' best toys with their designers. Arlo featured in a lot of them. In this one, Arlo was smiling and looked happy and relaxed.

'And you got rid of the guy?' asked the Sheriff.

'No, Sheriff. It was his choice. He . . . er . . . left the company a few months ago.'

The Sheriff recognised a note of guilt in Bernie's voice. Years of listening to countless interviews had trained his ears to know when somebody was trying to hide something. That was what he was hearing now.

'With less than a year to go before he was due to retire? He sure must have had a reason. Can you think of a reason, Mr Dimaggio? After all, you say you've known him a long time. Not that I'm accusing anybody of anything, you understand, but I have to ask these things.'

Bernie had felt bad about the way the promise he and Diego had made to Arlo had been broken. He felt bad about his own weakness before Diego's daughter – his boss – who had not respected that promise. He knew that Arlo must have been disturbed by the loss of The Havens but he hadn't been brave enough to talk to Arlo about it after he had given him the letter. Could Arlo have used his expert skills to make these explosions?

Bernie told the Sheriff everything about Arlo, about Teckno-Toys and The Havens and how he thought Arlo might be responsible for the explosions. Bernie felt glad to have finally told somebody how he really felt about things. 'So, what will happen to Arlo now?' Bernie asked.

'Now hold on, Mr Dimaggio. You may have given us a motive for Mr Penton, but we don't know that he did any of these things. There have been a number of explosions: at the Tucson radio station, some heavy machines blown up and the one a few nights ago at a fireworks factory. That caused serious damage. But we can't be sure that any one person is responsible for all of these crimes. For all we know, there may be any number of people out there making their own bombs.'

'But you don't really think so, do you Sheriff?' Bernie asked.

Sheriff Calhoun took a few more thoughtful chews of his gum and wished he had a cigarette. He looked again at the photograph of Arlo.

Suddenly, he noticed a model aeroplane, like a child's toy, fly past and before he could reply, there was a loud BANG! from outside. Bernie rushed to his window to look.

'Sheriff, it's the factory. It's on fire!'

Arlo had been working hard. He could not see the results of his work immediately because the television cameras were destroyed once his models hit their targets. He had to listen to the radio for news of his work – not the loud music stations, of course. His last action had been against the electrical generator at

the Teckno-Toys factory. Without the generator they would not have the power to work their loud machines, and the hated factory noise would be silenced at last.

Unfortunately, though the action had been a success, three people had been badly burned. He heard about them on the radio. It upset him. 'But it's not my fault,' he told himself. 'This is war. Every war hurts some innocent people. It's the enemy's fault, not mine. Once the enemy is defeated there will be peace. I have to fight on for peace. There's nobody else. I *have* to.'

But Arlo had no peace. His heart was saddened by the news of the three injured people. And the noises that disturbed him had not been silenced. The enemy was strong and there was much work left to do.

He made his way to the garage again.

Arlo began working immediately. He had to do the next one right. He had no idea that the Sheriff and a large number of police officers were, while he was working, speeding towards his house in their cars. All he was concerned about was putting the finishing touches to his model Mustang fighter plane. He had saved the Mustang for the new radio tower they were building at the place where The Havens used to be. They would never finish it. No way. Not if he could help it.

It would not need much explosive, just enough to bring the tower down. That would be enough. He got his little computer ready as he switched on the video camera attached to the model aeroplane. It was time to fly.

Arlo placed the Mustang on the ground by his garage then sat down by his controls. He did not see the Sheriff's men, but they saw him. They had positioned themselves some distance away from him. They all had powerful guns. They saw the Mustang as it started to take off. A shot was fired before the model had gone far enough to leave the ground.

There was an explosion.

Arlo felt a force hit his ears and he was knocked to the floor. There was a pain in his arm. He had closed his eyes. Was he dead? Had the enemy beaten him? He opened his eyes and saw that his arm had blood on it.

As he started to get himself up, Arlo did not see the pieces of broken glass on the floor behind him. He did not notice the angry shaking sound of the snake whose sleep had been disturbed. He hardly felt Susie's bite before he sank to the floor again. His eyes felt heavy as the daylight turned to darkness and death ran with the poison in his blood. But he was happy.

Arlo's world was, at last, a silent one.