

The Gremlin: Transforming the Past's Failures

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AMERICAN MOTORS CORPORATION entered the sub-compact field in 1970 with a sturdy little car it named the *Gremlin*. Its rear door-window (the hatch-back) descends so abruptly from the vehicle's roof that it gives it the appearance of having been cut off before it finished growing (or perhaps the way that Sir Yvain's horse was cut off at the hind quarter by the falling portcullis at the castle of Esclados the Red). The company itself exploits the car's looks in television commercials which depict a snide and burly service-station attendant asking a pretty young driver about the "rest" of her car. But the ad concludes with the important message that though the car might have unorthodox looks it is economical to drive: the girl smugly and tauntingly hands her tormentor a dollar bill for gas.

What is most incongruous in all this, particularly for those people with clear memories of World War II, is the very name of the car, *Gremlin*. Historically this is the least likely name for a machine imaginable. But apparently not for the general public, and presumably not for the staff at American Motors which named the car several years ago. The company must have assumed, or conducted extensive field research which demonstrated, that car buyers would think of pixies, sprites, or other varieties of the "wee folk" when they heard the name *Gremlin*. The name conjures up an image of a small, compact creature (very much like the car), who is harmless, playful, and whimsical, perhaps something like the Celtic elf who sells the breakfast cereal, "Lucky Charms."

When they first became known to Americans in 1942 (Gremlins had already made the acquaintance of the R.A.F.), they were the subject of several articles in leading magazines, and their diminutive stature was usually featured. *Newsweek* called them "exasperating pixies, often clad in caps, ruffled collars, tight britches, and even spats."¹ *Time* described them as "about a foot high," often wearing soft pointed suede shoes (occasionally with spats), tight green breeches, red jackets with ruffled necks, stocking caps or else flat-topped tri-cornered hats with jaunty feathers. Nourished by air-mail stamps, their suction-feet enabled them

¹ September 7, 1942, p. 24.

to clamp on to the wings of planes whizzing past, and to stick there.²

American Motors has not exploited this diminutive pixie image very intensely, although a small impish figure, with long pointed ears and even longer pointed soft shoes, does appear on the car's key cap on the hatch-back locking apparatus. But displayed more frequently is one model's large "X," which Mr. Henry Berry of the Public Relations Office in Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania, tells me is to designate the experimental nature of the car. Many new vehicles, particularly sports and touring cars and jet aircraft, also use this symbol.

Gremlins were, in the first American reports of their activities, accused of various mischievous pranks upon R.A.F. and then American aircraft, particularly fighter planes. They jammed guns at critical moments, got into carburetors and clogged them, and deranged instruments. The R.A.F. Coastal Command found that Gremlins were fond of punching holes in pontoons, of jabbing pilots in the back when their hands were occupied at their controls, and of drinking up nearly all the petrol in the tanks, barely enabling the pilot to bring his craft back to his home base safely. Fighter pilots were said to complain of Gremlins who sat on their shoulders and made knocking sounds like a sputtering engine, or who climbed into their gun barrels and deflected their bullets, or else who whispered to cloud-bound pilots, "you fathead, you're flying upside down!"

Bomber pilots also had their complaints: the "little people" were playing "see-saw" on their "automatic horizons" while they were flying blind; they were using the bomber's compass for capricious games of merry-go-round; or they were engaged in the most dangerous game of covering the plane's wings with ice.

One of the first gremlin anecdotes recorded in America³ told how, on a raid over Dieppe, Eagle Squadron Leader Augustus Daymond tried to fire at a Focke-Wolfe 190 but later wistfully reported, "too many Gremlins ganged up on my controls. . . . When I finally beat them off and finished my diving turn, it was too late. . . ." Later, near the mission's end, a Fifinella (female Gremlin) drilled a hole in Daymond's gas tank, and he soon had to bail out over the channel. Later, *Time*⁴ carried the frustrating experience of gunner Z.E. White, who, while lining up another F-W 190 in his sights, had his guns jammed by another Gremlin. The encounter was duly reported to Pilot Oscar Coen, also of

² *Time*, September 14, 1942, p. 37; the *New York Times Magazine* (April 11, 1943, pp. 20-21) featured a full page of pictures of Gremlins and added the details of their diet and their handy suction feet.

³ In *Newsweek*, *loc. cit.*; the story was repeated in Quentin Reynolds, "What Every Pilot Knows," *Collier's* (October 31, 1942), pp. 30-33, who also said that Daymond had to bail out, a detail omitted by *Newsweek*.

⁴ *Time*, September 14, 1942, p. 37.

the Eagle Squadron, a noted "Gremlinologist," who had heard many such tales and was beginning to collect them.

As soon as the Gremlin was introduced to the American public, theories of his origin also sprang up. *Time* (Sept. 14, 1942, p. 37) rather fancifully suggested that the Gremlins, like all pixies, originally lived in the hollows of river banks and in deep pools, though later some had moved to the rocky crags along the English shore. Quentin Reynolds, no less whimsically, speculated that they came from the Scottish Highlands and were the spirits of humans who, tired of their eternal standing, were hanged there and buried vertically. They were dispossessed, the *New York Times* reported, by the roar of aircraft.⁵ *Newsweek* (Sept. 7, 1942, p. 24) was less imaginative while attempting to be more accurate; Merrill Mueller wrote from London that the first Gremlin was thought to have made his appearance in a Fleet Air Arm accident in 1923. One pilot, nameless, was particularly given to *Fremlin* beer (a brand name?), and on the night before his catapult-launched plane plunged into the sea, he was ardently renewing an old comradeship with his favorite brew. The next day, after his crash, he told his rescuers that the little people from a beer bottle had haunted him all night and then had gotten into his airplane's controls and engine during his abortive flight: "the bloody Gremlins did it."

The one serious guess (in *Newsweek*) as to the origins of the Gremlins was repeated by A. Marjorie Taylor in *The Language of World War II*,⁶ indicating her acceptance of Mueller's story. He had contended that the name came from the Old English verb *greme*, "to vex." (Hall's *Dictionary* translates *gremian* "to enrage, provoke, irritate," which is a bit strong for Gremlins.) But if these airborne nixies did have their genesis in OE *gremian*, we still do not know which British aviator in the early 1920's had both a knowledge of Old English and a creative enough imagination to personify mechanical failure as one of the "little people."

However uncertain the origins of the name and even the conceptual genesis of the Gremlins, during the early months of World War II their proliferation among allied pilots was extraordinary. Respondents to *Life's* article⁷ (illustrated, by the way, with several "photographs" showing Gremlins at work) flooded the magazine's offices with stories of the Gremlins of their own experience. *Life* had listed only four different species in its November, 1942 article: the spade-nosed Gremlin which dug up airfields and put pot holes in the runways; the big-bellied genre which sucked the air from under planes about to land, causing them to

⁵ Quentin Reynolds, "What Every Pilot Knows"; the *Times* detail is from the article already cited.

⁶ New York: H. W. Wilson Co., 1948.

⁷ "The Gremlins," November 16, 1942, pp. 93-96; replies to this article were printed in the issue of December 7, 1942, pp. 2-8.

bump down or to throw off an on-target bombardier; the groundling, who never flies—except to other airfields—and then only to play pranks at the new location; and the hairy-legged Gremlin, encountered only at the Gibraltar air base, which had a triangular hole in its stomach, causing the wind to whistle through it and in turn causing the pilot to misjudge his speed. *The Language of World War II* added three others: genus *Jockey*, who guided seagulls or pigeons into the windshields of approaching planes; genus *Incisor*, whose infants teethed on airplanes' control wires; and *Optic*, who cast a glow on the eyepiece of bomb sights just as the target came into view.

But the letters from around the country were ample testimony to the instantaneous fame of the Gremlins. They came from coast to coast. Byron Fish, a Seattle employee of Boeing, claimed that the first Gremlins to inhabit American equipment were discovered by Boeing test pilots while proving the B-17 "Flying Fortress." This first American pixie was of the genus *Stratogremlin*, since it was seldom found below 35,000 feet. (The R.A.F. had named this high-flying kind *Spandules*.) Up in that rarified atmosphere Gremlins grew to nearly twice their "normal" size, and they were most easily identified by their oversized noses. Their color was a very cold blue, their fur was tinged an icy azure, and, in the stratosphere, these Gremlins grew ears like muffs. But like their kin at lower altitudes they were not really malicious. True, they poked pilots in the stomach at 35,000 feet, but not to cause any real harm. They also snapped rubber bands in their ears on descent and sipped oil out of the tank just to see what would happen when the pressure gauge dropped. They were merely playfully curious, as when they "fooled around" with the plane's antenna and garbled its messages, congealed oil lines, foamed the oil at 40,000 feet, fogged up the windshield, or moved the propeller governors up and down.

Responses on the east coast showed the nation-wide scale of the proliferation of the idea of the Gremlin. A South Orange, N.J. respondent, Henry J. Adams, wrote that local Gremlins left furnace boilers running and touched live wires with handy knives so as to burn holes in the blades. Or Widgets (baby Gremlins) spilled salt on the rugs in the house. Adams thought that he might be describing the species *Gremlinus domesticus*. Cuteness was the reaction of many others; a Richard Wynn of Rockville Center, N.Y., revealed that the name of the chief Gremlin was Air Marshall Rickenbishop Slipstream.

The American trivialization of the Gremlin did not run counter to the British attitude, for this vexer of pilots appears never to have been thought of as seriously, and certainly not fatally, harmful. *Life*, in its article of November 16, 1942, truly recorded that Gremlins "have never caused fatal accidents or, if they have, pilots haven't lived to tell of them." The second half of that sentence is as ominous an utterance as

has been made.

Gremlins are pranksters, not mortal enemies. By sticking their fingers in gun barrels they may have caused bullets to go astray, but they do not seem to have caused the death of any gunner. One story even had it that gunners had at times invited Gremlins into their turrets for warmth and companionship. Some Gremlins were said to have jammed the retractable landing gear on fighters so that the pilot had to land on the plane's belly, but the pilot was never killed, and the purpose of the trick seems to have been to embarrass the pilot by having to tell his comrades and his commanding officer that Gremlins were responsible for his forgetfulness.

Time (Sept. 14, 1942, p. 37) had the right spirit when it tried to describe the Gremlin as friendly, like the Fenodyree (Manx brownie) from the Isle of Man, or the Robin-Round-Cap; and though they were winged, like the flying fomarians, they were not nearly so large or as belligerent. Neither were Gremlins to be confused with druids, dryads, brownies, trolls, Nereids, Kobolds, leprechauns, or elves. But then *Time's* writer went on to make a fatal error, that of seeing in this triviality some cosmic meaning. The Gremlins, he guessed, come "out of the tradition of Irish, Scottish and English whimsy. . . . There is a sociological and psychological necessity in thinking of Anglo-Saxon Celtic peoples to conjure up the embodiment of fate in a charming form." Quentin Reynolds was more practical, finding comfort in the courage of the R.A.F. "lads" who made light of their daily encounters with death.⁸

Yet surely these little folk who wear tights, bob-tailed frock coats, and pointed shoes, who make ailerons flutter and chisel the edges of cockpit canopies to make the airstream whistle are not the embodiment of fate, Celtic or otherwise. They are simply and clearly (I am tempted to write, "indisputably") the embodiment or personification of mechanical failure and human error, almost as Reynolds had guessed. They make little things go wrong: haywire compass needles, jammed machine guns, fogged windshields. And they cause people to make mistakes: to forget to lower the landing gear, to aim poorly at an enemy aircraft, to neglect the gas level in the tanks. These mistakes are not fate, they are not divine, they are not cosmic. They are human and mechanical, immediate and terrestrial, personal and fortune-bound. Fate is a force beyond the power of men, even of R.A.F. pilots; Gremlins are the personifications of factors within human control and of everyday luck, as is shown by the charms which flyers used against the wee folk: rabbit's feet, clover leaves, horseshoes, as well as the specialized "Gremlin Cradles" (empty beer bottles). In this century men have hardly resorted to such trivial

⁸ Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

measures to protect themselves from the forces of destiny.

Where Gremlins first came from, as I have said, is not known with certainty. American reporters in England in 1942 claimed that the R.A.F. had been vexed by them for several years, but for how many years has not been determined. It hardly matters. The name itself suggests something compact and friendly, as do *pixie* and *leprechaun*, and the sound alone⁹ probably sustained its life in aviation lore. No doubt the people at American Motors who are responsible for such things thought of cuteness and compactness as well as amicability.

For several years after the war the term *Gremlin* continued to evoke the original aspect of its meaning, mechanical failure or other malfunctions and accidents caused by human error. Such was the embodiment of Gremlins in articles in *Hobbies* magazine (July, 1943, 94-95) and in *American Home* (February, 1946, 111-13), where, returned home from the wars, they set about to plague the American housewife in the kitchen and the laundryroom. At that date, on the eve of their hibernation from common usage for more than two decades, Gremlins had become so generalized that they embodied mechanical failure of any sort, on land as well as in the air, in the home as in a dog-fight. Once the scourge of the Spitfire and the Flying Fortress, by 1946 they vexed mainly washing machines and vacuum cleaners.

American Motors released the Gremlin in 1970, presumably in the expectation that the public had forgotten both the origin and the widespread usage of the word in the early 'forties. By a shift in point of view—a common enough semantic phenomenon¹⁰—the public would associate the name with compactness rather than with mischief. And presumably American Motors guessed right; the American buying public has little interest in philology. Buick had shown that when it named one of its cars *Electra*; so did Chevrolet with its *Caprice*, and Plymouth with its *Fury*.

The naming of consumer goods, especially those as expensive as automobiles, must be a delicate and demanding business. The most cogent demonstration of this is Ford's solicitation of a name from Marianne Moore for a proposed new line of cars in 1955.¹¹ As an anecdote it is also instructive. Ford's initial letter stated the problem most elegantly:

Dear Miss Moore:

This is a morning we find ourselves with a problem which, strangely enough, is more in the field of words and the fragile meaning of words than in car-making. And we just wonder

⁹ This is not an argument for an onomatopoeic, or "bow-wow" theory of lexical genesis, but merely a suggestion that at least a few words are created this way and perpetuated for this reason.

¹⁰ See Edgar H. Sturtevant, *Linguistic Change: An Introduction to the Historical Study of Language* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917).

¹¹ This fascinating exchange can be found conveniently in Donald McQuade and Robert Atwan, eds., *Popular Writing in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 76-81.

whether you might be intrigued with it sufficiently to lend us a hand.

Our dilemma is a name for a rather important new series of cars.

We should like this name to be more than a label. Specifically, we should like it to have a compelling quality in itself and by itself. To convey, through association or by other connotation, some visceral feeling of elegance, fleetness, advanced features and design. A name, in short, that flashes a dramatically desirable picture in people's minds. (Another "Thunderbird" would be fine.)

Over the past few weeks this office has confected a list of three hundred-odd candidates which, it pains me to relate, are characterized by an embarrassing pedestrianism. We are miles short of our ambition. And so we are seeking the help of one who knows more about this sort of magic than we.

. . .

Miss Moore replied that she would "take it under advisement," and during the next several months submitted the names of *Silver Sword*, *Aerundo*, *Hurricane Hirundo*, and *Hurricane Accipiter* (a hawk). After that first batch she paused, then sent to Ford another, more exotic, group: *Resilient Bullet*, *Intelligent Bullet*, *Bullet Cloisonne*, *Mongoose Civique*, *Dearborn Diamante*, *Pastelogram*, *Fee Rapide*, *Taper Racer*, and *Varsity Stroke*. Still Ford was not fulfilled. In near exasperation, she finally submitted *Pluma Piluma*, *Utopian Turtle-Top*, and *Andante con Moto*.

The last word was Ford's (in a letter dated November 8, 1955):

We have chosen a name out of the more than six thousand-odd candidates that we gathered. It fails somewhat of the resonance, gaiety, and zest we were seeking. But it has a personal dignity and meaning to many of us here. Our name, dear Miss Moore, is Edsel.

I hope you will understand.

Cordially,
etc.

So many names appear to have been chosen which are meant to evoke a sense of power and aggressiveness that the whimsical *Gremlin* comes as a surprise: *Barracuda*, *Mustang*, *Falcon*, *Sting Ray*, *Skyhawk*, *Manta*, *Cutlass*, *Le Sabre*, *Javelin*, *Cobra*, *Cougar*, *Hornet*, and *Toronado* (suggesting both "Tornado," and "Toro"). Another group of names appears to have been chosen to suggest fleetness and agility: *Impala*, *Mercury*, *Satellite*, even *Dart*. Others suggest elegance: *Brougham*, *Coupe de Ville*, *Continental*, *El Dorado*, *Ambassador*, *Saratoga*, *Monte Carlo*, and *Cordoba*. American Motors made its own gamble with the laws of semantic change, and won. No one must think of the embodiment of mechanical failure when he buys the *Gremlin*, but rather, through a semantic shift of emphasis he does think of something small and friendly. The alternatives which AMC may have considered are not appealing: *Nixie*, *Elf*, *Sprite* (though good enough for a carbonated soft drink), or *Fairy*.

The people who named the Gremlin were apparently aware of the creature's history. Such decisions at American Motors are made by the Vice President for Styling, and Mr. Richard A. Teague, who gave final approval for *Gremlin*, has been quoted as saying that his little creature "was like a thorn in the side of the competition."¹² He knew, then, of the history of Gremlins as vexatious nuisances, but assumed—according to this account—that the public would think of the Gremlin as vexing Ford, Chrysler, and G.M.¹³ This would have seemed to me, a mere amateur in such matters, as a risky gamble; but obviously it has paid off for American Motors.

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NECROLOGY

The Secretary-Treasurer regretfully announces the death of one of the contributors to this issue: Professor Albert H. Marckwardt. An obituary will appear in a forthcoming issue of *Names*.

¹² From a telephone conversation with Mr. Henry Berry, AMC Public Relations Office in Sharon Hill, Pennsylvania, November 16, 1974.

¹³ The 1974 AMC *Annual Report* claims (p. 9) that 89 percent of the previous year's Gremlin's sales, an industry high, were to owners of other makes.