

A Christmas Story

by Daniel Harris

Two days before Christmas 1946, my mother put me on an Illinois Central railroad train at the whistle stop of Neoga, Illinois. My father had been the Cumberland county veterinarian. Now he was seriously ill in a New York City hospital. Since the birth of my brother, my father took me with him on his calls and rounds. He and I became very close, more so than I was with my mother.

When my father left for medical treatment in New York City, his hometown, I became a serious psychotic case: Peeing in the house, trying to set the house on fire, and hiding in the shallow house well. The local doctor sensibly suggested I should be sent to be with my father. The only choice was to send me by train to New York City. There was no one to travel with me, so I went alone. I was not yet four years old.

I remember a burly conductor lifting me on the train and taking my small suitcase. He showed me to a seat and put my suitcase in the rack over my head.

When we arrived at Illinois Central Station in Chicago, the same conductor escorted me to Union Station to catch the New York Central Twentieth Century Limited to New York City. A large gentle black man in a uniform with gold braid met us and he helped me aboard and showed me to my sleeping compartment.

To me, it was the perfect home.

—Here is where you will live, sir, until we arrive at Grand Central Station, he said.

The porter served me beverages and meals. He told me stories. He opened up my bed and folded back the top sheet and blanket. I slept to the rhythmic clickety-clack of the train wheels.

When we passed Albany, the porter woke me and said I should get dressed. We would be in New York City soon. I told him I could dress myself because I was four years old. I put on my sailor suit and packed my pajamas in my suitcase.

The porter took me to the dining car where I ate a hearty breakfast of pancakes and orange juice. When the train went underground at Park Avenue in Harlem, the porter took my suitcase and led me to one of the car exits. I was afraid of the train traveling underground, but the porter held my hand and said it was the only route to Grand Central Station.

When we arrived. The porter took my suitcase and led me down the platform. At the end of the platform were three women dressed in furs and hats with feathers. They were strangers to me.

—Mrs. Harris? Inquired the porter.

—Yes, and this must be my grandson, Daniel.

My grandmother reached into her handbag and gave the porter some money.

—This is the finest gentleman I have ever served on the Twentieth Century Limited in my twenty years on this train.

I shook his hand and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He gave me a big smile and a wink.

—You take care of your grandmother and your aunts, young man.

—Yes, sir.

I sadly watched him walk back to the train.

My grandmother was not pleased. I had never met her or her sisters before, Illinois being Indian Territory to them. One of my aunts took my hand and the other aunt took my Lilliputian suitcase. There was a car waiting outside the terminal. We were driven to Mount Sinai Hospital. Sitting in the silent car, I felt like a familial obligation, not family.

When we arrived at the hospital we went directly to my father's room. He was very sick. I did not get a good feeling, but I was overjoyed to see him. He managed a wan smile.

—Ah, Daniel, you came all the way from Illinois by yourself and here you stand, a son to make a father proud. What a wonderful Christmas surprise. You are a courageous young man.

Much to the surprise of the medical staff, my grandmother and aunts, I jumped into the bed and hugged my father.

—Oh, you mustn't do that. You will get sick, hissed my grandmother.

No one was going to take me from my father, not on Christmas Eve.

