

Det's Toyland

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If you were a kid in Bellevue, WA in the 60s, you probably remember a store on Main Street called Det's Toyland. It was a precursor of the big box toy stores we have now but it had a very hometown flavor. We'd swivel our heads keeping the Det's display window in view for as long as possible whenever we drove down that street. Det's published a Christmas catalog that – along with the Sears big book – was required reading for any self-respecting kid on our block.

Det's had their own pavilion at Century 21, the Seattle World's Fair of 1962. The store was a fixture in the childhoods of uncounted now-geezers like moi and a chance reference to it by a friend earlier today got me to thinking about it.

I remember going to Det's with Mom to buy a stuffed animal as a birthday present for my sister and another time to get Matchbox cars for my brother. But the time I remember best I don't remember at all.

Let me explain... I had gone to Det's with my Dad and since he had me along, most likely it was a trip to purchase a gift for one of the other kids. I don't recall exactly the mission, nor do I recall actually shopping with my Dad. But I remember the day as though it was yesterday.

My memory of that day begins back home later that evening with my Dad noticing I'm playing with a new stamped metal train that he didn't recognize and asking how I'd come by it. I recall in detail the shiver that went down my spine. I couldn't tell you exactly what he said next but I know I sat alone in the bedroom I shared with my brother while I waited for sentence to be passed. Seems like it was forever and I spent the whole time trying to figure out a way to just disappear before Dad came back. I thought I heard him talking on the phone to someone and I imagined the police showing up at my bedroom door, handcuffs and truncheons at the ready.

Next thing I know, Dad's telling me to get my coat on and bring the toy train and meet him at the car. It slowly dawned on me as we drove that we were heading back toward downtown. I wanted to ask but I didn't dare and my father said not one word the whole trip. Didn't even look at me.

When we parked in front of the toy store, the marquee lights were off and I had a fleeting moment of hope that I'd been reprieved by the simple expedient of closing time. But then I saw the front door open and the store manager looked out gravely and waved us in before stepping back inside. I looked up at my Dad and he looked at me and said five words that changed my world, "You know what to do."

I gathered up the now-hated toy and opened the car door. I remember stepping down, turning back to close the door, stepping up onto the sidewalk and advancing on the store entrance. The manager had gone back to the sales counter and was leaning his rump against it, his arms crossed in front of him. I felt like the Cowardly Lion advancing toward the Wizard. Only, I wasn't Bert Lahr and nothing about this encounter amused me. Let me just say that walking up to that man and confessing that I'd swiped the

toy train was not a peak experience. I was so scared I can actually remember precisely how dry my mouth was, and that my throat squeaked when I took my first run at making my confession.

I put the cursed thing in his hand and I apologized and then the oddest thing happened – it seemed odd to me at that moment, that is. He reached around and put the toy down on the counter. Then, with the same frown on his face that had occupied it since we'd first arrived, he reached out and shook my hand.

I must have gone back and got in the car, must have ridden home with my dad. But the last thing I remember is my hand being swallowed up in his bear paw.

I was about seven that year, so now it's been about sixty years since I stole anything of any description from anyone. Dad's disappointment and the disapproval of the store manager weighed pretty heavily on me that day and for a long time after.

These two men worked out a solution that taught me a life lesson. I don't suppose that's how folks handle such things these days. Wish it was. That was one good lesson.