

[PR]



Ponder Review

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A SINGLE LOOP TRAIN

When I was a kid, every year Smiley's Auto Repair displayed an electric train in its holiday window. The layout consisted of a single loop track, a mirror lake, two or three little houses, and artificial snow. A black engine pulled three freight cars and a caboose. Round and round it went, its operation spellbinding to a kid who wanted nothing more than a train of his own. Pretty elementary, but it kept me glued to the window, starting when I was six or seven. Each year I hoped Santa might bring me a train; just a simple one would be fine. But Santa never delivered. When I got a bit older, I asked my parents for a train at birthdays and at Christmas. But the answer never varied—too expensive. Maybe next year. It seemed a derelict hope.

Each holiday season, I lingered outside Smiley's window and monitored the train. And then, when I was fourteen, a Lionel train finally appeared under our little tree. It was a simple O-27 Gauge track with a dozen or so straight and curved sections of three rail track. Like the train in the window, it had an engine, three freight cars, and a caboose. A transformer plugged into the wall, and wires carried power through a clip onto the track.

Contemplating the train and the tree and listening to Christmas music on the radio confirmed my imagined notion of what Christmas should be like, at least as depicted on the little black and white television set someone had given us. To be honest, however, the time had passed when the train could generate much enthusiasm or gratitude. I was too old. It had come too late. Still, I had the train and my parents felt good; they'd fulfilled my long-standing wish.

Christmas Eve arrived cold, crisp, and clear. I'd just finished setting up the track on our linoleum floor, ready to give the train its first run, when there came a pounding on the front door. "Merry Christmas. Anybody home?" The booming voice belonged to Jim McCarthy, the foreman of the line crew, and my dad's boss. When my dad opened the door, Jim surged into the living room, tossed off his jacket, and plunked down on our two-cushion sofa.

Jim was a big man, broad-shouldered, large-nosed and red-faced. He filled the room with his presence. He had on a shirt with two or three buttons undone and a red tie that had gone askew. His liquor-laden breath made you want to take cover.

"Wearing my tie for church, you know," he said and surrendered himself

to a rolling belch. He'd launched his holiday celebration with an extended visit to the local Legion Club.

He was smiling a lot as he sat there; maybe grinning better describes it. "You got anything to drink?" he asked. "I could sure use a snort."

My mother's whispered comment summed up the obvious. "He's really drunk." She looked at my dad. He nodded.

"I think there's some Old Crow on the shelf over the sink."

"Now, that's just what I needed," Jim said. He ignored the proffered glass and took a gurgling swig from the bottle. "Just dropped in to say Merry Christmas. Then, I'll be on my way." He took another swig. My mother looked worried. Word was, when he was drinking, Jim could go from happy to mean at one fell swoop.

Just then, through the dazzle of intoxication, he spotted the train. "Well, what do you know, a Lionel train?"

Ungainly in his moves, he stood up, and then dropped to his knees next to the track. He manipulated the transformer handle, and the train began its obligatory run. Jim said nothing. He seemed mesmerized by the train as it completed one circuit after another. This went on for five minutes. During that time, he mostly mumbled to himself. "Why's the caboose always red?" We no longer seemed to exist for him. At one point, the train careened off the track. Jim fumbled trying to put it back, but he seemed equipped only with calloused thumbs. His swearing drove my mother from the room. My dad quickly put the train back. It resumed its run. Engineer Jim again monitored its travel with fascination.

"It's a Lionel," he said. "Damned if isn't a Lionel." Then to nobody in particular, he added, "That's the best one, you know." Was he bleary-eyed or teary-eyed. It was hard to tell?

I whispered, "Dad, it's my train. I haven't even had a turn." I suppose I sounded whiny.

"Shut up," was all the consolation I received.

This situation persisted for another ten minutes. Then, when the train jumped the track a second time, Jim struggled to his feet. To say he was unsteady is an understatement.

"Well, folks I've gotta go. Cab's waiting," he said. He swayed. "Where's my coat? Gotta have a coat."

My dad held the coat for him, but Jim couldn't get his arms in the sleeves. Then came the worst of it, he staggered two or three steps and toppled over. His boot crushed the caboose, and as he landed, he destroyed the freight and gondola cars. The track was twisted and broken in several places.

It took both my parents, one on each arm, to steer him out the door and into a waiting taxi.

The train was wrecked. "Why did he have to do that?" I said. "I've waited

[PR] Fall 2021

a long time, and he spoiled everything.”

My dad surveyed the wreckage and said to me, “You know, I think he’s waited a lot longer than you.” That’s all he said.

We put the train in a box. Later, my mother delivered it to a neighbor who said he would repair it and give it to his boy. He said it reminded him of the one in Smiley’s show window.