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A Train Ride Through the Garden

I hear the roar of the lawnmower outside. Dad is busy grooming the grass and maintaining the yard for his garden railroad. Most spring and summer days he can be found outside lying on the grass, working on his masterpiece. Dad's garden railroad fascinates me because it is so intricate and detailed. The amount of effort and time he puts into it are impressive. I feel tremendous pride in his accomplishment. The railroad runs along the entire East and North edges of my parents' property and ventures into a central flower bed as it weaves through the perfectly manicured landscape of my parents' yard.

I decide to go outside to see the latest additions and changes Dad has made to the Lilliputian fantasy world he has created. Dad's garden railroad starts at La Puerta del Sotano, literally "the door of the basement." Of course, La Puerta yard is just outside the lower basement door. Dad is funny that way. He enjoys putting humor and oddity into his model railroad. An observant visitor will notice many unique and curious features, such as the "Dinosaur Rentals" sign between Redwood City and Boomtown that guides potential customers to Auntie Em's farm where they can hire a brontosaurus or triceratops for the day. All of Dad's dinosaurs are herbivores.

The first thing I see is a sign that reads "Gunnison: 50.902 miles West." Dad tells me it refers to Gunnison, Colorado and that he is modeling a fictional, narrow gauge

branch of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad in that state. His model is set in the 1950's and 1960's. There is always a mix of realism and fantasy in his handiwork.

I ask Dad if I can run the train. This is a special honor bestowed on the worthy and well trained. There are only a handful of people who are allowed to run the trains. Thankfully, I am one. Dad is protective of his railroad. It is his creation, and he does not want any harm to come to it. He even begrudges the local wildlife their treks through the yard. The deer, raccoons, cats, and dogs are notorious for knocking things over and disturbing Dad's utopian world. This protectiveness reminds me of his insistence that my sisters and I wear seatbelts when it was still legal to ride freely.

As Dad goes into the basement to retrieve a train for me to run, I find myself looking at La Puerta del Sotano more closely. I immediately notice a beverage coaster that has been painted to match the deck post it is mounted on. Dad's practical side shows through. The coaster hovers above the track, daring people to place a can of Pepsi One on it. God forbid it falls into La Puerta. I also discover a train height maximum indicator projecting out from the post to warn visiting operators of the height restrictions on Dad's garden railroad. A tunnel and other low-clearance areas are ahead, so beware. Dad is intensely thorough and precise.

A nearby, full-size Rhododendron has been fitted into the landscape of the railroad, for practical reasons. The Rhodie was there long before the railroad. One of its main branches is growing between two of the tracks in La Puerta yard. I laugh at this reminder that Dad's fantasy exists in the real world.

One thing that always amazes me is Dad's re-use of everyday household items in his railroad. I see an example in La Puerta: a spent "green scritch" that started out

scrubbing dishes in the kitchen has a new job as part of the support network along the track. It has been painted brown, just in case it peeks through the gravel and shows itself.

Dad is creative with his recycling. Absolutely everything that can be recycled is recycled in my parents' home. Occasionally, Dad will convert items to raw materials for use in the railroad. For example, he uses the metal handles on Chinese food take-home containers as handrails on passenger cars. He also paints things of all shapes and sizes and uses them as freight for his freight trains.

Dad arrives with a train for my imaginary voyage. The train he has chosen for me is a passenger train with D&RGW yellow cars, mustard to me, and a black and silver steam engine. The cars are full of passengers of all kinds waiting to travel to points East. I see men, women, and children, some sitting, some standing. All have been meticulously placed for optimal realism.

Departure is only moments away. I press the green-painted button on the handheld controller and the train begins its journey, slowly at first. The more I press the button, the faster the train accelerates. This particular engine is equipped with a sound system and I hear the chuff, chuff, chuff of the steam as it is pulling out of the yard. The train passes a small engine shop with a distinctly argent roof and five busy railroad workers. Two ebony and silver steam engines are parked behind the shop, waiting to be scrapped. After the engine shop are a coaling tower, a sand tower and a water tower, their systems of chains and weights ready to deliver the much-needed supplies. In my mind this train is already full of coal, sand, and water, so it doesn't stop. The train also passes a TARDIS from the world of Dr. Who, one of Dad's favorite TV shows. Dad has painted a red English phone booth blue and added a light on top to create his TARDIS.

Beyond the TARDIS is La Puerta Station, complete with passengers waiting for the train. Here I spot another of Dad's ingenious use of everyday leftovers. He has spread used coffee grounds around buildings to form roadbeds and walking paths. I slow the train to a stop and pick up the eager passengers. The train is soon on its way again. I walk up the steps to follow it, and I hear the crunch of the gravel under my feet.

As the train rounds the pansy bed, a tunnel comes into view. Dad has fashioned the tunnel out of two large, country mailboxes, attached end-to-end. His innovation and invention continually amaze me. I notice a statue of St. Francis atop a hill next to the tunnel. It reminds me of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Rio de Janeiro as it looks down on the train and its passengers. I also see a black bear and a moose on the dirt and foliage covered mound above the tunnel. The bear is on his hind legs, and I wonder if an attack is imminent. To the left of the track and just before the tunnel is a whimsical home, made from a recycled wine-barrel-shaped piggy bank that belonged to my grandfather when he was a child. The bank is lying on its side. Its metal rings are rusting, and Dad has added a black metal chimney to what is now the roof of the dwelling.

My train proceeds through the tunnel and passes another hill that's covered with scale trees. I know one thing the casual observer does not. The hill hides an old tree stump. Dad has mounded dirt around the decaying stump and created a feature for his garden railroad. A one and a half foot tall fire watchtower is perched at the top of the hill. A lonely forest ranger is positioned inside to keep careful watch over the trees below. I notice upon closer inspection that some of the trees he's guarding are dead, and Dad has painted them to match the living trees so they look like they are still alive. This

causes me to smile. The dwarf trees must have been somewhat expensive, and Dad didn't want to waste them. Always reusing, always recycling.

The train continues on its journey. It approaches an old railway station that has recently collapsed into a multitude of pieces. For some reason Dad has chosen to leave it where it landed. He explains to me later that there has been a "condemned" sign next to this particular station for some time. Ah, the details! I had not noticed the sign in all these years.

The train crosses a walking path created for the life-sized people who visit Dad's garden railroad. It is on its way to Redwood City, Boomtown, Raspberry, Shedd and Summit, the towns Dad created out of his imagination and wood, metal, paint, and plastic. I feel close to my dad when I operate his railroad. I use his hobby to interact with him, and he uses it to interact with the world by having open houses for the neighbors and the public. He shows his love for the world through his intriguing and fanciful railroad and by minimizing the amount of garbage he puts into our nation's landfills. He has earned a lifetime achievement award for his efforts, the Master Model Railroader. I am so proud of him.