

A Ticket Home

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DEDICATION

For all the trains we've known, no matter how big or how small, and all the people who have loved them and us.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First a disclaimer: if these characters sound like anyone you know, living or dead, it's unintentional. If the hobby shop sounds like one you hang out in, it's a composite of every one we've been in over the years. Pat's is a real place and you ought to shop there, but it's not full of glitter and he hasn't chased any burglars down the alley (so far.) Bert is not a real hobby shop owner. We do know a wildly successful man in a totally unrelated field who calls himself the world's most inept crook and says he had to go straight because he wasn't smart enough to keep stealing.

Second, our profound thanks to Gary and Mike of the late great G&M, John at T and K, Pat of Patrick's Trains and all the others who helped us get started in O gauge and continue to answer our sometimes off the wall questions. Thanks also to Tom Morgan, who has financed Becky's train adventures for thirty-two years and Gabe's for twenty-five.

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1: Promised Land

In honor of those who lived it, and of the Righteous Among Nations

Once upon a time, the way all good stories about wonderful places start. there was a little town way across the ocean. There had been a war that made a lot of people short on money, so they were taking care of their little town as best they could. Most of the houses were small, simple and old, whitewashed stone built on steep streets cut into the mountainside. There was a tiny white church on one end of the street and a tiny white church on the other end of the street, and Max's family was one of a half-dozen who met on Friday nights above the store.

It was an hour's ride from a very big city, so people who had office jobs like Max's father often took a slow train into the big place and came home in the evening. Times had been very hard since the war. Many men from the town who knew how to work in coal mines found jobs across the ocean, and when one worked awhile, he sent for his wife, who brought her brother and their parents and the brother's wife and children. Next the neighbors came and found a place next door, and so it went. Because of that, many people from the little town of St. Joachim had come all the way over the ocean and the mountains and ended up in Jensen. They kept in touch, so everyone there knew the important news on both sides of the water.

In spite of the lack of cash, people in St. Joachim tried to be happy in the fall of 1938. They had their small stone houses and the depot at the foot of the biggest street, and all around they had the mountains, green slopes in summer full of flowers, deep snow all winter and white caps above their gray stone heads all through the year. Most of all, they had the little railroad that wound around the corner of the mountain and wrapped around town.

Papa, Hiram Schuler, was a draftsman at an office in the big city. He got up early to take the morning train and didn't come home until the evening run stopped, so Max, at six, didn't get to see him a lot. It didn't seem to matter, because Papa always seemed to be thinking about him and Mama and the baby. Often there were little surprises in his coat pockets, like a piece of candy or a tiny toy.

On Max's fourth birthday, Papa came home with a package wrapped in brown paper. There was some whispering about it-- "but Esther, it didn't cost so much, it was *used!*" Max squealed when he

unwrapped a fat little engine, two boxcars and a passenger car just like the evening train that brought Papa home. The real train always stopped at the St. Joachim depot for about an hour to take water and let people get something to eat before it crossed into the next country for the long trip into the next big town.

The model engine had been owned by a few careless children who had to have the latest thing at all times. When the novelty and part of her paint wore off the next year, she had been traded in and spent a long time in the box of used trains. It upset her a lot until the nice young man with the sharp dark hair and eyes came in, asking about the price for the set, and acted so pleased that the shop owner threw some track in with them. She found herself on the floor at Max's house almost every night, making her imagined stops at a dozen little villages as she climbed slowly from the bigger city over the mountain pass and down again. Freddi from next door liked the cars best and had his own little engine who sometimes pulled them. Max most loved the engine, and if anyone who knew steel happened to ask, the feeling was mutual.

In spite of the usual little boy arguments, it figured that Max and Freddi would end up sharing their toys. Freddi's family never minded when he came over to play dreidel and have latkes, and Max's family didn't mind if he wanted to go to the Mullers' house and sing carols while they had the tree up. This year felt different. Mama seemed upset all the time and when Papa came home from work he always looked worried. In November, something happened in the city where Papa worked. "The broken glass, all ruined, and after the first of the year, no work for me. They'll come here before we know it," he said when he thought Max didn't hear. "The letter must come soon."

Mama and Papa had always been very careful with money, putting away all they could into the America box. That year Max didn't ask for sweets when they were out because the answer was almost always "we shouldn't." Dinner was often bread, cheese and fruit so they would have more money for the America box. "Now it eats better than we do," Papa said, "but someday it'll feed us." When there was so much in coins and notes, Papa took it with him and brought home gold coins, and when he had so many smaller ones, he traded them for bigger ones that were easier to carry.

Mama and Papa had filled out and sent away papers for as long as Max remembered; now they watched the incoming mail very closely. When there was a letter from America, it came not from the post office in St. Joachim but from one over the border, brought by Freddi's papa on the days when he came home. She always put new letters up until Papa came home, then huddled over them with him after Max was supposed to

be in bed. He had seen them often, struggling to fill out forms and asking each other what this could mean or why the American government would want to know that. They always sent the letter away with Mr. Muller when he went across to Switzerland, and Max wasn't allowed to talk about that.

On the first night of Chanukah, while Mama was busy in the kitchen with a chicken and potatoes bought especially for the night, Max's dad pulled the curtains shut. "You could ask, but Freddi might not be allowed to come over if we have the candles lit," he warned. "The new policemen who just came to town this week don't think we should be celebrating. It's best not to make them angry."

"But we're supposed to light the candles. I mean...won't Grandfather be upset?"

"He understands. We've written about it. There's more." Max's dad seemed to be getting up steam, the way the steam engine did when she got ready to climb the mountain grade beyond St. Joachim. "Your mama wants me to tell you. We're celebrating tonight for another very good reason. I have a new job waiting in America, all the papers on that side are arranged, and soon we'll go to live in the town where Grandfather and Aunt Rachel are."

"All the way across the ocean?" That was a long way from Freddi.

"Yes, and I'm afraid we won't be able to take much. We'll send a trunk ahead with the things we can't use here. Freddi's family will keep the important books and other things we can't take and will get them to us when they come. Mrs. Muller's family lives near there and they'll be moving soon, too. Now--" Max's dad lifted a hand-- "this is very important. You can't tell anyone, not at school, nowhere. Freddi will know, but on the street even the two of you can say nothing to each other. Those policemen I talked about will be asking questions of everyone, trying to find out who goes to *shul*. The whole town knows who we are, it's true. We don't want to make them have to lie if they're asked where we are. If they don't know, they don't say."

"All right," Max said, even though it didn't sound all right at all.

"There's another thing: Mrs. Muller will teach you what to do as if you went to their church. You need to learn very fast. Listen to her closely and learn so you act just like the other children in Freddi's church. This is hard, Max, but it's for the best."

"But...we don't go there. We don't believe the same things."

"It's what we have to do right now, even Grandfather agrees. Their priest will help us. He believes one way, we believe another--I haven't thought about it in ages, but I find myself believing, who knew?--but he's a good man and we *all* believe that what those policemen want is

very wrong. These are very strange times, Max. Soon it's not going to be possible to be a good German and a good Jew. In America, people may make fun, but we can be good Jews and good Americans."

Max expected the short walk to the store, but Mama shook her head. "We won't be going there now, and no more Hebrew lessons."

That brought him up short. There was no rabbi on Friday nights since Grandfather had moved to America, but the older men always gave the children cookies shaped like letters and explained how to read in the other direction. "It isn't hard if you learn young," Papa always said. "Learn now, have it forever!"

"But if there is no learning now, how will I have it forever?"

Mama looked off at the wall, sighed, shook her head. She was pretty and barely looked old enough to have a child Max's age, but she had brand-new Isabelle too, cradled in the crook of her arm while she stirred the soup. "I can't begin to explain. It's time to start packing. You may take whatever you can get into your suitcase after I put your best clothes in. The ones you've outgrown we'll leave for the Schmidts' little boys, and the too-big ones Mercedes gave us we'll leave for the Kristoffs. We're going to send our trunk with most of the important things that will fit. If anyone asks where we're going once we're on our way, we're going to visit a Cousin Jakob and his wife Maria, and let the police think he's in Zurich. In the next week or so, we're going to practice what you will answer when you're asked different questions, and it's very important that you learn it all right. Even if you need for a little while to do less than perfect at school, you need to be perfect in this."

He reached for the idea, could only find one thing like it. "Like the Haggadah?"

"Yes. Yes, very like that. We're not even sure when our train will be, so be packed and ready no matter what. Even your toys you should keep in the suitcase, everything but the clothes you have on. You'll have to leave your train cars with Freddi to be sent ahead. You might be able to carry the engine with you if there's room."

After a day or so, Max would have been glad for Hebrew school and would even have done without the letter-shaped cookies rather than memorize all the questions and answers Mama and Papa had for him. He and Freddi were on the floor playing with their trains at Freddi's house when he caught himself muttering the answers. Instead of making fun, Freddi looked serious. "I should ask Mutti what I should say. My papa also says we're leaving, but he can't go yet. There are things he has to do and he can't go to America until those are taken care of."

“Speaking of taking care...” Max looked down at the train in front of him. “I don’t have room for my whole train in my bag, only my engine. Will you take care of these cars for me?”

“I will, and bring them to you in America. Mama says you can’t be *that* hard to find since we’re going to River Heights also in Ohio and that isn’t far from you.”

Things started to go away a few at a time, packed into the biggest trunk or disappearing into the city with Papa to come back as little gold rectangles that Mama sewed into the hems of her dresses. Mama tried to keep the house looking like they lived in it, but the few things they had left to spread over the rooms made it hard to hide. Freddi’s mother’s priest brought over some church pictures to decorate the bare walls after Mama took down the family ones and sent them away with Herr Muller.

On the last afternoon of school before Christmas, before the last sunset of Chanukah, Max came in to find two men talking to Mama. One was tall, white-haired and friendly and took only a few notes, while the other didn’t talk but seemed very interested in the church pictures and their suddenly barren bookshelves. He even looked at the newspaper in the basket beside Papa’s old chair. “It must have been a false report,” the one taking notes said, and patted Max on the head. “We’ll be in touch with further questions should that be needed, but all seems in order.”

As soon as they left, Mama oozed into her chair, shaking. She looked up at the clock and said a prayer under her breath, scooped up the last eight tiny candles and put them in her apron pocket. “Mama, what’s wrong?”

“Oy, when your father comes...the train will be early today, the Christians’ holiday...make ready. We must surely go tonight.”

Now? he thought. His mouth wouldn’t work for a moment. “May I go to Freddi’s and get my engine? I left her with the cars since they have to stay.”

“Go, but watch and be back when your father comes home.”

He ran next door. The men were there, too, talking to Freddi’s mother in her kitchen. One look between the two of them was enough somehow; Freddi pretended nothing was wrong and they pulled the engine and cars out to play with on the floor.

Freddi’s mother came to the front room, still talking to the men. “No, I can’t say I’ve ever seen anything like that going on over there, and the boys play together all the time. You see how it is. Freddi, have you ever seen them light candles?”

“Sure, on the tree at Christmas, then we sing *Stillige Nacht*,” Freddi shrugged.

"You see? That's all good." The friendly man turned to Max. "Can you sing it for us?"

What a question! Didn't they sing it at school? "*Stillige nacht, heilige nacht...*"

"You see?" the first man said. The second shook his head and said a few quiet things. "*Danke*, Frau Muller, I doubt we'll need to ask more."

When the door closed behind them, Freddi's mother clapped her hands to her face. Freddi was already pulling the engine from the train. "Quick, here! Did he say what I thought he said?"

"The one who didn't talk much looked at all our shelves, looked at our pictures, and went through our newspaper basket." Max's stomach clenched into a knot. "Do you suppose..."

"Max! Whatever you do, when you go, don't say anything about newspapers or *shul* or any of those things. Hurry, I see your father coming up the street!" Freddi's mother hugged him hard. He and Freddi ran out to the street, the engine tucked into Max's arm and wishing she could hang on for dear life.

"Hey, how's my boy? Let's see what's for dinner!" Max's dad never talked like that. He scooped Max up in one arm and strode into the house, shutting the door fast behind them. "*Mein Gott*, they were at work, asking questions. Did they find anything?"

"Nothing, and they looked all over. I burned the newspapers, even the books that were left. One of them looked in the stove. By then I had a good fire going with wood on top and bread in the oven." She wrapped a dishtowel around the loaf and shoved it into her biggest bag with the cheese and apples. "If it hadn't been for the Mullers I wouldn't have had a chance. She hurried home from market to tell me they were asking questions about the room above the store."

"The train will be on the way to Zurich in half an hour." Papa gathered his pipe, tobacco, slippers and sweater. "Max, your suitcase!"

"I have it." He tucked the engine in tighter and ran to the bare little bedroom. The window looked out on the alley and the apple tree. One of Frau Muller's pictures of a lady holding a baby was where the picture of Grandfather had been. The lady's picture was bigger than Grandfather's and covered the faded lines on the wall where the little frame had hung for so long. That was one thing the quiet man had mentioned when he was half-whispering to the other: "Klaus, anyone can see they've changed the pictures on the wall. Anyone can see he has a basket by his chair for reading, but only one paper and no magazines. No one needs a basket for one paper. I didn't see books, only a new unopened Bible, and there was nothing on the shelves where books should have been. Are you a fool, Klaus?" Max had never hoped so hard for anyone to be a fool.

Mama wrapped Isabelle in her shawl and put on her best clothes for travel, even the gold earrings she only wore on Fridays. Around her neck were all of her necklaces and her rings, strung on one of the gold chains, hidden under a scarf, and a necklace Frau Muller had given her hung over the scarf so everyone would see it. She dried her eyes and patted her face with powder from the compact in her purse. "I cannot cry," she said out loud over and over. "Not now I cannot cry, for nothing I can cry, they would know." As Papa reached for the doorknob, she set Isabelle down and pulled the tiny candles from her pocket on the hearth, melting the bottoms so they would stand.

"Esther, what are you doing?"

Her head went up, her dark eyes sharp with a pride Max had never seen before. "It's Friday. It's sunset. It's the last of Chanukah. The candles I'm lighting!"

"We can't wait for--"

"So who's waiting? Let *them* find these burning. They can make me run, but they can't make me forget." Papa grabbed her bag to free both of her hands. She touched a match to the servant and lit the rest quickly, then dropped the match into the fire and covered her eyes, hurrying through the blessing. At her "Amen" they all rushed outside.

Evening was soft, misty, with a little snow clinging to the trees and more beginning to fall. Max tucked the engine into his shirt beneath his coat as they all walked fast down the street, carrying their suitcases. The long whoop of a whistle down the valley called out that the train was backing up to the water column while the passengers were off. Her regular evening train usually had two boxcars for packages and mail and her single passenger car where Papa rode. Tonight she had an extra coach because of the holiday.

The depot's cafe was full of happy people lugging boxes and bags of presents, so only Mama and Papa's sad strained faces looked odd in the crowd. Mama forced a smile and nudged Papa to do the same. Everyone else seemed to be chattering away about where they were going and who they were going to see. One of the smiling women who had been talking to Max's mother looked down at him. "So where will you be spending Christmas?"

"With Uncle Jakob and Aunt Maria in Bern. They live in Grandfather's old house. I'm so excited. I'll get to play with my cousins!"

"How nice for you. Merry Christmas."

Papa had tickets when he came back from the window. "They suspected nothing," he whispered to Mama. "At least, it looked so."

The engine called again as she came from the water tower. A thousand times Max had heard her friendly voice as she went back and forth; tonight she sounded different. He didn't know, or maybe some part of him did, that she called steel prayers for help on the way, for police not noticing her passengers, for a quick trip over to her own rails and her own country.

"Them!" the woman who had been friendly said loudly, pointing as she tugged at a policeman's sleeve. "They've been going to synagogue in Vienna!"

The man she pulled along by the arm was Klaus, the tall white-haired officer who had been at the house earlier. "I'm sure this is not what you think, madam." He rolled his eyes and said to Papa "May I see your papers, please?" then leaned over them as if the light failed his eyes. In a voice too quiet for anyone but Max and Papa to hear, he said "Play along, whatever I say. She's with us." He held the papers this way and that, giving them what couldn't be seen as anything but a thorough going-over. "Just as I thought. Ma'am, you're a very good citizen, but mistaken. Why would anyone from Vienna be all the way out here? As you can see, these people are from right here in town, and here, even, are the children's baptismal certificates from Saint Joachim's. They're very wise to carry such things with them." He turned to Mama. "And may I say, that is a lovely St. Christopher medal."

"For traveling," Mama said, fingering the gold oval lying over her scarf at her neck.

"It's always a good idea when traveling." Klaus bowed politely to both women. "A simple misunderstanding only. Please, if you see anything else suspicious, don't hesitate to make a report. It's very important for the future of the country. Merry Christmas." He walked off toward the depot as people began to climb onto the cars.

"I'm sorry," the other woman whispered. There were tears in her eyes and Max could see her coat didn't fit very well because of her belly. "My name is Ruth Goldblatt, Joel's wife. That one was watching who..."

"You said what you had to and it worked perfectly." Mama reached into her purse and pressed something bright gold into her hand. "To help you get where you're going, if you can make yourself wear it." Max saw it was a medal with a picture of the lady and the baby. "Ruth, will you be going to your husband?"

The other woman shook her head, snuffling. "They came for him last week."

"I'm so sorry. Travel with us?"

"Only to Paris. I need to wait there." She closed her eyes against something Max couldn't see. "In case. If only. Until there's word."

In a few moments, the white-haired policeman walked by and beckoned quickly. They all stepped around the corner of the depot, hearts hammering. He handed a large coin to Papa and a smaller one to Max. "Herr Muller tells me your engine will need cars when you get where you're going, and you'll all need a good place to stay in Paris."

Papa goggled at the gift. "I can't..."

"Doesn't the book say you should borrow gold and get out of town? That one who was with me today paid me a big bribe to find some of your people in St. Joachim so he could fill out the right reports and get the right promotions. He's at the party at his barracks. I made sure they had plenty to drink. Everyone knows I'm old, my heart isn't so good these days, so I went off looking instead. I couldn't catch up with you, what a shame, you escaped right under our very noses, so take it. Use it instead of what you have in the seams of your clothes. Think of it as borrowed if it makes you feel better." He waved as he left.

It was time to get on the car, and Max looked around, one more time, at the little town on the hillside half asleep in the early winter dusk. The engine called again--he didn't know she meant *Hurry, oh please hurry!*--and he scrambled up after Papa.

The evening train mostly served those from little towns along the line. Most didn't mind the slow ride or the many stops. Every one seemed to make Mama more nervous as a few people got off and a few got on. "It's all right, Esther," Papa said quietly over Max's head when they left one little place. "They'll be watching the night express. So many go that way. This one won't be worth bothering with."

"But to be sure," Mama said.

"We'll know in less than half an hour. Once we hit the border, there are no worries."

Max felt better squeezed between Mama and Papa. Isabelle began to cry once, but stopped when Mama took her to the car's restroom and came back with the baby tucked under her coat. They rearranged just before the engine whistled again and the brakes hissed gently.

"Papers," called another officer, walking down the aisle of the car. He barely seemed to give them a glance. Max held his breath while the officer looked at what Papa handed him. "*Alles gut.*" He gave a curt nod and went on.

Mama kept her head down, petting Isabelle's hair with the tips of her fingers. Not until the engine whistled again, a long two whoops that sounded very like relief, did she sigh. "Was that really it, the border, behind us now?"

"In a second..." Papa looked out. "There, yes. We are in Switzerland."

All through the car, there seemed to be a great rustling and sighing; children who had been abnormally good began to whine a little at the close quarters. "How far to America? Will we be there in the morning?" Max asked, and couldn't understand why Papa laughed.

The train rocked him to sleep, and he woke up as Papa set him in a seat on a different, much bigger coach with only a few people scattered through it. The first thing he felt for was the engine in his shirt. It was hard to miss her, since she was digging into his ribs and wasn't any more comfortable than he was. Soon Papa was asleep and Mama must have just finished tending to Isabelle; the two of them were drifting off as a different landscape went by.

He looked out the window, keeping one hand on the engine. The mountains seemed smaller and more rounded, less craggy than he was used to and more dusted with a light coat of snow instead of old glaciers. In a little while, they entered a rail yard and the train changed engines. The outgoing one creaked and popped as she went by, her *Good luck*, echoing a *Thank you* rattle or two from the one in Max's shirt. The new one glided by, drifting downgrade, with a whisper of steam: *I'll be glad to do whatever I can*.

When he woke up again, it was light, and Mama was breaking the bread they had brought and dealing out cheese with Papa's pocket knife. She seemed lighter too, like the sky. "I suppose the next big stop will be Paris. Do you think we can find a good place to stay?"

"I'm sure of it. We can take our time there. Our ship doesn't leave for a day or two."

"I'd rather we could go right now. There was nothing sooner?"

"This is the ship Rachel and Jake took. It's not new or fancy, but they say it's a good captain and crew. If we'd gone on one of the bigger liners, we'd have had to go steerage and that's not safe. Granted we won't be dressed for dinner in first class every night, but the boat won't be a deathtrap and we can get a nicer room with this extra. I expected to have to bribe a policeman to get across, not get a gift from him."

"Ah," Mama said, and wiped her eyes again. "Can we really be safe and on our way? Just last night, I thought... It seems like a dream."

"If so, it's a bad one. I only hope the job Jake has for me is good enough to keep all of us. Oy. It's unbelievable how fast things are falling apart."

"But Max has his train," Mama tried to smile. "Or part of it."

"The Mullers won't be far behind. He sent our trunks over the border yesterday in his name when he heard the first rumors. The big one we won't catch up with till America, the little one should be at the hotel in Paris. I thought we'd have more time, so many aren't even thinking

about going yet, but when that happened, oy. Shame we had to sell the furniture. Not my style, but I know it meant a lot to you.”

“To tell the truth I always thought it was tacky. I liked that it had been Grandmother’s, but for style...This place in America. You don’t suppose they’ll come looking for us there?”

“No,” Papa said, as sure as he ever sounded about anything. “That won’t happen now.”

Max didn’t understand how much the policeman’s money was, but they had a plain, clean hotel room in Paris and there was a kosher café. He and Papa walked around a bit and fetched the smaller of their trunks from the station, the one with things the bad policeman would have liked to see. Everyone around them was only a little nervous. On Friday Papa wore his tallit and laid tefillin and looked years younger when they went to *shul*. The congregation didn’t have to hide or speak quietly.

Mama used part of the extra money to buy small things they needed for the baby and the trip. They packed, checked and rechecked, and Max put his engine into the small grip he had bought with a coin he had found. Mama gave him a handful of the wrapped peppermints she had bought and a packet of crackers she knew were all right; those went in the bag too. It stayed with him on the last train when they rode all day and found their ship. Thanks to the gift, they were in second class instead of third, with a porthole in their room, small though it was. “Cabin!” Papa snorted. “More like a cabinet!”

There were police around the docks, and some were not very nice to Papa. One made a rude remark that Max only half understood. Another muttered in French and made a gesture that Max did understand, but Mama wouldn’t let him say anything and pulled him along. Getting aboard fast seemed like a good idea until the wind started rocking the boat before they were even out of the harbor. Papa got up just long enough each day to groan that he was going to die. He drank coffee and went back to bed for the first three mornings. Mama got her sea legs after the first few hours and took Max up on deck when the stewards said they could go. The waves only bothered Max on that first day; even while they did, he was happier to see the wind bring snow sideways across the gray mountains of ocean. Surely no nosy policeman would come across the waves to arrest them.

Once he slipped and had to grab a rail to keep from sliding across the deck; his engine poked halfway out of his coat and he let go with one hand to grab her. If she might fall out of his coat on deck, he worried more that she might walk off from the room when no one was watching her, even if it seemed silly. Others on the trip complained about things going missing, but they were gold or silver or pocket watches, not nice

little engines who weren't new. Still, the idea of someone taking her away bothered him a lot.

It bothered him even more to think of Freddi. Would he and his mother just get on Herr Muller's train over the border and not go home? Why would Freddi and his people have to leave, anyway, when they went to church? There were times when the water came to his eyes when he was playing with other kids and should have been having fun. He wanted to wake up from what had to be a bad dream, get down on the floor with his train and play with Freddi.

Many days out, people began to gather the things they had scattered around their cabins. "Another day to Baltimore," Mama said.

"Baltimore?" The only American city Max had ever heard about was New York.

"You'll see land ahead of us, then we'll turn and go a long way up a big bay."

"And then will we be where we're going?"

"No, we have another long train ride." Mama jiggled Isabelle to keep her from crying. Both of them looked tired, and when Isabelle cried she sounded less like a baby and more like someone older who was too upset to talk. Papa still didn't feel like getting up much, so Mama and one of the other men made him walk on deck every few hours. "Hiram, you shouldn't lie there. You'll need your legs to work when you get to the port so they don't send you back."

Max heard that and his heart hit his shoes. "They can send us back?"

"They used to send back if you couldn't walk right, but they won't. You'll see." Mama didn't sound as sure as Max wished she did.

In the evening, a lighthouse popped into view on their right, and the boat did make a long slow turn. Once they were in the bay, the waves were calmer and Papa got some of his color back. Max went up on deck for a walk with his parents and Isabelle, carrying the engine, and came back to find the bag missing. "Thieves even here!" Papa growled. "We'll see whether the stewards can find it."

"We'll land sometime in the night," Mama said when it was bedtime. "Lie down now, Max, but don't undress, only your shoes take off. I don't know when they'll call us."

"At least this time our shoes we can take off," Papa grumbled. "At this rate I'm going to need a walking staff. As for those thieves that went through our room, now I see why you have the engine in your coat always."

The bag showed up, empty, in the long hall when they were standing in line to get off the boat. Max thanked the steward who found

it for him, but didn't put the engine in it just in case, only some leaflets the stewards had given him on the trip and some more of the peppermints Mama had bought in Paris. "We may not be able to find food that isn't *treyf*," she cautioned, "so for the trip you should make these last. It's a good thing little steam engines don't need kosher coal."

As the line moved slowly forward, a big, heavyset boy ahead of them looked back. "Whatcha got in the bag, kid?" Max didn't understand that much of the English after only being around it for a week. "Hey. You, stupid, gimme."

The kid made a wild swing for it and Max jumped backwards. His candy spilled and he tried to bend over it, but the bigger kid jumped on his neck and knocked him down, grabbing a handful of the candy. Max was floundering under the weight when the other kid's mother grabbed him by the scruff. "Hisht, you, they'll be thinking I never taught you manners."

"But Ma, he's only a--" The other kid's mother towed him away, far back down the line of people. "Ma, come on, I was just--" as they disappeared around a corner.

"Oy, those people are here, too." Papa bent down to help Max look for his wrapped candies among the sea of slow-moving feet. The line shuffled forward. Papa got an odd look as something squeaked underfoot. "Max, you dropped your train!"

So Max had, and some unknowing foot had bent her side rod. "I'm sorry! Oy, I'm so sorry!" He tucked her back into his coat and, for the first time in front of people, didn't care about crying. The tears ran onto his coat while they stood in line, while they crossed the deck, while they went up to the crew at the gangway; they stopped for a moment when the kind steward took a look at the engine.

"That's an easy fix, bud. I bet your uncle can do it if you can't. She'll be fine, trust me."

After that, on the way down the gangplank, the tears didn't seem to be connected to the engine at all, and he didn't think they would ever stop. Mama wiped his face and made him blow his nose, but neither she nor Papa told him to be a man the way they usually did. "Bubbie, you heard the nice man. You'll be able to play with your train when you get where we're going."

"But she's never going to be the same. There are scratches and a little dent, and this is bent and she won't be able to run straight, and they might send her back, and it's my fault everything is like this. I was Freddi's friend and he has to leave St. Joachim too, and--"

Papa picked him up again and hugged him, right out in public, hard, and he hugged the engine too. "None of this is your fault at all. Freddi

and his family will need to leave too, but they may have a little time. We've all been getting ready to go to America for ages, and it's good we were prepared because we'd never have been able to get it done in time. It was almost too late as it was. At first we thought the things people were saying were just talk. Too many people are waiting because they can't make themselves believe it. The longer we waited, the worse it looked, things that happened around my old work sounded worse, and we had to be ready."

"Like... 'why is this night different from any other night'?" Max snuffled, looking up at Papa. "Like when the sea parted?"

"Eh, well, the sea for us didn't part, but we got across it all right, no matter what I thought for a while there. I hope it only feels like forty years to get to that little town where we're going!" He drew a deep breath. "And now we get to go through immigration."

There was a trickle of traffic through the big building by the docks. Not so long ago, when Grandfather had gone to America, Mama explained, there had been many more people coming over, but the laws had changed. It had taken since Max was small to get permission to come in, and then more time to plan the trip. "They don't just let in everybody. Only most. And now you can't come even this far unless your family speaks up for you."

Papa had to pull a few stitches out of his hat lining to get his America papers out. He handed them to the smiling man behind the desk who spoke decent German. "Ah, this is an easy one! You have a job, I see, you have family here, they're good sponsors, you're showing me you have money, it's all been approved well in advance and here you are. How are you after that long trip?" The man cast a sharp eye over them all.

"Fit as a fiddle. Fit as a whole orchestra." Papa wasn't quite as green as he had been, but Max still held his breath.

"Anyone who can sail across in this weather and stand up when they get here is all right with me. Prettiest baby girl we've had through here today. And how are you and that nice little *Dampflok*, son? Looks like she had a little trouble."

The words stuck in Max's throat, then came out in a rush. "Please don't make her go back. It was an accident. I dropped her and she got stepped on. Back there it isn't safe!"

"Send her back? I wouldn't dream of it!" The man laughed, but not in a mean way. "She doesn't have to go anywhere except to your new home. She's an American engine now. I have my first train, and he looks much worse than that. A toy isn't properly played with if there aren't a few scratches, right?" He patted Max's shoulder and the engine's boiler.

“Welcome to America.” He stamped the papers in a couple of places. “You’ll find a cab stand outside. Here’s a leaflet with some English phrases and other things you may find helpful.”

“More papers,” Mama said, “but this time good ones!” She followed along with Isabelle in one arm and the leaflet in her other hand, puzzling out the German phrases among other languages as Max held the door for her. “We need to go to the station and wait until eight o’clock tonight, but any time before then we can go to the ticket counter...”

“Hiram and Esther Schuler?”

Papa flinched. He turned himself, and Max and the engine, toward the voice. A middle-aged man waved to them, holding a photograph. He was not a policeman, not in his dark coat and hat, full beard and round glasses. Papa moved to shake his hand. “And you are?”

“Your sister Rachel’s brother-in-law Joel. Rachel worries, it’s what she does best.” He spoke such good German that Max didn’t have a bit of trouble understanding him. “I had to promise I would find out when your ship came in and meet you here, so I’ve been pestering the front desk every couple of hours since morning.” He showed the photograph, which had been taken and mailed to Rachel when Isabelle was brand-new. “From this I knew you right away. She said I had to make sure you got to your train on time and got good tickets, not what somebody would shove off on you. But first, my wife says you have to eat in case it’s all *treyf* on the dining car. Come on, I brought the car, it’s over here.”

“You’re not going to get in trouble being away from your work?”

“At my watch shop I’m the boss and in shul I’m the rabbi. The congregation can’t wait to hear about all this.” That set Mama and Papa off to excited babbling while Mama tried to hide the medal around her neck. “We understand that, too, Esther. Whatever got you safe to us is good. Now let’s get you and the kids over and have a nice lunch and a rest before it’s time to get to the train.”

Lunch was in the dining room at the rabbi’s house, and his wife had a bunch of ladies over to help her and fuss over everyone. She insisted Papa go and phone Aunt Rachel. It was amazing to watch Papa shout into the box on the wall and hear, from hundreds of miles away, a voice that must have been Aunt Rachel crying thanks over and over. When the phone call ended in a few quick minutes, Mrs. Rabbi showed Mama upstairs so she could freshen up, as she put it, and Max and Papa to another bedroom with a bathroom attached.

After trying to wash up in train station washbasins or on the ship, being able to get in a tub with hot water was a half-forgotten memory sprung back to life. Their dirty clothes disappeared while they were in the bath and they found clean ones laid out. Mama had put on her

second-best dress and another pretty scarf, and he had to admit Isabelle smelled better.

He had one small moment of panic because his engine wasn't where he had left her. When the ladies shooed them into the dining room, she was at the place they had laid for him. Her bent side rod was straightened, someone had wiped away the mud, and the scratches had been cleaned and touched up with ink so as not to seem so deep or ugly. He tried to tell himself it was his imagination that she felt happier when he picked her up.

Lunch began, and what a lunch! It wasn't like the ship, where even when he felt like eating sometimes all he could have was bread, milk and what fruit was around. The chicken soup wasn't quite as good as Mama's, he tried to tell himself, but the chicken itself...maybe it was American chicken and that was why it was so wonderful. It took a long while to eat because everyone was asking questions and Mama and Papa tried to clean up the answers so as not to frighten the children at the table.

Even so, Max began to see a bigger picture he would rather have missed. He thought he understood where Ruth's husband might be and he was suddenly glad to have left St. Joachim. One of the older ladies must have seen what he was thinking. "That was then, bubbie. This is now. All through our history, these things have happened, and there's nothing to do but go on. So do you like cheesecake?" As it turned out, yes, he did, very much.

Stuffed almost to bursting, he obeyed when Mama told him to lie down for a nap. The bed wasn't moving and Isabelle was full and not complaining or smelly, so he and the engine curled up with her until Papa came to wake them. Their clothes had come back clean and packed into a box, along with some he didn't recognize and a lot of fresh soft diapers for Isabelle. "The least we could do," said a lady Mama tried to thank. "We know there will be many others coming to us. Never think it was a moment too soon. You were very wise to be ready and get out when you did. It's good for us, too, to get in practice now."

The short winter light had gone down to gray. The rabbi drove them to the station and walked them all the way to the train, chatting with the conductor in English, then beckoning Papa. Max waited beside the train while a lot of other people got on. The belt on his coat didn't seem to be fastening right, but he didn't want to interrupt Papa.

"Hiram, you're on your way. Here in English I have written where you're going so you can show it if you get lost. The conductor knows where you're going and he'll help when you need to change trains at Pittsburgh." There was a brief jostling from a big lady carrying a lot of

packages before Max was able to squeeze himself onto the car. The conductor showed them to seats in a compartment, and Max leaned on the window to wave to the rabbi and a couple of kids who had come to see them off. He sat back down and patted his shirt. Where was--?

The conductor came up, carrying the engine. "Miss someone?" He tucked her into Max's arm. "She fell on the carpet where you didn't hear her. She looks important. We'll make sure she gets where she's going."

When night fell, an American with the darkest skin Max had ever seen brought coffee and milk to their seats to go with the sandwiches the rabbi's wife had sent. After awhile, he came back and asked if they would like their beds made. With a few deft flips of this and turns of that, he changed the seats, table and shelf into an upper bunk and a lower bed. He couldn't speak German and Max didn't have much English yet, but smiles and gestures got the idea of thanks across. He climbed up, the Pullman attendant handed up his engine, and they snuggled into the bunk. At first, Max was busy listening to the big engine up front bark and growl as she climbed a grade out of the city. Flat land gave way to hills, the hills to what he thought at first was a tall gray cloud, and the track rose through a gap not unlike the one at home. As they went west, mountains rose around them and great ancient slides of gray shale closed in above slopes scattered with small spruce up high and young oaks lower. Safe in the mountains, he slept.

There was a small commotion in blue early light, Papa gathering things and Mama bringing Isabelle back from down the hall. Max rolled out groggily and nearly fell to the floor, forgetting the bunk was up in the air. He landed on the lower bed. Papa helped him dress, pulled the belt on his coat up tight, then reached up, got the engine and tucked her in. "After all this, she only has one more change of trains. We're not going to lose her now!"

Max looked around as they walked from the first train to the new one and took seats in a coach. The city around them poured down hills to a point with three rivers, and all of it seemed to be smoky and glowing. Steamboats ran the rivers with whole tows of barges, trains shuttled around them with steel and coal, and as they passed they called greetings to one another (he had heard so many languages over the past weeks that ours had begun to make sense too.) The rhythm of the rails picked up, the train rocking happily with a light crowd on the weekday morning. They dove through tunnel after tunnel, mountains giving way to softer hills that clung to the river, then they crossed a bridge and curved south to a station. "Change trains just once more," Papa said, checking Max's coat, "and make sure she's with you!"

While they waited, Papa flipped through a newspaper he had bought in Pittsburgh. It was in Hebrew, and he was reading it out in the open where anyone could see; Max looked up and down the platform and saw people reading papers in other languages too, no one paying attention. When they spoke, it was in a jumble of English and other things he didn't understand, a Yiddish or German word here and there familiar.

The train came in behind a shiny black engine with a keystone on her smokebox. Max could have sworn he felt a greeting-- "*So there* you are!" He pressed one hand to his own locomotive as he climbed aboard. Soon they were southbound again, through one town and another, with the big blue river to their left and the landscape dotted with more mills and coal mines.

After almost two hours, the train pulled into a low brick station beside a roundhouse. "Jensen, folks. You made it," the conductor said. "Welcome. My people came over when I was ten, right before things got nasty the last time. There's Rachel and Jake and her dad waiting for you, right there."

There was Aunt Rachel, just like her pictures, Uncle Jacob, just like his pictures, and-- Grandfather? Like the picture on the wall of a stern middle-aged man with a solemn graying beard, a black wide-brimmed hat and a shawl over his shoulders...out in public, and no one minding? He was hugged within an inch of his life and had to explain the bump in his coat, then had to show her to the rabbi. Grandfather beamed. "*Eine kleine Dampflok*, just like the ones that used to go through St. Joachim. She should be right at home with us."

They moved into Grandfather's house, bringing the boxes the congregation had sent from Baltimore and finding more left by friends on Aunt Rachel's end. Max wasn't sure what to think of Grandfather at first until, while everyone else was running in all directions putting blankets on beds and clothes in closets, he said "Come on, boy, here even I have a car. Your engine can stay right there in Rachel's old room that is yours now. We have some errands to run." On the way out, he waved a hand around. "Look at this place." Little white houses clung to the side of a steep hill, and a railroad track swept around a corner and climbed beyond a bend half a mile away. "Will it do? Now let's hurry before the sun starts to set on us. I don't think Mr. Harvey has any cars to go with your engine, but he surely can find us some track."

That night, a lot of people came to the house and Grandfather set up the Shabbat candles on the sideboard in the dark quiet kitchen. Aunt Rachel picked up a match, then looked at Mama. "Esther, you're here, I'm so glad--" and she made a little swoop of her hand toward the candles. "Please?"

Grandfather wiped his eyes and nodded. “*Bitte, Esther, bitte.*”

Mama struck the match that seemed to light the whole room. When she began the blessing, her voice shook: “*Baruch atah...*” and she nearly had to stop, burying her face in her hands instead of just covering her eyes to go on.

Before they all sat down to a dinner as big as the lunch in Baltimore, Grandfather hugged Max again. “Next week I won’t be such an old softie. Back to your Hebrew lessons we’re going. But to think, tonight, my grandson is here!”

Grandfather was a good teacher and not nearly as stuffy as he looked. Max and the other kids at his shul actually had fun learning. Unfortunately, regular school wasn’t fun in America, because he didn’t start with any English and that teacher wasn’t a kind one. Some of the older boys were mean, some of the older girls were stuck up and nasty, and there were times when the school wanted him to eat their lunch even though it was wrong for him. In spite of that, Max began to settle in. The engine did too, finding her place at the foot of his bed.

Papa had the same time at work. A few of the millworkers were nasty to him, a few were indifferent, but most were all right and the job paid better than his old one. When payday came, he brought home the money and reached for the little box on the mantel, then laughed. “No need to put in there now!” The America box only held the America papers.

Mama looked at the amount he handed her and raised her eyebrows. “I was going to see about buying a little more cheese, but...you don’t suppose I could have Grandfather bring from Wheeling maybe a little cut of beef for Shabbat? Every week he goes to the kosher butcher for everyone’s order.”

“I think,” Papa went over and picked her up off her feet, “you should buy whatever makes you happy to cook. Maybe we can’t ourselves buy a house yet, not that we need to. Maybe until next year we should wait to buy a car. But this week I think we should have beef!”

He thought about Freddi when his birthday came, but there was no word, only a card with five whole American dollars in it from a Mr. and Mrs. Klaus Ritter in New York. Mama just shook her head and smiled. When the snow melted, he wondered whether Freddi had seen the Statue of Liberty that was in school books, or if he had even been able to get into Switzerland yet.

Passover came and went; at the end of May, he fell in with the rest of the mob of kids who spilled out of the school. Summer was running barefoot on the green hills most days as soon as his chores were done. He

picked berries and outran a mean bull, got his pants caught on barbed wire and found out that the people who ran the little narrow-gauge railroad that went west from town to a coal mine were apt to forget to collect fares from kids going fishing.

By the time school started, he was as suntanned and strong as the rest of the class. Isabelle had started to pull herself up on things and follow him around. His new teacher was much nicer. Terrible things happened in Europe that Labor Day; she explained as kindly as she could. All the children who had come over the ocean brought maps or newspapers they had at home so everyone in the class could see exactly where things were. *At least it's in Poland and France*, Max thought when he saw how far both were from St. Joachim.

As he was ready to leave on the day when Yom Kippur would start at sunset, she seemed to be picking out a set of books from the supply closet. "It's a new student for our class," she said with the smile that seldom left her. "He'll be here Monday. I'll want you to help him learn English, because he speaks German."

He raced home to change and get out to play before the sun could set. When he bounded up the front steps, there were people on the porch swing. The lady from the platform, the baby she had been waiting for--and Klaus the policeman. The old, white-haired, smiling policeman, but he wasn't wearing his uniform any more. "Max!" The policeman seemed happy to see him. "We just got here. You've grown so much! How do you like America?"

"We live here now." Max made ready to edge away. "You can't make us go back."

"Go back? I hope not!"

"But you're a policeman--"

"As far as I know, my uniform is still back there in the men's room at the depot in St. Joachim. May I introduce my cousin's widow Ruth, who is now Frau Ritter? Here is her son, Joel Goldblatt. For his father's memory he will be keeping his last name always. He was born an American. As soon as was proper after this little one was born, we were married, and no one is sending us back either. I'm an old man, I was single, and I have no family who want me, so it made sense, nu?"

Freddi's dad came out of the double house next door and leaned over the bannister on the big porch. "More sense than you know! He made all the fake papers he could for as long as he could until we knew time was up, then we all got out and met Ruth in Paris. By two days we made it out before...you've seen the reports about what happened in France. We were waiting in Ramsgate. The news came just as we sailed from England."

“But...but why did you need to leave? You’re not Jewish.”

“No, but Mrs. Muller is Romani. They aren’t real Germans either under the new laws. She and Freddi would have been next, even if they didn’t catch me first.”

“And when they needed somebody else to blame, I’d have been next, even without the thing about the papers,” the old policeman said. “You’ll understand when you’re older. Now I am just your neighbor Klaus Ritter.”

“He’s got half of this house and we have the other half, next to you,” Freddi’s dad said. “When they said River Heights, I thought it would be a long way. You’re the last house on the road in Jensen, we’re the first in River Heights, and thanks to Rachel finding the house for us, we’re still neighbors.”

Max tried to let the idea soak in and couldn’t. Freddi’s dad was still there, holding the answer to the question he was afraid to ask. “Mr. Muller...did Freddi come...”

“Ach! Yes, he’s fine, he has a certain trunk to go through. There he is!” And he was, carrying two boxcars and a passenger car wrapped in brown paper and a bigger paper bag.

“Promise kept,” Freddi said. “And they brought friends who also needed out. Do we have time to play with them tonight?”

“We have time,” Max said. “Now we have lots of time.”

I mention all this because it’s Prewar Night, and two old men are back in the corner with a little engine, two boxcars, a passenger car, and a ragged assortment of other rolling stock who had nowhere else to go and found their way west in Freddi’s trunk. When the Mullers left St. Joachim, it took three weeks for them to get to Jensen and catch up with the boxes that had been oozing in since the December before. There are still parts of that trip Freddi doesn’t talk about but says he’s written down. However it happened (and the cars have their own version, which is scary enough) they got here, and if Freddi and Rabbi Max are a little creaky now, they still run. Like a lot of things, and people, who were supposed to disappear, they didn’t.

Not so long ago they took a trip back to St. Joachim. The town is still tiny, the houses are still white, the building that used to be the store is now a house, and the old depot now gets traffic from tourists who ride behind a chunky little engine who pulls a couple of coaches up to the border and back down the mountain. No one knows how many people she smuggled over the border, but she’s always happy to see them one more time.

Klaus the honest cop took care of Ruth's son Joel for the rest of his life, and to his utter surprise he and Ruth had a little daughter the year after they married. They named her Anna, for her grandmother, but it almost doesn't matter what her first name is, because nobody uses it. In the course of things, she became Mrs. Schuler to the kids she taught, Sweetie to Max for the last sixty years, and Mom to their houseful of children, starting with their firstborn son, who is Klaus so his grandfather's name will be remembered among the righteous. Sweetie and Max have not quite lost count of how many grandchildren and great-grandchildren they have, but they do have to stop and think about it.

As for the nosy policeman who thought Klaus was a fool, no one remembers his name, or the names of most of the others who helped him afterward, and that is as it should be.

2: A Little Karma

That Christmastime, maybe ten years ago, Hunter Wright was being a clinker. He didn't mean to be a bad kid. He'd just hit that stage in his building when his mouth had outgrown his don't-say-that and his muscles got in the way of his common sense. His grade school had been solid behind him when he lost his mom and got hurt. At his new middle school, kids from all over the county who didn't know the story teased him about his scars in gym class and he, being not exactly small or weak, finished the fights people started. To me, it never made sense; if they didn't want their freight shoved, they shouldn't have switched it to Hunter's track, but the school complained, so he had to get used to it.

He also had to get used to helping his dad put two extra rooms on the house that had seemed too big for the two of them and the cat only three years before. Their friendly house was excited about the new space, and so were Hunter's dad and stepmom. To Hunter, it was one more change in a row of them that were already hard to figure out. Just that morning, he was putting up decorations when he realized the light string that had been across the end of the living room for two Christmases had to arch up over the new hallway. Even new things had to change already.

Jessica, his also new stepmom, called him in to put the tree topper on. The tree herself had grown a little in the past three years, but being a small Alberta spruce, she wasn't bothered by keeping her roots in a big tub, so they didn't have to dig her up to bring her in. Hunter unwrapped the angel, who looked a whole lot like his mom. "You sure you want her on there?"

"Oh, honey, yes! Michelle was my friend and I like to have her there." Jessica stood back and let him reach over to put the angel on the tree. "There, perfect! You still haven't given us many present ideas, you know."

"No big deal. Whatever. You got the little guys to buy for, and the new one."

"I know you're used to being broke and so am I, but really, this year, with all the overtime, and only one house to run? We're fine, as long as you don't want a pony or a Corvette." Darn it, she grinned at him. He was trying not to like her as much as he did, but it was hard when she did that. She even liked trains and old cars, like Hunter and his dad. Horses, well, he would leave that to Jessica. "I got some ideas otherwise, but is there anything train you'd like?"

Hunter hesitated. "If there really was a Santa Claus I'd be getting coal this year."

"My brother used to say that when he was your age. He also says 'You only have to beat them up once.' I don't know if Mr. Rogers would approve, but you know, he did have a point. Most bullies take a hint after they get their tenders parked a time or two."

"The principal says it's my fault because I let them get under my skin."

"Not your fault some people raise their kids to be animals. No, animals are nicer than that, aren't they, Bacon?" The round cat blinked one eye for a second, then flipped her bushy tail back over her nose and went back to sleep. "Now, about that present idea...?"

"There's lots of nice-looking new stuff, but it has all the computer boards I can't fix yet." He didn't realize he'd thrown in the "yet" but Jessica heard it and smiled. So, not that he noticed, did a certain old engine who was sitting on the couch waiting for the track work to finish so he could get up to his usual rounds. Sam's postwar stuff is neat. If you find something old and cool, I wouldn't even mind if I need to straighten it out."

Jessica could have sworn she heard a metallic giggle. Word gets around, you know, and it got to the right place, but to explain how that happened we need to back down the years and switch to a big department store up on the lake around Christmastime of 1946.

"BUT I WANT THAAAAAT ONE!"

"We'll see. Uh, that's quite an expensive--"

"THAAAAAT ONE!" Anybody with a whistle that loud ought to pull some freight. Santa's helper rubbed the ear he wasn't sure was still attached and hitched his beard back into place. So far that day, he had been handed three scared babies with leaky diapers, two terrified toddlers who couldn't tell him anything and ran off the instant the camera flashed, and dozens of kids who wanted fun but unfortunate stuff like drum sets, giant bags of marbles and toy stoves with real burners. Most of them were nice about it and some even wanted fun but not so smart presents for their brothers and sisters or their parents. This next to last one was a challenge.

His name was Trent, but there were a lot of things his toys wanted to call him instead. When he plopped himself on Santa's lap, it was obvious that he expected the man in the red suit to crack loose with exactly what he demanded. After all, he was the admiral's son, and ever since Daddy had come home the year before, Trent got whatever he

wanted as soon as he wanted it because the admiral told his staff to fetch and they had to.

What he pointed to, up on the top shelf in the big Chicago department store's train display, was a shiny black steam engine that cost half again as much as the next one. It wasn't the most expensive one the train company made, but it had the biggest price tag in the store and that was all Trent cared about. "We'll see what we can do. Sometimes there's a good reason not to--"

"THAAAAT ONE! I WANT THAAAAT ONE AND YOU HAVE TO GIVE IT TO ME! MY DAD WILL MAKE YOU!"

"Hmm, we'll see." Trent stuck his tongue out as his mother came up to get him.

Santa's helper steeled himself for the last customer. The little girl asked if she could hug him. "I haven't been good all year, but I've been trying. If it's all right to ask, I'd like a doll."

"It's perfectly fine to ask. What kind did you have in mind?"

"I'd like her to be soft so I can hug her and not so big I can't carry her. If she has extra clothes with her, that would be really nice." The little girl cast a distressed glance in the direction of Trent, who was still whistling off as his mother hauled him away. "After him, I really didn't want to ask for too much."

"Don't you worry about that, honey. Some people spend a lot less time on the naughty list than others. You might take a look at those Raggedy Anns on your way out and let your mama know what you think. She can tell me what you have in mind, and we'll do our best."

When the little girl skipped off with her mother, pointing out the Raggedy Anns and their accessories, Santa's helper got up, stretched and lumbered down the steps from his throne. The store manager met him at the bottom. "You handled that remarkably well. I was about to toss them out of the store even if the old man would give me grief."

"It did come to mind." He checked the front door; the CLOSED sign was up and the lights were out, which meant the itchy beard could take a hike for the night. "Two more weeks and you can get rid of me."

"I meant to talk to you about that, Mike. You know, we have a place for you here after all. I'm willing to believe that shouting match was a one-time thing."

"Really?" The manager smiled, nodded and held out a hand, and Mike shook it. "I don't know how to thank you. I've been through some rough stuff, and Madge has been working while I'm in school, but that's no excuse. It was bad enough I got ahead of myself and bought that big train for Billy without seeing what my wife had for him, then when I

realized it was too much and wanted to bring it back...well, you know I said some really dumb stuff.”

“A lot of us were in bad places and we’ve seen some things we’d rather not have. Now and then, we have to blow off steam, and we don’t always pick great places to do it. When that clerk at the returns desk gave you that disrespectful bunch of lip, I’d have been tempted to slug him myself. All you did was yell back a little crudely. He was the one foolish enough to call the police. You seem like a customer service natural. Sure enough, you’ve been here for a week, not expecting anything but working off what the judge said, and you’ve been everything we’ve wanted and done all we asked...even for that kid!”

“He wanted that train, the one that kept falling off the shelf in the returns booth and cracking that clerk in the head till he quit. I think that thing and the kid deserve each other.”

The manager couldn’t help joining his laughter. Neither, though they didn’t know it, could the locomotive.

There are toy engines like Joy Harrison, who makes everybody happy. There are trains who seem to carry magic in their very frames. Then there’s...well, just call her Karma.

In 1945, the big toy train company had just barely been allowed to make trains for Christmas; the next year, they’d been geared up and some new designers got their first shot at making toys for everyone who wanted them. They had a lot of great ideas. They also had a few that weren’t so great, and all of those seemed to have ended up in one model.

That would have been bad enough, but the batch on that particular day had been cooked up with a courthouse’s old window frames and some engine parts careless people flung into scrap drives. When metal has seen a whole lot of the wrong people can get into, it gets attitude that might not go away right off, and we hold shapes and grudges just as well. By the time that batch of zinc alloy hardened in the molds, wanting to straighten people out was second nature.

Sure enough, a young sailor came into the store the next day and hauled Karma to the gift wrap girl. The wrapper was just a hair snobby and a little bit of a show-off. She taped her finger to the gift wrap, so the sailor had to help her peel herself loose. (It’d be a good story if she’d coupled onto him, but she did get acting-decent practice for when the right one for her came along.) The sailor delivered the wrapped box to the admiral’s office, and the admiral chunked Karma under the tree where Trent the Brat found her on Christmas morning.

Trent the Brat should have been squealing happy to find that big shiny engine under the tree. Instead, he took his whole present pile for

granted and only got around to putting Karma on the rails now and then, running her too fast and laughing at the crashes until he got bored. Everybody in the house knew when that happened. It would have been hard to miss all that whining. Diesels that run out of crankcase oil make less of a racket.

The only thing that kept Karma from total destruction, besides being built like a tank, was that Trent the Brat had more toys than a lot of stores. His mother had the nanny sort through and haul out a batch every year to make room for new, and Trent never even noticed the missing ones. He wasn't an only child; his brother was two years younger, Brett Not A Brat, and his sisters came along on schedule and weren't mean at all. I don't know what got into Trent's casting to warp him like that. The good side of it was a lot of kids got nice toys out of the deal-- but that's their story, and this one's Karma's, and she didn't get that lucky.

Karma hoped Trent the Brat's nanny would sort toys and she would get to go where the others did. There was talk about it, but as the admiral sighed, "It cost a lot, and I'm not sure how many underprivileged children would know how to take care of something like that."

"I know there's at least one overprivileged child who either can't or won't," the nanny inevitably muttered at the admiral's back, and Karma got left on the shelf. Even though the other three children might have liked to play with her, they all had their own rooms full of new shiny toys. Besides, touching Trent's stuff would have brought him down on them like a bad signal.

Time was a friend to those who had to deal with Trent the Brat. He got bigger, his voice got deeper and even louder, and he learned more dirty words. He wanted to play football and got kicked off the team in spite of his dad. Before anybody knew it he wanted to drop out of school, leave home, marry his girlfriend and make big money working full-time at his gas station job. One day he was arguing with the admiral about it as usual, throwing stuff as usual, only that time the train box was what came to hand and he slung five pounds of engine at the admiral's head. The admiral caught the box and told Trent the Brat...I'm not about to translate for a sailor, so let's say he told him go make his pickup in some other yards. The minute the door slammed, the admiral went to Trent the Brat's room and started tossing stuff into a crate. "What on earth are you *doing*?" his wife howled.

"What we should have years ago." The admiral kept on tossing. "None of this is any good, he says, and he didn't want it anyway, he says, and he doesn't want his crummy old room. So, one last time, I'm giving him what he asked for, and I bet he won't want that either!"

He was right. The gas station hadn't wanted Trent full-time. They barely wanted him part-time and would have chucked him out after a week if it hadn't been for his buddy trying to fix things for him, and you know he didn't think that was enough either. The girlfriend didn't want to marry him for some odd reason. It took him a year to figure out minimum wage doesn't go far if you're actually paying bills, nobody has a sense of humor about tantrums when you're big, and a judge who gives you a choice of shaping up and shipping out or going to jail isn't taking "neither" for an answer, much less "You can't make me!" Trent was up for the draft anyway, so the Navy seemed like the best idea. Without a high school diploma, and without any help from his dad, he went to Great Lakes as an ordinary recruit. His life got *much* more interesting.

Karma's factory box sat in the bin with the rest of the toy pile at the charity until the volunteers got to sorting one day. "Wait, Florence, that's one of those expensive ones," one said to another who was about to stick a price tag on her. "We'd better see what it's worth." She made a phone call. "Oh! Really?...Well, of course!" and was very happy when a man came in with a few big bills and took Karma out of the store.

There was a hobby shop, briefly, then a friendly voice and a house, and a half-grown guy who looked bored. The friendly voice handed over Karma's box. The kid said "Oh. Nice," and ran her around a couple of times.

"It wasn't run much," the man who had brought her said. "Don't like those any more?"

"They're all right. I'm just not working on the layout much because I'm busy with school, and my job, and saving up for a car." The kid seemed to think it over; maybe it was the Karma effect. "It's really nice of you. I mean that. You don't have to be nice to me, and you are."

"I'm not your dad, but your mom's the whole world to me. I wish you and I could be friends. Did she tell you we want to get married?"

The kid watched Karma make another round. "Not in so many words. I kind of knew because I overheard last weekend. If Dad's not thrilled, the more I think about it, it's not like he has room to talk. It's been five years and he's got somebody else. You and Mom, getting married? It's okay. Maybe it's even a good thing."

Karma got out again at Christmastime, for a few rounds of the tree and a lot of time on display, then she went back into the box again. Toward spring, the men's voices came back to the basement room where the old layout was. This time they were happy. Other boxes were coming off shelves. "...let me find something nice for you. I can be that much use, can't I?"

“You don’t know how much you’ve already been. Hadn’t been for you showing me what to look for, I’d have bit on that jalopy Mr. Richardson’s been trying to sell me just because it was cheap. I wouldn’t have made it home with that oil leak. Think these should sell for enough to make the down payment?”

“I think so. The payments won’t be bad at all.” There was a door opening, a thump into a car, the trunk closing, and in the distance: “Your mom doesn’t need to hear this. She knows it’s not bad-looking and the girls won’t turn up their noses, tires aren’t bad, mileage isn’t terrible and it runs like a Swiss watch. Not the latest thing, it’s a ‘50, but it’s got great paint and the interior looks new. What she doesn’t know is, I’ll just have to trust you to figure out when not to mash your foot through the carburetor, because with that big engine it’ll *go*.”

The next time Karma saw light was at the hobby shop, where the owner acted pleased to see her and her tender again. “Little scratched up, few dings, but overall, still very nice,” the dealer said, and handed over a fair amount of money. A day or so later, she was out of her box and on a shelf, and a car at the light had her former person in it. The new driver in his not new but nice car looked over at the shop, toward the shelves, and Karma saw the question on his face--*was that the right thing? Should I have let go of them?* She wasn’t sure if the kid heard their *Yes! Go, be happy!* but his new-old car did, and agreed.

After a few months, when a man came into the hobby shop and asked to see her, Karma got her hopes up for a bit. The customer turned her this way and that, looking at every little mark, and paid the price. It seemed like a promising gig, but after the man took her home, cleaned off the crud from Trent’s careless handling and touched up her scratches, she sat on a shelf in her box again. She wasn’t alone; there were dozens of trains on the shelves, all grumpy from lack of use. Every now and then, the man dusted the boxes. About as often, a woman would ask when he was going to use any of them, and the trains always heard “But they’re an *investment!*”

After a long time of the trains being bored but not at all dusty, the woman’s voice said “They’re not brand new. You painted over scratches, not all that well. It’s not as if running them will ruin them. Can we at least put some of them under the tree this year? April and Randy would like to see them. They’re old enough to be careful around things now, and it’s not as if they’re here from California every year. What about this?” She opened the flap on the end of Karma’s box.

“Not *that* one! Careful with that box. Do you know what I paid for that? Not that one, either. It’s much too nice.”

“Maybe I should buy them a toy train they can actually play with.”

“Honestly, Clarice! You wouldn’t know the first thing about--” and the door slammed as the argument went outside.

A week before Christmas, the woman scooped Karma and some cars off the shelf, took them to the living room and put them on a track that circled the base of a tree, then lifted off the new basic set who had been on the rails. “Grandpa’s on the road until tomorrow evening,” Clarice told a boy and girl who goggled at the sight. “Be really careful and don’t touch. Here, you just barely move this and she’ll go.”

She wanted to, even if, after all of her time in boxes, she could barely creak forward for her first couple of laps. After some of the stiffness worked out, she was glad to pull four cars and a caboose around. The boy and girl were fascinated. The door opened, and Clarice talked to someone in the hallway. “No, they’ve been good as gold. They’re playing with my train so nicely that I let them watch one of those engines he got and never runs. How’d your shopping go?”

“I think I got everything on my list. Just look at them! Those two will never be that good after Christmas.” It was a happy, friendly voice joking, and that wasn’t all; Karma heard a giggle or two from one of the shopping bags the newcomer set down. “Oh, look how pretty. What a shame not to use that.”

“But it’s an *investment*. He’s forever getting used things and stashing them away. What fun is that?” Clarice bent down, stopped Karma, felt her boiler and sent her off again. “Not overheating. I keep an eye on it just in case.--What do you two think?”

“I wish we could take this engine home, Grandma!” Karma wished so, too.

Instead of having to go back in the box that night, she got to sit under the tree, swapping stories with the rest of the equipment and especially with the new set in the bag behind the chair. A little after three in the morning, Clarice’s engine said “Did our guy just come in?”

“It sounded like the basement door they never use. Weird, he’s not due until tomorrow night...Uh-oh.” Their guy never dressed all in black, and if he’d come into his own house he’d have turned on the lights instead of using a flashlight that wasn’t working too well.

Every couple of steps, the invader’s light went out. “Rust it to scrap, these cheap batteries. For a guy who does nothing but brag about his investments, he’s got nuthin’. No jewelry boxes. Radio so old it ain’t worth carrying out. No TV. Hey, look here. Shopping bag! I’ll take that. And look here, I bet this would get me something.” The burglar had a pillowcase on hand and began to stuff Clarice’s train into it. “Ooh, lookit this one. It’s bigger, looks fancy...ahh, there it goes again.” The

flashlight, not amused by the idea, blinked out for the fourth or fifth time and the burglar tripped over the aptly named throw rug.

“April? Randy? What are you doing out of bed?” The voice from the bedroom down the hall made the burglar jump. He smacked his flashlight alive again. A door opened. He tried to turn off the light, which wouldn’t. “Didn’t I tell you not to play with Grandma’s flashlights? Wait a minute. Who are you and what are you doing here?”

The burglar yeped like a switch engine. He had dropped the pillowcase, and scrambling for it in the dark with the Christmas tree running interference wasn’t working. By the time he got up some steam, his foot was tangled in the pillowcase, he had Scotch pine needles in his face, the flashlight was blinking on and off and he lunged for the basement door right over Karma. True enough, even a heavy model like her didn’t have the mass of a full-sized train. Also true enough, five or six pounds of cast zinc must have been a decent burglar derail, because he pitched headfirst down the basement steps and the wreck at the bottom was loud. “Ooh,” Clarice’s engine said, “I heard him break. They’ll have to call out the big hook.”

They did, because he’d busted a leg, and they called the cops too, and there was a lot of excitement for an hour or so. By the time the police were ready to leave, Clarice was worrying out loud. “Ed’s going to pop a flue when he sees that man bent his engine up like that.”

“It’s not too bad,” one of the officers said. “Bet it runs fine. Is he real picky about it?”

“You have no idea. He won’t usually let the grandkids touch his trains, let alone play with them. Oh, dear.”

“If he asks, the burglar musta been dragging the train around and dropped it,” one of the cops offered. “Don’t he know these are for everybody to have fun with? My kids love ours.”

When the man got home, he was loudly unhappy about the loose basement door lock, but the rest of his yelling was surprising. “Who’d’a thought he would break into my house? We worked together what, ten years? I knew he’d get up to no good. Don’t be sorry for him because he broke his leg. If I’d been here that wouldn’t be all he had broke!”

“I’m sorry about your train, Daddy.”

“Aw, honey, forget that. He had the nerve to break in here, and that’s what matters. I gotta keep you and the grandkids safe, ya know?” He picked Karma up. “Eh, look at this, tender’s cracked, cab roof is bent and the coupler’s broken. I paid way too much for this thing, and now look at it. I never even let the grands play with it the way they should have. You did get them a train for Christmas, didn’t you, honey?”

“Well, yes...”

“Aw right, then. Maybe I can get them stuff to go with it, some they can use and not worry about. The insurance guy offered me decent money for this. I oughta say yes. While I’m at it, I bet the hobby shop could use the box it came in.”

The insurance guy was nice about it when he picked up Karma, and his car seemed oddly familiar. “I gave him enough to be fair,” he said out loud as they rode away from the house on Christmas Eve. As it turned out, he understood a whole lot. “Nobody should get a train as nice as this one and not have it out where somebody can enjoy it. I still can’t believe this happened. If my boss will go for it, if there’s any way I can scrape that much together--I have track, a transformer, cars...I hope those cars will couple onto this engine. Now to convince the boss.”

The insurance man bundled Karma up under his arm and went into an office. “What’s that you got?” said an older guy whose steam dome had poked up through his hair.

“That’s part of the Fitzwilliam claim.” The younger guy handed over a folder. “Broken basement door, broken step, and he had a rider to cover his trains. This one got a good bit of damage when the burglar tripped over it. He said it was shot for collector value and he’d rather get the kids something new.”

“What’d we pay out on that?...Not bad. You taking that home?”

“I’d like to.” Karma thought *Please do*. “I’ll pay what we--”

“Not necessary,” the boss waved away the offer. “It’s already in the budget as a writeoff. Take it. Tell the little squirt merry Christmas.”

Karma sat on the new guy’s desk until it was time to go. He found himself riding on the passenger seat again while the man maneuvered through traffic. “Boy, everybody must be out shopping tonight...first, get that crack fixed if we can, then straighten out that cab roof if it’ll go without breaking. I can try while they’re at choir practice. By the time they get home, I should have the whole thing stashed away. Half a day tomorrow, that’s going to be the tough part, keeping this hidden when all I want to do is give it to him.”

The insurance man hurried from his car to a workbench in the garage and tossed a shop towel over Karma. “Just wait right there. They shouldn’t be in too soon. I have to hit a meeting.” He rushed back out the door.

In a half-hour or so, the house’s door opened. “Yes, Daddy will be home. He needed to go talk to his friends first.”

“Is Christmas Eve tonight?”

“Not quite. Tomorrow night. You’re ready for Santa Claus, aren’t you?”

“Uh-huh.” The voice belonged to a little boy, maybe five years old, worn down from what must have been a long afternoon of shopping with his mother. He rubbed his eyes as he stumbled along from the car and nearly bumped off Karma’s towel on his way into the house.

The mother with him shyly poked at the towel to put it back, but sneaked a quick peek and whispered “What a nice engine. You’re pretty.” Karma was most pleased and thought the same of her.

The man came back in a bit and whipped off the towel. “We’ve got about half an hour here and we can get a lot done if we work fast. Hmm...” He wasn’t kidding. The first thing he did was to fix the crack in the tender with body putty. Next, he got hold of the bent corner of the cab roof and pressed it back, not quite straight but as much as it could bend without breaking. “You know what? We might have time to match that chipped paint and fix that coupler tomorrow, but you’ll have to ride into the city with me. She needs the car, so we’ll take the train. We’re going to meet at noon because of Christmas Eve, and the hobby shop is open till two.”

Karma got to meet a good-hearted young commuter diesel and his passenger cars the next day. The insurance man and the conductor had to look at Karma and exclaim over the good luck that had brought such a nice engine to him. “To think, a year ago,” the insurance man said.

“I remember,” the conductor said. “There were times I wondered if you’d be able to get yourself the two blocks home from the station. I’m so glad for you.”

“Never again.”

“You know the rules, one day at a time. I do know what it’s like and you may slip now and then, but I’ve known you since you were this high. You’ll pull your weight in the long haul.”

Sitting on the insurance man’s desk that morning wasn’t bad. People were in a holiday mood, swapping boxes of cookies and chatting about their evening plans as they locked up the office. The insurance man smiled. “My plans? I’m going home and smuggle a train past my kid!” When they walked off, the man said “But first, two little detours.”

At a church nearby, people were milling around the basement with coffee cups. When one man looked at a watch and said “Let’s get going,” everyone sat down, and they all said a prayer together. “We’ll try to keep it short today,” the leader said. “We have a couple of visitors with us. Would you like to introduce yourselves, then we regulars will?”

A policeman in a suit and a handcuffed man in a wheelchair with his leg in a cast gave their first names. The group called out a welcome, then it was the insurance man’s turn. “My name is Mark and I’m an alcoholic. I’ve been sober for one year today and I want to thank you all.”

"For what?" someone else said. "You did all the hard work."

After the meeting, Mark carried his engine to the hobby shop. "Hi, Greg, this is the engine I called about. If you have a coupler that will fit her, I'll be back in training."

"Never thought you'd be," the hobby shop owner said. "Hey, isn't this the one you sold to me years ago? Not that many of these around. Ed Fitzwilliam bought it from here."

"That's it, then. I was kind of hoping it was. I just had to have that car, you know?"

"Of course you did, and that's been a good idea. It only took you ten years to figure out you needed trains too." The hobby shop owner dug through a parts rack and handed over a coupler. "There you go. Remember how to put that on?"

"I sure do. I forgot how much fun it was to work on these. Now with Junior and our new one coming...boy, I had no right to expect that would happen."

"If you were going to mess up, you picked the right girl to take you back. Hey, wait a minute, I got the right size of little screwdriver." The hobby shop owner took off the broken coupler and put the new one in place with a few deft turns. "There. Sandy's always been tops. Tell her and Junior Merry Christmas for me, would ya?"

Sandy was waiting at the door when they got home, looking a little anxious. Mark grinned and tossed her a small round chip. "See?"

"I see." She gave him a shaky smile. "I was afraid, when it was a little late, with all the parties going on...I'll get over that. It isn't good for me to keep wondering."

"No, it's okay. If I start up again, you call me on it. I never want you to be scared of me again." Mark held up a piece of mistletoe so it hung above her head. "Darn. I have to kiss you. It's the law or something. Merry Christmas, honey, I never thought...thank you."

When dusk fell, they took Junior out for a long ride through the Christmas lights around town to wear him out. That night, Sandy and Mark slid under the Christmas tree and put together a collection of cars, then she went off to put together a log cabin. Mark held his breath as he slid Karma back to couple on. "Perfect! I was so afraid I wouldn't be able to afford an engine, and you showed up again after the way I treated you. And my stepdad showed up after the way I treated him. He even brought my car back after I lost the new one we'd bought. And Sandy came back and brought Junior after the way I treated *her*! Never mind getting anything for Christmas. I already got everything."

For the next forty years, Karma spent a lot of time under Christmas trees. She spent even more on layouts that started with a warped sheet of

plywood in that starter home outside Cleveland and ended up with a whole lot of good modules in the basement of the family's third or fourth house, the one in Jensen after their last big move. The garage in that house was big enough that when Mark's mom sold her house and the '50 Chevy needed a place to stay, she got it, and the boys fixed her up until she looked as good as she did the day Mark and his stepdad brought her home. They had a lot of fun at car shows until the guys moved out on their own.

That was life until Hurricane Ivan hit. When water started to come up through the basement drain, Mark hurried as fast as he could down the basement steps to grab the trains, then went down again for Karma to bring her upstairs. He had to sit down on the top step and rub his chest for a long while. "Between your motor and mine, neither of us is doing very well. Sandy's right. We both need tune-ups."

One summer afternoon Mark went upstairs, slowly, and never came back. A few days later Sandy and the grown-up kids came to sort through the trains in the basement. Everyone got a set, more or less, and a few modules, until finally Karma was left. "She doesn't run very well," Junior sighed. "I have this one that does. It would cost a bundle to fix that one up."

"I know we wouldn't have the time," his sister said. Everyone else agreed, so after the rest of the trains left and the modules went home with a dozen or so friends from the club, Junior scooped Karma up and took her to the hobby shop. He didn't say a lot, and Jesse didn't either. "Find a good place," were as many words as he got out, then he left too.

Karma sat under the workbench for a month or so. Trish would pick her up and look, and Jesse would too, and no one did much. Finally, one afternoon, Bert was bored enough to pick her up. "Man, what a sack of old clinkers. You had the wheels run right off you. I'd part you out, but you don't have that many good parts left. If it wasn't for the lousy way that motor sits, I could..." From there it turned into a regular Bert repair job with all the usual sound effects, only the odd angle of the motor and some of the bends and twists over the years made it just about impossible. "That does it. Maybe you'd make a half-decent shelf piece." He slapped the shell back on and tried to straighten the corner of the cab with his pliers, only his hands were a lot bigger than Mark's all those years before and there weren't, and aren't, many notches on Bert's throttle; he's stopped or flat out, and that's why the cab roof snapped.

I don't know that there were actual words involved. Bert sounded like a diesel when the turbo blows out. He whipped open the back door and heaved Karma into the alley, except his brother-in-law was about to come in and was startled by five pounds of engine flying at his face.

Luckily for all of them, Ricky had never forgotten his baseball days in right field. "I think that's the fastest this poor old gal has traveled lately. This is Mark's, right?"

"Yeah. That's why we tried to fix it, but--"

Ricky sent a text and looked at the answer. "Take a hundred for it?"

There was a yes among the descriptions of Karma's motor and all. "...what you're gonna do with that hunk of junk."

"It's almost the end of the semester, I'll have time, and there's not enough original and good here to worry about, so we'll have fun with the scrap pile up at the machining lab."

Karma wasn't sure that qualified as fun, even when she got the corner of her cab back. While her shell was off, Ricky and his wife changed a whole lot of things, and when she was all back together she felt better, like new again, but different. The first time her tender whistled, after maybe ten years of not being able to, she nearly jumped off the rails, and having a clean, working smoke unit was such a novelty that she made Ricky cough. "Works," Beth squeaked, fanning away a cloud. "Now let's do a little smuggling."

Smuggling sounded a little dubious, since it involved being wrapped up in a bag and shoved into the bottom of a box of paper napkins and cups, but Karma felt better about it when she heard the familiar voices at the model club. The box thumped down on what she knew had to be the kitchen floor. "Psst," someone said, "keys?" There was a jingle, then someone carried her out and stuffed her under the seat of a familiar truck, who was happy to see her.

When the truck got home and the rag unwrapped, Jason was holding her--Jason, who Karma had known for three years, the man who had first come to the model club desperate to fix his son's old 999. At a layout under a tree in Jason's friendly house, 999 was on the rails with his unlikely assortment of bright-painted cars. "Share the space, bud," Jason said, stashing her all the way to the back. "I hope you run as nice as you look now."

Late at night, while Jason was at his job, Jessica pulled into the garage from work. There was a different note to the car's engine, not like the soft purr of her little Escort. Hunter tiptoed to the door and looked out. "You got it!"

"Yes! I hid mine around the corner. I hope he likes it. That's six months of overtime."

Come morning, there was a lot of noise around the tree, and a lot of paper and boxes went in all directions. "Why's the train not running?"

Hunter poked his head under the tree to turn the transformer on.

“What...Dad? That’s--Whose is--” He scooped Karma up and held her.

“Yours.”

“Whoa. Oh, wow. I...after the way I acted the other day...”

“You’re not *that* bad. Besides, this engine needs somebody to keep in line.”

“So when are you going to open your big present?” Hunter asked him. So far, Jason had unwrapped a couple of tools he needed to be a good nurse and a few small train parts.

“My big...?” He followed Jessica’s point to the red ribbon on the door to the garage. Her kids giggled and Hunter got up to watch. “Ho-ly-cow!”

Sandy had no use for that ’50 Chevy, and the kids weren’t into car shows any more. She and Jessica struck a decent deal. It wouldn’t have done to let some collector put him in a box somewhere.

Karma gets to go to the big layout and play a lot, because her rebuilt motor lets her pull just about anything. She usually rides in the truck or the Escort, then in good weather she gets to cruise with her old friend the Chevy. Speaking of her, she was the car Hunter learned to drive in. She wasn’t going to let him get in trouble.

Not so long ago, there was a special program in town, and in the evening Sam brought his friend Mel and the visitor to see the place. The visitor was an older man with close-cut white hair and a dark blue uniform. The brass had been polished so much it looked kind of blurry, like Mel’s own. Karma was in the middle of a spin around the upper track when she skidded in surprise and hoped the visitor wouldn’t notice her.

“It was the truth,” the visitor was saying to the people around the layout, because Hunter had asked the question. “When I was your age, I was an absolute brat. Matter of fact, I had an engine that looked just like that one up there and I threw it at my dad’s head. I’ve always thought I’d have been dead if he hadn’t kicked me out, because I was in every kind of trouble a teenager could get into back then. Even after I made it through boot camp, I was on the edge of getting the boot for half of my first hitch. When I got the news about our first being on the way, I had to straighten up right then. Of course, by the time I had that all sorted out, had time in with good behavior and some college behind me, the program started, and the rest you know about.”

“Not that we could admit it for a long time.” Mel grinned. “I think you turned out all right, Chief.” After all these years, Trent the Brat finally has a better name.

3: Sunshine

For over thirty years, the window of Keylor's Sunshine SuperGo gas station looked like any other from a week or so into January to the evening of Thanksgiving. There'd be a kind of tire on special, a pyramid of oil cans, maybe a poster about some promotion from the gasoline company. That was all until Thanksgiving afternoon. The station was closed for regular business unless somebody was desperate for gas to get to Grandma's. Otherwise, after dinner, Archie would hang up a sheet to block the view, go in for half an hour, come out and yank the sheet down. In that break, Christmastime happened.

Christmas in 1965 promised to be really good because SuperGo had commissioned train sets with tankers and boxcars that advertised Canned Sunshine oil and GetAGrip tires. Archie only got a few in stock, and one of them went in the window that year. If it was past the great years of sidewalk shopping in old downtowns, if rockets and moon boots had taken over from trains and cowboy hats, if nothing was quite as magical any more, little kids and big ones alike still had to take a walk down to see what Archie had in the window.

That Friday morning, with a lot of offices closed and school out, a lot of little noses and hands pressed up to the glass to see the Sunshine Special, and a lot of big noses and hands wanted to. For some, the engine and cars were the first electric train they'd seen, what with all the space toys and little cars in their lives. For others, just a little older, they were one more moment of childhood when the world seemed to be running away downgrade way too hot and picking up speed by the second. Sunshine didn't move that fast. Archie made sure she didn't. After all, she was going to a new home on the sixth of January.

That was as much a tradition as the yearly train set itself. Anyone who stopped by the gas station could drop a ticket in the jar up front. On the sixth of January, Archie would hang the sheet up again, thump around in the station for half an hour and come back out to pull it down. There would be a pyramid of oil cans, maybe a tire, maybe a poster. The train set from the window would be back in its box, and the last thing he'd do that evening was get the next customer to pull a ticket from the jar. Some kid, or even grownup, would get a gruff but friendly call: "You lucked out, sport, come and get your train!"

Even with waning interest, that year's jar had a couple dozen tickets in it after New Year's. Sunshine was chuffed to have drawn her own winning ticket to land with Archie's friends. He liked to pull his rocking chair up to the window and watch her cruise around. She would start off slow, forget herself and pick up the pace, and he'd bump back the transformer. "No sense hurrying," he always said, because he couldn't. His lungs were scaled up from the coal mine and his heart had a bad time squeezing with all his flues loaded like that.

He had a lot of pictures from the mine on the walls: a crew that set production records; a rescue contest he and his friends had won; a picture taken out front at Prosperity with the morning and midnight crews together, hundreds of men standing and sitting on everything handy to get in the photo. He also had a framed newspaper page, a collage of smaller pictures, and a baby food jar with forty-seven pennies. "One for each of my buddies," he said. "Penny from the year they were born. If nobody else knows, I do, and that reminds me. I want to be the one who remembers things." He didn't talk about it to anyone who came in; those stories were for the times he was sitting alone, watching Sunshine.

On the fourth of January, he was rocking and Sunshine was making her slow loops in the window when the tracks beneath her wheels thumped. It was an odd strong quiver, not like the big trucks going by. "Hmm." Archie shuffled to the door, watching down the hill where the railroad was going about its business. After a minute or two, he shook his head. "Wasn't them. All's okay down that way."

Another bump, sharper and stronger, derailed Sunshine. Archie reached over to put her back on. "I could swear that felt like," he said, and left the power off while he went to the door again. "No, they're all right." He picked up the phone on the counter. "Hey, hon, look down by the rail yards. See any smoke and such from your angle?...No?...Well, how about...that's what I thought. It was...oh, there's the siren." He got quiet while the siren yelled out the warning once, twice, three times. "Out of town. You do? Wait, is it from down by the old Fort Bend portal?..." He went to the west window so he could look again, and by

then Sunshine could see a thin chimney's worth of pitch-black smoke squirting up to the sky from below the bluff. "Prosperity was working over this way, toward the old works. Seven South was getting awfully close to Fort Bend. If they holed through--hon, I gotta go."

Sunshine waited for him while the short winter day turned to night. The kid who helped run the place came in, but didn't play with her. He closed at the regular time. She waited in the dark all night. In the morning no one opened the store; Archie's son stuck his head in once to grab keys. The sheriff's deputy with him said something, and Sunshine heard Archie answer "I'm leaving them unlocked, honor system, anybody that needs it," as he left.

Later that afternoon, Archie's son Rocky came in and didn't bother hanging up the sheet. He put the train box on the counter, lifted Sunshine and the cars off the track, put them in their wells in the Styrofoam box, pulled the track apart and set it back in its place. He put the lid on, and Sunshine heard the jar with all the tickets rattle beside them. If she had to guess, she'd have thought she and the jar were in a bigger carton.

Which was where she stayed, in the dark, for the next thirty-five years.

When they scrapped the worn-out parts of Archie, the gas station never felt right again. Archie should have been sitting by the pumps in his rocking chair on any half-decent day, and no one else would do. Rocky was racing cars a lot and working in the other mine and didn't have time to run the place, so Rocky sold it to some other people who tried for a while, then the big gas crisis ran them out of business. They tried this, that and the other way to make money with the building before they gave up and lived in it for a while. Eventually, they got other jobs, inherited a house and moved out, and the old station sat empty.

By and by a big company bought the old building and its lot. A local construction outfit came to tear the building down to make room for a big new fuel-up station for people as well as cars. Archie's great-grandson Nicky, who also made a decent living driving race cars, asked for the old plastic off the front and the big picture window and hauled them back to his place. The rest of the building fell in the first time the backhoe bucket nudged it, which scared everybody who'd been in there. Shoveling up the broken bits from the surface didn't take long, then the archaeology club came to look around and so did Archie Keylor's grandkids.

"It doesn't seem right," Archie's grandson Paul said. "All those years and they flattened it in one morning."

"It flattened itself. I remember Grandpa sitting out here. Dad was never cut out to try to run a station, but I wish he had." Paul's brother Sam was still a little stiff from his own trouble the year before, when a race car he was driving broke and mashed him. He'd never told Paul, but he'd mentioned to us engines that he was thinking about buying the old station and fixing it up just for show. The wreck had left him out of commission long enough that the big company had beaten him to the punch. There were times when Sam really missed his grandpa, and that afternoon was one. I don't know what people use sorts for, but Sam was all out of them and his brother didn't have many left either.

"I guess things change." Paul finished it off with a big sigh. He brushed something out of the dirt at his feet and laughed. "At least I haven't lost all my marbles!"

"I'll be." Sam held the blue striped marble up to the light. "We'd leave these all over the floor, and next time we came down they'd be missing and we'd get another handful out of the jar. The ones he missed scooping up to put back, he must have been sweeping out with the dirt."

"Which really meant sweeping them through that crack under the block in the front wall, right where we're standing. I'm surprised there was enough room for all the years he dumped the floor dust in there. He claimed it was on top of a groundhog hole and he might have been right." Paul shoved the dirt around and picked up more marbles until all of his pockets were full, then handed a double handful to Sam. "Ha. Toy car."

Sam grabbed it. "My red Vette! That's where it went!"

"No telling what else we're going to come across." Paul was right; over the next hour, he dug up two more toy cars, another pocketful of marbles, a cheap old wristwatch (it still ran when they wound it, just as the brand advertised) and thirty-seven cents. By then the cloud deck was starting to spit rain and promising to do a little more than spit fairly soon. "When they dig up the old tanks and put in the new ones, we ought to see what else shows up."

"I think the state archaeologists are coming in to make sure they don't miss anything, but I don't think they're that interested in where the Indian head penny jar went, or the pictures, the sign from out front and that stuff."

"Oh, that! It's not lost, it's in the old garage up by the dealership. I keep meaning to get it out of there before winter so I can shut off the heat and tear that garage down before the rest of it falls in. The upstairs leaked in the last big snow we had a couple years back, so we cleaned that out already. We had to carry the big Sunshine sign down those creaky steps...A lot of Grandpa's stuff needs to be at the museum. We

ought to look through the boxes before we forget what was what. Maybe we can do that next week.”

“Next week” turned into “week after next” and “maybe next month,” the way things do when you’re only half serious. That September’s big story about the planes and their people distracted everybody from anything that wasn’t war news. Late in the month, everyone thought they heard a mention of bad weather. It didn’t seem terrible for flooding, so most of them ignored it because there wasn’t a lot to do ahead of time and the war seemed way more important.

That night, in the shed we used then, the three of us steam engines heard the wind throttle up. The steady plop of rain changed to popping, then heavy tapping like a bunch of workers breaking rust with hammers. Old Five said “Big hail. I bet stoker coal size.”

97 half woke up. “That big?” Just then, a bouncing rock of water broke a pane in the back window. “That big, all right, and what *wind!*”

The hail rattled along the length of our roof. The back wall creaked. I’d heard it do that in a blizzard once, years ago, and not since. When it gets like that, I wish you all could be like me, heavy and solid and easy to fix when my jacketing gets dents. The night watchman bailed into the building, jumped into my cab and slid into the cool solid firebox, the safest place we had. Two or three more people who had been working outside joined him, all so scared they were barely talking.

Down at the fire station, the siren raised its voice into the storm. One for a fire on the east side...no...two for a fire on the west side...no...three for out of town, no...four for needing the ambulance...no, the siren kept yelling, drawing a fresh breath and yelling again.

“People are fragile. They shouldn’t be moving trains in this,” 97 said.

“I don’t think they are.” I wished to cram the little engines into my firebox too. The wind’s thudding diesel noise meant no guarantees. Creak...creak... there was a sharp rumble above us and part of the roofing paper scraped along till it flew by the windows.

The wind stopped as if a hand shut the throttle. The workers crawled out, looking around at all of us, trying the lights that of course didn’t work before they turned on their lanterns and stuck their heads out the door. The big generator started up and the signals in the yard went live again. All of our buildings were there, if a little disgruntled at the rough handling. “Back to work, I guess,” our watchman said, “but man, what a scare that was!”

“Little more than a scare,” another one with his ear to a scanner called. “Lot of damage uptown. Fire department says at least one roof off, small building and power lines down.”

I don't speak good building, but I think our shed growled "Ow. No wonder."

Pete and Ellie came over in boots and pajamas, sliding back the door to look around. "All right in here? Looks like just a piece of roll roofing peeled off," and they went off to check the rest of the places in their charge.

A few minutes later the Whiskey Hill brush fire truck flew down the creek. Sam was driving; we all know the way he slides that last corner no matter what he's in. Instead of stopping by the station, he went on up into town, and in a couple of minutes the big pumper followed.

There was no smoke or red glow, only showers of silver and gold sparks shooting over the line of trees on the bluff, a lot at first, then less and less. Soon the yards were the only light around. We could hear generators firing up all over, and here and there beyond our windows was a house with lights or someone walking with a flashlight. The police blocked the road at the top of the bluff, so there wasn't much chance to ask any cars what was going on. We had to wait for Pete and Ellie to come back, talking loudly, no doubt because all the people in the yards wear earplugs. "Man, what a mess! Limbs down all over, couple of trees broke off at the Lutheran Hall, power lines on half the streets knocked down, shingles here and there. The big thing is, the roof blew off of the old school and caved in the storage building at Paul and Sam's Chevy place. I don't think there's much left of it that isn't all over the street."

"That explains Sam flying past," 97 said. "Hope nobody got hurt that can't be fixed."

Maybe Ellie just happened to hear the same question from the watchmen. "People are okay. Three or four new trucks got dents and there's a few cracked windshields, but they jammed a lot of the cars inside the showroom when they heard it could get bad. Can't get them out right now, but the roof's still on the main building and there was only a small transformer fire, so they're safe." Now *there* is a useful person.

In the cold windy daylight, the dealership looked even worse than it had in the night. The old building hadn't seen any point in standing up when the big wind hit it. "Microburst," Paul sighed. "They don't even have the grace to call it a tornado."

Mark the insurance guy didn't turn a wheel, just kept making notes as he walked around. "Tornado or wind doesn't matter. you're covered. We'll get a decent settlement for you here, then you can have your Hail Sale. For that matter, if you like the idea, we can have our adjustor set up out here in the lot and have people drive through, because we've had I

don't know how many dozen calls about hail damage already. That should give your body shop some business."

"Any business would help about now. Nobody's bought anything since the eleventh of last month. Then there's the showroom roof we'll need to have done before winter, and..."

"Don't worry about it. Like I say, I should have you a check later today. For now, I gotta run. Be back in a few hours."

The insurance guy steamed off, already on his phone to the next place, while Paul was still stuck and needing sand. "Ashes, what this'll do to the rates! For a year I've been thinking about tearing down that building, never got around to it and now look at this mess."

"Aw, settle," Sam growled. He was used to Paul getting all out of tram every time life happened, and that's not the way Sam ever has worked; from his angle, the roof was a mess, the cars were stuck inside but safe, and the building had torn most of itself down, so things could have been a lot worse. "TV news was here, so you got free publicity and lots of people driving by to look. More will come through to show off their hail damage. Make a real good deal on dented cars and problem solved. You can even get a couple retired Byron Cup drivers to autograph stuff and throw some coffee and donuts in on the deal to call it a party. Besides, the power company is getting that pole off the showroom doors, so you'll be back open anytime now."

"I guess." It looked as odd to see Paul in jeans and a sweatshirt as it would to see Sam wearing a tie. He made a few ineffective pokes at the pile of bricks and chunks of wood. "How's this going to get cleaned up? It'll take forever."

"It's not your house, nobody's dead and the fire department says we can unload what's left that was in the bottom floor over there. Be glad you'd cleaned out the upstairs already. Let's get out of the way here so they can finish the doors and we'll get to that."

Like Sam, Paul's boys and the people who worked for him were a lot more used to picking up heavy dirty things. "It's okay, Uncle Sam, we got it. Don't mess your neck up."

He grumbled a little about that and climbed up on part of the pile to look around. "I bet if we got the wrecker out we could pick some of this up pretty quick even before the backhoe gets here. Ain't nothing to say I can't do that much." The wrecker was glad to hear it because she'd been sitting in her garage wanting to help as much as Sam had.

It didn't take long before the pile of old chestnut beams from the roof had jumped into the bed of Nicky's passing pickup truck. Paul's herd of grandkids stacked boards out of the way and rolled out the parts wagons and old packaged stock. The less hopeless it looked, the closer

Paul was willing to get, until when he could see the gray metal shelving he was willing to step over a few leftovers of crumbled roof and look.

"Hey, here are the Indian head pennies." Paul held up a baby food jar. "Forty-seven, one for each of the guys Grandpa knew in the mine back when."

"How about that carton they fell out of?"

"Which one? Oh, that." The cardboard carton labeled "Gas Station" had fallen apart and spilled its contents. Paul knocked aside a thick wad of wet newspaper to unveil a flat box. Beneath the crud, it was white, strewn with train pictures. "I thought when he closed the station Dad sold all the train stuff that was...wait, this has to be the last one."

The rest of the stuff on the old shelves got carried to Nicky's truck for safekeeping, but the white box went into the dealership with Sam and Paul. They put a paper floor mat on Paul's shiny desk and set down the box, damp and smeary as it was. "Coulda been mine," Sam said. "If Dad wasn't going to have the drawing, and I get it, everybody was too upset, all I had to do was ask. But I was fourteen. Trains weren't cool for a few years."

"I was seventeen. You don't think I could have asked? Nah, only four wheels were cool. Even then, I never wanted to drive as hard as you and Dad. Now I wish I'd raced you guys."

"Uh." Sam made a motion toward his neck and back. "After I broke my everything?"

"But you were in like a thousand big-time races and you only almost got killed once."

Sam couldn't argue with racer logic, even if it was the first time he'd heard it from his brother. "True. I gotta admit, I can't wait till they let me back on the track again even if I'm only driving the pace car. The farm's fine, but racing is the only job I could have other than the coal mine where it felt like I was doing something."

"You coal miners. He had to go back in that caved-in smoky mine with his lungs all torn up and his heart that bad, no matter what."

"Guys he knew were in trouble, some of them his friends' kids and his brother-in-law. All he said to Grandma was he promised...Wait a sec." Sam couldn't sprint, but he hustled out to the latest truckload of trash and grabbed the wad of papers that had been stuck to the set. The ones on either end were yellow under crumbled dirt, glued together by melted hail and dust. He peeled open the fold: *Jensen Observer*, January 5, 1966. *Four Miners Dead, Rescuer Critical After Prosperity Mine Explodes*. He plopped the damp papers on the desk beside the set. "I figured if Dad kept this train when he took it out of the window, he'd have kept these with it."

"I never saw these." Paul scanned down the article. "But then, I never looked or asked."

While he read, Sam lifted off the cover of the train set (he might have heard the faint "whew, finally!" from inside.) The set was all there, carefully packed into the proper hollows in the Styrofoam. "I suppose we shouldn't take it out," Paul said. "It's barely run."

"But the box top is ruined." Sam pulled out sections of track and shoved them together. Some were stiff after thirty-five years of sitting. "I remember when Dad packed this. No wonder he couldn't let go of this one. It was still in the window the day that happened."

"I was working at the station after school and that was my last day. He never even let me open up again, just gave the Johnsons the keys. Dad sold the last couple of sets that were sealed. This one had been out of the box. He put it away when he and Grandma got back from making the funeral arrangements." Paul leaned down, chin in hands, to watch Sam set the cars on the track. "Surely you're not gonna plug it in?"

Yes! wasn't a good idea right then, but pardon Sunshine; after thirty-five years in the dark and a couple of rough moves, getting dropped a few times and having stuff fall on her way too often, the light was glorious and the idea of getting a move on was even better.

"It wasn't all *that* wet and the cord's not busted, good enough." Paul shielded his face and Sam cackled. "Just messing with ya. No, we better let the transformer dry out. Everything needs a good going-over and no doubt some oil. Tonight's Thursday, model club should be down there. I don't have to go anyplace till this weekend and we got most stuff done up at the farm, so, you coming?"

"I ought to take care of all these things..." Paul looked down at his list and shook his head. "That's how I got divorced, isn't it? I ought to take care of *this*."

That evening, when Sam made time to come to the museum, he and Paul unwrapped the set again. The guys their age, and those a little younger, gathered around. Bobby surprised them. "Oh, wow, I remember that train."

"You were so little...seriously?"

"That was the first model train I drooled over. I was four." He knelt down to get to the small engine's eye level. "This is about the right height, only I need a pane of glass in front of me so my nose can smush into it." Of course he understood that tiny *I remember you*. We don't forget our steam people, even when they're very small.

With a little dusting off and a lot of oiling around, a little wheel cleaning and a couple of back and forth swipes to get the creaks broken loose, Sam got Sunshine fired up for the first time since Archie had

rerailed her. She was a tad confused for a minute or so, because the hand on her back felt so much like Archie's, big and knobby. When she realized who it belonged to, she was even happier. We don't forget our kid fans, either, even if they forget us for a while.

"Sunshine SuperGo Gas," Doug sang. "Put the power of sun-shine in your taaaank!"

Doug's brother Steve crawled out from under the layout. "I remember that jingle. They ruined their ads a year or two later when they went to 'Sunshine SuperGo, go, for a super go-go' with the go-go dancers. I didn't mind the dancers, just the lousy song."

"I wasn't in town much when this one was in the window. Think I did throw my name in the jar, though," Doug laughed. "Yeah, Sam, you gonna draw for it?"

Sam displayed the pickle jar with its old stash of tickets. "Yep. So she has a track for Christmas, what do you think, the night we have the party? Out of these three dozen or so, I mean. We have a new set to raffle off the regular way. This one, we draw out of these."

It took a second for that to soak in. From my spot on the siding I saw the idea ripple across the room. It wasn't hard to see who remembered putting a ticket in that jar, even thirty-five years later. Sam's wife Honey thought of the obvious. "Does anybody even have the same phone number? Were we even on all numbers then or was it still letters-numbers?"

"I see both on the tickets, so a lot of people still wrote them the old way. The phone up at the house hasn't changed, APple5-6325. I think your dad's name is still on it."

"True. Some of the people might not be around. What then?"

"Whatever kid or grandkid of theirs we find gets a cool train. I'd bet most people who are still around and put their names in want it, even with the beat-up box. Well, most would."

Honey poked him in the ribs. "You would. You're even goofier for these than I am. If we call a number and it's not that person or their family, we draw again?"

"Until we get a live person from the family who wants her," Paul agreed. "Until then, we get to play with the set."

Sam's son Nicky had a construction company to keep his old friends busy. After most of the storm work got done, they put the salvaged parts together out on the hill. Paul even went out to see how it looked after the new old plastic went up and the new old window went in. "He's got one great-grandpa's station on the other great-grandpa's farm. Can't say the kid doesn't do tradition." It did look nice, and it wasn't only decoration; sure enough, a big truck dropped off a pair of pumps one afternoon

around the first of November. Another truck came along with a couple of cold drink coolers. For the first time in five years since the last station out that way went under, the Whiskey Hill fire department and anybody else in the neighborhood could run over and get bread, milk, pop and chips without going all the way into either town. Some of the old friends ran the place for Nicky, when he couldn't be there himself.

Within a week or so, the station felt as if it had been there forever, and that's what the neighborhood thought of it, too. Nicky didn't have a service bay by the place, so he didn't put a tire in the window, but he did have some posters and one morning, when Sam stopped by to fill up his beat-up black farm truck, they found Nicky trying to stack oil bottles with boards between them. "No cans, huh?"

"No, and now I wish I'd saved the ones out of the back corners of the paint shed. Wouldn't have been enough to do a good pyramid anyhow."

"Well, if this was old times, it's almost Thanksgiving and you'd have a way around it for five-six weeks while you think of something."

Sam wasn't sure Nicky had heard him, but let me tell you, there's not much he misses.

There's a good bit of traffic out at the corner of Rocky Fork and Steelworks Road, halfway between River Heights and Jensen, and on Thanksgiving a lot of people from the neighborhood and both towns stopped by the station. At around five o'clock, a car noticed the card readers on the new pumps worked even though the place itself was locked up.

When another carload of Thanksgiving people came by not much later, there was an old white sheet hung over the window. Word got around out on the ridge, and into town, where a lot of people were trying to walk off big dinners or wait between football games: *Can it be? He wouldn't really!* Those with not much else to do wandered to the station at the corner.

Just before six o'clock, Nicky came out of the station and yanked down the sheet. Sure enough, Christmastime had happened. There was a lot of tinsel hung around inside, and a lot of Christmas ads for the soda and other stuff he sold, but the main thing was the little tree with a train set under it, a jar with a hole cut in the lid and a roll of tickets beside it. The train set was an N-gauge JB&S diesel, brand new, shy and a little bewildered; he'd expected to find himself in a house with a few people, not a gas station window with a good-sized audience. "After New Year's you won't have such a herd to deal with," Nicky said, not pretending the engine wouldn't hear, and parked his tender in the straight-backed

rocking chair beside the register to fool with his computer while kids stuck their faces to the window and pointed.

In the first week of December, the new gas station downtown opened. It had bright lights, lots of parking places, hot coffee and good hot dogs all night, so it was a hit with most of the big railroaders right away and the modelers as soon as they realized it was open on a club night. My steam people and their truck made it sound so good I wished they sold coal. Sam didn't want to be as impressed when he and Honey closed the tree lot for the night and came by the museum to help get the big room ready for the party. "Nice enough," he said. "Donuts aren't Red's, but they're decent. Coffee's good, gotta admit."

"But it's not your grandpa's station," Honey finished for him. "Nicky took that out on the hill with him."

"I know, I wish it could be the same, but nothing much is now."

"And the championship banquet is this week."

"Well, yes. I got no reason to be there. Not like I raced this year."

She looked down from the chair she was standing on, garland in hand. "Tomorrow's your check-up. If Doc says it's all right, I can shut my eyes long enough for you to drive some short tracks. If you want, that is."

"If?" He lit up like the tree. If anybody understood Sunshine, he did, even if he'd only spent one year out of where he belonged instead of thirty-five.

"But no more superspeedway craziness, just enough to take the edge off so you don't try to footrace Mel to the back of the lot while you're both carrying trees. Both of you could have piled up into the wreaths and garlands." She turned to catch another bundle of plastic pine. "I know this is safer and all, but the real stuff smells so good."

Bobby chuckled. "Lead icicles, glass ornaments, metal hooks, raw eggs in eggnog, big hot light bulbs on dried-up trees...How are any of us still here?"

One of the guys who isn't there too often handed up a box of lights that are bright, but not hot or all that dangerous. "It's like racing. You know bad stuff happened, you draw a convenient blank on it when you need to."

"Bet it won't be the same at the banquet in New York," Sam said. "We've been there at Christmastime. The skyline just looks...weird. I guess we'll get used to that, too."

"We got used to a lot. Like the time we burned down the TV station on Christmas Day," the infrequent flyer snorted. "The whole crew on duty was right out of college and I can't believe we didn't all get fired."

New tradition since then: the tree in the lobby is fake so it never runs out of water and turns into a great big candle.”

“Some things are better,” Sam admitted. “Grandpa didn’t sell hot dogs. He didn’t even have milk and bread. The Coke machine, though...”

“I don’t think you were allowed to open a gas station without a pop machine. Dad always acted shocked that it had gone up to a dime a bottle when I was little,” Honey added. “Hand me the tape so this hook won’t be holding all the weight.--No glass bottles to send back now, no nasty saccharine diet flavors, no cans with loose tabs to drop all over the place. But--I still have the cookie recipe Great-grandma brought from Sweden. Don’t have the six dozen I made last week, but I do still have the recipe.”

“They evaporated.” Sam isn’t good at looking innocent. He glanced at the pickle jar on the counter. “Somebody gets to keep that tradition going, anyhow.”

After an hour and a half of punch and cookies around the layout, people were starting to sneak looks at their watches. It was a school night and the little units were going to have their own parties the next day. There’d been doings for the genealogy club and the garden club and the Masons and what all, and after so many, fun feels like a job, but there were at least a dozen people in the room who didn’t want to leave until Sam got the heart to pick the jar up. It had to happen. “Next person through that door,” he said at last.

Not half a minute later one of the young guys who’d had to work late found himself stirring a handful of old blue tickets. He turned his back and plucked one out. “Jim Henries?”

“Seriously?” Sam blinked. “Wait...what’s the phone number?”

“I never saw one like this. APple5-6325.”

“Dial it,” Bobby said. “It’ll still work. You might get a machine, or you might get his grandson. I guarantee you got somebody who will want that train.”

The young guy looked confused. “How do I dial this?”

Doug took the ticket. “Lemme show you on the desk phone. See the letters above the numbers? They’re not just for texting. The phone company thought people couldn’t remember seven numbers, so the first two are letters. Nobody expected we’d have to punch in ten.”

The young guy tried punching it up. “It’s ringing...Hello? Is there a Jim Henries there?...I see. Uh, did you say you’re his grandson?”

Doug’s brother scratched his head. “Jim Henries...? I never knew he had a first name. He was just always Captain and I wanted his spiffy blue B&O uniform so bad. Hey, that’s...I mean, if it’s going to mean a whole lot to anybody...”

Sam stared at Honey, who shook her head and shrugged. “You got me how this happens. Everybody saw he drew fair, right?”

One of the women made the same puzzled gesture. “Sure, why?”

“Because right now he’s talking to our Nicky, who just snagged himself a train set.”

Nicky has changed the tradition a little. The train set in the gas station window goes home with somebody on Christmas Eve, when Sunshine takes over. For the rest of Christmastime, she makes a loop now and then, too slow and then all at once too fast until Nicky reaches over and taps the transformer back. He sits in his rocking chair, and these days there’s a baby on his lap who helps him watch the train clatter around the tight loop under the little tree.

The difference is that when the sixth of January comes and Christmas goes back in its box for the year, Sunshine goes back in her box, with the lid left off, just long enough for Nicky to carry her back to his and Cindy’s new house. She doesn’t have to spend any more time in the dark. He keeps her on a shelf by Grandpa’s picture when she’s not busy on one of the layouts. If you look close, there’s an old baby food jar with forty-seven Indian head pennies and five wheat pennies from just the right years, because Nicky remembers.

4: Here Comes Santa Claus-RUN!

A lot of years ago, local television was black and white. It went off the air from a little after midnight till breakfast time. Preachers in town took turns doing Sunrise Sermonette, to talk people out of doing anything too bad that day, then there'd be news, cartoons and a kids' show the station made in its own studio up the hill.

The show moved to Jensen Toy and Hobby on Saturdays a few weeks before Christmas and turned the front counter into Santa's Workshop. Santa was busy at that time of year, so the station used a helper. Mr. Harvey was kind and jolly even if he did have to wear a couple of pillows to be round.

By and by, people got pickier about homemade shows, not as many kids watched, and it wasn't worth the trouble to take all the lights and a big camera down there, put pillows on Mr. Harvey and have Mrs. Harvey wear a red dress and white apron to be Mrs. Claus. When they sold the store to Bert and Trish, the TV station had an excuse to forget to set up that year, and nobody much noticed.

Thirty-some years later, Bert, Trish and Jesse bought the old pharmacy next door for more room. They had started to make noises about "when we retire" a lot, but they didn't mean it (and still don't, and even if they did their kids would take over.) They were moving stuff and painting that long front counter with the shelves underneath, wondering whether they should get a new one, when one of the customers looked horrified. "You can't get rid of the counter! That was Santa's Workshop!"

She was just old enough to remember when the Harveys used to set up all kinds of toys along the counter and on the shelves behind it. Her friend was the anchor and news director at the station, and before anybody knew it Sally was making plans to shoot Santa's Workshop again. "The cartoon we have in that timeslot is getting awful ratings. There's the nostalgia thing going, local is a big deal, and people want something decent for their kids to watch before they get up."

"Uh...okay," Trish said. "It was always fun, but who's going to be Santa?"

Sally doesn't take off with her brakes on, so she had a whole list of candidates up at the station. As the time got closer, they all found excuses. The silliest one said he didn't believe in lying to kids. He didn't

believe in a nice guy who wanted to do good without getting caught at it. I know a few dozen of them, so why would I doubt there's one more?

There was no question about it being great publicity for the store. Filming could take place Friday evening, when not many people would be around downtown. Trish put up a mailbox for letters to Santa in the store so they could answer some themselves and send the rest on to the right place. They picked out toys to display under the front of the counter, mostly in boxes so they wouldn't be as liable to fall over as, say, the life-sized Baby Stumbles. She was supposed to wobble around like a toddler, fall down and cry until somebody picked her up. Most of the little girls wanted that doll. Most of their parents, and the toy store owners, wished she'd disappear.

The biggest box belonged to a special train set Bert got by accident. One of the big model companies made a set in a bunch of different road names. He had ordered a B&O set, but got a dark blue diesel (C40-8W, if you're a rivet-counter) with a different road name that wouldn't even have been made until many years after that railroad got eaten by a much bigger one. She wasn't the kind of thing a collector or serious modeler would want, and she had all the fancy stuff that put the price of the set way higher than most people would spend on a kid's toy.

It was cheaper for the train company to pull damaged boxes or misprinted sets and turn the engines into a pile of parts to fix other new ones with, which is not fun to think about. Those sets were a natural parts source and their piles of cars sold cheap. One way or another, things got dropped and shuffled and misplaced, not that we big engines or a friendly forklift would know anything about that, and what the warehouse thought was a stack of four B&O sets were three B&O and one completely not prototypical, slightly smeared Powhatan and New Florence. When Bert and Jesse complained about the mistake, the company sent a replacement. As for the offbeat one, they didn't want to pay the shipping back on it just to dismantle it, so they told the guys to do what they wanted with it. Jesse tried putting her front and center in case somebody didn't care about minor impossibilities.

Meanwhile, the issue of Santa's helper was up in the air a couple of days before the first filming. Sally even tried asking Mel and Sam, but they had their regular jobs to do that week getting the Christmas tree lot ready. By and by, the awful truth hit home: if anybody was going to wear a Santa suit, it had to be either Bert or Jesse.

Even though Jesse's been in this country since he was a little kid, he still has some of his parents' Havana accent. Even if he didn't, he has one of those voices you'd know anywhere. That meant he was stuck with silent elf duty. Trish hemmed and hawed a little and finally allowed as

she could do the Mrs. Claus red dress and white wig and apron bit. The missing piece hid in the warehouse for a week.

“Bert hardly talks to anybody, so nobody knows his voice,” Trish told the TV crew. “Either he’ll come out on his own or he’ll come out with some help. Jess, take that Santa costume back there for me and put it on him, would you?”

“It says one size fits most, but Bert isn’t most. Never mind. It’s going on him however it has to.”

While the crew was measuring this, setting up that and moving that big model rocket box two inches to the left so it didn’t throw a shadow over Baby Stumbles, Jesse marched into the warehouse. I’m not sure I want to know what went on back there. It was kind of muffled and a lot of words leaked out you’d usually hear when Bert was trying to put new brushes in a postwar engine. By the time the crew was set up, Jesse hauled Bert out of the back, wearing the suit and fake beard, happy as a wet cat, simmering and popping off now and then.

Nobody from the TV crew wanted to mention makeup lest they go home missing parts. Trish combed the fake beard and hat trim, then Sally handed Bert the letters they’d picked out for that week. “Like any kid’s gonna believe this!” Bert grumbled. He whipped out the first one. “Connor Presley...wait a minute, I know that little cinder! Emma Holcomb. Ha. She throws one more tantrum about Baby Stumbles, she’s getting coal.” I guess that’s supposed to be bad, not that I’d mind. “Madeline Keylor? Maddie wants that rocket setup so bad I expect to have to mop up the drool in front of it...”

Bert fouled the introduction a couple of times and had to back up and do it over. By the fourth or fifth time, he was getting used to the idea, and when he didn’t slip his drivers and cuss, he looked almost happy. That’s when the strange thing happened: once he got to reading the letters, you’d have thought he was used to being on TV. He looked the camera straight in its big eye and talked to the kids on the other side of it. “Connor. Listen up. Pick two or three things off this list you want the most and leave some for other people. If you want to get anything this year, you need to quit hitting your little brother over the head with your toys.” He went on to the next one. “Ah, yeah, Emma. You want Baby Stumbles because when she doesn’t get her way she falls down and cries. Just like you, huh? If you want anything that big, you’re going to have to listen to your teacher, and don’t pull the dog’s tail or one of these days she’s going to deck you.”

Kids weren’t sure what to think. Janna Gilchrist quit being mean to two girls in her class, not because she realized it was bad but because the local version of Santa said “Janna. I know where you live. You want any

presents, settle.” Mrs. Holcomb, Emma’s mother, surprised nobody by being ticked off at how rude Santa was to her daughter.

“Special snowflake,” David Pribic’s mother sighed. “I think Santa should tell Emma’s mother a few things.”

There was such an epidemic of good behavior for the next month that toy orders went way up. The store sold out of so many things that the display had to change every week. By time to film the last show, the stuff in front of the counter looked scanty until Trish moved up the fancy misprinted train set. The big set and its engine (one of the nicest little locomotives you’ll ever meet, and the cars are a friendly bunch too) were perfect for filling the empty spot with bright colors. They attracted attention all week while they were sitting there. Most of us didn’t realize they were attracting the wrong kind of attention from a wrong kind of person.

They had attention from some right ones, too. All around town, kids who hadn’t ever been in the hobby store were coming in to drop off letters. Even the ones who didn’t believe in a guy leaving presents in the middle of the night were willing to try it in case they were wrong. Santa’s helper knew an awful lot about them, and it didn’t do to take chances.

Bert helped pick the letters for the last fifteen-minute show. He wasn’t being helpful; there was a big basketball game at St. Syl’s gym and he figured if he picked the letters he’d be able to whip through faster and get out in time to hit the concession stand before tip-off. The game would start about fifteen minutes after the show filming wrapped up.

He didn’t even have to do an extra take on the intro. He picked up the first letter. “Hey, Caitlin, there you are! I thought you forgot me. You don’t know whether you want a puppy or a piano keyboard, huh? Take the keyboard. Christmas is fun, but there’s a lot puppies can get hurt on. Spring’s much better for puppies. Alex. Let’s see here. You want a few practical things and maybe a basketball. You’re a good kid, Alex. Hey. Ask for the hoop, too. You never know. Sophia! Yes, I do think you’re old enough for that robot set. I’ll see what I can do.” He went down the list until he came to David. “Hey. David. You sure the train set is okay with your mom? Would it fit in the apartment? Look, you been a good kid, except for that thing with the rock and Mrs. Grady, but I gotta get with your mom on that one. Look for a big surprise, anyhow.”

After the director gave the cut sign and happily sent the crew packing, Elf Jesse gave Bert an uncomfortable look. “Uh, Sophie Morrison? That robot set is kinda expensive for her mom, and we can’t just give that stuff away. David and the train set...that’s David Pribic,

right? Molly doesn't have a lot of room and she *really* doesn't have a lot of money."

"Way ahead of ya. Sophie's on the Giving Tree and Mel and Lila got her the robot kit day before yesterday. David's real surprise is that he's been helping his mom work on that Habitat house for two months and doesn't know it's theirs. She got everybody to keep their mouths shut and ask him what color he thought they should paint the second bedroom. The only good part of her having been broke so long is that there isn't a lot she needed to pack."

Jesse looked at him as if he wasn't sure Bert's switches were thrown right. "If I hadn't known ya for thirty years I'd think you were enjoying this. Eh. I'm gonna de-elf myself and go over to the game."

Since Bert and Trish had a kid on the St. Syl's team, she went ahead too while Bert went to the back to shut down the computers and get out of the suit. He got as far as turning down his hearing aid to get ready for the crowd noise. Before he got changed he checked his mail, got distracted by a couple of orders for last-minute shipping, bent over the computer in his outfit and didn't get around to locking the front door when he should have. Even with the hearing aid off, he could hear Baby Stumbles wailing when a truck went past. "Good thing that pile of scale only screams a couple minutes at a time," he growled, and went back to the orders.

Crook had been hanging around the stores in town for a week or so, looking at all of the window displays with an eye out for anything small, expensive and not nailed down. He made a living moving from town to town every few days so people couldn't get used to him. Once he saw likely merchandise for his flea market and parking lot sales, he'd ease into the store, pocket it and wander out. He never set off the security alarms. He was even good at changing what he looked like really fast, so when the cops would go looking for a blond guy in a gray coat, he'd whip off the wig he was wearing over his shaved head and turn his reversible jacket inside out so it was white. If he hadn't been stealing, it would have been like magic.

If he'd kept taking tiny stuff, it's hard to tell how long he'd have kept going. What happened to him happens to most crooks: small wasn't enough challenge any more. The hobby shop attracted him because there were little things in the window. On further inspection, none of it looked expensive enough to be worth the trouble, but when he wandered in while the place was crowded, he saw a train set with a big price tag. He didn't think about the size of the train set box, only the size of the money he'd get when he sold it out of the back of his truck. That Friday, he

parked by the city building, walked the block and some up to the hobby shop and hung around until he saw the TV crew packing up. The lights in the store were out, so he laid a hand on the front door, jiggled it enough to know it wasn't locked, and slid in. Anybody who saw him would have thought he was part of the crew coming back after some forgotten doodad.

He picked up the box, which was about two by two feet and maybe six inches thick. Most humans don't have enough reach and room to hang onto a package that size and maneuver through tight spots. That was why Trish always made sure customers couldn't walk from the counter to the door without going around a spinning wheel or a big display of teacher supplies. As he tried to make the tight turns, Crook began to think anybody going by on the street might notice him carrying the big bright-colored box even if they thought he'd bought it. While he was thinking, he bashed into Baby Stumbles, who did her fall down and scream act.

Even if you're ready for it, and even if you're as big as me, that shriek will make you jump off the rails. When it came out of nowhere at about a billion decibels, it lit a fire under the small skinny crook. He had gone down the alley a couple of times over the last week, had watched Trish and Jesse go out the back without locking it just a few minutes before, and he assumed Santa had been one of the TV crew. When you're doing wrong, assuming is a bad way to go, and that occurred to Crook about the time he bumped open the door to the workshop and saw Bert's broad red velour shoulders bent over the computer.

Crook thought about hitting him over the head if he could find something heavy. That seemed like a bad idea for a bunch of reasons, starting with nothing heavy and compact being where he could reach it and ending with the idea that if he missed at all he was going to be yelling louder than Baby Stumbles. Instead, he eased backwards toward the back door past the tall racks of steel shelving. He hadn't thought about the oversized box whacking the shelves and shaking things, or the racket it made when it knocked down, of all things, a box of big jingle bells who were not at all happy with him. As they crashed down on his head, Crook froze.

A howling baby doll that goes off all the time is one thing, but a hundred sleigh bells dropping six feet and scattering will get attention from anybody. Bert turned around and looked right into Crook's eyes, then he stood up. He needed a pillow to make a belly. The rest of him filled up that one size fit most sweatsuit with no room to spare, and the pants legs were up above his old boots so they weren't in his way at all.

On the other hand, Crook was wearing a pair of too-long cargo pants with lots of big baggy pockets, a jacket with lots of big baggy pockets, and ten or fifteen pounds of loose phones, necklaces and all kinds of little expensive doohickeys crammed into the big baggy pockets, all of which were trying to catch on things. When he made the turn to get out the back door, Bert's salami breath was already on his neck.

Half the town had come to the game and was parked anywhere they wouldn't get a ticket. The other half didn't care about tickets and parked wherever they fit, including the alley behind the hobby shop. Crook put on his best sprint without looking and ran into Mrs. Phipps' car door because she was on her phone and didn't notice him. He only touched down with one hand and took off again, without any better luck.

With a few people getting out of their cars and stopping to stare, more car doors opening because people were on their phones and not paying attention, and the usual number of big deep potholes Bert had memorized and Crook hadn't, Crook realized he was about to get his tender handed to him by a guy almost forty years older with an artificial leg on one side. Having that on his permanent record wasn't going to be a good thing if he got locked up. Even with the added inspiration, he couldn't get a good lead.

Bert asked Crook to stop. Actually, it wasn't so much asking, and with the number of people who were out on the street, it would have been a whole lot better if he had yelled "Stop and give me that train set." Instead, the kids got an eyeful of Santa's helper making swipes at the running guy's back while he was describing Crook's blueprints and rebuilds.

Little eyes bugged out and parents grabbed for little ears, but the people I know only have two hands and quite a few have four or more little ears to tend, so it didn't work out. If the little units had been impressed before, they were really convinced when Crook did the only thing he could. The police were at the end of the alley, waiting to take care of things at the game, so Crook threw the train set at Bert and bolted toward the cops with his hands up, yelling for help.

Bert gave him a solid boost in that direction with his boot, waited for Officer Brian to field him, and picked up the train set. "It wasn't his," Bert explained in his most reasonable voice to all the kids who were staring in awe. "You don't go stealing stuff. Santa doesn't like that."

"Wow," one of the little guys squeaked. "Don't mess with Santa!"

"Oh, I ain't Santa, kid. I'm just one of his helpers. You ain't SEEN tough yet."

After the game, Bert got a better look at the skinned-up train set box. It didn't seem right to give it to a club to raffle off when it was muddy. When they thought about pulling off the torn shrink wrap and putting on new, Jesse found the handrails on one side of the locomotive were bent and the decal from the old road was chipped.

I don't know whether Santa carries a cell phone, or how Bert got the go-ahead, but there was some fussing around the back of the shop after hours, and some printing and striping and general fixing up, and David's mother said she didn't imagine any train that came to the new house was going to see the inside of its box again anyhow.

On Christmas morning, David went to the living room of their apartment and found nothing under the tree but a big note that said FOLLOW ME. A skinny piece of string ran from the note out the door, down the steps, around the corner, across the street and down a couple of blocks to the Habitat house, which had its own tree and presents and a happy little JB&S Dash-8 and her freight cars under it. If you didn't know where her skinned places were, you'd never see them under the reflective tape that's just like we big engines wear. Matter of fact it is what we wear, split down to the right width, which is why it's a little thick and lumpy. She doesn't mind. She found her kid, he found his train, both of them found their house, they're all happy and that's what matters.

Well, that, and finding out Santa has ways of knowing things, and getting the idea that unless the police are really close at hand it's a good idea not to cross him or his helpers. When snooty Mrs. Holcomb got up that Christmas morning to watch Emma open her presents, Baby Stumbles tripped out of her wrapping and flopped around screaming for a couple of minutes. It's funny, but nobody yet has owned up to getting Emma that doll.

5: Surprise

“So would you like steam instead of a diesel?” It seemed like a normal question to all of us, the little trains on the shelves and we big ones sitting across the street. To the woman holding the N-scale train box, it wasn’t.

“Steam? Diesel? I don’t understand those things. If you won’t give me a refund, I just want to exchange this thing for a toy that’s...*normal*.”

Trish scratched her head with the end of her knitting needle.

“Uh...normal?” It’s not a word that gets used a lot around this town.

The woman slid the box onto the counter, shoving it across with a manicured fingernail so she wouldn’t have to touch it much, as if it were a sooty old flue. “Toys for *normal* children. Science kits, wrestlers, cars. *Real* toys. My children aren’t autistic.”

“Neither are most people who play with trains. I’m not,” Trish’s sister said from behind a bowl of yarn. The woman looked around at her, startled.

“Oh, hello, Dr. Vauclain. You...play with...?”

“And I knit. People make fun of that, too, but they’ll just have to live with it.”

“I can ask Bert,” Trish sighed. Before she could get up and go back to the workshop, he had heard the discussion and rumbled his way out.

“Ask me what?”

The grumpy brick of Bert had the effect it does on most people. The woman quit waving her hands around and lost the edge of screech in her voice. “Uh...we won this in the drawing and my kids don’t...well, they don’t know about it, but I’m sure they wouldn’t ...no one in our *circle* would let their children play with something so...old-fashioned. I didn’t mean to be rude. I’m sure it’s very, ah, quaint. The only family I knew who had a train used it because their son was autistic, and I thought...I don’t want my children to...”

“It ain’t catching. No exchanges on free stuff.” When Bert folded his arms, even his ugly dancing girl tattoo looked steamed. “If you need help putting it together for your tree, the workshop’s tomorrow. If you want to sell it, try bringing it to the swap room.”

“Saturday. Well...I suppose...” the woman squeaked, and gathered up the box.

Bert was good and let the door close behind her, not that he had any illusions that she wasn’t going to hear. “You won the rusted thing, lady. Take it home and let your kids play with it. It won’t make them any stupider than they already are from being around you.”

If that sounded a little coarse, it was what we trains were saying, too. Beth was more diplomatic. "That's Mrs. Talbot. He's an accounting prof, came here for spring term, didn't get the family moved down till this fall. She's the academic version of a trophy wife." Beth held up two skeins of mohair and wool in the light from the window, squinted at them and put one back. "I need three of these, but the other dye lot. Anyhow, he's a nice guy. She's...herself."

"Professional faculty wife, lives up at Copperas Pointe, two point five children all in soccer eight days a week, drives them around in a land yacht?" Trish didn't need the answer; Beth rolling her eyes was enough. "Let me guess: town's way too small for her and she worries about the kids getting into bad influences."

"They could get into plenty, but what she thinks of as a bad influence might be a bigger problem, especially if she thinks you can catch autism."

"There's a lot she doesn't know about...a lot," Trish agreed. "Too bad she didn't appreciate her prize, but somebody will if she brings it in to sell."

On the Saturday after Veterans' Day, the town did its usual quick change from ordinary time to Christmas, and it went really well. When Bert sent Jesse to the bakery after boxes of cookies, he came back with most of them. By ten o'clock, the shop was full of people looking at hobby stuff and petting yarn, asking about the little helicopters and trying to decide which train set would look best under the tree.

"No, ma'am, the sheep don't die when you give them a haircut, and the goats don't either. This is a picture of our goat Mo, that's some mohair we combed out of him, and yes, it's a very bad joke." Trish answered that question every single year. The sheep and goats didn't get to come to the shop after the year Maybelle the baby alpaca ate half of the nut rolls, so everybody had to make do with petting George the long-haired bunny and watching Beth spin his loose fur right off his back. People were always amazed at how yarn appeared by magic while George munched his salad, and how a lot of the women who were knitting and crocheting weren't old grannies, and how somebody would bring in a little plane or train they thought was hopelessly broken and Jesse could fix it in a couple of minutes. None of it would have impressed anybody thirty years before, but people had forgotten how to change batteries or tighten loose screws, let alone put a nice twist on wool or get a pair of fancy socks to fit just right.

The demonstrations were popular and someone always had the light click on. "So that's why we weren't getting our rockets back in one piece. You mean if we fold the parachute like this..." or "Clean wheels

make that much difference? We were afraid our engine's motor was no good." The year brought the usual number of people tickled that Grandpa's train wasn't broken, as well as the usual number of people who thought Grandpa's train was going to finance a slew of Christmas presents, a vacation and maybe their retirement. That year, Bert didn't even throw any of them out the back door and Jesse didn't yell at anybody in Spanish.

About ten-thirty, Mrs. Talbot reappeared with the prize train and complained that she couldn't find the swap room, in spite of the great big signs and arrows. Actually, she appeared with Dr. Talbot and three kids, none of whom showed any hint of wanting to find the swap room. To be fair about that two point five, little Sarah happened to be backpack size, watching people, toys and lights from Daddy's back. Mrs. worked her way into the middle of the store and glared at the happy chatter around her as if she'd landed among aliens.

Dr. Talbot and the kids, on the other hand, nearly got lost in the rocketry corner. They barely escaped the gravity of all those shiny little models and orbited the tall display to get to the train section, where they hit a red signal and took siding by a friendly little blue engine with a British accent. The bigger kids, one of each, were impressed enough, but the backpack one was squealing and her dad kept saying "Wow!" as he watched the passenger train rattle through a couple of tunnels and the hidden turnaround. He was so busy admiring the blue guy that he sideswiped a six-year-old boy who was glued to the railing. "Oh, sorry."

"Huh?" The kid hadn't noticed. "Oh. 'S okay, Dr. Talbot. Cool, aren't they?"

"Yeah!" the boy's dad, who was the O-scale model of the HO-scale kid, agreed. "Hi, Dr. Talbot, do you guys have trains too?"

Dr. Talbot sighed and shot a regretful glance toward his wife. "Not...yet, Tyler. You?"

"We'd like to, soon as I graduate and we're not quite so broke." He looked down at his half-scale model. "Right, buddy? Until then, we go to club nights and learn all we can."

"Yeah, that's my Dad night during the week," the kid said. "We fixed it with Mom. It's a good thing we started like that. There was a whole lot to learn."

"Is there! I don't know much about wiring and such." Dr. Talbot leaned closer to the smiling engine, who is, we all agree, awfully good at putting new people at ease. "I was looking at the box, and it doesn't look that bad. Maybe we could figure it out."

"You'll want a beginner set, we found that out. No matter what size they are, a set has a loop of track, a transformer, maybe some scenery,

and enough train to play with at first. They say it isn't hard to set up what's in the box once you make up your mind what size you want, but we want to see what everybody is doing at the club because there are so many little things you can do and so many ways you can put stuff together."

"I see. So do you have to have all the scenery, or can it run plain?"

"Plain will work. A lot of people run them on a Christmas tree skirt or some fake snow. The all-year ones, usually you have more or less permanent tracks down. Can't do a layout in my dorm, of course. Six more months and I can work on getting a place where we can have fun building one. There's another thing, if you're renting, you build one you can move."

Junior had scooted off around the other side of the layout, so Dr. Talbot cleared his throat and lowered his voice. "By the way, what did you decide about grad school, if I may ask?"

"I told Ronnie I was only doing tax season and part time after, and I took the TA job offer. I mean...it's not great money, but it's here," Tyler said, glancing down at the kid. He didn't have to say what all of us heard: *and so is Junior*. There were places he could have gone to grad school that would have paid him more to be a teaching associate, but they were too far from Junior in towns so far away that they wouldn't be around for club nights or two weekends a month. "I haven't told Junior yet. He still thinks I'm going to Chicago or Indianapolis. I have my eye on a place here. Not too near his mom, but not too far away, so he can walk back and forth whenever he wants. She's always been pretty laid back about visitation, and I actually like the guy she's got around now, so as long as I'm not right by her kitchen window it's good."

"Excellent. By the way, you know the job gives you free tuition, but I hope you realize there's also free tuition for him since he's doing well in Meade Academy."

That brought Tyler up with a start. "It does? I mean...his mom and I agree on trying to swing the money for next year. It's the perfect place for him."

"Crummy as the pay for teaching associates is, they had to do something to get you all to sign on. Anyhow, the elementary ed majors always need practice students. Bright children and new teachers who haven't learned any of the interesting tricks yet." Dr. Talbot sighed happily. "We should sell tickets. It's a real education for both sides. Speaking of tickets, I let the club president know...um, this is kind of uncomfortable, but Tiffany has rather sticky fingers and we always go with her in stores because she often--"

Just then, there seemed to be a commotion at the counter, and it might have been louder had Bert not been refereeing. “First I win this...*thing*...then you tell me I didn’t?” Mrs. Talbot waved the foot-square box around so violently that the little diesel inside was making tiny little howls for help.

The lady beside her took the box out of her hand gently. “Yesterday, when we drew for the prizes, you glanced at the ticket, said ‘Talbot, that’s mine, I’ll take it right now!’ and ran down here to trade it in before they closed. I didn’t even have time to look at the ticket we’d drawn. You only showed me your half, and when I looked at it this morning it definitely doesn’t match even though you dropped the winning ticket in the punchbowl so the ink would smear.” The lady held out the ticket so an innocent passer-by could see it. “Sir, could you tell me what that name is?”

“Hm, the print is smeary. Looks like T...y something...”

“Tiffany!” shrieked Mrs. Talbot.

“No, it’s not Tiffany, it’s shorter than that and the y isn’t on the end. Ty something and a last name that starts with T. The phone number is okay.”

“Duh,” Trish slapped her forehead, picked up the phone at the counter and dialed.

The one that rang was still on Tyler Tolbert’s hip. He pulled it from his belt and stared at its screen with the train shop’s number. “Hello?”

“Do we really need the phone for this?” Beth said into it, and hung up.

“Uh...you mean...”

“Come here and get your train, Junior!” Bert growled, holding out the box. Junior bolted across the room and whipped it from his hands.

“Hey. You can swap that for anything else about the same price. That the one you want?”

Junior wasn’t much on talking right then. He nodded, squeezing the box against his chest. The engine was getting a little squished, but didn’t mind very much. Junior finally got a good head of steam back. “This is perfect! It’s just the right size so if we build a module we can take it with the club and it’ll fit wherever Dad goes.”

“Dad’s not going very far,” Tyler said. “I’ll be right here in town for grad school.”

Junior, still hugging the train, whipped his head up. “You...But Chicago?”

“Nah. There was a good job and some other important stuff here.”

The engine didn’t get a lot of attention for a little while, not that he or anyone else minded. “That looks so small,” Dr. Talbot said, easing up

to the counter. "Junior can handle it, no doubt, but let's say my kids wanted one. The size that blue one is...?"

"O gauge," Bert said. "Ya wanna basic set the kids can't mash to pieces too easy. That's a good one right there, steam or diesel. That gets you started, all you need for a quick wrap around the tree. If you'd rather get the blue guy, his set's good too, he doesn't have a lot of small breakables and you can always get more real-looking ones later on. They all use the same track."

The bigger kids boinged and bounced. The little one yelled "Tain! Want bloo tain!"

Dr. Talbot leaned down and pulled out the two big sets Bert had pointed out, one with a slightly nervous steam engine and one with a diesel who wasn't as concerned about a lot of small detail parts. "If we get this one, hmmm, we should be able to..."

His wife wrung her empty hands. "But but but the decor I had planned for the living room--a tree is simply too gaudy for a minimalist--"

"Was," he smiled, and kept looking at the two set boxes.

Mrs. Talbot stood empty-handed by the counter with her ticket stub that didn't match, looking sort of the way I did when my crew forgot about the wet leaves and smacked me face first into the end of track bumper. "Charles, you can't! What will everyone say?"

"Not as much as they'll say about you trying to skin a raffle and complain about the prize," Bert rumbled. The club president guffawed so hard I expected to see cinders come out her stack. Bert handed her a couple of napkins to wipe off the punch she had snorted onto her shirt.

"But...but..." Tiffany looked around at the mix. I counted professors, cops, a beautician, farmers, nurses, coal miners, retired athletes, a couple of full-size railroaders, a nun, Red the baker and the county emergency management guy, most with kids. Whatever she thought people who play with trains look like, she wasn't finding it. She made a little squeaky noise like her whistle was clogged.

"I dunno. This set, or that one?" Dr. Talbot asked the big kids. It took them almost five seconds to grab up the diesel set, much to the steam engine's relief.

"But we should get *him* for Sarah," the oldest one said, pointing at the sturdy little blue guy. "Do you have just him in a box, maybe with cars but not track and stuff?"

"We do--" Bert held up the box with just an engine, and six little hands lunged for it.

"Tain! Bloo tain!" yelled the backpack section, and she got him.

“So, that’ll be--” Trish rang up a nice sale and took the professor’s credit card.

Mrs. Talbot made more squeaky noises about minimalist decor and skittered out the front door. “You know,” Tyler said, and he pulled up for a minute the way people do when they’re trying to say things nice instead of straight out, “the whole single dad thing isn’t as bad as you’d think. Just sayin’.”

Bert had to duck back into the workshop so he wouldn’t laugh. If anybody happens to ask, those odd noises from the steam track across the street? That was just my air compressor sticking a little. As for the cinders Tiffany Talbot had to shake out of her sticky bleached hair, into each life a little soot must fall, and I just helped hers along.

6: Christmas Magic...Sort Of

If anybody in town doesn't like Bob Sobieski, I never met them. He worked at our big grocery chain store for forty years, from the time he got out of the Army until his sixty-second birthday last fall. When he retired all at once, people were afraid he'd broken down. "No," he said with his usual big grin on his last day, "I'm in good shape and quitting before I'm not!"

When he wasn't in earshot, Carol explained, to anyone who cared to know and didn't scare her, that the nice place to work he'd found when he came back from Vietnam had turned into a barely okay place and then a really not okay place after the management changed a couple of years back. She would know, because he'd been Carol's husband barely a month less than he'd been married to the produce department.

Well, he hadn't actually, but he said it felt that way when he had to work weekends or extra time in the evening. "At least the kids weren't little. Boy, the stuff I had to miss out on these last few years. Couldn't go to car shows, couldn't get around to putting up that train layout I wanted, couldn't go see the kids. Now we might have time for fun." That was his excuse to whip out pictures of their granddaughter, who was almost five, and her little brother, who was two. They were the first from Bob and Carol's three kids, and they lived a couple of hours away, not too far to drive up for a weekend. Not too far, that is, if the store hadn't always insisted that Bob needed to come in on his days off.

The store kept him busy, trying to squeeze the last couple of months out of him. In spite of all her shyness, Carol took over that October when Bob's mom needed to move out of her house into the senior apartments. Carol was sorting through a box of Bob's childhood when his mom pointed out an old catalog. "There's the train he always wanted."

"He still talks about getting one now and then, but he's never gotten around to it."

"I don't know why I never threw that catalog out. It always seemed to show up on the end table folded open to one page before his birthday and again around Christmas."

"That's Bob, always subtle."

"I wish I'd bought him a train. Back then, with no way to get around because I didn't drive...If Martin had lived, you know? So many things a boy is supposed to get to do with his father, and men weren't just leaving like they do now, so Bob was always the odd one out in Scouts or what

have you. Even my learning to drive--I'd never considered it. We lived in town. When we wanted to go anywhere else, of course back then Martin was expected to drive. When he didn't make it home from the mill that day, we missed him because he was Martin, but we missed him for all the little things too."

Carol picked up the catalog. "I remember when we got engaged, the first thing you asked me was whether I had my license."

"I bet it did seem strange, but no one should have to learn to drive at twenty-five with a stick shift Buick the size of a bus and an instructor who alternated yelling at me to go faster and screaming because I did." She smiled. "Which is why I'm moving. I'm getting to where people yell at me for not going faster, and they're screaming even if I don't."

"You're not nearly as bad a driver as I am. I've always liked living up on the rise where I can walk almost everywhere. The craft store is a little bit of a hike, so I've only been there once or twice. Bob brought me a pattern book from there during the open house."

"I've never been down there, believe it or not. While I was working I was too busy, and now I'm out of the notion. Trust me, Carol, go before you're eighty-two. It's like his trains. If we'd lived down here, I might have been able to take the hint, but I didn't see any places that sold trains in River Heights. I wouldn't have known how to set it up if we did find one, and my brother lived up in Michigan, so he couldn't help."

"Hmm," Carol said, flipping through the old catalog. "Which one..."

"Do you have to ask?" Bob's mom picked the booklet up and balanced it on edge. It fell open to a creased-up page, handled so much that the picture was crinkled and the type was half worn off. "Lay that out where he can find it and see what he says. You can always tell him the grandkids are hinting."

I don't mind most noises, since everything on me rattles or clanks. That year I was ready to make an exception, and most of my people were, too. People who made toys had new sound chips to make them say and do things, and they went way over their track and time with the idea. When that crop of toys hit store shelves, older toys and people alike grumbled about the way all of them made some loud, repeating noise bound to jangle nerves.

For instance, most people were hoping the Baby Stumbles fad would go away. Instead, the toy company had a TV show made with an obnoxious theme song so all the little girls wanted one of the tantrum dolls. The store had six, all with test buttons that weren't made to run for more than a thousand tries or so. Every time Trish got them all turned off, some helpful soul re-armed them when her back was turned. She'd

jump out of her skin when a little girl grabbed Stumbles and she went off. If the little girl held and rocked the doll, she'd quit screaming, but half the time the customers got scared and dropped her and she'd keep howling until Trish or Jesse picked her up.

Another company came out with stuffed animals that were supposed to teach one thing or another. The display only had Chunky Monkey working. Even though he had a whole bunch of songs, all we ever heard out of his display was the test part of his TV show theme: "Happy monkey, happy monkey, happy happy Chunky Monkey!" every time a kid got near the motion detector.

There was even a guilty party on the rail side, because some company made a knock-off of the blue British steamer to teach things. We didn't even get to hear one to ten, just "Learning Train, Learning Train, all aboard the Learning Train!" Learning Train was as embarrassed and annoyed as anybody. She'd have liked to show off the count to a hundred song or the names of all the states one. No, her test chip only had that first line on it, and she was stuck singing it all the time, just like Bump and Go Model A couldn't do anything but sing the alphabet song and ah-oo-gah as he bumped and went. After a couple of weeks of noise around the shop, people walking along Claytor Street kept finding cheap test batteries on the sidewalk. Honest, if I had thumbs I'd have been helping rip them out of the test packs too.

One afternoon not long before Christmas, while everything left on the toy side was either screaming or singing the same song for the forty-fifth time that day, a young man brought in a shiny postwar set his family didn't want any more. He swapped it for part payment on one of the new, fully loaded sets. Now, if Bert had listened to the metal better, he might have been forewarned, and if he hadn't been wanting to get out of the front of the store so he didn't have to listen to the model Ford chugging around singing his ABCs, he might have taken his time to look the 2018 over, but instead, he glanced at the shiny cars and pretty engine wrapped in kitchen plastic and gave the guy a good deal. The guy who brought them in left town happy with his new set.

Bert had a snicker or two about the deal he'd struck, right up until he unwrapped 2018 and put her on the test track. In spite of looking shiny and nice, some of her pieces tried to take off. When that happened, Bert blew off a bunch of steam about punching the guy's ticket. I don't think our railroad goes there. People out front heard him, and it might have been bad if they weren't glad he drowned out the Chunky Monkey song.

Whoever had tried to look at 2018's motor had bent the big pin that held the shell, motor and all together. Half of it was stuck in place with a

bent end folded back along the frame out of sight. The motor brushes were caked into their wells. It goes without saying that nobody had cleaned her wheels since she first went on a track. In the pin-bending process, the not so good home mechanic had managed to tear loose a couple of wires that were important unless she wanted to stand around watching everything else run. Better still, whoever had tried to oil around had used thick sticky grease that smelled like skinned knee ointment. The unknown hostler had laid it on wherever it looked like there was a moving part. Late in the inept repair job, most likely right after he tried to pull the pin and broke off the end, the nameless guy had stuck the shell back on with a wad of poster mounting goo, wrapped her in just enough plastic to discourage anybody from looking too closely at her, put the whole set in the shoebox and cut his losses by trading it in. Bert stuck the "Needs Pin" note on the box, put all the parts in it and put it on the rebuild shelf, hoping that after Christmas when things were slow either Trish or Jesse would get bored and work on it.

Carol bought presents for the grands, who were easy, the grown kids, who were even easier, and her mother-in-law, who was a cinch because all she wanted was a gift certificate for Lila's beauty parlor. A week before Christmas, with the send-away presents already at the kids' places, she went out trying to find a nice gift for Bob. He had been retired for two weeks by then, and when she asked him what he wanted, he always said "I got it already. I'm home!" and went back to whatever he was painting or fixing.

Until a week before the big day, there wasn't a lot of time to discuss it because, for the first time, they had a chance to go to things like the granddaughter's kindergarten play and the lodge's Christmas party. They even got to help at the Union Church basket-packing, which finished that Wednesday morning. Once that happened, the last few days seemed oddly empty. Most people claimed they had shopped all they wanted, the stores looked picked over, and she still had nothing for Bob. When she insisted on ideas, he thought a minute. "I could use a new pair of slippers. This year I might be around home enough to want them."

She got the slippers and a few other little things she knew he'd like, but two days before Christmas he still didn't have a big present. That's when, in the course of looking for her crochet pattern book, she ran into the catalog. It had been on the end table in the living room, but Bob hadn't noticed it while he was still working and hadn't had time to notice it since he retired.

She looked at it more closely than before. The back was stamped *Keylor's Sunshine SuperGo, 844 Lee Street, Jensen*. She lived near the

top of Lee, so she got up and looked down the hill. That address was now a big convenience store, not the corner gas station she'd grown up around. When she thought back, it had closed when she was in junior high. "Too bad," she said to the cat and the room in general. "That would have been a fun thing to get him."

She was edging a crocheted Christmas ornament when she glanced over at the catalog again. That logo looked familiar. It wasn't the gas station's, but the model train company's; hadn't she seen it lately? She flipped over the pattern book Bob had brought her, which still had the price tag: *Jensen Train and Hobby/Bert Reed Restorations/Trish's Yarn Barn*.

Bob and his stepladder came in the front door. "I gotta run after another string of lights. Those cheap old ones on the big tree out front are shot. Need anything from uptown?"

"Umm...milk if you go by there, and if they have any of the good rye bread. While you're doing that, I might take a walk."

"Okay. I'll bring a chicken home for dinner." He trotted out the front door--he wasn't kidding about the "run" part--and she let him get around the corner.

"They might think I'm crazy," she told the cat, "but I've got to ask."

She only had a few blocks to walk in the mild, windy afternoon, past her old workplace at the school office, by the bed and breakfast, the woolen mill and the historical society. The wisp of coal smoke on the air made her whip around to look because, like a lot of people in town, she had never really noticed the railroad museum or us steam engines. "I didn't know they still had big ones like this, either!" We were part of the landscape, like the toy half of the hobby shop she hadn't noticed till that morning because she had always focused on the craft side. When she put her hand on the door, she paused to look at the logo in the window, the one that had tucked itself into the back of her mind.

"Hi. What can we do for you?"

It wasn't a voice she was used to; Trish had been out front when Carol went in, not the thin man with the thin accent. "No Trish today?"

"They went up to Junior's girlfriend's house for the afternoon. Anything I can do for you? I don't know a whole lot about yarn and all, but I'm learning."

"Um, I'm not here for the yarn, it's..." She fumbled in her purse and pulled out the well-worn catalog. "Do you have...I mean...does anyone still make something like this?"

When Jesse first got to town, he'd have come up with a not at all nice answer to a woman who asked that while she was standing in front of a wall of the same kind of model trains. What saved her was that Jesse

and Delia's kids had gone to the school where Carol used to work, and they all knew how airheaded she was. He looked at the catalog politely. "It's surprising how much has been remade these days. Do you see anything you like?"

His gesture woke her eyes up to the shelves and shelves of trains, most of them bright-colored diesels, and her mind couldn't sort through them, let alone hear the little *Pick me! No, me!* "Um. This one here." She let the catalog open to the worn-out page. "I thought...if you had that one, you know?"

Jesse took a look. "Yep. They started making that exact set again with a lot more bells and whistles. I mean literally, bells and whistles and talking crewmen and all the fun stuff. Here, I have--" he turned around, looked the shelves up and down and frowned. "Huh! Must have moved it. Maybe it's...no, that's a Chessie engine...uh, how about over...nope... oh, come on, we had four of them at the beginning of the month. Let me look here. We sold all of them? *All* of them? Lemme call around." All of the local train shop owners know one another. It didn't take Jesse that long to find out everybody else around had sold their limited stock, too.

Carol wilted even more than usual. "Oh, dear, well, thank you. I should have thought of it sooner." She started to reach for the catalog, but Jesse put up a hand.

"Wait a minute. How about this exact train, made back then? I know we have this whole set from 1956 back in the workshop. It was a Christmas tree train, barely run. The cars don't have boxes, but we can make it look nice. If it won't have all the stuff on it, he won't have as much to learn, and it'll be about half the price. Lemme show you the cars. Just to make sure, I'll take the catalog with me and match them up."

Carol had the luck to get to the store during the only lull in Jesse's day. All morning, the people who had said they were done shopping the week before had either been blowing smoke or had decided they hadn't got enough at the last minute. Nobody had come in for a good half-hour, so he figured it was safe to go behind the curtain into the workshop and warehouse. "One boxcar, got it, there's the gondola, there's the caboose, here's the tender. Now where'd the engine...maybe Bert put it away. Oh, right, it needed brushes." (Jesse talks to himself a lot. It's his excuse when he's talking to us.) He looked on the shelves over the workbench where finished repairs went, causing a lot of sleepy stirrings of small wheels and little voices. "Aw right, 2018, where are ya?"

Surely he didn't hear the irritated little creak, or did he? He leaned down, moved the trash can, pulled out the stack of stuff waiting for serious work and found her in pieces in a plastic shoebox. Thanks to the

container, he could see that all of the major parts were intact and present, but there was a sticky note in Bert's handwriting: NEEDS NEW PIN. He opened the box and began to lay out the parts so he could get enough together to show Carol, and that's when he knew that some washouts are deeper than they look and 2018 was one of them.

"Ayyyyyy de mi." Jesse thought fast and cradled the cars to his chest. When he swept the curtain aside, Carol was still there, rooted to her spot. "Here's his catalog, and here are the cars." He set them down one by one, showing her that they matched. "This set didn't have a transformer or track with it when the owner brought it in, but we always have those in stock from newer set break-ups. You can get the new easier to use track and be sure of the power that way."

"But doesn't it need an engine?"

"Sure, and we have it. Standard policy, everything that comes in gets cleaning and minor repairs, and it's on the workbench. It's really nice, and if you come by tomorrow about this time I should have it ready and you can decide. We're closing at four, but it's not going home with anybody else since we know you probably want it." He gave Carol his best harmless grin.

"I guess that's the best we can do. I'll make an excuse to be here tomorrow afternoon." She tucked the catalog into her purse and crept back toward home. Jesse watched her go, looked around the shop and squeaked, to no one in particular, "Help!"

"Bored" was not a word Jesse got to use the rest of the day. Carol couldn't have been out of sight before the door alarm started going off like a cuckoo clock at noon. Every time he tried to get back to look for a replacement pin, somebody else was out front, and in the ten seconds it took him to get from the workbench to the register at least one customer would be popping off and pounding on the countertop so hard that at least one of the toys went off. When one guy tried to order an oil filter and a gallon of antifreeze because he thought the car parts store next door used the same counter, and he threatened to pitch Jesse through the front window if he didn't pony up, Jesse thought about throwing *him* through the front window, and most of the customers waiting behind him wouldn't have minded.

It wasn't even the strangest request that day; a very nice older lady politely ordered a meatball sub and chips and was disappointed to find she needed to go around the corner to the sub shop. Another man tried to buy a gift certificate to the corner shoe store and wouldn't believe they weren't the same business because the buildings were shoved together. Baby Stumbles got dropped and wouldn't stop screaming because her

test button stuck. Chunky Monkey couldn't stop singing the same single line because kids kept bumping into the display. The Ford ran into people, sang the alphabet and honked his ah-oo-gah horn. A pint jar of marbles tipped over, thanks to a young man in baggy clothes bumping it. He got embarrassed and ran off, to everyone's relief, then one of the customers from the knitting side went off at Jesse for the glass on the floor even before he could get around the counter to it. He slid on the marbles, who were as disgusted as anybody, and landed on his tailbone just as Bert walked in.

"What the scrap is going on in here?" Bert rumbled, and since he sounds like a Dash firing up, the people settled down enough to try to give him an earful. "We got no sammiches. We got no car parts. I got no shoes for sale, so go look next door. Quit shaking the loudmouth kid doll and don't give me no rust about Jesse because he's trying to clean that pile of glass up and you almost walked through it. He's not a Mexican, he's from Pittsburgh and he's Cuban and he's half owner of this place and got blown up for this country so SETTLE!"

You'd think people would walk out. Instead, it was like our big Baldwin switcher giving a stuck cut of bad-order cars a good hard shove. When Trish got behind the register, the customers lined right up and bought almost everything the hobby shop actually had, including the screaming Baby Stumbles. Bert unplugged the test button, then showed the customer where the OFF switch and battery box were.

Jesse thought about stomping on the Ford, but the Model A was so cheerful he couldn't. "I guess it is the day before Christmas Eve," he sighed as they all tried to clean up after the last few customers. "Them two getting married?"

Bert took a big swig of his soda. "Tomorrow at two. You and Delia are invited."

"Two...on Christmas Eve? Oh, right, Ashley's on afternoon and it's not like cops get holidays off. Uhhh...the store?"

"I guess we could close early. Most of town's closing at noon except for the flower shop. Be hard to get anybody here on short notice."

"Well, see, before things went nuts I made this sale..."

All three of them blew off a bunch of steam, then gathered around the little engine laid out on the workbench. "How hard can it be with the three of us on it? Yeah, the pin's shot, so where did I put the other ones?" Bert flicked through the little parts bins.

It's amazing how a two-inch skinny piece of steel can lose itself even if it doesn't mean to. While Trish took over going through parts bins, Bert and Jesse tried to get everything else on 2018 clean, put together and properly lined before Jesse had to leave to help set up his

church for the Christmas Eve service and Bert and Trish had to make a last-minute clothes run for the next day. That steamed Bert up even more than scraping out the brush wells packed full of grease. "But I got a suit that fits!"

"Your old dress uniform that's been in the attic forever does not qualify as a suit you can wear to the wedding. Be glad they don't expect you to rent a tux."

"Can't I wear my ribbon shirt? It's black and fancy."

Jesse snorted. "Delia wouldn't mind, but Ashley might not get it. I'd loan ya a suit if you wouldn't look like the Incredible Hulk busting out. Hit up Mel and see if you can borrow one. Aaah rusty busted bolts! These are the wrong brush springs."

Trish balanced on the edge of the workbench and squinted down. "They can't--Oops, yes they can. These are in the wrong drawers and so are those. I bet the work-study kid tried to put them away, and he can't read real well. There's a box of them up here. Aw great, this should be in the bottom cabinets, and who knows why he put the big jars of superfine Christmas glitter away up here instead of down THERE..."

The crash when she fell on top of Bert and Jesse must have been impressive, because she set off the Ford parked by the curtain. He tooled around slowly on his fading batteries saying "Ah-oo-gah?" as if he wasn't sure about it.

Delia came through the back door, waded into the pile like a referee sorting out who had the football and picked out Jesse. He wasn't hurt that much, only dusted with stray glitter and a little squished. A brush spring and a coupler fell out of his hair. "What's with all the glitter and parts?"

"Ow. They were up there on the top shelf, I wanted them down here, and now they are. Ow." Trish got up, rubbing her wrist and flexing her fingers. "Bert, you okay?"

"I'm sparkly." He was, incredibly so, in a powdery red, white and green way, and so was the greasy engine. Bert stood up by hanging on the tipped-over chair and hopping on one foot. "I broke my leg. No, I mean I broke the fake one." He shook out the front of his shirt and removed a smokebox door. "Oh, good, that's not hers."

"Nah, hers is over here. I didn't break it when I fell on it." Trish set it on the counter among the other parts, then thought better of it and put it in her purse. "After all this, no way am I getting that mixed up or lost."

"I ain't touching that till morning," Bert grumped, hopping up on his original issue foot. "While I borrow a suit off Mel I'll see if he can fix my leg or loan me his spare. Till then, gimme the duct tape. I know there's a chunk of that busted chair here someplace."

Many stores in town closed at noon on Christmas Eve. For sure all the ones where Bob tried to shop had. He had a couple of small items for Carol, but no single big goodie by the time the east end of town closed. Even if the malls were open until five or six, the idea of driving all that way to face those crowds made his grates stop up. “Darn, I should have tried the hobby shop. Wonder if they’re still open?” he said to his car. “Seemed like a nice place when I was in there last month.”

When he opened the door, he wondered at first whether anyone was there. A little Ford wobbled up to him, honked and toddled off to run into the curtain behind the counter, still singing the alphabet song. “Hello,” he said carefully, and Chunky Monkey started to sing.

“Be glad the last Baby Stumbles sold already,” said the big man who limped out from behind the curtain. “What can I do for ya?”

“I was...interested in some really soft fine yarn, something unusual and fluffy, and that set of bamboo crochet hooks.” It was hard to avoid staring at the man’s sparkly black hair.

“Ah. The hooks I could do, but lemme get Trish to show you the yarn cause I ain’t great with all the fancy kinds. Trish!” The big man limped back behind the curtain, giving Bob a glimpse of two people down on their hands and knees picking small objects from the floor.

She got up and came out, one hand in a wrist brace. She was also sparkling faintly in the Christmas lights. “Good choice on the hooks. That’s a really nice set. Now, what price range did you have in mind on the yarn? We don’t have a ton of our top-shelf stuff left, but I do have a single fair-sized skein of this kind, and I know she likes aqua. This cowl pattern comes with it; they’re very popular.” She went on as brightly as if she didn’t have the front end of a steam engine imprinted in bruise purple on her cheek.

Behind the curtain, moans of dismay mixed with snarls. Whatever was being worked on was all kinds of wrong, put together sideways and running backwards, and should have gone to scrap and melted. The furnace took the hint and kicked on, warm air shot up through a floor grate, and a fine mist sparkled out of it, calling Bob’s eyes to the shelves of trains infested with red, white and green Christmas magic.

The door dinged, the little car honked, and a tall man strode in with a metal leg over his shoulder. “Yo, Bert!” He threw the leg to the curtain. A thick arm shot out to grab it.

“Thanks, Mel.” The big black-haired sparkly man hopped out, pants hiked up on one side, tossing aside a plain pylon and buckling on the leg. He gave Bob a sheepish grin as he maneuvered back to the hidden mayhem. “Oh. Hi. Forgot you were there.”

"It's not usually like this," the tall man, turning to go, said to Bob. "Sometimes it's worse. Hey! Merry Christmas, you guys."

The curtain yelled "Merry Christmas, Mel" and went right back to swearing. Something was supposed to get where it wasn't going, and something else wouldn't fit and caused a great squeaking of styrofoam. While Bob tried to picture Carol with the yarn sliding through her fingers or wearing what she'd made, one ear caught the unfortunate entertainment, and all he could imagine was Carol cussing because her hook didn't fit the yarn.

The big guy stalked out, not limping that much any more, to grab a roll of clear gift wrap leaning on the wall. He bumped into the Chunky Monkey display. "Happy happy--" the display model began. Without missing a step, the big man yanked it off the display, went to the door and flung it. It might have been Bob's imagination that he heard "Chunky MonKEEE!"

"S all yours, kid, Merry Christmas!" Bert yelled after it, shut the door and flipped the sign to *Closed*. "Kid's got a good field on him if he can hit."

The other sparkly man set a box on the counter and steadied it while Bert laid on the plastic and taped it down. "There any bows left?"

"Second drawer, left side under the counter," Trish said. "I can gift wrap this too, Bob, since Bert already has the stuff over here. Or rather, I can get Jesse to do it while I freshen up. I'll need to put some cover-up make-up on this cheek and it's going to be slow one-handed."

Jesse switched to holding the yarn box for her while she arranged the skeins, then took over with the wrapping paper and bow. The other project was in front of Bob, where he couldn't help looking down at it: a very old catalog open to a well-worn page. The very same train set was laid out in the box with it. The original manual was also in the box, stamped on the cover with *Keylor Sunshine SuperGo, Authorized Dealer*. "Somebody's lucky this year."

"You have no idea," Jesse said. "And Mel's right, it's not always like this. It's usually worse. But we don't bite. At least, I don't. My upper plate won't take it."

That made as much sense as anything else he'd seen in the last five minutes. Oddly enough, it didn't worry him. He thought there might have been some benefit to working for crazy bosses. "I'll have to come back after Christmas. You won't believe this, but when I was a kid a boy in my class brought his granddad Keylor's leftover train catalogs and passed them out. I carried that thing around and left it out with that same page up every time it looked like I might get a present, because I wanted

that set so bad I could taste it. Never got a train of any kind, let alone that one. Oh, wow, they still have catalogs? Put that with my other stuff.”

“Aah, take it. Next birthday or whatever, crease that one open to what you like and leave it and I bet your wife will take the bait.” The little Ford ran into Jesse’s leg and honked. He picked it up and looked into the friendly little face. “You guys got grandkids. Take this display model. His batteries are about shot. Oh, and if I’s you, to go with this? The flower shop’s still open and I bet she’d go for a corsage.”

When Bob went out the front door, Trish was already dialing his home phone. “No, stay there if you still want it. He just left. Bert, hurry!” Jesse doused the shop lights and all of them flew out the back door to their cars. “Jess! Tell the kids we won’t be but about two minutes out of the way. We have a delivery to make.”

A little later, in a candlelit church, Ashley’s dad handed her over to Bert and Trish’s son. The bride wore her uniform, because she was heading out on duty in half an hour, and the groom wore his Reserve dress blues. “Told ya,” Bert grouched in Trish’s ear.

“Just don’t mess up Mel’s suit or he may take your leg back. Good thing you’re about the same size.” She rubbed her cheek with the wrist brace as the bride’s brother lined up a picture.

“Whoa,” the photographer breathed. “You guys should see the orbs in these pictures! That’s supposed to mean really cool things and good luck and stuff.” He turned the camera so they could see the little balls of light reflecting from Bert and Trish’s hair. “I gotta go post these on the ghost fan board.”

After he was out of earshot, the bride dissolved into giggles. “Are you two going to tell him what happened?”

Trish shook her head. “Not a word. Somebody has to get some fun out of it. Hey, next time you two get married, give us some warning. We had to close the store early, smuggle a train set past the guy who was getting it and drop it off at his house before he could get home by sending him to the flower shop and driving like maniacs. Why the big hurry?”

“Project we wanted to start on,” their son said, and shared a grin with his wife.

Bert is good at adding when people are about to multiply. “Ah, great. Next Christmas I’m gonna leave the batteries in Baby Stumbles and stuff her under your tree.”

The spare bedroom at Bob and Carol’s house is a layout now. The old catalog is framed, open to the page, above the shelf where shiny 2018

lives. She's happy, Bob is happy, and Carol goes to the hobby shop with him now. The smiling Ford sits on the headboard of the bed, ready for visiting grandkids. He can sing a lot more than the alphabet song. Just the same, Carol says they leave the batteries out when the kids aren't around in case they leak.

Christmas is coming again, and Carol was about to leave a yarn shop flyer on Bob's end of the couch yesterday when she spotted the new train catalog on her end table, paper-clipped open to a new set with bells and whistles. There's no doubt Bob will like it. There's also no doubt that he will always like 2018 best because, he says, in just the right light she sparkles with Christmas magic.

I won't tell him if you won't.

7: Special Instructions

In honor of Noah, who said Yes when the judge asked.

If the railroad was all flat and straight, we only wanted to run one train on it at a time, and nobody wanted to stop anywhere along the line, we wouldn't need Special Instructions. The JB&S main isn't straight, and really isn't flat, and it has switches stuck in here and there and old industries that don't use their sidings any more all mixed in with new ones that do.

Once upon a time, we figured out who held the main and who took siding by a timetable. These days, there aren't many times in the timetable, only pages and pages of "if you're here, do this" and "if you're there, for the love of all steam don't do that." It has directions for what to do if you come down Salt Creek with a loaded train, you poor soul, directions for using me in helper service so we don't bust anything, and places where you shouldn't run any of us heavy locos. Special instructions are for the things that make this railroad unique, which is the cleanest word my people use to describe it.

On one steam morning that December, Ray popped out of the museum onto the platform, every hair in place and every piece of brass polished. "Good morning, Alice." If he ever feels silly about saying that out loud, it doesn't show. "Special instructions for our first run today."

Bobby leaned out of my cab. "Wedding on board, proposal...?"

"Not exactly. It has to do with the real McCoy's."

That's a good railroad term, you know. Many years ago, a railroad fireman invented a mechanical oiler that kept things from overheating in a dangerous way. There were a lot of imitations, so a fireman about to take over an engine with an automatic oiler often said "Now do I need to watch that like a hawk, or is it the real McCoy?" To be a real McCoy was to be made solid and working right.

Our McCoy's were a foster family, and Mr. and Mrs. were (and are) railfans. If there was steam when a new foster kid came to their house, they had an excuse for an outing. Some liked it, some didn't, some stayed a day or two, some a long time like Ronnie. Dennis Wilkins...well, Dennis was back and forth a lot, mostly forth with them because not a whole lot of other people could stand him.

His dad wasn't around and his mother, who had been at the university, had tried to give him up when he was just outshopped. The county told her to think it over for a while, as if she hadn't thought about it for months. She was awfully sick, in and out of hospitals a lot, and

every time the county sent him back to her she begged the foster people to find him a family who could take care of him all the time. Some of the foster people saw her point and tried, but this family didn't like this about baby Dennis and that family didn't think much of that. Mom Wilkins had a scary virus that sometimes gets passed along to little units, and people said all kinds of ignorant things even though there wasn't any hint that Dennis had it.

Even when he grew big enough that Dr. Doug was sure he didn't have the virus, the foster families all seemed to be used to regular kids, and Dennis wasn't a regular kid. When he got bored, he tried to make parachutes out of bedsheets or made things blow up because he liked loud noises. In school, he'd do just enough to get by and not get yelled at so he could go outside and use a weather balloon for an exercise ball or do backflips off the picnic tables in the park. He would do anything, even try to be good, to come down to the yards and watch us and the big riverboats. It would have helped if any of the foster people had caught on to that.

They didn't. Some fed him medicine that kept him quiet but made him stiff and miserable until Dr. Doug told them it was hurting his heart (I don't think he meant the motor in Dennis' chest.) Some took him to people that talked to him about his behavior, and the behaving people told the fosters to be glad he was bright and give him chores to do that would use his mind, but that never worked either. Sooner or later, every foster family got tired of his being bored and sent him off to the McCoys.

He wasn't bored there. They had seven other kids, some homemade and some sent to them, not that they ever seemed to remember who was which. Even when he had to finish a grade in his old school, teachers always knew when Dennis had gone to the McCoys' because he showed up with his homework done, behaved himself and didn't sneak off to the music room.

Mrs. McCoy was a sound engineer and Mr. McCoy was a guitar player with a country band. They knew a musician when they saw one, so they and their kids and grandchildren let him play with the instruments that were scattered around the house. That made him happier than anything else. During one of his six-month stays at their house, Mrs. tried to teach him to play a flute, only to find he couldn't hear it very well. That called for a trip to see Dr. Doug, who looked in his ears and said "No wonder!" He excavated some cotton, a whole bunch of rock-hard wax and a cherry pit. "Okay, you tried to swab the wax out, but a cherry seed?"

"Mrs. McCoy's dad, Doc John, told me if I didn't keep my ears clean stuff would grow in there," Dennis shrugged. "It didn't work. Does it usually?"

"Not usually. Doc John kids a lot. It's better to root seeds in regular dirt."

"Yeah, but I can't always take stuff I plant with me. My ears are kinda attached so I won't forget to pack them when I go."

Doug is good at reading between the ties. "You like planting things?"

"Planting things, and climbing on stuff, and playing the recorder, and trying to play the guitar but it doesn't work too well yet, and riding horses at Nain Kate's farm, and Ronnie says when I get big enough I can hang around the trains with him."

"I would think! Do you like little trains too, or just the big ones?"

"Wish I could have little ones! Any size, but mostly steam engines. Last year, I was supposed to get to ride on my birthday, but..." Dennis let himself sigh. "I was back with Mom for a while, then she got sick again. I was out at Belltown with the Forresters for three or four months and they don't do trains, or much else besides TV and movies. Oh, well."

"No ear gardens, Dennis. You'll need those ears to tune things. No nose gardens, either! You can go grab your prize from the box out front. Tell Stacy you were awfully good instead of good and awful, so you get one off the top shelf." Dennis hopped off the table and scooted around the corner. "Missed a train ride. On his birthday, no less! I never."

If Doug thought that was a load of ballast, so did the tiny little Z-scale locomotive in her case on his desk. So did Mrs. McCoy, who shook her head. "Douglas, I swear..."

"I know they don't want people taking in kids just to see who has the most, but that's not what you're about at all."

"Ronnie and Eli are out on their own and married, for goodness' sake. Mary Kate's been at college, Alex is just starting and they're both in the dorms, so it isn't as if we're overloaded! This year, that kid gets a train ride. The rest of the gang is as ticked as we are when he has to leave. The state keeps sending him to his mother, who tells them every single time she can't take care of him and wants him to live with us. If we'd done an under the table adoption it would have been taken care of years ago. I hate to use the word 'dumb' but it is."

I know why she doesn't like that word. Her oldest one, Eli, has a kind of autism. It isn't too bad, but when he was in school people called him dumb and he really, really isn't. They had Ronnie with them all the time after he was ten or so, and he's more bothered with autism than Eli, but he isn't dumb either. They also went and got Julie, who has Down

syndrome and a big smile. She's grown up but small, and she loves to sit on Ronnie's lap in my cab and blow the whistle when it's time for everybody to get on the train. If she doesn't think very fast, she's kind and likes us all. The crowd in that house, all kinds of colors and shapes, call themselves Real McCoys and stick together. "Dumb" isn't a word they use a lot.

Doug peeked around the corner and pulled his head back. "Good. He found the cars I put in there when you made his appointment. He eyes up little Zelda here every time he comes in, even though he likes the bigger scales because he can work on them. I asked him why and he said if he had a Zelda he could take the whole set with him in his suitcase."

"Hm," said Mrs. McCoy. She's an engineer and can take hints from machinery. The question was how to fix that particular bend in the rails.

Dennis got to stay with the McCoys all that summer and into the fall. The county moved kids every six months, so he knew he'd be leaving right before his birthday. He was extra careful to have all the fun he could while he was at their house on the hill, on the edge of River Heights right up against Nain's farm. Everyone in Wales, where she was from, called grandmas that, and she was Mrs. McCoy's mother. One day she picked him up from school and they went to feed the horses and ride. "I heard about the cherry seed in your ear," she said. "Why don't you plant a tree or several up here by the tracks?"

"I won't always be allowed to be here, Nain. Mom doesn't mind, but when I'm staying with other people the county does."

"Ah, but you won't always be eight-almost-nine. One day you can choose a family, and when you do, I hope you choose ours. By then, what you plant should be blooming. I'd like to give it a head start."

When you say a thing like that out loud, everybody who hears takes notice whether you know it or not. Nain Kate has a way of knowing, and talks to us on purpose, and we all agreed that Dennis needed a train ride on his birthday.

A couple of weeks before that, the lady from the county came around to ask Dennis whether he would mind staying at the McCoys' for an extra few days instead of going on to the next place. He couldn't believe his luck; his stuff had been packed up and stashed under his bed for a week, just in case, even though he knew anything he left at the McCoys' would be there when he got back. His birthday would be on a steam day, the Saturday after Thanksgiving. When Mrs. McCoy asked him whether it would be all right for her to come up with a birthday surprise, he couldn't imagine why she thought she should ask, but he was glad she did.

Thanksgiving at Great-Aunt Shelly's was fun and he got into arguments with two of his foster cousins, then played paintball in the yard with them. Everybody ate too much, argued and watched football. In the morning, everybody young enough to be home piled into the van and they drove down to meet Ronnie in the rail yard so Dennis could ride the train on his birthday.

Most of the time, Ronnie took care of whichever of us was in steam until the regular crew got there. That day, he excused himself a little early to go clean up in the locker room. "Special instructions, Alice," he said. "Riding the varnish today." My whole train was decked out with McCoys and their relatives, trying to hide here and there in the cars. Nain's husband, Doc John, gave up being a brakeman and came up to the front car with the book about the magic train and the jingle bells. Mr. McCoy's parents hid in the second car and sneaked glances around the edges of the door. You'd think Dennis would have noticed. All he cared was that it was his birthday and he got to ride a steam-hauled train.

Doc read the book. When everyone checked to see that their bells jingled, Dennis' eyes bugged out. "Hey, mine works too!" He held it up to his cherry pit ear to be sure. "Yep, even that side. Best birthday ever!"

The ride went up around the balloon track, where we usually go right on around and come back to the yards. Bobby, my engineer on the run, reminded me of the special instructions. We stopped at the old concrete platform where the miners used to get on and off at Prosperity Mine. Nain Kate and Judge Hunter were waiting, the judge with papers in hand. A couple of people wondered whether they were about to get arrested, but when only the McCoys got out, the rest of the train relaxed and had their hot chocolate while the train was sitting still.

Dennis stood in the doorway of the front car, looking a little confused. Nain called out "Come on, then, boy, it's cold here and I'm an old woman!" He couldn't refuse her, so he bounced off and stood by her while Mr. and Mrs. followed.

Judge Hunter had seen him a few times with his mom, so she wasn't scary either. "Young man," she said, as sternly as she could manage, which wasn't very, "I understand you're nine years old today. Now, the law thinks a child is a child and can be ordered here and there. I have the impression of you as a young man who knows what he wants, and these people would like to ask you--" She motioned to the herd of McCoys.

They all yelled "Wanna be a real McCoy?"

I imagine there was a "yes" in there somewhere, because Judge Hunter signed the papers and handed them to the McCoys. Dennis got hugged and his cousins who weren't going to be foster any more

smacked him and his birth mother squeezed him, really carefully because she was mighty thin. "Mom...it's okay with you?"

"Oh honey, yes. I'd like to be able to take care of you, but you know I can't. I've prayed for this so hard ever since we got to know Kitty and J.J."

"But will I be allowed to see you? The Ridgeways didn't want me to, and the ones up at Bellton were kind of..."

"I'd like to see anyone try to stop her now," Nain interrupted. She was carrying a shovel. For a minute we thought she might offer to use it on the folks out at Bellton. We all realized she also had a cherry sapling with a big root ball. "Your birth mother's your mother, and so's Kitty, and a boy can always use two, or several. Now we're holding up the train, boy. Near did I break myself digging the clinkered hole for this, so the least you can do is plant the sooty thing!" She stuffed the tree into one of his hands and the shovel into the other and pointed him to a spot close to the platform. "You'll have to watch it this winter; it's late in the year to set it in, but it's the bigger size and it should take. I wouldn't look for much fruit on it for a year or two. After that you'll have cherries if the birds leave you any."

Dennis had the tree in the ground in a flash, then he looked up and down the line of bushes and young trees. "Hey...aren't those all..."

"The ones the rest of the grandchildren planted? Of course they are. Now run back and let the train be on its way, then. You'll be working on the blasted thing before I know it."

"Nain Kate gets a little jealous of the trains," Doc John said as they all got on. "So, was that a decent birthday?"

Dennis had trouble catching his breath at the size of it. "It was. I never had a party before and I sure never got a family for a present!"

"Oh, that was just your train ride. You have to have a party like everyone else does."

That scared Dennis a little, because he'd been to McCoy birthday parties that were barely controlled riots. Everybody kept his first one to a dull roar. He walked in to find a cake, ice cream and presents. The last one Doc John--"might as well call me Grandpa, hm?"--handed to him was a big flat box. When he ripped off the paper, he found a train set. It wasn't little like Zelda. It was one of the big O-gauge ones like the museum's, with a steam engine who looked a lot like our 97. He stared at it for a long while. "This is...one of the big...I mean, this is...wow, but how can I, I mean, when I have to pack up..."

Mrs. McCoy leaned over the table. "Have to what? You're not going anywhere soon. You can keep it in your room, or you can take it down to the basement with the rest of them. While you're at it, you ought

to think of something to call us, because this Mrs. McCoy business seems awfully stuffy when you're going to be ordering me around for the rest of your life."

Even the engine thought that was funny. After awhile, Dennis did take her and the whole new gang down to the basement where there was a big disorganized mass of track in a couple of sizes. Mom even came down the stairs with him, since she had help to carry her oxygen tank. She sat on the steps and watched him play with the trains, wiping her eyes now and then. Everybody else left them alone for a bit. "Kitty's right, you know. You need to call her Mom now."

"I...couldn't. I mean, you're Mom."

"Then think of another name. You don't have a problem calling J.J. 'Dad.'"

Nain's thin old mother eased down the steps. "There's old I am and my knees are shot. Somebody needs to put a stair chair in this place. I'm about to go home for the night. Give me a hug before, *cariad*, it's not every day I get a new great-grandson big enough to stand up."

Cariad was another good word because it meant Great-grandma loved him. "Nain-mom, what's that word you call a mom in Welsh?"

"Mam, for the most part. Need the word, do you?"

"Mam," Dennis repeated. "I think that'll do if she likes it."

"If *you* say it, she will. Did you get everything you wanted for your birthday?"

"I sure did! I thought at most I might get Nain to teach me some dirty words in Welsh."

"Ha!" Nain's mother tapped him on the head gently with her knobby knuckles. "Those wait for when you're older. I must admit they come in very handy, most especially around the railroad, and my daughter's right; it won't be long before you're bossing everyone about there. In the meantime, you got a good Welsh word instead, didn't you?"

"And a good train," Dennis said, and meant it.

That was last year, and it worried me a little that I didn't see much of Dennis after unless he was zipping by about a hundred scale miles an hour. He has a lot of kid life to catch up on. If he can't find something these days, it's because his room is a mess since he knows he won't have to pack up in the middle of the night. His sister Julie can't ride a regular bike, but she can stoke on a tandem, and yesterday she whooped and waved as they went past with Dennis pedaling way too fast up front. He argues with his brothers and sisters because they won't send him away. His life is like that now, loud, crowded and never boring. His cherry tree bloomed last spring, not much, but it's got a good start. It looks just right

among the peaches and apricots, apples and plums Nain Kate and Doc John's other grandchildren have socked in.

As for his nice little engine, she's on the basement layout more than on the loop of track in his room, and what we all know and he doesn't yet is that he's getting one of the new Hudsons to go with her. It ought to make him a decent birthday, but all of us doubt it'll top last year's when he did become, after all, a real McCoy.

8: Brown Box Railroad

A lot of serious collectors are surprised if they come into the hobby shop the week of the big Veterans' Day sale and see all the basic starter sets sitting out. They've forgotten that every railroad has a first spike. Big people get an idea they'd like a train under their tree, the way they've seen in old pictures, and little ones want to take me or one of the other museum engines home. Since none of us fit in anybody's living room, Trish and the gang are happy to find their customers trains that will. Getting just the right one for a family can take a little while, and some people come to the open house, see there's more than they thought to setting up a tiny railroad, and make a few more trips to learn what they want before they hand over money.

That's what happened with the man who came around during the open house. He dropped off a letter in Santa's mailbox, looked around, nodded and made a phone call before he left. In a little while, his wife came in, looked at things and made notes. That Monday, they both came in to compare this to that and that to the other. Trish said hi, but since she was running around like a switcher in a bowl yard they didn't ask her much. She usually lets people decide when they feel like asking questions. In case it doesn't look like that will happen, Bert or Jesse will come out of the back. Sure enough, Bert saw the couple who seemed perplexed and barged in. "What you looking for, and can I help?"

"Uh, yes," the woman squeaked, because there's a lot of Bert and there wasn't much of her. "We're after a very basic train set for our older son."

He swung a hand around at the waiting plastic and metal crowd. "I think we got some. How old's your kid? What price range you looking for, is this just for Christmas...?"

"He's eight, but..." She drew a big breath like she'd have to whistle for a crossing, but the man covered for her.

"He loves trains. Loves them. We were at a discount store and bought him one just like that when he was five--" he pointed at the cheapest HO set in the store-- "but it didn't last. We put it on a coffee table so he and his brother could both use it. He tried to go easy on it, he really did, but the way his hands are, they grab when he doesn't mean to. He couldn't help breaking those delicate little handrails and he was always mad because he couldn't get it on the tracks right. We finally took it away and just set it up at Christmas because he can't get down under the tree from his chair."

"Chair," Bert said, and rubbed the knee where his factory leg meets his after-market one. "How come you don't bring him in and have him look around? We got a ramp, you know."

"You have so many delicate things. He wouldn't mean to grab or bump, he just does when his muscles twitch, then he gets upset. Some people are afraid of him because the way he moves looks funny, and he has trouble speaking clearly so they think he can't understand. It's just his wiring. His mind is fine. Being able to use it is his problem. My mother got him an electronics kit last year because he was interested. He knew what he wanted to make, told us what to connect, but that upset him too because..."

"Because he should be able to do stuff himself. Got it. You got a Christmas train, you're looking for a daily runner. Can he handle a transformer?"

"Uh, the...speed thing? He didn't seem to have a problem with that. He needs one that's more...solid, I guess, than the little one, one where it doesn't matter so much if his hands shake. We keep looking at these bigger ones..." the dad waved at the boxes of O gauge, "but they're expensive. We didn't have a lot to spend this year."

"Ah. You never been around these. Tell ya what, before you buy anything, to get an idea how he's going to do with it, take him over to the model club on Thursday. Somebody's there every week by seven o'clock."

They both looked confused. "Model club?" If it sounds weird for people not to know the club is there, we see people who don't know there's a steam engine in town. You'd think half a million pounds of blue steel with smoke coming out the top would be hard to miss, but we've had people call the fire department when I'm in steam. "I don't think...I mean, he'd be out of place..."

"Museum. Thursday. Seven. That building over there." Bert pointed out the front door.

People have their own timetables and orders, and for all Bert should have known, they could have had some other place to be, but Bert has his ways of getting word, and sure enough, they showed up at the museum right on the advertised. Well, *their* advertised. Most people from the club start drifting in around six-thirty. The usual crowd found Bobby waiting, and he let them know nobody was going to bother the new kid about his chair, his hands or anything else. The only one who winced was Ronnie McCoy. "I hope he doesn't yell a lot," Ronnie said. "I jump half out of my skin when people yell. I can't help it. I know they usually can't help it either."

Bobby climbed out from under the layout. "His mom says he has trouble talking, so don't be too surprised. I don't think any of them know much about these, so it might be good we've got a thin crew tonight and we can answer a lot of questions. Ah. Yep, van pulling in."

In a minute, the mom and dad came in with one little boy who ran over and started introducing himself to everybody and one who looked as if somebody had tossed him into his wheelchair. That one's eyes were bright and darting around, even though his body was folded in odd ways and braced so parts wouldn't fly out. Both parents stared at the layout that ran most of the way around the room. They weren't used to little trains, let alone all of us big ones working back and forth right outside the window. When Max went by with a cut of cars for the morning Washington turn, I thought they were going to faint. The kids didn't. Little Gary ran over and pointed. "Wow, Kev, lookit!"

It took Kevin some effort, but he got his face into a big grin and mashed out words. "Ha! Little trains...are...in here, big train's...right...out...there!"

"This is a great place to watch all of them," Bobby said. "You must be Kevin." He stuck out a hand for the kid to shake. It might not have been a great idea, because Bobby got a funny look when his knuckles got squished. He bent his face back into shape. "Look around, have fun, ask all the questions you want and if there's something you want to see run, holler." He looked up at the parents. "Goes for you, too."

Kevin might have been amazed, but his dad was more so. His mom exclaimed over the Christmas corner because she recognized the old store models around the back. "Look, Gary, there's your dad's old pizza place!"

"Aw, man, I wish he'd never sold out to the chain. I liked Nonna's pizza so much better. They got the feed store right, too. Remember how they used to have all the farm toys in the window at Christmastime?"

"I always wanted a combine, but Mom said it wasn't a girl's toy." She laughed. "I finally got one, didn't I? Not exactly a toy or as much fun as I thought it would be."

Bobby came over. "So that's why you look familiar! You have the dairy farm up toward the west head of Salt Creek, don't you?"

"Hundred and twenty head, yes. It's not the biggest farm, but we've found some niche markets. We just got our organic certification."

"I'll...be...a...farmer," Kevin said. "I can with Little Gary. When...I'm...old...enough."

The bittersweet look on his dad's face was hard to miss. "Funny thing is, there are things he can do even now. He can't milk by hand, but he can put on a milking machine now. He might never be able to handle

cows alone, but he's good with getting them to go where he wants and he's great at herding with the dog while Little Gary gets the gates for him. Pretty soon, we're going to let him help with the cheese we make for the farmers' market."

Kevin flashed his teeth and drew a deep breath, pulling out a syllable at a time as if he were picking up a bunch of cars with stuck brakes. "We...make...lots...of...cheese. I...like...fresh... mozz...er...ella."

"And tomatoes, and a little basil?" his mom prompted, and he nodded as much as his neck would let him.

"That's...lunch...when...we have a...fresh batch. YES!"

It came out louder and sharper than Kevin likely meant. Ronnie jumped, then turned around, droopy in distress. He's made the speech so many times I have it memorized myself. "Sorry. I scare easy because I have autism."

Kevin's smile wilted a little. "My...fault. You...aren't...per...fect...ei...ther?"

I know Ronnie; I could see his relief. "Not hardly! Is anybody?"

Everybody's got some ding or dent if you look hard enough. Stay around people long enough and get used to theirs, and they'll get used to yours if they're worth knowing. While Kevin watched the trains, I was right outside and noticed his eyes were on the people as much as the rails. There were other kids, and they forgot about the chair and the twisted parts and just talked to Little Gary and Kevin because they liked trains too. It might not have worked that well if they were all at school. Even when they got into an argument, it was over who got to run Track 2 and who had to stay on the loop in the Christmas corner.

The family came back the next week, and the week after, and by then it was a safe bet they were going to need a Christmas train. Kevin knew which trains to help with and which not to handle; those who had tiny breakable parts cruised safely by, while the old diecast engines were glad to be picked up now and then, even if he did squeeze a little too tightly on occasion. Bobby noticed. "He seems to be doing pretty well when he needs to reach for things and I saw him half stand up once."

His mother beamed. "He can! That's just happened this year, almost in spite of himself. When they get him to do something new, if anything goes wrong, he won't try again for a long time, but he started a new program and in just this last few weeks, even his physical therapist sees a real difference. He can get things from the refrigerator or take care of the bathroom himself now as long as we're around to help him move the chair through the doorways."

"That's always good to hear. We had a preemie and they told us he might have problems, but he didn't beyond being a little slow to roll over

and all.” Bobby nodded to Burke, who was helping Kevin put a car back on the tracks while they argued over the Steelers’ season.

“Kev’s biggest present this year won’t come till next spring. It’s why we sound so cheap right now. He’s going to get real braces and learn to use crutches part of the time.”

“That’ll make such a difference for him!”

“You don’t know how much. Right now, he can’t even get all the way around our house because our living room has a little step down from the rest of the hallway. He calls it the bump-bump because that’s how it sounds when somebody shoves the chair over for him. They tell us not to, because he’s going to need his shoulder muscles strong and stable when he starts to get up, but how long do you leave your kid stuck? It’s the same thing with the back door; he could go all over the place outside whenever he wanted if he could get across the threshold. Once he stands up, life will change so much, but he has to want to get there.”

“I used to take it for granted, too,” Bobby said. “Won’t ever again.”

Kevin’s mom looked wary. “Can I ask why?”

“Maybe you don’t know. I was in a train wreck a year ago. Spent most of last winter in a wheelchair and part of the spring on crutches once my arm and shoulder got so I could use them. Even that long, when I knew it was going to heal...it made me think a lot about how to get people around the museum better, because it looks easy to get around but we had a lot of bump-bumps. You know, if you put a good heavy drawer handle on the doorframe at grab height, you can pull yourself right through without having to bend your hands around.”

“He’d have to be willing to try it first. But you know what, I might put some up.”

The next week, Bobby switched his way over to Kevin’s dad, who was watching from a corner while the boys were being ordinary kids.

“How’s going?”

Big Gary shook his head. “I put up handles. He wanted in the living room, gave it half a try and said he couldn’t pull hard enough. We even told Little Gary to let him sit for a few minutes, because he’s always the first to bail his brother out, but Kev didn’t try it again. His braces aren’t going to be instant success and no matter how well they should work he’s going to have to use that chair for awhile. I don’t know what else to do.”

“You decide what to get him yet?”

“Not yet. We’re waiting on checks from two big customers. When it comes to counting on payouts being on time, I’ve seen a lot of people lose farms like that.”

“You ought to ask Trish and Bert about used stuff.”

The light flashed on behind his eyes. “That would work?”

Bobby swung a hand at the layouts. None of us could believe Gary hadn’t noticed that none of us, big or little, is exactly fresh out of the shop. “Most of this was used when we got it. If it’s from one of the local shops, it’ll work or they’ll make it work. Trust me, check with them.”

Kevin’s dad didn’t even have to go to an auction the way he did to get a good used combine. In a few days, since they had to come to town for the bank anyway, the couple made another stop at the hobby shop. Bert thought for a minute, then his eyes lit up. That isn’t always good, sort of like when a volcano’s crater glows. “How fancy is the kid?”

The mom wasn’t sure how to ask Mount Vesuvius to repeat itself. “Beg pardon?”

“What’s he think of shiny boxes and that kinda scrap?”

“That’s more something my parents would complain about. Kevin would rather save the effort it takes him to unwrap things.”

“Ha!” Bert grunted, and started moving things in front of the counter. “Hang on here.”

Some of the little trains around the used part of the hobby shop have been presents for Christmas or Chanukah more than once. Some have been Christmas trains for years, working for one family and then another. They run maybe a month out of the year and spend the rest of their time in their boxes in a closet, so they’re shiny and well cared for even when some regular wear part breaks. People who think of them as a decoration don’t know how to fix them, so they bring them in and trade them on a new set. Bert takes them in the back, does a little patching and cleaning and puts on any new parts they need, then puts them back in their boxes for the next family or collector. If they don’t have boxes, he grabs whatever he can find.

A lot of trains don’t mind the once a year gig and the easy schedule. Brownie did. She had a thick diecast shell, a tinplate tender and three cars built slightly less solidly than small tanks. Her caboose could have been fragile, but wasn’t. Like a crowd of small football players, they thought sitting around, even in a comfortable spot, seemed all wrong. The family they’d gone to when they were new put them away every year, and Brownie wished the kids had been allowed to leave her out. Worse yet, from her point of view, the kids lost interest sooner than

most. Their mother traded the set for a smaller-gauge, more compact Christmas-themed one with cars full of glitter and snow.

The next person to take Brownie out of the store was Mr. Gartner down at the bank. Brownie and her cars got to show off for a lot of people in the bank's front window year after year, but there, too, all the work was between Thanksgiving and the first weekend in January. It wasn't a bad job until the year the bank hired a professional decorator, who put up a silver metal tree with silver bows instead of ornaments and a spinning color disc instead of lights.

The decorator said trains, and all the other traditional Christmas decorations, were out of date. When people lose a job, you look for a new one. When we're out of a job, we end up as razor blades unless people help us out. The decorator had planned to throw Brownie and the gang away, but Mr. Gartner took them home instead.

His kids didn't put their trains away after Christmas. They barely put them away at the end of the day, and to put it mildly they weren't careful. Before the Christmas decorations were down somebody lost the boxes, not that the set was ever in them for long. At the Gartners' house, they were part of a rolling mob on the rails. Two boys and a girl were always making up improbable trains and setting up derailments for the fun of it, so nothing had good paint left if it had it to begin with. They were all good with machinery and when any part started to lay down on the job, someone tuned it up.

Brownie was a good choice for them because she didn't start life with lots of detail. She got her name because the girl got tired of her chipped-up paint, took a spray can of glossy brown to her and put on orange trim in honor of her second-grade Girl Scout troop. With somebody always grabbing at the set, there were times when Brownie was scared out of her frame, but she couldn't say she was ever bored.

By and by the kids grew up. Though none of them lost their fondness for machines, they got their own jobs and houses and a taste for fancier trains with sound and remotes. Even their own kids grew up with nice little tank engines who expected to get their train orders from a controller in a toddler's hand. There was nothing fancy about Brownie even when she was new. She didn't have a lot of trim, she didn't use remote control and her cars were plain. The man who designed her had meant her to be a toy, not a showpiece.

That's why, in all the kids' growing up and moving and having their own families, the set got lost in the shuffle. When Mr. and Mrs. Gartner moved to Florida, one of the grandkids who was helping clean out their attic found Brownie and said "We don't really need this set, because

we've got a good plain one, but I bet Bert and Jesse could find somebody for her."

Jesse cleaned her up and made sure the whole thing worked as perfectly as always. The only real change he made was to take her shell off, hose her down in fresh black paint, then put her number back on. She was shiny and looked nice, but nobody noticed her while she was on display on the counter. Most people didn't think of buying a used set, and those people who did wanted a perfect one to show off. If Brownie had been a big train, she'd have been the one that sat in a park with pigeons nesting on her until city council decided she looked too scruffy to stay. Like most of those park engines, she'd been socked away in decent order with a lot of miles left in her, if only she could find somebody who'd let her run them.

Bert got an old mailing box and put the set in it. Brownie joined a half-dozen other trains in the same condition, some small, some medium, some her size and a few twice as big, stacked along the base of the counter up front. The brown box section of the shop didn't get a lot of attention even though it was literally underfoot; at that time of year, new sets in their bright cartons took up most of the space and made most of the sales. There was no furnace in Brownie's immediate future, which should have been a comfort, but watching the new sets leave with their first people made it much harder to wait.

That morning, Bert shoved aside a big fancy box with a shiny yellow diesel, leaned past a big carton with a smiling steam engine, then rummaged until he got a hand on Brownie's cardboard shed. He stuck the box into the dad's hands. "How's that?"

"Thirty-five *dollars*?" the mom gulped when she looked at the tag. It was cheaper than their fragile HO set had been, but when her husband passed the box to her she could feel the solid weight of the happy little locomotive. "Does it run?"

"Them old sixes, there's not much you can do to them to keep them from running. Let's see how this one does."

"Oh, you don't have to open it..."

"It's plastic wrap, not a factory seal." Bert hauled out Brownie. "I thought we went over this one...yeah. I remember her. If the Gartner kids and us couldn't wreck it, it can't be wrecked." He plopped her onto the rails of the layout and bumped the transformer. She gave a startled little *Erk*? then set off up the hill, squeaky and creaky from her layoff but determined. He goosed the power as she rattled off the rust. In a second, she went from crawl to gallop. "Yeah, it's good. If your guys have

trouble with it, bring it back and we'll fix it, but seriously, how much is here to damage?" He passed the solid bulk of Brownie to Kevin's mom.

She flinched in surprise at the heft in her hand. "That...will do!"

"There's a circle of track. I did the lock-on already, so all you gotta help them with is stuffing the track together and putting on the wires. I know he can handle the transformer, because he's been doing it. Yer good. Now gimme thirty-five bucks and merry Christmas."

Little Gary went to bed early, but it took some to get Kevin out of sight on Christmas Eve. One of the bits his dad had come across at the farm auction was an old folding poker table which, with the middle sawed out, turned into the tree layout. If things got a little loud when he and his wife had to hoist the tree and stuff it down through the tabletop, putting together the track wasn't the problem they expected. They perched the set on the rails and went to bed.

After so many years of farming, not being up before dawn would have been an unnatural act. However, being rattled out of bed by strange noises at four in the morning was still outside the norm. Kevin's dad went down the hall and froze.

Kevin was running the train. It wasn't possible, but it was happening, right before his eyes. "Kev, how'd you get here by yourself?"

"Needed...the...bathroom...looked in and...saw...tracks!" He wrenched his folded body around so his dad could see his smile. "Bobby's right. My chair...went...through the...door...fine. Hold doorknob, pull. Bump-bump. Works! I wantewd...to play with...this train now. Don't...need...to...wait for...braces."

It's hard to remember that was a long time ago by people standards. Tonight, the club's Christmas party is going on, and Kevin's over there in the corner. He just laughed loud on purpose to make Ronnie jump, so now they're making fun of each other. Kevin has a four-legged cane and his leg braces, and he has a brace on one wrist to keep his left hand from crushing little things he picks up.

The other hand works pretty well now, so he can even pick up little detailed parts because he's learned to be careful. In fact, he doesn't have the crumpled look he used to. There's been a lot of new medicine and new ways of straightening out bent places on people, and they worked for him. When he leans over to show his little brother how to fix a part, he knows he can grab his cane and stand up again, and when he talks, most people wouldn't notice.

When he needs to do anything complicated around home, Little Gary always seems to be around. The two of them have done 4-H

projects together for years now because Kevin is good at organizing and Little Gary is good at making the plan work. That's the way Kevin learned to use braces and eventually got where he could drive a car: his brother made him do it.

Kevin had a lot of help to get where he is, but no one did it all for him; that was nine years of his own hard work, and now he's doing even more of it in college. He's in the food science program. When he comes home on weekends he tries out new ways to make butter and cheese. Maybe he'll never handle the whole place on his own, but with his brother around and planning his own ag college degree, he won't have to.

Brownie's doing fine out there on the old poker table under the tree. She uses a remote now so Kevin can move around the room and still give her directions. It means she isn't exactly the way she was built, but, as she says, "Who cares? The work's steady!"

A couple of years back, Kevin's dad mentioned that he ought to take the extra handles off the door frames since Kevin didn't need them. "Nope," Kevin said, "I remember when you got my train out of her box, and she got me out of my chair. Next time I get lazy, like when I blew off my term paper till last week, they'll remind me that nobody's going to be around all the time. Sometimes I gotta grab hold and pull."

9: Closing Time

In honor of the Munoz Lines, past and future

The basement door was open, but none of the men wanted to turn in that direction. There was a high whine from a circular saw, then the pitch dropped to a snarl as it bit. Leaves rattled by on an autumn wind, their scent suddenly drowned by pine. "I couldn't look," Joey said, quiet as he'd talk in a funeral home.

"Me neither," Sam agreed. "All these years..."

I don't understand this any more than you do, but when train people sell a house, they hardly ever find anybody who wants the layout, and when they buy a house, they almost never find anybody that already has one. One club member bought his house that way, but it took the old guy who sold it to him a solid year to find just the right person. Most of the time, when a house with a layout changes hands, what happens is what was happening, right then, to the whole yards and mainline of the Pittsburgh, Oakmont and Ohio Railway.

The Poorly lived in a tiny yellow house on the side of the big ridge, almost under the highway bridge. Joey had rented the house when he first got out of college. He went railroading in the not quite a whole car garage basement as soon as he could afford the first four by eight foot piece of plywood, propped up on concrete blocks with some used track nailed to it. That sheet turned into a couple, then Joey found out concrete blocks weren't the best idea so he learned how to build benchwork. A bunch of guys from the club came over to help and if more than two or three showed up it was hard to move around the basement, but nobody ever wanted to leave.

Joey read a lot about how to build scenery, and he got better and better at it until people came just to see the new bushes along the riverbank or the towboat peeping around the corner. The basement was usually cold in the winter, and half the time most of the people had to sit on the steps because there wasn't room for everybody in there, but they kept showing up to help or just to look. They helped Joey take out the ratty garage door and board up all but enough room for a regular doorway so any snow on the layout was fake.

The last thing Joey built took him all summer to plan and all winter to build. He got out all of his grandpa's old pictures and spent a lot of evenings measuring this and that just so, and by spring the River Heights Coal Company's Prosperity Mine was set up in the corner, with the right old cars in the parking lot and the right old Baldwin switcher burbling

around the load-out. Everybody liked that so much that pictures of the mine got into magazines.

Trouble had started early that spring. All of the rolling stock was used to Joey and the guys not being around as much in nice weather, but when it was rainy and they were alone, and when summer days were terribly hot and still no one came to the shady basement, that didn't seem right. One day Joey came in with a Sharpie and made black marks on the main line, then he picked up all of the coal hoppers and the weathered old Baldwin switcher, put them in a box and went out the door with them. Later that week, while the engines were still wondering among themselves about what was going on, Joey picked up the blue EM-1 and put her in her box. The pair of GP-9s who more or less lived at the load-out expected Little Alice and the gang would be back after club night, but a week went by before Joey came back, and they didn't.

That was the rainy afternoon when they thought Joey was going to run some trains, but instead he unscrewed the wires and boxed up the transformer without saying a word. Next he started at one end of the river and pulled up trees by the roots all the way upstream, dropping them into another box. That was the day the Geeps left, too, shoved into their boxes just as Little Alice had been, and they didn't come back either. Neither did the cars from the mine's parking lot. Little Prosperity sat, lights off, tippie silent, empty as the real one had been before the scrapers tore it down.

All of the boxes that lived back under the narrow strip of mainline went away one Friday night in September, while there was noise upstairs and a big truck up on the road behind the house. Joey made one quick trip down to pull the river out of its notch, towboat and all. He wrapped it in an old blanket and left it tilted sideways in the corner by the mine.

October came and went, and turned into November. There should have been Christmas lights sprouting around town and the once a year cars out with Santa and reindeer. In the cold basement, there weren't even lights. There was noise upstairs only now and then, and no one came down. What little was left waited, wondering.

That morning, out of nowhere, Joey had appeared with his brothers-in-law and his friend Sam, pointing at the black marks. "Here and here," he said. "You're better with a saber saw than I am. The rest...well, you know what has to happen." And it happened. There were pry-bars involved, and hammers, and saws of course, not that anybody wants those details, but when it came to the circular saw and the axe, Joey and Sam couldn't bear to watch, so they were outside.

Joey's brother-in-law came out, grim-faced, and threw a three-by-four-foot chunk of the main into the dumpster. Joey flinched at the

squeaking and crunching from inside. Something wood tore to pieces. Something plaster shattered. The saw whined again and again, and a cloud of fine sharp fresh sawdust started to drift out. “We need more room,” Joey said to no one in particular. “We never hated it, we just need more room. This place is so tiny.”

There was no arguing with that. The house had two bedrooms, according to the realtor, but the second one didn’t have windows and its last people used it for a walk-in closet. The kitchen only suited somebody like Joey, whose idea of cooking was throwing stuff in the microwave. There was sort of a living room out front, right over the basement door, with a window that faced out on Crystal Run Road. It was big enough for a chair and a half-sized sofa. In other words, it had been built for one person, two if they were really friendly.

Britt was really friendly, and nice, and her kindergarten classes liked her a lot. Joey ran into her at church one weekend, and before too long he was making a point of going every week partly so he could go to church and a lot so he would run into Britt. It wasn’t too long before they coupled up and parked Britt in the house. She didn’t mind the guys hanging out in the basement, and she didn’t mind trains at all. She helped build trees and rock walls, making them look thick even though they had to be paper-thin to fit, and she figured out how to seal around the door to the outside so the winter wind didn’t freeze them. She didn’t mind the dinky kitchen, even when she was trying to help Joey make a dozen sandwiches to take downstairs. When their landlord wanted to sell the place, they had just enough of their college loans paid off to get a tiny little mortgage for their tiny little house. “Can’t throw the Poorly out on the street,” Joey said, and Britt laughed too.

But now, eight years later, he was doing just that. Britt’s brother tipped another cart into the dumpster. Anybody who looked at the crushed ruins saw the base where York Scrapple and Gas had stood, the dusty grass that had been in the park around the veterans’ memorial and the remains of some of the rock along the river. “It’s like a tornado hit,” the next guy with a wheelbarrow said, looking down at broken drywall, shoveled-up dust and a crumpled piece of Hewson and Evans’ Aviation Supply parking lot. “It won’t be too much longer now.”

“This better be worth it,” Joey sighed.

“It will be.” Britt pushed a broom out the door, bulldozing out a wave of sawdust and the crushed rock wall she had worked so long on. “Without this, both of us will never be able to stand in the kitchen at the same time, never mind having a place to sit down. And this way, everything’s paid off. We don’t owe student loans, we don’t have a

mortgage any more...it took us long enough, but thanks to the oil lease we don't owe on that, either."

Sam glanced inside, shuddered and opened a soda from the bucket on the grass. "I guess it's worth it, but...wow."

"There are so many good parts," Joey agreed. Another shriek and crash from inside cut him off for a few seconds. They all knew the riverfront must have crumbled to dust. The inside crew brought out another cartload of mangled chipboard and a torn piece of sky. They dumped it and brought their tools outside, setting most of them on the outside steps with the stack of lumber "Eh. I guess that's all of it."

Britt leaned in to look. "All over but the rest of the sweeping up." She went back in with the broom, then a vacuum cleaner whirled. She came back and emptied the vacuum into the trash. "Done. We ready?"

"Anytime you say." Sam backed his pickup truck to the basement doors and jumped out. "Nah, take it easy now, Britt, we got it."

She rested her belly on the edge of the wheelbarrow. "Okay, but do you need this?"

"Not with the four of us. We'll need the room to maneuver."

The familiar basement echoed in its emptiness. Upstairs, the carpet company thumped and banged as the new owner's flooring went in. The boxes on the floor waited, each with its bit of the very small world. Sam picked up Hewson and Evans and Joey carried out the church. Britt's brothers came out with Main Street and the memorial. When they had taken every box from the basement and swept the floor again, they shuffled the boxes around the truck bed gently, and Britt took the measuring tape to the space left. "Move that one about an inch that way and turn the gas station sideways. It's almost, not quite square. Mm-hmm, now we need the pieces of foam. If we stand the river up sideways with the wrap around it, nothing should be able to bounce around. It would be easier to make extra trips, but I don't like the idea of anybody sitting in back holding the big stuff."

"I think you're right." Joey shook his head. "Here goes nothing."

The four men lifted the last piece, the slab of wood with the coal mine perched on it. They held the corners, moved to the door, tilted it ever so slightly and held their breath as the mine just squeaked through the doorway. "People kept telling me not to try," Joey said, "but..."

"But it's Prosperity and you can't exactly pick up a new one at the hobby shop. Oo!" Sam gritted his teeth until one of the brothers realized the whole slab was sitting on his fingers.

"Very good. You didn't swear in front of the teacher." Britt giggled. "That's one thing I won't miss in the next four or five years. I'll miss the kids themselves, but not having to be good all the time." She watched

while the mine's base settled into the space, then she reached in and tried to shake a box or two. "Whew. No, it shouldn't move around on the road. Well."

"Yeah," Joey said, taking a last look around. "If we forgot anything they'd call us."

She reached back and patted the basement wall. "Thanks, house."

Nobody realized that little creaking was "Glad you were here, good luck, and all of you be happy," or that even the brokenness in the dumpster understood. Times change, things change, and all of us have somewhere to go next, whether we know it or not.

Sam followed Joey and Britt out the ridge toward his own house, but turned off onto a lane partway there. A roof with solar panels barely rose above the hilltop. They drove down the lane to a long, broad new house tucked into the strong curve of the hill, with a driveway winding down to its basement. It was a walk-in like the old one, but many times the size. The walls were old stone, the basement of the farmhouse before they got the job of holding up the new house built to fit them. Double doors opened on a deck overlooking the head of Crystal Run and, down the steep hill to the flat in the distance, the loop of track where the mine had been and tourist trains turned around. A big old maple had fallen, leaving a trimmed-off stump, and a new sprout was shooting up from it; in a few years, it would shade the deck from summer sun.

Britt opened the sliding doors wide while Joey and Sam dropped the tailgate. Her brothers came along and began to pull out the boxes. "Nice in here," Sam said. "That box outside a geothermal heat setup?"

"Yep. Outdoor wood stove for boost heat when it's really cold. Convenience kitchen and laundry down here, big kitchen and everything else on one floor upstairs. Four bedrooms." Joey smiled at Sam's raised eyebrow. "That'll handle company when the twins get here, and you never know, we might not be done."

"I think you're just getting started." He lifted Hewson and Evans from its box and settled it into the outline marked on the new layout. Joey put the memorial in place in the new park beside the new, longer version of Main Street. "That's better. How much land?"

Britt tried out the view from the patio doors. "Sixty acres. I wish the old farmhouse had made it long enough for us to fix it up, but the roof caved in years ago. Dad saved the mantels and the flooring from the living room when the aunts decided to let it go and put their double-wide on down the hill. When they decided to sell the rest of the land, we had to jump at the chance. This foundation was still solid and good, and so big, and everybody was always so happy in that house on this land. These two will be the seventh generation on it, and once we get settled I

have some angora goats coming and a Jersey heifer too. Speaking of moving in..."

Britt went back to the truck, brought in the river with its padding and laid it onto the notch ready for it, deep in the corner of the basement. The towboat had come loose a bit, so Britt straightened her up. "The *Nellie Belle* needs a couple drops of glue, but if that's all we broke with all this shuffling, we're good."

"Cross your fingers. We got this far, now we got the hardest twenty feet to go." The men followed her with the mine, its scalloped base cut to fit a wavy edge on the long benchwork. They didn't have to tilt it through the big doors, so the signs stayed in place and the loose handrail on the tippie didn't quite come off. Joey scrambled underneath to hold part of the weight while the others edged back and lowered it all they could. Sam scrambled under with him and the two of them eased it down the last few inches. With a soft bump and scrape, the mine settled into place. Britt tapped the edge with the side of her hand to move aside a few small splinters, then Joey brought out the bag of bushes and tucked them into their holes, masking the cut at the edge of the mine's parking lot.

Sam put the cars back in their places. "Dad generally parked around Jack. Them other Fords can stay over that way." That got a general snicker, especially from the cars. One of the brothers climbed under and picked at the wires, and in a moment the tiny LEDs on the tippie's handrails flicked on. The rock walls behind it weren't fake any more, but the real faces of the old basement stones that had grown with the same coal Joey had glued down on the layout.

There were wires to hook up and tracks to inspect, and everything didn't happen at once, but over the next week or so more pieces got connected and more touch-up paint went on. There were a lot of new trees in sockets along the hillsides, and one afternoon a whole Christmas tree popped up in the park by the memorial.

On the Saturday before Christmas, it plastic snowed on the town. Soon, the whole house was full of people who used to hang out in the tiny basement where the old Poorly had started. Joey flipped one switch after another, and Christmas lights sparkled all around. While Joey was taking care of that, the others unwrapped coal cars and set them on the track. Britt went upstairs and came back carrying the little old switcher and the blue EM-1 (I always did think they had good taste in engines.) Sam double-checked the big transformer on its shelf. "All good here," he said, and stepped back.

Joey picked up a remote and fiddled with it. The big blue engine fired up and stepped out of town for the first time, past a very small yellow house high on the rocky hillside. Anybody who looked closely

enough might notice a young couple in the basement doorway waving at the train. The track no longer leapt straight from town to the mine; it curved past the forks, with the edge of the university a few small buildings stuck to the top of the backdrop, then went up a little grade through the side of River Heights where the long corrugated metal mill stretched dark along the tracks to the line of trees by the mine. Little Alice chugged up to the load-out past the mine switcher, who had her cars waiting on the siding. Once she picked up the hoppers, she led them around the loop and back down the grade, all of them rattling and clanking when they hit the top of the steep part. Britt went to the door and looked down the real grade in the distance. "So that's why they call it Blacksmith Point."

One of the brothers nodded. "It does go by where old man Schmidt's shop was, but yep, on the real railroad it's because it sounds like the whole train's coming apart if the slack runs in. I don't know about you all, but this suits me pretty well."

"What'll suit even better is the old refrigerator is right around the laundry room door with a case of cold boilerwash in it, not to mention sandwiches and cookies, ready whenever you all want it. That's bigger than the old kitchen and it's not even the upstairs one we'll be using the most once these two get here." Britt patted her belly and landed the train at the lower yards. "Some things aren't a whole lot of fun when you're working on them, but the time does come when they're worth it."

The chorus of voices around the new old town agreed with her. That evening, when the Christmas lights went off for the night, nothing worried; they were home, and morning would come around the big glass doors soon enough to start the first of a lot more days.

10: Zadie

Zadie is Grandpa in Yiddish, and the only thing Jon liked better than his Zadie was teasing him. Zadie looked just like him, everybody said, and in old pictures he could see it was true. When he was little and they lived in Texas, Zadie was right next door, and Jonathan went to his and Bubbie's house all the time. Zadie had been a circus clown back in Germany, and he taught his only grandson lots of neat tricks, like how to grease doorknobs, tie bells to the bottom of a chair and put soot on the eyepieces of binoculars. Bubbie had gotten tired of jokes a long time ago, so they didn't prank her. She and the girls didn't pay much attention to Zadie, joking or not, so she retired early and moved to Florida, where Aunt Miriam lived, without him.

When the big war started and Dad had to go, Jon's mom moved their family to Ohio where her parents lived. There were a lot of other relatives there from their old home town and Zadie's. Zadie had needed to run from Russia when he was very young, then he had lived in little St. Joachim near the Swiss border for a while until he got his good American job. Most of the people from the little town settled in Ohio, so Zadie already knew everyone there. Jon had tried to get him to move, but the railroad wouldn't let him change jobs while the war was on. "One of these days, kid," Zadie said in his weekly letter. "When you least expect it. Maybe I'll climb in your window!"

When Dad came home, he had a good job waiting at a chemical plant just across the river so they stayed in Ohio. Jon wasn't entirely happy about that, even though he really liked the town and the friends he'd made. Grandma and Grandpa Cohen were the kind of grandparents kids hoped they'd get, and it was always fun when Bubbie came up to spend the summer. She was sweet and a wonderful cook and told great stories, and of course Jon missed her when she got on the train to go back home, but he really wished to see Zadie.

He couldn't visit, because he was still working on the Missouri Pacific and trying to get all the time he could before he retired, and Jonathan couldn't go to Texas because it took a long time to get there, nobody would be around to watch him and the tickets were expensive and hard to get in wartime. When the war ended, there were so many people trying to get home that Jon still couldn't go even though by that time he was twelve and could take care of himself.

As he got older, he missed Zadie more and more. Grandpa Cohen was nice to him, but always busy, because he worked at the steel mill and barely got time off. The one day Grandpa Cohen had set aside from

work, a whole year before it was to happen, was Jonathan's Bar Mitzvah. "Such a shame," he said, "Morris should be here to see this!"

"He'd make a joke about it." Grandma Cohen rolled her eyes. "The wine bottle would be full of seltzer, there'd be a whoopie cushion on the seat...but you have to admit, he's a lot of fun when you don't want to smack him."

"Oh, didn't we have fun when we were Jon's age! He's the only person I ever knew who really did run away and join the circus, and it turned out to be a good thing when the lousy Cossacks..." Grandpa caught Grandma's warning look. "Well, it did, Bessie! Even back then it did, let alone a few years ago. He's old enough to know."

"That was then and over there, and this is now and over here. So, have you two been enjoying the railroad lately?"

Grandma had a great knack for changing the subject. One thing Zadie, Jon, his dad and Grandpa Cohen had in common was that they loved trains. "One of these days, when we all have time, we need a train set," Zadie groused in his latest letter. "The railroad I work for keeps me running the full-sized one. The money's good, but how can I spend it? I think it's why Sophie left me. When you find a nice girl, Jonathan, also you should find a job that lets you go home at night."

"Or gives you a few days off in a row now and then," Jonathan sighed. His Bar Mitzvah would be the Friday after the end of Chanukah. Mom and Dad had been planning it forever even though they weren't very religious. He had made a lot of excuses to see if he could get out of it, but they seemed determined to make him stand up in front of everybody and read. Max had already done it that spring, and he'd survived, but Max didn't mind being the one people were looking at even if his voice was squeaky.

He'd even helped Jon pick a passage that didn't have any really hard words in it. "Come on, Jon, you're the only guy on your side of the family! You'll get presents and everything!" Rabbi Schuler had been quizzing him until he thought he had everything memorized in both directions, the rabbi's elderly father was going to be bar mitzvahed too for some reason Jon didn't quite get so he wouldn't be up there alone, and Grandma was tying the knots on his new tallit. The only thing missing wasn't likely to be there, so there was nothing to do but wait.

On the first night of Chanukah, Jon came home from school to find a package on the table. "From Zadie," his mother said, and tried not to smirk. "I'll just get out of the way before you open it in case it stinks or catches fire."

He was only a little disappointed that it did neither. The string was only string, the brown paper was only brown paper, and the note was on regular paper, not the kind that would go *poof* when he pulled it out of the envelope. "It says 'Happy Chanukah, Jon.' Just that, nothing else." When he opened the box that said it contained a caboose, there was a very realistic caboose from Zadie's railroad in it--slightly confused, but nice enough. "Wow, that was nice of him," Jon said. "Maybe I can take this over to Schuler's and see if it'll run with theirs."

The Schuler kids and Freddi from next door were glad to see him and even happier to see the caboose. Grandfather Schuler was trying to act stern and rabbinical without much luck because he really wanted to get down on the floor and play with the trains. "It doesn't explode? It isn't carved from soap? It doesn't shoot confetti out of somewhere? Morris is losing his touch, I tell you."

The caboose did run well with the Schulers' newer stuff, though not with the friendly old locomotive they'd brought from Germany before the war. Max got out the dreidel, mostly because the rabbi had come home with a huge bag of chocolate coins along with the congregation's boxes of regular food from the kosher butcher upriver. The rabbi excused himself because somebody had come to claim their order, and Max watched the dreidel slow and tip over. Freddi collected half the gelt. "It isn't the same, is it?"

"No," Jon agreed. "I feel it too this year. Maybe it's the bar mitzvah thing. Everybody's so happy, and so am I, I think, but it's almost like, are we grown up or still allowed to do fun stuff?"

"We need your Zadie to tell us. Did you send him a card?"

"Of course, with itching powder in it. I'm still trying to figure out why this nice caboose that doesn't do anything odd."

They all looked at one another in abject horror. "You don't suppose Zadie grew up and quit doing fun stuff, too?"

The next afternoon, Jon came home from school to find his mother out shopping and another package on the porch. It wasn't shaped quite the same. When he untied the wrapping, it was a tank car. It wasn't full of anything. It was a perfectly normal tank car that didn't match any of the sets in Freddi Muller's catalog. "For that matter, it doesn't even seem to *be* a single car in the catalog. How'd he get this all the way in Texas? It had to be a custom job."

"Imperial Glass," Jon agreed. "With that big 'I' it's hard to miss. Other than being kind of different, it's not weird at all."

They all thought about that, because Zadie's different was usually good. During the war, everything had been rationed, even shoes and bike

tires. One year, when Passover was coming, everyone saved points and bought way ahead of time to try and get the things they needed. Zadio sent a picture of a Seder. It was timed so the next day a package came with all kinds of good things in cans because Zadio's regular run took him close to the Mexican border, where things weren't rationed. He'd even promoted some chocolate for Freddi's birthday when all the Jensen stores had run out. When Jon's little sister wanted a doll, Zadio sent her a paper doll book. A doll showed up two days later, with extra clothes and all, just like the paper one. "His jokes always have punch lines," Freddi said. "And they always end up all right. But why do you have a caboose and a tank car and no track or engine?"

There was no Sunday mail, so the wait was torture. Sure enough, there were two packages on Monday, one labeled "Me first!" That one had a Yellow Freight trailer on a flatcar. The Monday one was a boxcar for American River Flour. Nothing was weird about either of them except for the company, and that was local for Zadio so it made sense.

"Caboose, tank car, trailer on flat, boxcar," Jon said. "Caboose, glass, trucking, flour. I remember Zadio sending a picture of them making a pickup at that mill. You got anything?"

"I got nothing," Rabbi Schuler said, lining the cars up. "Hmpf, if we had a couple more...there's always the question of how you spell in English letters...We'll see."

"Maybe it spells something crude," Max said after his grandfather left.

"From Zadio? I'd have bet on it."

On Tuesday, Jon almost forgot because of basketball practice. He brought his uniform home, dropped it into the laundry hamper at arm's length, and left his sneakers on the porch to air out. "Was that the package?" his mom called from the kitchen. The day was warm for December and the window over the stove was open.

"No, that was my sneakers. I think they need washed. I got another package?"

"You sure did." The package didn't stink. It was a Heinz Ketchup boxcar. He told Max and Freddi about it on their way to school the next day, on his birthday. All at once, Max laughed. "I don't know what the engine will be, but I know who made it!"

"How?"

"Line them up like you got them. Wait a minute, Izzy's wandering off again."

"Am not!" his little sister squawked, and they forgot about it in favor of yelling at Isabelle for stopping to look at decorations.

The package waiting for him, beside his freshly laundered uniform and sneakers, was a Coca-Cola tank car. He lined it up the way Max had suggested and saw what he meant.

Over too much cake and ice cream that evening, they sprawled in front of the radio. The Lone Ranger wasn't as much fun as he had been, either; the plots seemed thin and they could all guess what was going to happen. The gifts he had were neat, if a little unnerving--Dad had bought him his first razor, Mama a proper gentleman's hat--and a little thin because the real party would be Friday. "This is a grown-up birthday? I liked the one with the paper train better."

"Aw, man!" Freddi snickered. "We all got so excited when we saw that box and then Rabbi Schuler taught us a lot of new words for a week while he tried to put it together. That was one of Zadie's best shots. Not even he could come up with a real one that year. Oh, hey, I should have a party of my own right after New Year's."

That got much more general interest than Tonto saying "Gettun up, Scout!" for what seemed like the forty-fifth time that half-hour. "It ain't your birthday, so what gives?"

"Mom and Dad and I all got our citizenships."

"Wow!" It hadn't been easy for any of the refugee families to explain that to the authorities during the war years, especially early on; yes, they had come from Germany, no, they were not Nazi spies. Freddi's dad had just got his camera and binoculars back a couple of months before, even though he'd been on the Pennsylvania Railroad all through the war.

"I'm gonna change my name to Frederick Miller. Friedrich Muller, if you're not right around here people look at it funny and nobody spells Freddi right. I should probably be Fred pretty soon anyhow."

"Fred." Max tried it out. "Yeah, it sounds okay. I'm glad Max is just Max."

"Rabbi Schuler's dad is going to be bar mitzvahed too," Jon said. He hadn't been sure about that at first, but now, with the whole thing twenty-four hours away, it seemed like a really good idea. If he fouled up and read a word wrong or sneezed, people would still be talking about old Mr. Schuler's speech.

One of the other guys looked up. "Oh, good! He got out of the hospital and everything?"

"Yeah, he was pretty sick last month but the penicillin now got rid of his pneumonia just like that. He turned eighty-three yesterday." Since there were guys in the room who didn't get it, Jon went on: "The Torah says you get seventy years, so in his old town, when a guy got to be

eighty-three they figured it was like he was thirteen again in his second life."

Max nodded. "Great-grandpa told us he thought he'd missed his shot at it when he got sick, and man, was he ticked. Now he's threatening to camp out with your Aunt Miriam over the winter. We might as well call her place South Jensen."

"Florida doesn't seem like such a bad idea when it's rainy and gloppy like this. I must be getting older. The other day I even wondered what it takes to go to college up here on the hill."

"You should ask Dad. He's going to use his GI Bill money and go in the evenings because he didn't get to finish. If I didn't have my mind made up, I might be a draftsman like him. He wants to go on and be a civil engineer. You know where I'm going."

"Max, how long ago *did* you decide, anyhow?"

"About the time he had to take off from our old hometown on five minutes' notice with his train in his shirt," Freddi snorted. "After we saw how they got treated, I was ready to go be a rabbi! Railroad for me, if I can get on."

"Even with them laying off and everything?"

"Yeah. Dad's an engineer and that's good but I always wanted to be a conductor. With the new diesels coming in, that might not be the way things go, but it's always worth a try. I'm going to start asking around the shops down here, if nothing else, soon as I get old enough to work."

There was jealous silence, because everyone agreed Freddi's dad had the best job ever. "I think about that, but the railroad's so shaky. Everything's changing with the diesels."

"They're really efficient," Max agreed. "But they're not the same. I thought about summer help at the mill if I can land the job when I'm sixteen."

"Maybe that's our problem," Freddi said. The others gave him quizzical looks. "We're old enough to think about where we want to go and not old enough to go there. Old enough to think about jobs, not old enough to do them. When Papa was my age, he was allowed to run errands around the rail yards, and when he was just a little older he quit school and went to work as an engine wiper. I thought we might get away with quitting after eighth grade, but no such luck any more."

"Nah, they want everybody to graduate. You even have trouble getting on at the mill for general labor without a diploma now, same with the mine. I do have to think about something else I like to do, because it's not likely the congregations around here could afford a rabbi and a cantor and I'd kind of like to stick around this area."

"Why would they need both?" The one who asked was new in town.

“Because I can’t sing, and I mean I seriously can NOT sing!” Just to prove it, he lit into a cracked-voice version of “Hava Nagila.” Something odd happened: when his voice wasn’t popping back to its kid tone, it actually didn’t sound so bad. “Uh...hmm... maybe this growing up thing ain’t all rotten.”

On that Friday morning, Jon didn’t know whether to pass out or eat breakfast in spite of the butterflies in his stomach. His little sisters were being brats, which didn’t help. Mama handed him a toast and jelly sandwich and made the girls stay in while he got a head start on a few minutes of peace and quiet.

He walked slowly, past the synagogue, up the hill and left past the Catholic church and school, up again to the long, low new school on the hilltop. He had gone the first seven years at the older building down the block that only had the first four grades and the new kindergarten now; the school system was expecting a whole lot of kids to come along shortly now that the soldiers were home, so they had stretched six more classrooms along the street where the grade school playground had been. The new playground was smaller, stuffed behind the school as if the system were ashamed of it. “Relax,” his homeroom teacher said at lunch. “You get to read it, right? It’s not like you have to have it memorized like you do most speeches.”

“I know, but...at least Mr. Schuler’s going to take some of the weight off. I wouldn’t even want to do this, but Mom and Dad think it’s a big deal.”

“Um...” His teacher had been in Europe until June, when he had enough points to come home. “You...might want to think about it. There won’t be enough Bar Mitzvahs for a long while, considering. I don’t think your folks want to miss any.”

He thought about that while he was walking home. It was hard to ignore the red and green decorations and the trees in most front windows, harder to ignore the campus clock ticking off the minutes and chiming a mile or so off, thin notes blowing his way on the damp wind. The guys caught up with him, and that felt better. They followed him to his house by way of moral support, since he had to start getting ready.

The kitchen was full of relatives trying to fix food quickly and get it to the synagogue’s hall so it could sit in the oven until dinner. Winter sunset was coming early. “No, no package,” Mama said, and scratched her head. “I don’t get it. Surely Zadie knows you don’t have track or an engine. Oh, Papa went to pick up Bubbie and Aunt Miriam. Their train was a little late but they’re here--oh, that must be them. She should know she doesn’t need to knock.” She went to the door and gasped.

“Hi,” Zadie beamed. “I retired! Here you go, kid.”

Jon nearly dropped the package Zadie stuffed into his hands. His heart flipped, stood still for a second, took up beating again with a big thump of happiness. "Zadie? Here? Really?"

"I wasn't about to miss it, but I had ya thinking so, didn't I?"

Rabbi Schulman was right behind him, grinning from ear to ear. "Did he pull a fast one or what? He never lost his touch, I tell ya. Hey, what kind of engine is that?"

Jon unwrapped the bundle with shaky hands. There was plenty of track in boxes and an old, but repainted and happy, little tinplate engine from before the war. Jon took her to the cars lined up on the mantel. The circle-L on the engine finished it: L CHAYIM. *To life*, a cast-zinc toast. "What, they didn't have an apostrophe?"

Zadie threw back his head and roared.

That night, Rabbi Schuler's dad read first and Jon got all the way through his piece without messing it up at all, probably because of him. "I wasn't going to," the old man said with a smile, "but your mom and dad thought it might work better for you."

"They were right. Thanks. It meant a lot that you got up first."

"I remember. Seventy years ago I was a bucket of jello. If me going up there and reading first hadn't worked I was fully prepared to drop dead and bail you out," he said with a snicker. "Whoops, sorry, your Zadie's a bad influence. I figure we're all going to be really rotten from now on."

Their seats were side by side at the head table, but they stood for a moment looking around. Jon saw all of the people he wanted to be there, even his buddies who weren't Jewish, and Bubbie and Zadie were even sitting at the same table without being mad. "I don't know, it might work just fine like that," Bubbie was saying. "Summer up here and when it gets cold you can come down to Florida. Between the two of us we should be able to find her another nice husband."

"Ma, they aren't spare parts!" Aunt Miriam protested, but she didn't sound as upset about it as she had when she got the telegram about Uncle Simon three years before.

Jon made his rounds, then he and Mr. Schuler filled their plates at the buffet and sat down. Mr. Schuler's chair let out a resounding blast of gas. "Sorry," Zadie yelled across the room. "I lost track of whose was whose!" He lifted his glass to toast them, tipped it to drink and poured wine right down his front.

"Let's just say I was prepared," Mr. Schuler beamed. "I'm so glad they still make dribble glasses."

On Saturday evening after sundown, the living room at Jon's house was full of relatives who were still a little overstuffed from eating cold

brisket sandwiches. The gang was all there too, hanging out and helping clean up leftovers. Mr. Schuler and the rabbi were on the floor, chins on hands to watch the train go by at track level. "We may never get up from here, but hey, while we're stuck we get to see this thing run!"

"I thought I might be getting too old for these, but I'm not," Jon said, joining them after a while. "Thanks, Zadie. For coming, and for being here, and everything."

"Nothing to it, kid." Zadie got down on the floor, too, leaving the chairs to Jon's buddies. "Sometimes you have to grow up and get old enough to be a kid again."

11: Basket Case

“Zinc pest,” Bert said, for once not so much growling as sighing. He patted the wooden box on the mantel. They have a few at their house to remember dogs and cats who had to leave; you’d only notice that one because instead of a paw print on the lid, it has a spoked driver.

“It happened to so many of those old Dorfans,” the visitor said, and he gave the box a little pat too when no one was looking. “Did you salvage anything?”

“Most of the shell and two wheels. That on top is a crumbled one Trish glued together.” Bert brought the visitor’s engine from the den. Usually people pick up repairs at the shop, but railroaders don’t always get into town during business hours. “Here ya go.-- There’s the box mine came in, for all the good it did. It might have been opened once or twice.”

“Buy it at an auction, did you?”

Bert shook his head. “It was in the back when we bought the place from old man Harvey. Box had been on the back of the top shelf since *he* bought the place from Mutt Murdoch.”

“Sad,” the visitor said, and whether or not he knew it, the crumbled zinc in the wooden box agreed.

The cousins who put Dorfman together were proud of their trains and wanted people to know how they worked. They actually told people how to take them apart and look at them. The engines and cars came in bright, pretty colors, and they ran well...when they didn’t fall apart.

Their trouble was the zinc itself, not quite pure enough because nobody knew, back then, that some kinds of metal don’t mix well. If there was any lead in the mix, the little grains got on each other’s nerves in no time and started pushing against each other, and with all the shoving things warped and popped. Sooner rather than later, one little bump could make a whole casting crumble to dust. The company sent new parts to anyone who asked for them, and a lot of people did because they wanted their pretty

trains on the tracks. A lot of the time, even new parts wouldn't help because too many were bad on the same engine.

The crumbs in the box on Bert's mantel were mostly done, but the cab wasn't. Its shiny turquoise paint still gleamed when anyone opened the lid, and deep in the still stable atoms it remembered the day the packers shoved the set into its cardboard to send it off. Not the most expensive set, not the cheapest, it arrived at the department store too late in 1933 to go home with anyone.

The buyer hadn't meant to order anything that pricey. A misplaced ink spot on the company's form ordered it for him. Things had been so bad around town that even the mine foremen couldn't buy such big toys for their kids. In fact, things were so bad that by the next spring, an auctioneer was selling off what was left in the store. Ben Kelsey, whose own store had run out of credit, scraped up all the cash he had left at his place and bought a batch of the store's goods for pennies on the dollar, figuring he'd save enough that way to stay open even if nobody bought much. He brought the set and a few dozen other things back to the Big Value and filled his almost empty shelves with new, if slightly dusty, good brand merchandise with half-price tags. The Big Value had been teetering on the edge until then; it recovered thanks to cheap shirts and dresses, soap and towels. Even the toy department got attention it hadn't had for years. Dolls and cars sold pretty quickly, all things considered, while the train set sat unopened on the top shelf.

After a year or so, when a few good paydays started to take care of old bills, a miner and his wife thought a long while, then put the set on layaway. On payday a week before Christmas, they took it home. It was a good thing they didn't get the box gift-wrapped at the store, nor wait for Christmas Eve to set it up.

Archie was a natural mechanic and an even more natural train nut. He worked on cars when he wasn't working in the mine, and because he had his own shade-tree repair shop bringing in a few dollars at a time he'd survived the strike with all his kids and his wife alive. He couldn't resist looking at the machine he'd brought home. Even though the train was little, he knew metal, and the sound of distress, and he had to lift the box lid.

"What," he said, and added a lot more descriptions that don't make a lot of sense to me. The cars were all right, if awfully upset,

and the tender was in one piece except for its wheels, but the engine was a dying pile of zinc cracking and crumbling before his eyes. The slight bumps and thumps from taking the set off the shelf and carrying it out had broken the last threads holding most of the castings together. He started to lift the ruin, which set off the final collapse. Popping and pinging, the metal dropped away from his hand, leaving most of the cab, wheels and an axle sticking out of the ruins of a motor block.

He stared in horror for a few minutes, then carefully put the lid back and walked back to the store. The clerk up front waved him over to his friend's office that did double duty as customer service. "Hey, Ben, this ain't right."

"Should be a nice set. What's matter with it?" Ben Kelsey turned his chair from his ledger. Archie opened the box toward him, and his eyes went wide. "No kidding that's not right! I have no idea how that--oh, dear. It's too close to Christmas to get you a new one of those even if you wanted one just like it."

"I don't think I would anyhow. What else you got in a decent train?"

"That was the only train set I had. Let me give you the money back. Can you run that down to the hobby and bike shop? They're actual dealers so they'll return it for me, and I know they've got some nice stuff from another new company. Let me write Mutt a note. He'll give you a good deal while they find out what happened to that thing."

Of course Archie knew the people at the bike and hobby store. Mutt Murdoch was out front behind the counter, feet propped up over a display of a couple of dolls and a toy car, while the liniment bottling went on. "Mutt, you ain't gonna believe this." Archie handed over the note and opened the box.

Mutt gave the bottle a funny look and put down the cough syrup he'd been trying out. He stared at the crumbled zinc. "Whoa! Can you imagine if you'd given that to Rocky and he'd seen *that* on Christmas morning? We only had one other set from them, real nice-looking, and a few parts broke on it the same way, only a few, though. They sent us new ones. It's the metal itself; the way it was cast didn't work. They say they'll fix what breaks, so I can send away, but it won't get back in time."

“That’s why he gave me a refund and said you could handle it for him. You got anything else my boy would like?”

Mutt lifted down a half-asleep engine and cars. “This is pretty, and get a hold of that engine there. No matter if Rocky is rough with his toys, he’s not going to break that one. ‘S built like a tank.” Archie left with the box, and if you look over there by the door where Sam and his son Nicky are looking at a handsome, sturdy tinplate engine, you’ll know that worked out all right for Tank, who’s on his fourth person now and still in the same family.

It didn’t go so well for the pieces. By the time Mutt got around to sending for parts, the company was in bankruptcy court because so many people needed to fix their busted to dust engines. The company apologized and said they hoped they’d be able to send parts later, and they did try, but the way things were in the country meant it didn’t happen. After awhile, Mutt gave up and let people buy the cars to get something out of it, and Mutt, who wasn’t very tall, shoved the box with its broken engine way to the back of the top shelf up against the wall and forgot about it.

When things got better on the railroad and Mutt went back to work there, he sold his share of the hobby shop to Fred and Myrna Harvey, and they weren’t any taller than Mutt was. Because the box was too far up and back for them to notice, some years it was behind a carton of model airplane kits and sometimes under a tray of little battleships and eventually there were toy rockets piled on top of it. That’s where it was on the day Bert and Trish came in the back door for their first whole day of owning the shop. “All ours now,” she said. “First thing we need to do is find out what we have.”

“First thing we need to do is get our heads examined,” Bert growled. He was using a crutch on one side because his new leg needed a tuneup. “Nobody in their right mind takes on a loan for anyplace this beat up.”

“I don’t blame the Harveys for not being able to keep everything perfect. He’s almost eighty and she can’t be too far behind. Hang onto the ladder while I see what’s up high. I couldn’t get to it the other day when I took inventory of what I can see.”

“Nah, I know you and heights. Lemme try to get up there.” She didn’t argue a bit. For one thing, he was right about her not

being fond of climbing on stuff, and for another, it was the first time since he'd come home from the VA hospital that he'd tried to do more than limp a few feet, sit down and complain. She held the ladder and the crutch while Bert hauled himself up, mostly on his arms, and hung off the top shelf. "Hmpf. Anybody want an Apollo 13 moon landing set? Got a batch of Nixon action figures with Spiro Agnew accessories. Here's a zeppelin kit." Most of the stuff that had taken root on the top shelf had a reason to be there, and Bert of all people should have caught on, but just for a minute, when he saw the label on the last box all the way to the back, he forgot to be a pessimist. "Oh, man, look at this!"

He came down off the ladder faster than he could have fallen and hurried to whip the lid off the box. "I've been looking for this exact--" and he saw what was left, what had been left so long ago. "Nooooo! Not again!"

It was a couple of years before Trish got the rest of that story. While she was moving stuff into their new house, she found a train box with a paper bag of sparkling pieces of zinc with a few bigger shards. The recognizable parts looked like bits of an engine shell. A motor block was stirred in with the mix, clean and recognizable, but with shattered wheels. There was a coupler, she thought, and bits of turquoise paint. "Hey Bert..."

That dark cloud look covered his face. "I see it."

"Yeah, but what is it?"

"Zinc pest, what's it look like?"

Jesse wasn't back yet, so only Trish could annoy answers out of him. "And?"

When he whumps like that, he sounds like he's trying to start a long train of cars on a hard grade. I expect to see soot shoot out of his ears. "My granddad got it as pay for doing some work around a store that was closing. Dad was a teenager, so he never took it out and played with it. I was supposed to get it and I did. I opened the box and it looked like that."

She knew that was all the explanation she was apt to get, so she put the paper bag aside. On the day she picked up good old King's ashes from the vet, the idea came to her to get the same kind of box as his, put the glued-together wheel on the lid and pour in the pieces of both engines. When she got them out to combine

them, she picked out everything that wasn't dust. There wasn't a whole engine, or even most of one, between them, but she began to get an idea of what they could have been, and she liked it. Over the years, she'd get a glimpse now and then at a train show. She set aside the parts that were good, and when she put them in a shoebox under the bench at the shop, she said "Someday. Don't know when or how, but I promise, someday."

Trish's trouble was that not that many engines like Bert's were made to begin with. A lot had bad spots that matched; maybe all the cabs were bad one month, motor blocks the next, drivers after that. Luck of the draw gave a few all good parts. Most got some that were usable and a lot that weren't, and some instantly fell into sparkly pieces.

Trish got in the habit of wandering around the big shows they went to, taking the long way back from a bathroom break or hot dog run to cruise the boxes of stuff under tables. There were a lot of sad stories in there. All she was looking for were the right ones.

The shell had lost its engine and cab long ago. Its paint was as shiny as the day it had left the factory, barring a few scratches from years of neglect.

The set had been on a truck the day it was boxed up. Someone at the hobby shop said, muffled through the cardboard, "This goes to Mr. Warfield's office right away."

"Yes, sir!" The delivery boy scooped up the box and plopped it into his bike basket. He flew off through the Newark traffic, dinging his bell whenever he had to swerve around a pedestrian. "Man, it's Mr. Warfield. This ought to be a great tip."

Newsboys held up papers and called out headlines while businessmen plodded past, eyes downcast. The store boss had explained that four years of being poor had ground them down; the boy didn't know why, because he'd never been anything else. The fourth floor walk-up where he lived had never been fancy and never would be. He was happy if the rent was paid and there was food on the table, not that he took either of those for granted.

"Hi, Mr. Jackson." He walked his bike into the lobby and left it beside the security guard. "Mr. Warfield should be expecting me."

“Gotcha,” said the elevator operator, already holding the door open. “Train, huh?”

“I don’t know why it was an emergency, but they sent me right over.”

“Little guy’s birthday, I think.--Here you go.”

The carpet on the top floor was lush, the lighting low. The receptionist, a kind-faced woman who looked about thirty, nodded to him. “I’ll take that, and here’s something for your trouble. Wait a minute in case there’s any problem.” He tucked the tip into his pocket while she took the set back to the office.

In a moment, there was a lot of shouting down the hall, some of it directed at the delivery boy, then a great deal of it on the phone. The receptionist scurried back. “Oh, dear. It appears this one is broken. He’s, ah, letting them know about it.”

Judging by the popping off down the hall, the delivery kid decided his presence in the building wasn’t wanted or needed and might not be safe. He turned to slink away, still bewildered. Metal trains didn’t just break, and how could it have been his fault? He didn’t know a small indignant voice was sticking up for him.

“Young man?” He spun around. Mr. Warfield was before him, arms folded. He wasn’t all that old, straight, thin and stern.

“Yes, sir?”

“I just got off the phone with the people who made that train. It wasn’t your fault at all. I had no idea, they’re friends of mine, that’s why I wanted one of theirs, but they’ve had terrible problems and...What’s your name, son?”

“Tony, sir.”

“Come back to my office for a moment.”

Tony crammed his shaking hands deep into his pockets and followed down a dark-paneled hallway into a corner office with a huge polished desk. The set box was open, displaying a set of gleaming cars, shiny track, and a terrified turquoise engine shell...which was the only intact part of the locomotive. “Sir, I didn’t--I mean, how could it possibly--”

“Exactly. I asked you back here because I shouldn’t have shouted at you, even at a distance. I know the men who made these, but I had no idea...it’s a chemical problem of some sort. Isn’t that the oddest thing you’ve ever seen?”

He touched the brilliant shards of turquoise and silver where the cab had been. The metal looked almost like sugar cubes.

"Gosh, yes, sir. What did I do to it?"

"You? Maybe nothing. Whoever was unlucky enough to pick it up at the wrong time, that's all. I'm going to call your boss back and tell him I shot my mouth off without finding out what really happened." He turned around a picture. "This is my son."

"Cute kid, sir." He couldn't help noticing the other boy and girl in the picture. "Um..."

"We lost...the others...to diptheria this spring. Andrew nearly died too. He's getting well, finally, and I thought a train would help. I'll square it with your boss, but I would appreciate it very much if you would go to this address--" he handed over a sheet of paper, "and pick up what they'll have ready. The manager is going to inspect the new one personally and make sure it's all right. He and Milt and Julius don't deserve this rotten luck."

Tony swallowed the cold lump in his throat. "It doesn't sound like you and your wife did either, sir."

Mr. Warfield rearranged the picture gently. "It could be worse. We tell ourselves, every morning when he gets up and goes to school, that it could be worse. Four years ago, I took over my father-in-law's company when he was suddenly taken ill. Even when we lost him, he went happy because our future looked so, so bright. Anthony was four, Andrew was two, Mary was a new baby ... then October of 1929 came. We used to own our building. I rent this office. We used to have a thousand employees. We're down to twenty-nine. My receptionist is my secretary. She's also my wife. I have her back since Andrew was able to go to school this fall. It was better than sitting around the house alone, she says, and the work isn't too hard for her yet."

"Oh," Tony said. "At least he'll have a brother or sister."

"Exactly. Not Anthony, not Mary, nothing could replace them, ever. A new start. Like the company. We have orders in our order book again, not many yet but steady and from solid companies, a start. The rent's paid on our factory and there's food on the table at night. And we still have Andrew. I have no reason to yell at anyone when we've been so very blessed." He looked down at the desk, half-smiled. "So, can you run over to that place in the next block and fetch Andrew a train that isn't quite so...crunchy?"

An engineer met Tony at the factory door with a set box, but seemed too sad to talk about it much. He could see piles of glittering metal in bins, bits of paint still showing. When Tony handed over the box with its shattered engine, the engineer set the cars aside and shook the bits out almost reverently, then carried the shell away.

Mrs. Warfield took the set back to the office, motioning Tony to come with her, and all three of them opened the box; perfection shone within. "That should do very nicely," Mr. Warfield said, and pulled a five-dollar bill from his pocket. "Tony, here."

"Oh, sir, you already--"

"Above and beyond the usual service, making you run over there. Now, I told your boss to ignore everything I said, but just in case, you've delivered things to us several times, and you're always prompt and courteous. In case you need a better job one of these days when you're a little older, and assuming I'll be able to offer in a year or so, keep us in mind, would you?"

"I'll be sure to ask here first." He took the lift back down to collect his bike. The rent would be paid, there'd be food on the table, and what else was there to want?

As for the shell, it was on a shelf with others for a while; a few of the rest got mailed away, a few got put together with other salvaged parts. "I can't be sure what batch that one was from," the engineer said one afternoon. "It looks fine, and if we could be sure-but there's no such thing as being too careful now."

The lonely shell waited there until the day when the last workers left and the auctioneer came. From there, he had a place on a warehouse shelf, then a hobby shop's parts box where a few small scuffs marred his paint. When new trains came into the shop after the war, he was shoved into a bin under a bench, forgotten for many years while others came and went.

Once again, the last workmen left the shop, and an auctioneer came. The box from the bench went off as a lot without anyone looking too closely, and the whole thing was on the floor at a big fall show when a pretty blonde lady stuck her head under the edge of the table, said "Wow!" and whipped the shell out of his jail.

The turquoise engine's motor block was intact, even the armature, despite the scale miles he'd run in the last ten years. The

kid he had acquired at Christmas in 1933 had been exceptionally careful, so the big crack that had popped up surprised everyone. "Les, are you sure you didn't bump it or something?" his mother asked, though she already knew the answer.

"I'm sure. I got up to get a sandwich, and when I came back there was a little crack, so I picked it up and it went like this. It doesn't seem to be getting any worse."

"Let me see here," Les' dad had said. "Oh, look!--if it weren't your new train, it would be really interesting. Look here..." and he had taken a magnifying glass from his pocket so they could look at the unnatural glitter.

From then on, Les had to show the shiny streak to everyone who played with the train. His dad brought home some epoxy from the lab and patched the inside of the shell so it wouldn't get worse, and it hadn't, not much anyway. A kid who roughhoused with things might have broken the engine long ago, but Les, in his gentle way, handled it so carefully that it kept running with the shell on until a wheel cracked off.

That very morning, Les had gone to the shelf and taken the engine down. He hadn't had the chance to run for a long while, and he was briefly hopeful of repairs, but the dealer didn't have the layout any more and the scrap bin was full. "I guess it's time to hand this and my old rusty track over for the drive," Les said without enthusiasm. "Can't take it with me and the poor old guy can't run any more."

"You shipping out, Les?"

"Tomorrow morning. I gave the cars to Leroy and his brother, but they wouldn't be able to run this. See if there are any good parts. I sure had a good time with it."

"Can I ask what you'll be doing?"

"They have me working in a lab. Believe it or not, I get to grow tons of bread mold and try to filter enough of the good stuff from it to get it to the wounded. If you saw what it can do you'd be amazed! I remember thinking Dad must have a really boring job in the lab, and now look at me."

"Yeah, look at you. Ya grew up too fast, ya know that? Come back and see me, right?" The dealer let Les walk out the door before he dropped the engine in the bin. When he did, the cab shattered and the wheels fell off.

The motor block wished Les all the good things he could find. It was hard lying in the pile of thrown-away toys. Most of them had owners overseas somewhere. The dealer looked in every now and then, muttering in a distressed way: "This don't seem right. There's metal in there nobody can use for the war, so why do kids have to do without a nice engine like that just because? If I take it out, what's it to anybody? And there's that nice old thing. I remember the day Les' dad bought it for him. Sure the shell has had it, but the rest of it has some parts left. How about I scrounge and see if I can get the same weight in something else?" That was why a 224 found herself on a shelf in the back, replaced by the same weight in a broken cast-iron Dutch oven, and the motor block got a lift courtesy of the remains of a store awning that had twisted in a windstorm. "Not too many of these motor blocks were good. This one's been run a bunch, but what if I rebuild it? Not like I got anything else to do when there's nothing to sell but paper train dolls." Clean and shiny, the motor took a place on the shelf again.

After the war, new trains filled the shelves at the store, and they barely had time to say hello before someone was running out the door with them. The motor block lost his shelf space and sat in the back for thirty-five years until, one day, a familiar voice came to the stockroom. "Sorry to be selling out?"

"Yes, but no. It's high time I retired while Mary and I can still have some fun, and with prices the way they are all this stuff should go for a bundle if we go south with it. Heh! Remember this, Les?"

"Ah, look. It's works out of an old engine like mine."

"Is your old one. I didn't have the heart to scrap it when you left. Want it?"

Les! The careful hands picked up the motor block fondly. "We just bought the grandkids a new one, but man, does that bring back some good times. If I take it home, it's just going to sit. Take it down there and see if somebody's scared up the rest of an engine for it. This old thing deserves to run again."

Steel knows some goodbyes are much happier than others. He was on the corner of a table at a busy train show when a pretty blonde lady bumped into it, almost knocked the motor block down, caught him halfway and said "Oh, there's one!"

“So what’s the holdup?” her sister Beth asked her one day when no one was in the hobby shop, a situation that was far too usual in that hard year.

Trish sealed another package to mail out. “Nothing. I have the parts. I haven’t taken the time.”

Beth swung a hand around at the quiet store, the sign on the door announcing that they closed at three now. “Don’t tell me you’ve been too busy.”

“Eh... The cab, I think it’s okay. This shell is from a junk box at the big show. I was able to get matching paint. Wheels, I got repros. The motor block is perfect. The cars are all clean and touched up where they needed it. All that’s waiting is me.”

Beth gave her that look that says *You sure your drivers aren’t out of quarter there?* “You can put more complicated stuff than that together. I watched you with that broken book chakra What’s-her-name brought from India without instructions. If you got that to spin cotton when she had half of it bent and the rest put together upside down, this is no problem.”

“I can put it together, but will it fall apart after I do? I can’t imagine him opening his third promises-but-no-train box.”

Beth snapped her fingers. “I can help with that. Gimme them parts, girl. We have all kinds of fun test equipment on the hill.”

“But won’t it damage--”

“They ultrasound steam engine boilers to find cracks. This is no different. I have some other tricks handy if we need ’em.” She gathered up the parts and disappeared to campus with them.

The parts were getting acquainted, though they weren’t sure what on earth was going on with all the humming scanners and X-ray machines. The heap of accumulated sadness assumed they would be tossed away when the testing finished. The whole collection was surprised when Beth laid the parts out in the same order in which Trish had arranged them, covered them neatly and carried them back to the hobby shop. “Now’s your chance. Bert’s up at the VA, right?”

“Yeah, then he’s going to help Jesse move. I’m glad he got the JB&S job. It was bad enough when he and Misty got divorced, but after the accident...yeah, he and the kid need a change of scenery.”

“They going to be okay this year? Toys, and stuff?”

"I hope. If we weren't so busted I'd see if he wanted to help here. Everything we have for Christmas goes for the kids. You know how it's been with the mines laying off and the mills where you never know from one payday to the next. It makes me wonder what's going to be left of the whole town. I used a bunch of the yarn that wasn't selling to do presents. The mortgage is paid, this place is okay for now, Bert has his disability pension, we could sell out the store stock if we had to-- the rest of the country is fine, prices on trains especially are way up--we're not going to starve, and that should be something."

"It's a lot, considering."

"Maybe, but I had it in my head that if we worked really hard for five years we'd be good when we were thirty. We're thirty-two and if things don't pick up I'm going to have to find another job. This whole year has just been so...disappointing, I guess."

"Then un-disappoint it, quick, while you have the chance and I'm around to run the register if anybody comes in. You picked good ones, sis. Not a crack in the bunch. I even mounted the repro wheels to give you a head start, because we have that precision press. If Bert breaks this one, it's his temper, not zinc pest."

Trish reached for her tools and still hesitated. The parts were thinking *Well?* still not sure what was happening. "I guess," she said, and stood the motor block on its new wheels.

Getting the wheels quartered could have been a chore, but they seemed eager to cooperate. *A chance. That's all we ever wanted. Another chance.* Even after Trish test-ran the block on its new wheels, even after the shell and cab met the block and the new shoes, she didn't put the shiny turquoise engine back in the box for a long while; there was a yarn box under the counter big enough to hold it with a few skeins piled on top for camouflage.

It was Christmas Eve, and Bert had run an errand, before she took out the train box, stuffed the engine into the compartment that had always waited, and wrapped it fast before he got back. "It'll work or it won't. The way this year's going, it won't. Christmas Eve and that's all I got to give him besides a few lousy socks."

On Christmas morning, they unwrapped the baby's toys for her and let Rob rip into his stack of plastic. Bert handed Trish a set of double-pointed needles he'd made for her and a bottle of

perfume he'd almost wrapped. She gave him the socks and the train box, which puzzled him. "That's the old box from Grandpa's dead train."

"Yeah, well, take a look. It's a little something I put together."

He didn't cuss. He didn't even talk. He was still staring open-mouthed at the shiny turquoise engine when little Rob wobbled over and poked at it with one finger. Bert and Trish waited for the cracks to start. They didn't.

"Ooh pretty! Can we run train?" Rob grabbed it and tried to shove it onto the tracks under the tree. "Grandpa train?"

"How did he...How did you..." Trish gave him the rundown on where this and that had been all its life. The kid kept up a spirited attempt to haul the engine off. Bert threw up his hands. "Ain't gonna ask. Yer right, kid, there's even some shiny track here and this transformer looks like it won't electrocute us both."

All three of them matched up the pieces of track and set the power to it. Fifty years of waiting, fifty years of disappointment; none of that mattered when one small boy lunged for the handle and sent the new old engine off at scale takeoff velocity. He lunged around the curves, tipping until he nearly lifted off the inner rail. "Wheel!"

"Yeah, whee." Bert nudged back the power just enough to hold the rails. He eased off the couch and stretched out on the floor with the boy. "Ain't that something."

"Careful, Rob--" Trish began, and Bert shushed her.

"Nah, you don't make junk. If all these parts waited this long, they won't break on our account."

He couldn't have heard the answer, but it amounted to *Home. Finally, home.*

12: Three Wishes

When some people break down, they can't be fixed, and no one hates that more than the doctors trying to fix them. When Doc Green ran out of steam a long time ago, a big chunk of his estate went to setting up the Three Wishes Foundation, where anybody who might be about to outlaw can wish for three ways to have fun. They've sent people to Atlantic City, brought grandparents in from far away to see a sick kid, gone to a lot of games in Pittsburgh and arranged for rides on riverboats and in helicopters. Of course the museum and the railroad are part of it, because a lot of people wish they could ride up front in a steam engine.

On those steam days, our crew is as happy to be with us as usual, but they're awfully low in their boilers and don't crack as many jokes. Sooner or later, a car comes into the lot--or a van, a lot of the time it's a van with a wheelchair lift--and a family brings a patient to the shop to see whoever's in steam. I don't like to talk about it, but sometimes it's one of the last few days before they have to leave, and we all try really hard to make it a good one.

One of the first steam days of the year back then was a Three Wishes special. I could tell because Ellie was polishing everything around the cab extra hard, wiping down the least trace of dust when she oiled around. "You're gonna scrub the paint right off," Pete said.

"I don't know how much cleaner I can get it, and it's real important for both of them not to be around a lot of germs." She took another swipe at my throttle. "I guess they both volunteered for this experimental chemo, and it's pretty rough. They knew going in that it was likely too late to cure them, but it's a big breakthrough and what they found out might help other people. Is that them? Bet it is."

Sure enough, a van pulled up to the last parking space next to the tracks. A minute later, a Buick joined it. The van had the wheelchair lift and all, but the dad who had been driving leaned into the back and lifted out the kid instead. We could see why; he was all out of steam even to sit up for long. Thin and frail as he was, he would have passed for a whole lot younger than seven. "I don't know how good an idea this is, Alice," Ellie muttered, and I had to agree.

Before either of us could say what we were thinking, the woman driving the Buick went around to the passenger side and argued with whoever was in there. It wasn't an argument where anybody was apt to get punched; it was more a yes-I-can, no-you-shouldn't, and yes-I-can won out because the passenger hauled himself up on the door. His self

was stronger than his beat-up body, so he dragged it over to the crew. He was old enough to be looking forward to retirement, but, he explained, it didn't look as if he'd get there. "Almost didn't get *here*! This new chemo they're trying knocked the stuffings out of me. Looks like it did the same for you, too, huh? My name's Matt. What's yours?"

"Matt, too," the receipt for a kid said, still not lifting his head from his dad's shoulder. "You're right about the chemo. I just had my last one last week."

They compared notes. They had the same thing that hadn't stood any chance of getting fixed until lately. Big Matt's three wishes had been to go to one more Ohio State football game, take a riverboat ride and ride in the cab of a steam engine. Little Matt's family had wanted him to see one of the big theme parks, but he was too weak and got a visit from the characters while he was in the hospital instead. The cab ride was his biggest wish for himself. He'd told his people that he hadn't been able to think of a third wish.

Big Matt was able to get up in the cab. Little Matt let his dad carry him to save his energy for getting on Ellie's lap. She let him put his hand on my throttle while she pulled it back, because there was no way he could have handled it himself. When we got up to the top at River Heights, she picked him up and waved Big Matt into her seat.

It didn't take as much coaching as you'd think to get us down the hill, and it turned out he'd hired out on a big East Coast railroad just before all the layoffs at the end of steam. "Always wanted a job there. I got almost two years in before they dieselized and laid a lot of us off. I went to college and the bank's been a really good living, but I always wondered what it would have been like. Now I know," he said with a tired grin. "How about you, Little Matt?"

"Now I know, too." He closed his eyes and laid his down on his dad's shoulder again, but this time he was grinning ear to ear. "I got to run a steam engine. I got to run big blue Alice."

All kinds of things happen over the run of a summer, then fall work week and leaf specials come and go. The last runs go out at Christmas, or whatever people want to celebrate when the days get short and the dark seems like a lot to put up with. A couple of weeks before Christmas the mailbox fills up with bright-colored cards. Ellie picked up the stack one afternoon to start hanging them up on the crew room wall. Halfway through she gasped, laughed and held up a card. "Will you look at that!"

Little Matt didn't look skinny and broken any more. He was kneeling on a living room floor beneath a tree, watching a model layout, and we realized the train was in charge of the little blue Geep Pete had given him when he left. He still didn't have much in the hair department,

but Ellie told us that was only boiler jacketing and would be replaced when his big rebuild finished up. Everybody admired the card and she tacked it up where it was hard to miss. She kept opening the rest and stopped at one that had a check for the museum in it. "That ain't all! This one is from Big Matt."

So it was, and he was looking a good bit better, too. The note said he wasn't on the scrap list any more and would stop by with his family during the steam runs, and Little Matt and his people would be joining them.

One steam afternoon, the car showed up, and the van showed up, but there was no wheelchair lift. Big Matt was driving the same car and had the same wife, both of whom were a lot happier than they'd been the year before. Little Matt bounced right out of the back seat of the minivan and ran to meet him in the middle of the parking lot, both of them waving their arms and trying to talk a mile a minute. Little Matt had brought his engine, and they rushed in to see if they could run him on the big layout's HO level while Mrs. Big Matt and Little Matt's parents, brother and sister stood by shaking their heads. "I never thought he'd be here this Christmas, let alone like that!" Little Matt's mother said. "The chemo was so hard on him, but it worked. There's no trace left."

Mrs. Big Matt agreed. "That's what Matt's doctor says, too. The results are wonderful and now they're even getting the side effects down. It's just amazing. No one knows, from here, but considering..." I didn't blame her for getting leaky.

Things were backed up a little in the yard, and I heard Ellie talking to the assistant yardmaster about clearing up some of it while the steam run was out. They figured if they hooked up two trains that needed to leave about the same time, and let them get out of town to the big switch to go their separate ways off the hill, it would be easier on everybody (the diesels agreed, not that Ellie or the yardmaster would admit they knew.) They took care of the shuffling while we took our guests up the hill in my cab. Little Matt still needed to run the train from Ellie's lap, but he had grown taller and Big Matt had learned a lot-- "I read that book you gave me and tried to remember it all," he told Ellie.

"Looks to me like you memorized it," Pete said. "Too bad you didn't come around here while we still had regular service steam. Guess it worked out for you, though."

"I liked my corner office and the secretary that made me coffee. Married her, in fact. Got four good kids out of the deal and seven grands so far. When I want to take off and do something like this, I can, and I'll have at least a little more time. It's happening now, and isn't that what matters?"

When we got back to the yards, we parked outside the museum by the platform. The families went in to have fun with the stuff inside while I rested between trips. The Matts came out trackside close to me. "Think anybody noticed we snuck out?" the little one asked.

"I doubt it. So, how are you really?"

Little Matt set his engineer's cap further back on his head so he could scratch the short hair growing in. "I can go to school now. Funny, but I don't mind much. It's like you were saying about taking out the garbage. Who knew normal would be okay?"

Big Matt looked around. "They told me they can't tell when or if it'll come back. With the old chemo, you got six months, maybe a year, and it never really went away. This, they don't know. Could come back in six months, a year or never. That what they told you?"

"Yeah. I'm not supposed to know. I heard Mom and Dad one night when I got up to get a drink of water. You look pretty good. Are you?"

"If I didn't know I'd been sick, I'd figure I was just getting older." Big Matt pulled a blurry black and white picture from his pocket. "You can't make out much, but this is my new granddaughter. She'll be born around early April and there's no reason I shouldn't get to see her."

"I sure hope." Little Matt looked down the rails at the trains oozing toward us. "Mom and Dad have these books they started when we were babies. There's room to write about every grade in school and where you go to college and if you get married, even. Cody's will be full, and Mimi's will, but there'll be all those blank pages in mine if they keep it after...That's helpers, isn't it?"

"Hm. Sounds kind of loud for helpers, but it's hard to tell." Big Matt looked off at the distant train, too. "What if there's not an 'after'? What if it really did work? Nobody knows it doesn't, only that the old stuff wouldn't."

"I never made my third wish because that is my third wish, only nobody down here can do that one. It seems like too much to ask."

"What's the use of asking if you only ask for little things?" The headlight was crawling up the curve to get onto the mainline. "When I was a kid, they used to tell us if you counted the cars in a train, that's how many more years you'd live."

"Not that it means anything, but...what if it's just helpers?"

"Then we'll look for a better superstition. Nope, it's not helpers, I see at least a couple of coal hoppers." Big Matt leaned on the railing and started counting out loud. After a few cars, Little Matt joined him. When they got past the first ten, they looked at each other wide-eyed, but didn't stop. By the time the power on the second train came by, they had run

out of fingers, toes, and in Big Matt's case, hairs on his head. "There's mid-train power, so does the rest count?"

Little Matt had no doubts. "I'm counting every one of 'em!"

At two hundred and twenty, the actual helper set on the back of the train eased by them a few tracks away. They looked at each other, half breathless, and shook their heads. "I imagine most of those are yours," Big Matt said. "I had a fifty-eight-year head start on you."

"There's a chance they might use up some of the pages in that book." Little Matt turned around because his dad was calling for him. "Dad, you should have seen the size of that train!"

When the museum was ready to close and my fire was low, the Matts helped put me away for the night. Big Matt actually backed me up to the roundhouse door. When they got down that time to walk to their cars, they shook hands on a deal to be back next year.

And they were, the next year, and the next, and the next. In fact, today's a steam day, and there's a blue diesel coming down through the yards with a sand train. The Dash up front is slowing down for a crew change. He made another stop at the far end to pick up a passenger. It took a little doing, because Big Matt just turned ninety and his legs aren't what they used to be.

It'll take the engineer a couple of minutes to sign off on his run. That gives the crowd of grandchildren and the little great-grands time to help Grandpa Matt down from the Dash's cab and up to mine. Ellie is retired from full-time railroading now herself, but she still runs steam on museum days. "You running her?"

"If I have enough help," Big Matt grins.

Little Matt, who isn't little, hands up his toddler son and swings himself up on his burly arms. "You ain't sitting on my lap, old man. Ellie, I don't think I could fit on yours any more."

"Funny how that happens," she says, and stands back, because Little Matt works here and knows what he's doing. He had pretty decent teachers, after all. Twenty-five years of watching her handle me up and down grades, and almost fourteen years of being around diesels and getting a handle on them, has made him smooth when he picks up the cars.

The only thing he has to watch, even when he lets Big Matt have me for a while, is that his little boy keeps his goggles on. It wouldn't do for him to get hurt or sick, after all, even if both Matts have a lot of those two hundred and twenty cars left if anybody needs them.

