

THE UNDER GRAHAM RAILROAD BOX CAR SET

I sell vintage toys. All kinds of toys. I sell sheep that belch popcorn, dolls that whisper secrets, papier-mâché Santa Clauses, Halloween masks, Little Bo Peeps, and puppets. I sell toy parrots that say “Here comes a nigger,” 1823 fire engines that say “toot!” and windup clocks from 1834 that say “Time’s up, Gramps!” I sell tricycles from the Depression, toy coffee grinders from World War II France, and two types of the original 1964 Rock ‘Em Sock ‘Em Robots, including one that looks like Peter O’Toole and another that looks like Sammy Davis, Jr. I sell tin soldiers, steel trains, wooden cars, cardboard airplanes, ceramic piggy banks, and pinball machines. If it’s a vintage toy, I sell it.

I am a sole proprietor. I buy toys on commission from collectors. They love me. When I call on a prospective client, often an ancient widow selling off her husband’s collection or an ailing toy collector who made a killing on Wall Street and now is about to go kaplooney, I look the part. I’m not like my competitors from Sotheby’s and Christie’s who arrive wearing crisp pinstripe suits over starchily pressed shirts, the women with their hair carefully coifed, the men clean shaven, with their nails just so. Instead I play an antiques professor, a man of letters. I arrive ten minutes late. I knock on the door wearing a bow tie, a button-down shirt, and penny loafers, adjusting my glasses and scratching my beard. I fumble my way from the living room to the kitchen, dropping my pen, saying “Excuse me” to walls that I bump into. I am a lost professor, a toy savant, expounding on the attributes of the dollhouses built by the great toymaker D. U. Edwards of 1851 Germany while losing my spoon in the bowl of chicken soup that I accept with the humblest of thanks from my generous host. I preach the gospel of the precision pinball creations of the Frenchman J. D. Gourhand, circa 1834 Paris. I cower with tears in my eyes about the wondrous, glorious, dazzling tin rooster creations of T. J. McConnell of Belfast, killed in the Irish Uprising.

Toy collectors love enthusiastic, absentminded professors. Absentminded professors are goofy, forgetful, and cute: They give sellers the misguided notion that they’re getting the best price. That’s why they love me.

I've done pretty well over the last thirty years. Not bad for a Jew from Queens who started out as an actor trained in Shakespeare and then toiled unappreciated in the small towns of upstate New York where I plied my trade in summer theater, best described as continually shouting "Blow thou winter wind!" to retired New York garment workers who wouldn't know iambic pentameter from a pair of pliers. I slaved that way for more years than I have fingers. Thankfully, my audiences these days are far more sophisticated.

Still, no toy collector from Amsterdam to Anaheim can resist my charms. No weeping widow holding her late husband's valuable train collection of Herman Beavers Specialty Trains can resist me. No millionaire CEO teetering on the brink of ruin or the edge of life, clinging to his valuable collection of series 922 Henry Ford Toy Racers, gathered over a lifetime of savvy negotiation from Spain to Selma, can say no to me. Entire toy divisions at Sotheby's and Christie's shudder at the sound of my name: Leo Banskoff.

Toy collecting is a small world, and in that world I am Pete Rose, Henry Aaron, and the Babe, all rolled into one. My batting record over the last twenty years is close to 1.000. I have never lost a client. No one can resist my blend of knowledge, perception, and most of all, profit. No one can resist my charms.

No one, that is, except one.

I first heard of the Reverend Spurgeon Hart by way of an old friend, Milton Schneider, a New York tax attorney and investor who handles estates and divorces with a degree of skillful discretion that has earned him considerable sums over the years. Milton is a clever, joyful fellow and from time to time, while trawling through the shattered portfolios and economic wreckage of his wealthy clients laid bare by divorce, he has occasionally uncovered a pot of gold in the toy arena that he sloughs off to me. Young millionaire ex-wives don't care about toys, especially those rising from the wreckage of a marital disaster, most having served as the third or fourth notch on the marriage totem pole of the aforesaid wealthy client's love life. Milton sniffs these out with ease, and if he gets a whiff of toy gold, sends them to me. I do the dirty work, query the prey, find the mark, make the initial visit, talk down the sale price, sell off the toys, take my commission, and fork over a small remuneration to Milton for his trouble. Everyone is happy. It's a win-win.

Such seemed to be the promise of the Spurgeon Hart case, which arrived at my place last fall via an overnight package from Milton wrapped in a brown paper envelope bearing a note that said, "This is a long shot. But no harm no foul." I was suspicious, for Milton had previously struck out three times straight, and I'd recently informed him that he'd have to lighten his wallet in

my direction should this lead prove to be another bust, for the last had cost me no small amount of time and dignity, as I'd been shown out of the home of an elderly Upper East Side widow posthaste by her new boyfriend and personal trainer, an African-American fellow about the size of Milwaukee. He was offended by my opinion of a rare toy in her collection, a doll replica of a famous boxer named Joe Frazier. The doll wore boxing trunks and the headdress of an Indian chief, with a towel draped over his shoulders that read "Thrilla from Manila with the Gorilla." When you pulled the towel his tongue came out. It was a delightful piece—not vintage, but a rarity. There were only fourteen made in the world before the manufacturer was stopped by a lawsuit. But after six weeks of research and extensive discussions with the manufacturer, I determined that the doll was a fake made in Taiwan. That roiled this widow's paramour—he was a big fan of Smokin' Joe—and after several hot comments about my Jewish background, race, motive, and bearing, I was forced to leave the home with explicit instructions not to return, as well as candid descriptions as to what would happen to various parts of my anatomy should I venture to that cause in the future.

But I'd made a fair amount of money with Milton over the years, so when this brown paper package arrived I opened it immediately. Wrapped inside was a dusty vinyl portfolio containing the stock holdings of one Rev. Spurgeon Thelonus Hart, of Springfield Gardens, Queens, whose holdings had been discovered in a circular file by one of Milton's young law clerks. I sat down and thumbed through it. Apparently, the good Reverend's mother had worked as a domestic for the Von Klees family, one of the wealthy families of 1920s New York City and its cousin, the Hamptons. The stock holdings, along with a few family heirlooms, were gifts for her years of service, before the family died off.

Apparently, the Von Kleeses' wealth died off with them, because there seemed to be nothing of worth inside the portfolio: a wandering bond or two, a couple of mutual funds, some old securities that predated 1927 and were stamped "Prerequisite," which meant they were probably worthless. I was about to toss the portfolio back in its envelope and return the whole business to Milton when I noticed, attached to the rear inside cover of the portfolio, a faded black and white photograph.

I almost fell out of my chair when I saw what it was.

It was a toy train. But not just any train. An 1859 Smith-Deckert 2350 Blue-Tone, Single Engine, Steam Powered, Piper-Coal Locomotive. And a set of four box cars. Also known as the Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set. In immaculate condition.

Let me explain to you about the worth—and value—of antique toys. I have an art collector friend named Muriel, and we occasionally debate which of our respective trades is more lucrative and important to world history—an argument Muriel almost always wins. But one evening during one of these talks, after consuming a considerable amount of bourbon (which I'd generously supplied), I said: "Muriel, name me one piece of art in the world that is almost beyond wealth in terms of its worth, a piece that captures history's impact on the present. Name me one."

Muriel sat back thoughtfully, smoking a Gauloise with one hand and holding her glass in the other. "I can think of several," she said. "The Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo's *David*. Various Impressionists. Monet. Van Gogh. Those are priceless. They all import some kind of history to the present."

"But do they have some kind of intrinsic value? One that you can assign money to?" I asked.

"I suppose so," she said.

"Aha!" I said, pouncing on her weakness. "Therein lies the difference. Antique toys don't work that way. Toys are priced based on emotion. The ones in the best condition have the saddest stories. The sadder the story, the more valuable the toy. That is a human element and it's one that no painting has. The specific history of sorrow or joy in a child's life, when determining the price, means the sky's the limit. Because there is no limit to sadness at a child's suffering, or the happiness a parent feels at a child's wonder. Thus the emotion contained within the product, when determining the worth of a child's life, is tied to a child's innocence, which gives that product infinite value."

"I'm not finished," she said. "There are other factors. Say you found a sketch by Jesus himself. Or discovered the Ark of the Covenant. Or a cloth napkin used by Mohammad the Prophet upon which he'd sketched with his own hand. Those would be beyond value. Those things are not merely art. They are human history. They would then be worth, say, all of Argentina. Throw in Spain and Portugal. You're not talking millions then. You're talking hundreds of millions. Perhaps even a billion. Can you think of any equivalent in your field?"

I could think of only one, one that bears both the stamp of crucial world history and the infinite value of a child's innocence. And I was staring at a picture of it.

The Under Graham Railroad Box Car.

That set is unlike any box car set ever made. Most toy trains, even rare ones, are made in sets. For example, the Chestnut Rozinki Locomotives set made in Brussels. It's one of four sets, one of which was owned by Winston

Churchill. Or the Budskin Promethian by the great Flemish toymaker Noel Tobias Eisenhauser, one of four sets owned by George IV. Or the extraordinary Cuddinsky Router Chugger, a set of eight trains created by noted French toymaker Jean Pierre DuBlanc Rudan, of which there are only two left in the world, one of which is reputed to be owned by the King of Saudi Arabia.

The Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set, however, is unlike any of those. It is one of one. There is no number two. And it is a special one. To put it simply, it is perhaps the most valuable toy in the world.

Its value is tied to history, naturally, and complicated by time, war, and the unreasonableness and the emotions of a child's joy and sorrow.

It was a gift from General Robert E. Lee of the Confederate Army to his five-year-old son, Graham, who died before he could play with it. But it is not just the toy itself, nor the tragic death of Graham, that gives the toy its special value. There are other factors. For one, Lee actually commissioned the toy in 1859, just before America's Civil War, for the unheard-of sum of \$3,100 from the weapons maker Horace Smith, he of Smith & Wesson fame and who himself was an amateur toy collector and was considered the Fabergé of Toymakers.

The future commander of the Army of Northern Virginia knew that war was coming. He was also aware that Horace Smith, whose designs were later borrowed by the German gunmaker Franz Wilthgaard to create the weapons that powered the German war machine during World War I, was considered a weapons-making genius.

Smith turned out a masterpiece. The train consisted of five cars, an engine with coarse rubber wheels, three coaches, and a larger-than-usual coal car equipped with a tiny coal burner and a tiny compressor the size of a man's thumb that fed water via a metal tube to a tiny steam box. The train was powered by steam, and was said to be able to run on a specially made looped track at a top speed of twenty-five miles an hour for four hours on a full tank of water and a single lump of coal—faster than any horse and carriage could sustain at any length in those years. It was an extraordinary miracle of engineering.

But fate or providence got in the way. The train arrived at the Lee family home two days before war was declared, much to the delight of Lee's young son Graham. Two days later, war descended upon the nation, and Lee was called immediately from his Arlington, Virginia, home to organize Confederate forces along the Georgia and South Carolina seaboard. Two weeks later, while in South Carolina, he received a telegram from home bearing devastating news: His beloved son Graham had suddenly taken sick

and died of consumption. Furthermore, the beloved boy's new train and the female slave who tended to him—both valuable items, as slaves held considerable monetary value in those days—had both disappeared, the woman having escaped to freedom in the North. A double loss for the general. Triple, if you consider that the woman who had tended the child apparently had been a trusted family member and much loved by the poor departed boy—and had now absconded with his toy.

The great general was outraged. He vowed to find the thief, and spent a great deal of money both during the war and after toward her capture, but with no success. He came close in 1863 when a hired detective discovered that the thief had made her way north via the Underground Railroad and had landed for a time in the Hell's Kitchen area of New York City. But the trail ended there. The war ended two years later and the general died in 1870 not knowing what had become of his beloved son's lost toy.

The specific facts of the thief's life were never fully ascertained thereafter. But there is no doubt that the train actually existed. A painting of the train was known to be in the general's home in the ensuing years after his death, and design sketches for it still exist. Those sketches were discovered among the papers of several prominent weapons makers in Germany and France—its basic design was used by artillery designers in Germany's war department during World War I and was referred to in the letters of the general himself.

Which leads to the second reason for the intrinsic value and importance of this tiny mechanical device. For within its tiny loops and doll-like cranks and widgets lay a weapon of war. What other mechanical device, powered by a tiny piece of coal and a small amount of water, allowing a tiny engine to propel it twenty-five miles per hour for four hours, faster than any horse and carriage could sustain, existed during those years?

As the war progressed, the general realized that if the train's technology was made available to the engineers of the South, the fate of the rebellion could turn. A full-sized steam engine using that same technology could toss cannonballs for miles, pull armed Southern troops by the thousands, cart supplies, horses, and ammunition for miles without refueling—not to mention be further developed to create newer, more efficient cannons and guns that would wreak havoc on Northern troops. Indeed the possibilities of the technology were so great that during the war, the general convinced Confederate president Jefferson Davis to send spies to Connecticut to kidnap Horace Smith, the train's creator, with the goal of forcing him to reproduce the train as a weapon of war. The foray was unsuccessful and further complicated by the fact that once the war began, Smith, now realizing the true purpose behind the general's commission, suffered a burst of guilt and wrote a

letter to the general denouncing the South and declaring that he was an abolitionist. Furthermore, he demanded that the train be returned to him at once since the general's son was dead and no longer had any use for it, and insisted that the cost to develop the train had actually far exceeded the \$3,100 commission since the train was, after all, one of a kind.

The general was understandably angry. A flurry of outraged letters between Virginia and Connecticut followed. Another front of the war might have erupted between those two states had not a curious reporter at the *Hartford Courant* gotten wind of the dispute and poked around, asking questions, nicknaming it in one story he wrote "The Mysterious Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set," a cruel play off the name of the general's son and the manner in which the train made its way north, reportedly one train riding the other. Thus the train got its name and withdrew to a silent place in history, for the threat of additional publicity caused both sides to scramble to their corners immediately. If Smith & Wesson was discovered even discussing the business of selling weapons to the South—or cooperated with that idea in any manner—Horace Smith would have faced a firing squad. Conversely, had Davis's government admitted it rested the Confederacy's military strategy in part on the fate of a toy train stolen by a Negro who had absconded to New York City via the Underground Railroad, it would be the laughingstock of Europe, from whom it needed to borrow money to finance the war effort.

With these points hanging in the air, both sides clammed up, and the matter died down. History did the rest. The war ended. The general passed away, and in 1893 Horace Smith died as well.

The train then vanished from history, never to be seen again. Stories of its existence popped up from time to time. A French toymaker in 1923 claimed he'd procured it, but it turned out to be a fraud. In 1945, a Negro seamstress from Baltimore swore her grandmother had it and produced a picture, but that, too, turned out to be a fake. There had not been one credible sighting of the Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set in over 130 years.

That is, until that balmy afternoon in 1992 when I sat in my office and found myself staring at an old photograph in the weather-beaten portfolio of the Reverend Spurgeon T. Hart.

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I WAS SO STUNNED I sat in my chair for several minutes, staring at the photograph. I got up, collected myself, stumbled into my kitchen, and shoved a shot of bourbon and a spoonful of peanut butter down my throat, a combination that usually dulls my nerves. It tasted like sand. Still, when I sat down at my desk again to review the photograph, I could feel my racing heart

slowing, and my fast, shallow breathing deepening. I again stared at the picture.

Finally I swung into action. I turned on my computer, scanned the photo onto my hard drive, and compared the photo with the sketches available on a private-access toy website. When they matched, I canceled all of my appointments for the following week. I called in both my assistants, then telephoned a fellow toy collector who sent over two more helpers. With this army in place, I laid out my war plans.

I sent one assistant to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., to check its files. I sent another to Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, where Lee served as president, to procure a copy of a drawing of the train made by General Lee himself. I dispatched my top assistant to Norwalk, Connecticut, to check the Smith & Wesson archives of Horace Smith's descriptions and early working sketches of the train. Then I sat down and studied the photo again.

I studied it for a full day. It was of a dark-skinned, African-American boy, perhaps six or seven, seated next to a barren, beaten Christmas tree. He was wearing tattered pants and a tattered button-up shirt. He sat with his legs crossed Indian style, staring up at the camera. In front of him, in a neat row, lying on their sides so the photographer could catch them more clearly, were the three passenger cars, the famed coal car, and the locomotive engine of the Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set.

I sat staring at that photograph a long while. Then I placed it on my bookshelf just above the desk where I could stare at it. It was nearly midnight when I finally went to bed. I fell asleep dreaming of trains, and frauds, and fools who chased millions. I slept not like a log but rather like a frog, with my eyes open.

The next morning I rose and took the image to a well-known photography expert I know to have it analyzed. He took less than two hours to confirm that the photo was real and warranted further study, which required a series of tests. I hastily agreed.

A day later he called me to say that, given the age of the photo paper and the sparse furnishings around the child—part of a chair was the only furniture that could be seen, and the narrow wall behind him—the picture was most likely taken in an uninsulated structure, perhaps a cabin of some kind. Using a magnifying glass, he identified several detectable slivers of light seeping into the home from the wall behind the child, which appeared to be slats of wood.

“My guess,” he said, “given the type of wood construction, composition of the floor, and light angle, is that this was taken in the South sometime in the late 1930s.” He based this on several equations using a ruler, a spreadsheet, an

astrology table showing the position of the sun and the moon at various times during the year, and a cheap dime store calculator, which he also used to tally up his fee, which was impressive.

All told, during those first two weeks, I spent several thousand dollars on the Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set—a healthy sum, but a pittance if the train proved to be real, which I was certain it was.

With that evidence in tow, I set out to contact Reverend Spurgeon Hart, the owner of the photograph, whose address was procured from the portfolio. I telephoned first to break the ice and deliver the good news. I got Mrs. Hart on the line. I was delighted to learn that her husband was alive and well. I identified myself as a friend of the firm that held her husband's portfolio and asked if I might drop by.

“For what?” she said. She seemed suspicious.

“I am a toy collector and am interested in the toy train that is pictured in your husband's portfolio.”

“Oh, that thing,” she said.

I nearly fainted, my heart was pounding so hard.

“Does your husband still have it?” I managed to gurgle out.

“Oh, Spurgeon's got that old thing laying 'round someplace,” she said.

At the words “laying 'round someplace,” I felt dizzy.

“Do you happen to know where it would be right now?”

“Course I do.”

“May I come see it?”

“You got to ask Spurgeon. I'm sure he don't care.”

“May I speak to him?” I asked.

“He ain't here, mister.”

“And when may he be in?” I asked, willing myself to sound calm. I was scared. Afraid of disappointment, I think. I had begun to dream high. Was it wrong of me to believe that I'd stumbled onto every vintage toy collector's dream? I had no children. No wife. No dog. At fifty-seven, I had become my father. I even walked like him, with a kind of drifting, wandering look, my pants always loose around my stomach, my face configured into a puzzled, bemused, locked-in grin. I'd become my worst fears: a drafty, ancient-looking geezer, motoring around lovely Bucks County, Pa., in a newly leased Mercedes-Benz that lives in front of my converted 1726 barn, which like its owner looks bountiful and prosperous from the outside but on the inside is hollow, worn, unsound, and filled with useless old things. I wanted a cause. A purpose. And a decent pension, too, for God's sake. And for the first time in my life, I was circling the door to all those things and more, and this woman on the line held the key.

I heard a crash in the background and two dogs barking. “Hold on,” she said. I heard a lot of yelling and some cursing, then more barking. After a few moments she got back on the line.

“Now what do you want again?” she asked. She seemed flustered.

“About the train,” I said.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “Well, I ain’t got time to talk about it just now. My dog is whipping up on the neighbor’s dog. You know a Rottweiler ain’t worth two cents? You ever own a Rottweiler?”

I confessed I hadn’t. “About the toy. Could you mention to your husband that I want to see it?”

“Mister, you want to talk to Spurgeon ’bout that old piece of junk, you better put your foot in the road and come here yourself. Myself, I ain’t got time to chat about some toy.”

“Can I come today?”

“Come anytime you want.”

“When will he be home? Your husband, I mean.”

“Can’t tell you. Old Spurg is hard to catch. He’s always on the job. Working for the boss, like they say.”

I could feel beads of sweat forming on my neck. “Who’s his boss?”

“The Son of Man.”

She hung up.

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IT’S A FOUR-HOUR DRIVE from my gentleman’s farm in Bucks County to Springfield Gardens, Queens, where the Reverend Hart lives. I made it in three. I would’ve made it in less, but I had to get my stage props in order. I tossed aside my usual absentminded professor getup in favor of a tailored suit, tie, shiny shoes, my Mercedes, of course, and \$90,000 stuffed into a briefcase in carefully packed wads of \$9,000 held together with rubber bands. It was all the cash I could muster quickly. Also, I’m told by an accountant friend that any bank deposit under \$10,000 will not draw IRS attention. I assumed there would be some negotiation and depositing of accounts on the Harts’ part. By starting with 9K, then increasing my bid by the same increment, I could draw \$9,000 clips out of my suitcase without mistakenly drawing more or less, and at the sale’s end advise the Harts about the wisdom of making their deposits at a clip of \$9,000 per deposit, thus keeping them off the IRS radar and convincing them at the same time that I had their best interests at heart. I also brought a release form. I meant business.

I drove to the Reverend’s address and parked out in front of the Hart home. It was a tiny red house that sat at the edge of a pack of small, claptrap houses,

which but for the grace of God and the airport designer's pen would have sat dead along the middle of Runway 12 at Kennedy Airport had there been a need for more tarmac space. The sight of massive 757s just three blocks away, the giant logos of the airlines that owned them gleaming in the sun as they made their final turns just beyond the airport fence, gunning up to takeoff speed, added an unnerving roar to everything. Talk about bad location. The place was fresh out of a real estate agent's listings garbage pile.

I approached the house and noticed a sign atop the front door that read "The Lord is listening to your junk!"

As I climbed the rotted, beaten steps to the front door, I glanced behind me and noticed my Benz suddenly had suitors. Several young men who when I pulled up had been lounging on a battered stoop across the street, listening to the infernal racket of rap music from a giant boom box, now had risen to their feet and were slinking toward the car, nodding approval and gazing at it admiringly. I ignored them, aware that I was carrying what amounted to my life savings in cash in my briefcase, and focused on the door. I knocked loudly.

After a moment an enormous creature answered. Six feet, six inches tall if she were a foot, a towering figure and nearly as wide as the door. After a moment, I guessed it to be a woman. She was clad in spandex pants, which were tight enough to reveal the dates on the coins in her pockets, had there been any, which I suspect there were not. Her hips were wide enough to nearly touch both sides of the doorway, and her rear end seemed to stretch into the yawning darkness of the room behind her. She was wearing a sweatshirt that said "Kill the noise! Turn up Jesus!" Her hair was clipped short, lathered tightly to her scalp in neat waves like the rippling rivers of a pond and dyed blond—which is why, I suspect, I had trouble guessing her gender at first. Overall, she was an impressive sight, for her face was gentle and pleasant, and not unattractive. She was a most bizarre amazon.

"Look at them," she said, nodding over my shoulder at the boys with the boom box who were approaching my car. "That's all they do. Piping garbage into their minds. What you want, mister? You a Jehovah Witness? We gave at the office."

"I'm the toy collector."

"Who?"

"The man who called about the train. From Pennsylvania."

She drew her head back and laughed, unbelieving, and by God, she seemed seven feet tall then, towering over me, her head thrown upward in laughter, giving me a clear view of an enormous mouth full of sparkling white teeth. She then looked at me again, took in my suit, my silver Benz parked

behind me, which the youths had surrounded and were peering into its tinted glass windows.

“You came all the way here from Pennsylvania? For that old train?”

“Yes, I did,” I said.

“You’s a tad bit old for toys, ain’t you?”

She motioned me inside. As we moved into the hallway, I heard the snarl of a dog and suddenly a huge pit bull burst out of a doorway and rushed me. “Buster!” she snapped. She stepped forward, picked him up by the collar, and tossed him into a bedroom, slamming the door tight. Behind the door, the dog howled. She led me back into the kitchen and motioned that I should sit.

“You sure you all right, mister? You got the right house?”

“Yes, I am,” I said. I looked around and took in the kitchen.

I have a habit—call it professional instinct if you will—of sizing up a person’s net worth at a glance. It’s more ritual than anything else. I suppose this morbid curiosity is rooted in the fact that while most of my clients are worth millions, some toy collectors live like dogs. It’s not my business, and God knows a lot of them live better than I do. But from what I could see, the Harts’ entire estate, complete with interior house decorations, furniture, dog, home exterior paint job, and location, was worth about half the \$90,000 I had in my briefcase.

The kitchen table where we sat was one of those giant wooden spools that hold telephone wire that crews carry to sites and abandon after the wire has been removed. Around it stood three folding chairs. The straw placemats on the table were chewed at the edges. The gas stove looked to be from the 1950s and was something you’d find in an antiques store in my part of Bucks County—as an antique. It required matches to light. A bare lightbulb hung from the ceiling. Dangling at the end of the light switch was a glow-in-the-dark crucifix of Jesus hanging off the cross with blood oozing out of his wounds. Pictures of Jesus in various states of repose and torture hung around the entire room: Jesus with his mother, Mary; Jesus being kicked; Jesus stuck on the cross; Jesus bleeding from his head and suffering every possible outrage.

She was seated with me at the table and got up to open the refrigerator, removing a large pie. “You want some sweet potato pie?” she asked.

“No, thank you,” I said.

“Don’t be trifling,” she said. “It’s bad to miss eating.” She produced a butter knife, cut a large piece, and set the pie before me. “Bible says man got to eat and be merry. Unless you got a ram in the bush,” she said. “You got a ram in the bush?”

“No, but I have a cat.”

She eyed me warily. "This is a sanctified house," she said solemnly. "There ain't no cats in the bush." She said it as a kind of warning.

"I'm sorry. I've come to talk to your husband about the train."

"He ain't here. He's out working."

"Will he be home soon?"

"God knows."

"Where does he work?"

"Everywhere."

"Well, who does he work for?"

She looked at me oddly. "He works for the King of Kings, mister."

"Of course," I said.

"Jesus," she said. "Jesus is his boss. You got Jesus in your soul?"

I didn't want to tell her, but I'm a Jew who hasn't been to temple in fourteen years, not since my mother died. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur sometimes make it onto my calendar. Once in a blue moon Hanukkah and Passover make the grade. Shavuot and Sukkoth, however, are more problematic. I mean, I sell toys. I need money. Who has time?

So instead of speaking out, I simply gave in and ate some pie to calm things. It tasted terrible.

"Wonderful pie," I said.

"Thank you, mister."

"So did your husband leave the train for me to see?"

"That thing?" she laughed. "Spurgeon be glad for you to have it."

"He will?"

She chuckled. "Men and their toys. Finish your pie first." She cut a piece for herself, gobbled it while I nibbled at mine, barely able to swallow.

My eyes watered with each bite. The pie tasted like mush and old goat cheese. I took a forkful and then another, wiping my eyes with my handkerchief.

"Spurgeon never did like toys," she said.

"Well, I'll relieve him of it. And pay him for it. I really want it. It's . . . I think it's worth quite a bit."

"Save your dimes, mister. Spurgeon called after you did and when I told him you called, he said you could have it."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "But I've come to buy it," I said. "Doesn't he want to discuss price?"

"He ain't interested. What you wanna buy it for anyway? You ain't even seen it."

"I'm a toy collector, and I'll pay a lot if it's what I think it is. I love old toys."

“Spurge said give it to you. I can’t take no money if he said give it.”

“Do you have any kids, Mrs. Hart?” I asked.

“Just one,” she said. “Junior’s off at choir practice.” She went to the refrigerator, removed some milk, poured a generous amount into an old mayonnaise jar, and placed the glass on the table in front of me. “Have some buttermilk. It’ll wash that pie down good.”

“Mrs. Hart, I can’t eat another bite. About that train set—”

She waved me off. “You ain’t drunk your buttermilk, which I made fresh. Nor finished your pie. What I’m gonna do with all that?”

“I’m full, Mrs. Hart. Lovely pie. I’ll take it home.”

“It’ll spoil. Can’t go about wasting it. The Bible says Jesus told his Disciples, ‘Gather up the leftover fragments so nothing’s wasted.’ That’s John 6:12, sir. Gimme.” She pulled the plate over to her and set to work on my piece, then grabbed my jar of milk and gurgled it down her throat in one impressive, mighty gulp.

“About the train,” I asked timidly. “Where’s it from?”

“It’s just some old toy his grandma had or something,” she said between mouthfuls of pie. “Spurgeon said take it, so take it.”

“I have to pay you.”

“He didn’t say sell it. He said give it. Bible says, ‘Don’t say to your neighbor come back tomorrow and I’ll give you what you need. Give it now.’ Proverbs 3:28, I believe.” And with that, she rose again, reached over atop the refrigerator, brought down a large shoebox, and set the box on the kitchen table.

. . .

HOW WOULD YOU FEEL if someone set down a Rembrandt in front of you? Or if someone placed the riches of the ancient Egyptian pharaohs in your lap, or several bars of gold from the Mayan ruins, and then sat and ate sweet potato pie right in front of the thing, as if the riches of the world, just inches away, were nothing more than crumbs and buttermilk being chugged down their throat?

I have always favored African Americans. They have had their share of troubles, well documented. But at that moment, I could have strangled the woman. To show such disrespect for a valued artifact, a genuine piece of American history, was too much. I nearly blacked out with rage.

But then my excitement was overwhelming and I wanted to shout for joy as she pushed the box toward me with her elbow, so as to not drop her fork and drip a crumb of her precious sweet potato pie.

It took all my will to calmly reach out, pull the box close, open it, and gaze down upon my future.

“Might I have a glass of water?” I said.

“Surely,” she said.

. . .

I INSPECTED THE TRAIN for an hour. It was in perfect condition. All three coaches, the coal car, and the engine. All of it, by God, kept in an old Thom McAn shoebox. A few bits of it were missing, mostly paint chipped and a few tiny pieces of piping off the coal car, but nothing that one of the great modern toy restorers of Austria or Belgium could not repaint or reproduce. Its tiny compartments, the engineer’s cabin, the passenger car railings, were extraordinary, simply out of this world. The workmanship overall was exquisite, as if it had been made by a thousand tiny, thimble-sized engineers: perfectly crafted gauges, gadgets, switches, pipes, fittings, down to the tiniest detail. It was magical. Otherworldly. Immaculate. I felt faint as I examined it.

“I’m dreaming,” I whispered to myself.

She looked at me, puzzled, chewing as she spoke. “Common sense is shy as rats in this world,” she said. “That a soul would let a little toy have such power over ’em. Blessed God.”

I barely heard. She was a fool and I was in love. I couldn’t see her. Couldn’t see anything but the train. I wanted it. I had to have it. My initial thought was to steal the train by offering them the increments of \$9,000 I carried in my briefcase until I reached the \$90,000 I had there. I discarded that idea. I decided to offer the \$90,000 as a down payment.

“Do you have any idea what this is?” I managed to croak. My voice took a minute to come back.

“In this house, we care about souls, sir. The Word. Toys don’t count. You want your water? You ain’t touched it. ’Cause if you’re not thirsty, I’ll have that, too. We don’t waste in this house. How you like your gift?”

“I can’t accept it as a gift,” I said. “But would your husband sell it to me?”

“He don’t want no money,” she said. “Spurgeon said give it to you. How many times you gotta hear it?”

“I can’t do that,” I said. “It’s valuable.”

“You free, white, and over twenty-one, mister. Do what you want.”

“I’ll pay him. I insist. I’ll pay him a lot.”

She looked at me oddly. “What’s the matter with you? That little ol’ thing’s just a worldly something. Spurgeon ain’t no worldly man,” she said proudly. “He’s a man of God. He made a promise. The Bible says it: Ecclesiastes, fifth chapter, fourth verse: ‘When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling

it; for he has no pleasure in fools.' God's first in Spurgeon's life," she declared. "Mine's too. You know Spurgeon's been running First Tabernacle out on Fulton Avenue in Brooklyn for twenty-six years this coming August."

"How nice. Couldn't your church use some money if you sold it?"

She thought a moment. "I reckon First Tabernacle could. That building's falling apart. And we need a new van. American made. But you got to talk to Spurgeon."

"Well, I will pay you enough for a van and to fix the church and even buy your family a car," I said.

"You talking crazy. Why would we take a car when the House of the Lord needs fixing?"

"You can do what you want with what I pay."

She eyed me. "Make sure you talk to Spurgeon, 'cause right now our phone is about to get cut off and Junior needs some new shoes. He eats enough for two people. Growing so fast I can't keep up with him. Why, he's twelve and he's bigger than me!"

Given her size, Junior must be so big they feed him with a harpoon.

"Let me tell you about this train," I said. "See this smokestack—"

"Mister," she was impatient now, "if it ain't got God's Kingdom in it, I ain't interested. Jesus, mister. Jesus! Put Jesus in your heart. Spurgeon is gonna try to save you when you meet him. Have you been saved?"

"Saved?"

"Got Jesus, mister?"

"Well, um. I do like him . . . but can we talk about this train? And the price?"

"It's nice of you to come all the way out here. But I got prayer meeting in half an hour. Spurgeon told me what to tell you. I done it. He said give it to you. Now you do what you think is best."

"I need to talk to him. Can I reach him today?"

"He's out at Rikers Island doing prison ministry."

That didn't seem safe. Even I have my limits as to where I'll go to talk about toys. "Tomorrow?" I asked.

"Prayer meeting from noon to seven."

"Friday?"

"Hour of Power Bible Study. He runs four classes."

"Saturday?"

"Church bingo in the morning, then feeding the homeless in the evening. Then his janitor job at Brooklyn College till two a.m., 'cause he's saving to send Junior to Disney World. Then his regular job at the night shift at the Domino Sugar factory in Williamsburg. From there he goes to the shelter on

Kent Avenue and works with the homeless till noon. On Fridays he got a third job at a horrible club in Brooklyn someplace, sweeping the floor till four in the morning. But like I said, he wants to get Junior a ticket to Disney World.”

“Doesn’t he sleep?”

“You don’t sleep when you got the calling.”

“What about Saturday before church bingo? Bingo doesn’t start at eight a.m. does it?”

“He’s got prison ministry in Newark seven a.m. Saturdays. They need God in New Jersey, too.”

“Sunday?”

She looked at me strangely. “Sunday’s church day, mister.”

“How can I see him, then?”

She rose from the table. “Don’t you worry. Take the toy. I’ll tell him you was here. If you want to give us a few dollars, go ahead, but you ain’t got to. Spurgeon said take it. He was pretty clear about it.”

I stared at my briefcase. Ninety thousand dollars and a release form, and I was rich for the rest of my life. Free of Bucks County. I could get rid of that drafty converted barn with its lousy heating system and field mice. No more pretending to be a professor for stupid clients willing to kill each other over hundred-year-old dolls made of porcelain and wood. No more being the only Jew in the room with no connection to anyone or anything. I would find a temple I liked. Hell, I would build a temple I liked. Even with attendant lawsuits, bad publicity, and more lawsuits—and a prize like this would draw more lawyers than dung draws flies—the worth of the train would cover me in retirement in Maui for the rest of my life. That was my dream. Maui. I could see it. I never thought it would happen.

But I couldn’t stand it. I’m a dealer, a businessman, not a thief. I wanted the thing free and clear. Besides, the Reverend, not his wife, was the owner of the train. It had been passed down from his grandmother, she said. I needed the story behind it. A toy dealer is only as good as the story of his toys. That’s what you use in part to sell the thing. It’s a good part of the value. I needed that, too. The stories sell the product. Given the rarity of the asset, I needed that story badly.

“I’ll wait for him, then. Here. If you don’t mind.”

“You can’t do that,” she said. “I got to go and you can’t stay with Buster here. Not by yourself. That dog’s crazy. Plus you want Junior to come home from choir practice and find a white man in a suit setting at the table and nobody explaining nothing to him? He’ll be scared stiff. You wanna take it or not?”

As tempting as it was, I had to be aboveboard. “I can’t. I have to get your husband’s okay in writing. He has to sign a release.”

She shrugged and stood up. “Suit yourself. I’m already late for prayer meeting. You wanna take some pie with you?”

I nodded out of courtesy. She wrapped another piece in a paper towel, handed it to me, and headed toward the door. To my horror, she left the train on the table.

Trying to hide my incredulousness, I chirped out, “Mrs. Hart. The train . . . it shouldn’t be left on the table.”

“Oh, you’re right,” she said. “Spurgeon is funny about this darned thing.”

She picked up the world’s rarest, most precious toy train set and dropped it back in the shoebox as if it were a pile of junk, then plopped the box atop her decrepit refrigerator, next to a box marked “Rat Poison.”

“He had a little wood box that came with it at one time,” she said. “Handmade. Nice little thing. It’s around here somewhere. Junior keeps his Legos in it.”

It was at that point that I had to restrain myself from grabbing her by the throat—assuming I could reach it—and cracking her head against the table. Toy boxes in mint condition are often nearly as valuable as the toy itself. In this case, the box could be worth God knows how much . . . many millions.

“Mrs. Hart, just so you know, this train is worth quite a bit of money,” I repeated. “In fact—”

She cut me off and patted my hand patiently. “Mister, the only train I care about is the train to Kingdom Come. Jesus, mister! Come to Jesus! You ain’t saved. I can tell. Don’t worry. Spurgeon’ll fix you.”

She placed her hands on her hips. It was time for me to go.

“Can I call him tonight?” I asked.

“I told you our phone’s getting cut off. Phone company’s shutting it off today at five. That’s what they said and they ain’t fooling. We’ll pay it next week and get it going again. He’ll get back to you then. Don’t worry.”

“Isn’t there any way of reaching him now?”

She shrugged. “Well, I suppose you could scoot over to the Domino plant if you want,” she said. “He works the overnight shift.”

“You sure I can catch him there?”

“Why not?” she said, ushering me to the door and out onto the front step. I glanced at my car, which was mercifully intact.

“His shift starts at eleven. Take care, mister. And you ought to check yourself. Running around after a silly little train. There’s a bigger train coming for you. The big train, honey, bound for glory. You best be ready.”

With that, she nudged me down the steps and closed the door.

. . .

THAT NIGHT, cloistered in a room at the Hilton on Sixth Avenue, I made a few careful inquiries by phone to three of my most important buyers, massively rich clients who try to outspend each other just for fun, frivolity, and ego. After spending several minutes convincing them that I was not joking and might in fact shortly be procuring, at great cost, the Under Graham Railroad Box Set that was once the property of General Robert E. Lee, their laughs and disbelief turned first to shocked silence, then to muted exuberance, and finally to bursts of fast figures, first murmured, then shouted. The initial offers began in millions—then tens of millions. The numbers made me sweat. I told them I'd get back to them and then hung up.

The Reverend's shift started at eleven. I was out of the hotel and heading for the Domino Sugar plant in Brooklyn by ten o'clock. I had changed and was dressed for battle, wearing a crisp white shirt, khakis, and—to complete the transformation—left the Benz at the hotel garage in favor of a rented car and driver. The briefcase was locked in my hotel room safe. The idea of pawning off 90K and a release to this man for the train set was, I decided, a bad idea. This man worked several jobs, was obviously intelligent, and, I suspected, would not part with this object easily. Despite what his wife said, I decided there was a game afoot, a long-winded game plan to coax more dollars out of me. There was no reason that train was sitting on the refrigerator with him telling his wife to give it to me other than he wanted it to bait me in some kind of way or draw me into some kind of trap.

I decided the Reverend was toying with me and gave up the idea of walking away with the train for a mere pittance. I was ready to bargain. The Reverend, profoundly clever operator that I knew he was, would not find a better toy dealer. I would convince him of that.

Instead of cash, I toted along a backpack bearing the Reverend's portfolio. The plastic binder had long ago been replaced by a hand-hewn leather-bound spiraled job with the name "The Reverend Spurgeon T. Hart" emblazoned in crisp, gold, roman letters, with gold braiding around the edges. The photo of the Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set was between two pieces of glass, covered with acid-free paper. I hadn't shown this wonderful piece of theater to his wife, saving it for what I expected would be a second go-round or perhaps a last-ditch attempt to lure the prospective client. This seemed an appropriate moment.

I arrived at the plant's front entrance with no small amount of fanfare, having given the plant owners the dazzle treatment before I left the hotel, a song-and-dance involving one of my customers, a bank branch president I called at home, at night, who in turn telephoned the CEO of the Domino

Sugar Packing Company and made a few discreet comments about values, indexes, blue-chip stocks, and the kind of clients I represent. The rich have their own language, and it worked like magic. When I arrived at the plant and emerged from the back seat of my shiny, hired Lincoln Town Car, I was promptly ushered inside by a sheepish-looking foreman to a long row of workers on an assembly line stamping sugar cubes out of huge sugar blocks.

“There’s your guy,” my guide said.

Rev. Spurgeon Hart, owner of the most valuable toy in the world and a millionaire in waiting, was stamping sugar cubes and stacking them in one-pound yellow boxes in a line with twenty-five other workers. He was rail thin, a foot and a half shorter than his wife, a light-skinned black fellow with long dangling arms and a tattered baseball cap that said “Jesus Is Coming.” He wore a plain plaid shirt, a pair of yellow ragged polyester pants, and scuffed shoes.

The plant floor was busy, and over the hammering of the machinery the infernal racket of rap music was pounding in a boom box near the Reverend, property of a young man who worked across from him on the other side of the assembly line. Clearly, the music seemed to cause the Reverend no small amount of consternation, for he occasionally glanced at the boom box in irritation as he dumped sugar cubes into boxes and expertly placed them on the rack, where they were fed to another set of workers who crated them. The incessant boom of the irritating music, combined with the hammering of the assembly line machinery, was so loud I could barely hear myself think.

As I approached, the Reverend glanced up, saw me coming, and actually seemed to shrink inside himself. He began to work faster, as if by being busier it would make me disappear. He didn’t wait for me to speak.

“I know who you are,” he shouted over the din. “My wife told me you were coming. Can we talk tomorrow? I’m busy.”

“I think what I have here is worth taking a break for,” I said. I smiled and held up the cover of the portfolio with his name emblazoned in golden letters. I had spent several days putting it together and was quite proud of it. I held it high so he could see it. He glanced at it and grimaced.

“I told her to give you the train already,” he shouted, pulling a stack of yellow sugar boxes off the rack and placing them into a carton.

“But we have to agree on a price.”

He stopped packing for a moment and sighed heavily, stepping closer so I could hear him. “Meet me in the workers’ cafeteria at two a.m.,” he said grumpily. “We get a break then.”

“Will they let me stay that long?”

“Foreman says you know the president or something like that,” he grunted. “Ain’t nobody gonna fool with you.” Then he turned away and began stamping sugar cubes again.

I sat in the cafeteria a solid two hours, drinking coffee from an old coffee machine that charged fifty cents a cup. The sugar, though, was free. At 2 a.m. the assembly line machinery ground to a stop, the roar of the cranks died, and several weary workers tromped into the room, Rev. Hart among them.

He strode in with a distinct, pigeon-toed gait, which reminded me of a superb Negro baseball player I had once seen as a boy in 1947 play in Brooklyn at a Dodgers game with my father, who loved baseball.

He sat at the table across from me and without a word opened a brown paper bag and unfurled an egg salad sandwich and a piece of the appalling sweet potato pie. I noticed it was the same partially eaten piece that Mrs. Hart had left on her table that afternoon when she got up to leave; that is, after half devouring my piece, she gave the rest of it to him. He unwrapped it, grabbed the odorous thing with his fingers, and gulped it down in what I can only characterize as an act of unbelievable willpower, for whatever ingredients had been tossed into it seemed to have spawned by then, as it smelled horrible. He got rid of it quickly.

As he turned to his more appealing egg sandwich, several workers still streamed in, one of them the young man bearing a boom box, which he placed on an adjacent table and turned on, joined by three of his young friends. The infernal racket of rap music, full of pejorative curses and pornographic references, pounded across the room. The Reverend glanced at the radio, clearly irked, which gave me time to think of an opening line.

“Rev Hart, you walk just like Jackie Robinson,” I said brightly.

He waved me off. “One minute,” he said. He sat up, placed his palms upward, bowed his head, and prayed, drifting off into a kind of zone, murmuring to himself. His prayer, as best I could tell, started out sounding like a choo-choo train, slowly, softly, with several incantations to the Lord for forgiveness, apologizing for gulping his wife’s pie down before giving thanks, holiness, help, blessings for this and that and so forth. He warmed to the task slowly at first, which took about a minute, and five minutes later was full out, preaching like a roaring diesel engine, eyes closed, gone, hollering at God for redemption, mercy, help, and forgiveness for his coworkers. He ended with a long, ranting tirade about devil music, making a few direct references to the roaring, cursing filth that was emerging from the nearby boom box, praying for cleansing and dimension and all sorts of business for those who listened to it, praying for the boom box and even its owner, a young African-American man he referred to by name.

This brought a chortle from the young fellow and his three coworkers, two men of African-American and one of Hispanic descent respectively, sitting with him eating their 2 a.m. meal, talking at the Reverend with genuine amusement and, dare I say, encouragement.

“G’wan, Rev.”

“Git it, Rev.”

“Preach, Rev! You the man!”

“Gracias, Rev.”

“Mention me, Rev, mention me!”

Then they turned the box up a notch. The music boomed louder.

The Rev. Hart, still in prayer, ignored them. He was in his own world. He roared on a bit longer, delivering a litany about the blasphemy of the pornography and funk that wafted out of their boom box. For several minutes, man and boom box shouted at each other. It was a kind of war. And then the box won. The Rev. Hart sat in silence. And as a reward, the other side relaxed: The young man turned down the box to a decent volume.

The Reverend, sitting meditatively, opened his eyes. The spell was gone. Several older coworkers, mostly Dominicans and Haitians who had joined him in fitful prayer with their eyes shut, opened their eyes, too, and smiled at him. The room finally began to simmer down and eat.

“I can break their junk every time,” the Reverend said, glancing at the four young men who were now busy eating. “They don’t know what’s good for ’em.” Then he spoke to the young men directly. “Y’all don’t know what’s good for you. That music is devilment.”

The young men grinned, amused.

“Right on, Rev,” said one.

“You the man,” said another. “Do your thing, baby.”

This whole business took nearly fifteen minutes, and he had yet to speak to me. I was under the impression from the previous lunch break crew that he only had thirty minutes to eat. So I got right to it.

“About the train,” I said.

He cut a nervous glance at his fellow workers, none of whom were now paying attention and who chatted among themselves. “Oh, that old thing,” he said dismissively. “That’s from my grandmother. She died when I was a boy. I never knew her well.”

“Well, she left you quite a present.” I produced the leather portfolio bearing his name in neat gold gloss trim. He barely glanced at it. I opened it to the picture. “Is this you?”

“Naw,” he said, waving his hand. “That’s my great-grandpa there. He got his money same way my pa did. Selling booze and cigarettes. Making money

hand over fist selling evil, the devil keeping score,” he said, biting into his egg sandwich.

“Reverend Hart, let me be clear here. That train is rare. It’s quite valuable. I’d like to buy it.”

He frowned, suddenly miserable. “For God’s sake, go ahead then. Since you keep crowing about it, g’wan and buy it.”

“Don’t you want to know what I’ll pay?”

“Whatever you say,” he said miserably, looking away.

“It’s probably worth . . . I’d say it has considerable value. Much more than you think.”

He looked around nervously, then glanced at his watch and brightened. “Only three minutes left for meal break,” he said gaily. “Factory rules. They’re tight about mealtime breaks around here.”

“Reverend, for what that toy is worth, you could buy this place, fire your boss, and have lunch all day.”

A sudden, wild look crossed his face, then disappeared.

“Just do what you want with that thing,” he said. “How much you wanna pay me for it? Whatever you say is fine. I’ll take whatever you got.”

I could stand it no longer. “Reverend Hart, do you realize what you’re saying?”

I spoke louder than I wanted to, and several people sitting nearby glanced at us. He suddenly reached over and grabbed my arm with such force that I was nearly pulled across the table. The pallor of his yellow face seemed to darken. He leaned in close, whispering, his face drawn tight, and suddenly fierce and wild.

“Do what you want with it,” he said. “I got a church to run. And a God to serve. And that devilment”—he pointed to the boom box—“is what I’m put on this earth to stop. That dumb train is just a silly earthly thing setting in my house gathering dust and bringing sin. You come all the way here to talk ’bout that thing? I already told you: Do what you want with it. Talk to my wife.”

“But she told me to talk to you!”

He stared at me with such force, such severe purpose, his face crunched into outrage, his eyebrows furled into angry valleys meeting at his eyes, his thin mustache suddenly drawn around the corners of his mouth in roaring fury, that I became frightened. His whole sense of purpose seemed so deep and wretched that I felt panic.

He must have seen the fear in my face, because he released my arm and with what seemed a great effort cleared his face of the expression until it was again blank and docile.

“Just set it up so that Junior gets any money from it when me and my wife is gone,” he said. “I don’t want him to know about it till I’m gone. You’d be doing me a favor. And don’t tell my wife what it’s worth. Can you do that for me?”

I assured him I could.

“Then it’s done,” he said, standing up. “And I reckon there’s a small piece in it for you, too, somehow, which I hope you enjoy. And take it with my blessing. Good day, mister. God bless you. I got to get back to work.”

. . .

TO MAKE A long story short, I got the train.

And a few days later I sold it.

I am rich.

It drew so many millions to myself and to the good Rev that I . . . I am loath to state exact amounts, as Uncle Sam has developed a sudden interest in the hyper boost to my once-modest income, and my lawyers have their hands full. Suffice to say it was the biggest—and emptiest—commission I ever got in my life. I could have gotten many more millions had I sold the train on the open market, but the fact is, I have no children, and the Reverend wanted quiet. And frankly, how much money does one really need?

As it was, the buyer paid quite respectably—very respectably—for it, and he too wanted secrecy. He was one of my regulars, a billionaire from America’s upper crust who was familiar with the train’s story and wanted it kept quiet, in honor of General Lee and his beloved son and his beloved South. I’m told when he took possession of the train he put it on a private plane and flew it to Zurich, where it was placed in a private Swiss bank. It lives in a specially air-conditioned vault by itself. Every week, a worker wearing an all-white, special dust-clean suit, complete with mask and gloves, enters the vault and cleans the train and air brushes the entire vault.

The 15 percent commission set me up for life. That’s what the Reverend insisted I take. It’s above my usual 10 percent. The Reverend, of course, is set as well as any millionaire in New York City.

I never spoke to him again. Milton, my attorney friend in New York—he got so fat from this deal he retired—handled everything from the Reverend’s end. The Reverend bought his wife a new stove, paid off his phone bill, and had the rest of the sale proceeds placed in a trust in his son’s name. Even his wife doesn’t know the value of the fund, which at the moment, according to Milton, brings in about four million a month toward little Junior’s future, give or take a few hundred thousand. Every day the Reverend, who, as I

understand it, has yet to buy that American-made van that his church so desperately needs, draws \$45,000 in interest.

I supposed that would be the end of it. But I confess I could not understand it. I still can't. I am, after all, a man who sells more than toys. I sell stories. And the story of the Under Graham Railroad Box Car Set eluded me. It was confounding. The Reverend refused to tell me how he got it. He refused to talk about his grandmother or his family. That was the condition of the sale as well. That I never ask. I had to accept those terms, which afterwards I deemed simply unacceptable. It just clawed at me.

I suppose it was for that reason that several months after the sale was completed I called his house. The surface reason was that one of his funds had matured and needed his signature, though Milton could have easily processed the business without him. But it gave me a worthy excuse, since the Reverend refused to talk to Milton himself and only dealt with him through me when the deal was consummated.

I was happy to call him—delighted, in fact. To my surprise, his phone was shut off. My curiosity wore at me, and I began to drift toward his Queens neighborhood occasionally. I came up with the notion of actually buying the dream house in Maui I once wanted—I could afford it, after all—and the idea of flying to Hawaii out of JFK seemed suddenly attractive. Thus I found myself frequently driving four hours from Pennsylvania to Kennedy Airport, knowing the freeway passed the Reverend's house. I drove through the neighborhood several times, hoping to spot the Reverend by chance and broach the subject with him of how the train survived this long, how it made it to the North, who stole it from the general, and so forth. But to no avail. When that didn't work, I drove to Brooklyn and parked outside the Domino plant at night, hoping to catch him on the way in or out of the busy plant gate. But I could never spot him in the hundreds of workers who wandered by.

This is where I started to wonder: If he didn't know his grandmother, how did he know the story of the train? Perhaps he didn't. Perhaps it was all some kind of ruse, a game he played with himself? Or with me?

It was too much. After several months I gave up, decided to enjoy my newfound wealth, and almost forgot Reverend Hart.

Until last month.

I happened to be in Brooklyn. I was there to check out a collection in Greenpoint owned by an Orthodox Jew. The collection wasn't worth much, maybe a few hundred thousand, but the man planned to use the money to pay tuition for his daughter to attend New York University, and that's a big order these days. He was a nice fellow, an English teacher, and he really needed help, and I was glad to assist. I planned to meet him Friday morning, but I got

hung up in traffic and didn't make it to his house in Brooklyn until nearly 7 p.m. Too late did I realize, awful Jew that I am, that it was Friday night, the beginning of the Jewish Sabbath. He couldn't see me. He couldn't touch a doorknob. Even if he could, he wouldn't be amenable to discussing anything as worldly as money. Or a toy. He wouldn't be available until probably Sunday.

I was disappointed and starving, and knowing I had a long drive back to Pennsylvania, I drove around Greenpoint looking for a place to eat. I stopped a passing pedestrian to ask about the whereabouts of a good diner and was directed to nearby Williamsburg. I found the street and diner in question, and as I sought a place to park, I noticed a crowd lining up to get into a corner bar across the street from the diner. The neon sign above the door said "*The Tonk: the funkiest, nastiest, skankiest, hip-hop and R'n'B club in New York City!*" Underneath that in smaller brightly lit script letters it read "*Tonight and every Friday night: Dr. Skank.*"

I pulled my Mercedes-Benz, the newest top-of-the-line model—which I own now, by the way, no more leasing—up to a parking spot across the street from the club. I was fidgeting with the back-and-forth of wedging my car into a tight parking space when a familiar figure with a pigeon-toed gait wandered slowly right in front of my car. I almost hit him.

It was Reverend Hart. I noticed his walk immediately, along with the telltale ragged baseball cap with the Jesus admonition on it. There was no mistaking it.

He didn't notice me. He seemed to be in a kind of fog, walking slowly, deliberately, as if he were marching to his own death. He trudged sadly, as if in a trance, to the front of the line of clubgoers who were waiting to get into the club. He stepped up to the bouncer at the door, who saw him, nodded, and let him pass, and the Rev disappeared inside.

"That's impossible," I said aloud. Then I remembered his wife said that his weekend job was the worst of all. Working as a janitor at a horrible nightclub.

I quickly finished parking, crossed the street to the club, stood in line, bought a ticket, and went inside.

In the bar it was dark, smoky, loud, filled with flashing neon lights, pounding rap music noise, and wriggling bodies of young squirming girls and bulked-up young men dancing. It was clear that I would not find him in that crowd, and so I gave up, deciding to make for the door, convinced I'd made a mistake. He'd never be here. However, the room was so thick with wild young people, packed like sardines, I could not make my way back to the door. I was pushed in deeper, trapped in a wedge of humanity as the incessant sounds of rap music pounded the walls and bounced into the air amid the

excited crowd of young squirming bodies. They moved like wild animals, dancing, laughing, smoking, sipping beer, guzzling alcohol. Onstage, four young men in headphones operated turntables, each playing theirs in turn. It was a kind of competition, creating a tremendous, booming racket that blasted out of giant speakers on each side of the stage, while in front of the turntables, a young man holding a microphone beseeched the crowd, admonishing the youngsters in the most graphic terms imaginable to be foul, dirty, nasty, filthy, and to dance the night away. He was followed immediately by another young man who took the microphone from him, then by another, and then a young woman, then another young man, and then another, each surrendering the stage to the next in turn, ranting and talking in various rhymes, trading quips—a nonstop litany of rhyming and fibbing, flattering, and heretical yelling. While I’ve never been partial to this bit of youngster foolishness, trapped as I was, I found myself forced to listen, and was stirred a bit by some of what I heard. The young men and women were telling stories, some funny, some touching, some ironic, stories about their lives, their poverty, their middle-class lives, the emptiness of their parents’ wealth, the strife of their struggling mothers, and all manner of things, far beyond the mere pornography and filth I’d associated with this music before. Indeed I was so taken by some of the stories that after a few minutes I forgot where I was, for each of the young poets who leaped onstage was better than their predecessor, and each ended their stirring performance by reminding the audience that an even greater presence was among them, The Great One, Dr. Skank, who had started it all, The Originator of the Original, The Anointed and the First, The Greatest Rapper of All Time, was coming in just a few moments. The crowd buzzed with anticipation each time his name was mentioned: Dr. Skank.

The mention of the coming messiah was enough to jolt me back to the reason I stood among those young hooligans, an old man among children, for I too had a special person I was coming to see. I looked around for several long minutes for the Reverend, who I expected was pushing a broom in the back somewhere or admonishing a poor young soul—there were plenty of candidates there, to be sure. But he was nowhere in sight. I decided to try to leave again. I’d had enough. This was, after all, his life and his business. This was his war. Let him fight it. He’d asked to be left alone. I would honor his request.

Just as I turned to fight my way to the exit, the music onstage quit and the stage lights dimmed, the flashing neon lights ceased, and the dark room went quiet.

An excited announcer took the stage. “Y’all have been cool,” he said. “Y’all have been nice. So now, here’s what you’ve been waiting for: The

Grandmaster of Dirty Ass Funk, The Mister Meister of Sweetness. The Funk Beast of the Infatuation. The Original Godfather of Rap. The One. The Only. The Grand Funkmaster and Stinkmeister. The Original Rapper of the Original Rap. The man who created hip-hop as we know it. Give it up y'all for The Doctor of *the Shit!* The Mister of the Mister. The Doctor of Historical Noise. Here he is. . . . *Dr. Skank!*”

The crowd roared. A lone spotlight hit center stage, and into it stepped Rev. Spurgeon Hart.

He was dressed in sparkling white tennis shoes, colored shoelaces, brand-new sweatshirt and sweatpants, and dark shades that covered half his face. He wore a brand-new baseball cap sideways, and a ragged T-shirt that said “Fuck you and everything you stand for.”

He turned to the four DJs spinning records behind him and motioned. They began to whirl up their machines, one at a time, as he pointed. He pointed at each, like a ground control flight director commanding fighter pilots to start their engines. One by one they cranked up, playing their music until they were in sync and roaring full blast. And only when they were at top volume, the sound shaking the walls, did the Reverend step to the microphone and begin—launching into a litany of nonstop cursing, roaring, funky, low-down, skuzzy, earth-scrapping, to-the-bone brilliant, rhyming lyrics that made the previous rappers before him seem like choirboys. His voice was unworldly. It sounded like sandpaper grinding on a gravelly road, yet smooth as a glass of water, both powerful and mighty, yet calm as the curve of an egg. The voice ripped through the room, the thunder of his words seeming to peel the wallpaper off the walls. The crowd went wild.

Looking back, I cannot recall every word the Reverend said, but the gist I will never forget.

His words had to do with history. He spoke of a nation of people with good hearts misled by men with bad souls. A system where men traded souls for cash and the most evil of them shouted the loudest and led the rest to sin: men who would be punished by God yet were revered by man; men ruling a world of underlings—slaves, Jews, Muslims, Arabs, Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians.

And amid this story was that of a little boy many years ago who had once owned a toy, who had done nothing wrong other than to live in a world where he suffered the punishment for crimes inflicted by generations before him. And the punishment of those whose sins had killed off this boy and his dreams before the boy even had a chance to live, before he had a chance to play with his toy, a simple train, which was more than a train, it was a weapon dressed as a train; the story of a boy dying in agony, an innocent child paying

for generations of stolen trains, stolen cars, stolen land, stolen horses, stolen history, stolen people, arriving at a strange land inside a merchant ship, their innocence and freedom forever soiled, and then God's punishment for their captors, passed down for generations to their captors' innocent children, whose forefathers were fools stealing for today while leaving nothing for tomorrow, robbing their own young of their future, all of them, both captor and slave, suffering God's justice and inexplicable will, the punishment of a gigantic wrong gone awry for centuries, and the payment thereof of generations, whose clumsy attempts to try to right wrongs with war or halfhearted stumblings toward the right created even more pain and war. Suffering, all of it, greed, horror, a holocaust against decency causing unbearable agony. Pain upon pain upon pain. Suffering, all of it, because of some great wrong.

"You reap what you sow, you dog!" Mr. Skank roared as he wound it down, "and so it will be forever, you motherf—ers! Generation after generation. Till the end of time, you fucks! You men-bitches! Hooooo!" he shouted, releasing a torrent of vicious curse words that ricocheted across the room like machine gun bullets, yet from his mouth they sounded not like filth, but more like redemption. His filthiness cleared the air. His rage cleansed me even as I stood and listened. His rage washed the room clean.

I turned and left.

I never contacted him again. Why bother him? I'm set for life, and so is he. Because of him I get to move to Maui. And because of me he gets to be Rev. Spurgeon T. Hart, who could not afford to buy his wife a new car or send his son to Disney World, a poor preacher who holds down two jobs a week so that every Friday night he can be Dr. Skank the motherf—er, delivering true redemption to a small group of believers.