



# Merry Murder in Miniature



by J.H. Jones

Leo felt a surge of excitement as he breathed deeply, savoring the faint tang of glue in the air, and put the final touch on his model railway. The layout dominated his tiny bedroom in the Queens, New York apartment that he shared with his mother. The tracks and scenery ran along one wall and jutted out into the center of the room. Even though he had shoved his single bed and small-sized dresser against the opposite wall, he still had to shimmy to keep his belly from colliding with the layout.

And he wanted to avoid colliding with it. Because tonight, as part of the family's Christmas celebration, he planned to unveil his holiday layout to his mother and brother. He could already picture their stunned faces when they would at last acknowledge he had devised the best Christmas decoration ever.

Despite the narrow space, he leaned back on his heels as far as he could to take in the entirety of his handiwork.

His eyes brushed from left to right, caressing the elevated subway track as it threaded between the miniature office buildings and houses. Then his attention settled on the area in front with a fierce hunger, lingering on the wonderland of his neighborhood in Astoria, Queens. He had recreated every feature with lifelike authenticity—snow-dusted brownstones with wreaths or menorahs in the windows, the empanada food truck with its twinkling, colored lights, and the sprinkling of New York City cabs plying their trade.

But he felt most proud of the meticulous craftsmanship he had put into the recreation of the corner where Broadway and Steinway Street intersected.

Exactly like in real life, his model showed the building where his apartment was on one side of Broadway, and his brother's apartment building was directly opposite. Leo felt proud of how he had crafted every detail of both buildings precisely, including the narrow alley next to his brother's building. The thin strip was dark and shadowed and unsettled him, just as it did outside. Still, he painstakingly

modeled every inch, even the line of garbage and recycling cans, and the regulation brown compost bin. Everything was perfect. Or was it?

With a gasp, he laid his hand on his heart. A little pedestrian was out of place. He must have caught it on his cuff when he did the final touch-up. Holding his breath, he carefully shifted it back into place, and let out a long sigh of relief.

Finally, accurate in every detail.

Now it was time to show his accomplishment to his mother and brother. He envisioned the moment of the big reveal, imagining his mother's face glowing with admiration and his brother's green with envy. In fact, big brother Gardiner would have to admit his plastic holiday village from Job Lot couldn't compare to the triumph of Leo's Christmas in Astoria layout.

"Gardiner's here, Leo." His mother's voice cut like a hatchet through his dream. She pounded on his door.

"Don't come in, Ma!"

"Good grief. Got a girl in there or something?"

Leo felt his cheeks grow hot, and he wrenched open his bedroom door just enough to maneuver his plump body through. "Quit it, Ma. Where is he?"

"He's at the table, so hurry. Don't forget, we'll eat and then it'll be time for the TV show." She wriggled and sent her earring bells jingling. "It's a Christmas Eve special, called *A Christmas Miracle*."

"I told you I planned something for you and Gardiner after dinner. No TV."

"Mr. Big Shot!" Folding her meaty arms across her Mrs. Claus apron, she rolled her eyes. "Whatever you've been working on ever since you came back from...being sick, well, I'm glad it's over. Huh! When your doctor said you should keep busy, I thought you'd get an actual job like other grown men."

Leo frowned at his mother's familiar complaint, but he didn't want her barbs to distract him. He couldn't wait to show off his model to Gardiner. So, he ignored her and hurried down the hall to the living room, where his mother had taped swags of tinsel to the walls and plugged in a tiny plastic Christmas tree with blinking lights. She had also set up a card table decked out in red and green party decorations, where his brother, Gardiner, sat on the far side.

“Hey, bro. Merry whatever.” Gardiner shuffled to his feet and extended his hand for a shake.

Leo hung back. “What’s the matter with you? Your clothes are a mess, and your hair is dirty. Have you lost weight?”

“You look like you’ve gained...” Gardiner shook his head and flopped into his chair again. “Forget I mentioned it. I know you’re kinda sensitive. Thing is, I’m feeling low, thinking about Eva and...everything.” As he rubbed his wedding ring, his chin trembled.

“I got something to show you. Something you’ll want to see.”

Ma burst into the room, staggering under an enormous platter heaped with slices of bloody roast beef alongside a mountain of steaming mashed potatoes. As she thumped it onto the table, Leo smacked his lips at the scents of butter and roasted meat, and reached to help himself. His mother swatted his hand away.

“Guests go first. Besides, the doctor said you’re supposed to watch your cholesterol.” She pointed at Leo’s stomach, and he felt his cheeks burn.

She turned to her other son. “Now, Gardiner, I want you to eat up and put some meat on those bones of yours. You’re not taking good enough care of yourself since...” With a catch in her throat, she turned away and fiddled with the cat’s eye shaped glasses hanging from the gold chain around her neck.

The little snowman clock on the side table let out a robotic tinkling, and Ma’s face brightened. “I don’t want to rush you boys, but I set the alarm to remind me about the show. It’s almost time!” She darted a glance at the TV in the corner. “Where’d I put the remote?”

Gardiner cleared his throat. “Ma, I’m not sure how long I can stay.”

Glaring at Leo, she hissed, “You’ve gone and upset your brother, haven’t you? I bet you mentioned his wife.”

“Quit it, Ma.” Gardiner groaned. “He didn’t say nothing. I’m thinking about Eva because today’s the anniversary. On this night, last year, she was...” After a ragged breath, he finished, “No witnesses. They still haven’t found who did it.”

“Never you mind, son. They will one day.” She plopped her bulk onto one of the folding chairs, spooned big helpings of meat and potatoes onto a poinsettia-decorated paper plate and set it in front of him. “Eat up. You’ll feel better.”

A grin spread across Gardiner’s face. “If you say so, Ma. Gotta admit, smells good. You know, you always were a better cook than Eva. Remember last year, when she messed up the mac and cheese?” He made a sound like a strangled laugh, then continued, “You’d already left, Leo, but the whole apartment stunk of burned cheese. She had to throw it away, so she took it downstairs to the garbage and then...” He pressed his knuckles to his mouth as if to push the words back down his throat. His mother shimmied her chair closer and patted his arm.

Leo’s fork darted to the platter, and he speared some beef and scooped potatoes and shoved them in his mouth. Chewing, he said, “I got something to show you. It’ll take your mind off things.”

“Really, bro?”

Ma wagged her fingers at Gardiner. “I know something that will definitely put you in the Christmas mood. Abracadabra!” After waving the serving spoon like a magic wand, she dug into her apron pocket and shook out a knitted cap with foam antlers. “We had a lot of fun getting dressed up for Christmas last time. Eva loved you in this, remember? She’d want you to wear it again tonight.”

Gardiner’s face crumpled, and he pushed back from the table. “I thought I could celebrate Christmas with you, but it won’t work.” He took a napkin, dabbed his eyes, and then blew his nose. “I’m going home. You two enjoy yourselves and watch TV.”

Leo blinked. “TV? No TV! I got something to show you.”

“Yes TV!” Ma shot Leo a grimace, then flashed a tremulous smile at Gardiner. “You always liked my Christmas cake, and I made an extra big one this year. Try some before you leave.” She bustled out.

Gardiner leaned into his brother. “She’s right. Last year we put on the ugly sweaters, the funny hats and stuff. Remember? You and Ma were over at our place, and I showed you the Christmas village Eva and I set up and—”

Leo smirked. “Right, the Christmas village. I got something to show you.”

“You remember? Okay, and then you leaned on the shelf and broke it?”

“No.” Leo slammed his fork down. “It was already broken, and you were lucky I came back here to get some tools.”

“Whatever. When you broke the shelf, you knocked all the houses down, remember? And Eva said you were too big and laughed at you.”

Leo thrust out his lower lip. “Laughed.”

Their mother sing-songed, “Ho ho ho, Christmas cake! Christmas cake!” as she lifted a lacy cake stand over their heads and placed it on the table. A candy Christmas tree drooped at an angle on top of a large chocolate cake with frosting and sprinkles. She wielded a cutter with both hands and sliced a huge wedge for Gardiner, then slapped a mound of Reddi-wip on top. “Here, son. Eat.”

“Thanks, Ma, but I’m not hungry. Thanks for everything. I’m gonna go.”

Leo sighed, wanting to eat cake, but Gardiner was leaving. He hauled himself to his feet. “You never listen to me. I got something to show you. Now.”

With a shrug, Gardiner mumbled about staying only for a minute and followed Leo up the hall to his bedroom, as their mother trotted after, warning it was almost time for the show.

Throwing back his bedroom door, Leo reached for a box with levers, dials and switches. He pushed a button, and in an instant, a soft radiance illuminated the layout, tiny neon signs flashed, and little traffic lights turned from green to red to green again, while electricity hummed along the tracks and subway cars rattled along the loop.

He puffed out his chest. “Well? What do you think?”

Gardiner slipped into the room and surveyed the Astoria panorama, letting out a low whistle.

While his brother continued to stare, Leo turned to his mother. “Pretty impressive, huh?”

“Well, it’s very nice, Leo,” she said, tilting her head to one side, “and I wish you would put this amount of energy into getting a job.” She made a face. “Truth be told, I liked Gardiner and Eva’s village better. It was so cute! The glitter! And little candy cane decorations and Christmas elves and...” Her eyes flicked to her Santa watch. “Time!”

“Candy canes? Elves?” Leo counted on his fingers. “I scratch-built the whole layout and hand painted everything. The buildings? Exact replicas. See? There’s our place, Ma. Don’t you recognize it? And across the street, there’s Gardiner’s. Do you know how many hours this took?”

Hands on her ample hips, Ma said, “You asked me and I told you. I will not stand here and argue. *A Christmas Miracle* is starting.” She bolted to the living room as Gardiner hovered over the Broadway corner.

“Looks like Broadway, all right. You even put snow in the gutters. Sweet. You made the model just like my building. Nice job, bro. And there’s the side exit, leading to the alley.” He swallowed hard as sweat glistened across his upper lip.

Bouncing on his toes, Leo said, “All the details are accurate. As for the alley,” he poked a pudgy finger, “See how I lined up the garbage cans? Exactly the same way they’re arranged at your place, and see—”

His brow furrowed. Somehow, the scene had...changed. “How did this get here?” He reached into the alley shadows and plucked a tiny statuette of a woman, who wore a red swirly skirt and held what looked like a trash bag in one hand.

Gardiner mumbled about leaving, and Leo set the figure down on another street, then angled himself to wave his brother closer.

“I haven’t shown you everything yet. See how I copied all the shops and restaurants, including the bar next door to you? Keep watching. I wired lights inside so you can see the customers. Lemme turn it on.”

He shifted to reach for a switch, and his smile fell. “Wait a minute!” He peered at the figure of a chubby man frozen mid-stride as he crossed Broadway to Gardiner’s building. “Did you put this here?” His outstretched fingers closed on the figurine.

“Put what, where?” Gardiner squinted harder at the scene.

“Well, I didn’t put it here,” Leo huffed.

“Well, I didn’t either.”

With trembling fingers, Leo moved the figure off the layout. “You’re jealous and messing with my stuff to get me upset, like you did when we were kids. You think you’re funny? Quit it! Leave my stuff alone,” his voice rose to a shrill whine. He

caught himself and cleared his throat. “I mean, you gotta admit, this is better than your old Job Lot village.”

“I dunno.” Gardiner’s tongue darted over his lips. “There’s something about this. Weird. Do you feel it?”

“I feel magic,” Leo’s arm swept out across the layout. “A magical moment in time from last Christmas.”

Gardiner flinched as if he had been struck. “That’s it! That’s why it bothers me.” He turned away, his eyes wet and his chin quivering, and stumbled to the door.

Leo blinked at his back, confused. “What’s wrong with last Christmas? It’s supposed to be a Christmas scene. Did you see the snowman?” His face suddenly hardened with fury. He pounded behind his brother, yanked him around and prodded his chest. “I told you, keep your hands off my layout.”

“What?”

“You moved them. Did you think I wouldn’t notice how you took the people out of the bar and put them on the street? It’s not the way it was. Nobody was there. This is not accurate.”

“Nobody was where? What are you talking about?”

“I’ll show you!” Leo grabbed his wrist and wrenched him along the edge.

Gardiner tugged his hand free. “Chill, bro. Are you talking about the little people in the street? The ones facing the guy?”

“What guy?”

Gardiner pointed at a chubby man crouched and peeking over the hood of a car parked in front of Gardiner’s building. Leo’s hand shot out, and as he looked at it, he let out a sharp yelp and then thrust it behind his back.

“What’s the matter? Why are you hiding it?” Gardiner levered himself around, trying to get a glimpse, but Leo refused to let him get close. He pressed his brother towards the opposite wall, while he sagged backwards against the benchwork. The wood let out a sudden crack, and Leo spun around to catch part of Broadway drooping at a cockeyed angle, which sent the tracks askew and the subway tumbling down. “Oh, no! Look what you did. This is all your fault!”

As Gardiner protested, Leo crawled under the wooden structure to find his toolbox. Muttering to himself, he rummaged through the box, tossing screwdrivers and hammers aside, until he spilled a box of nails on the floor. Finally, with a heavy grunt, he hoisted himself up, breathless, swaying and gripping a nail gun with one hand and a fistful of nails with the other.

Gardiner took a step further into the corner. “That’s not a toy! Keep the nose down. It could go off!”

Leo sneered. “As if I don’t know how to use it.”

He wriggled to face the street and examine the problem, but Gardiner hounded him. “What the hey, you’re not supposed to use power tools. Besides, the problem’s underneath. On top here, you’ve got...Whoa! How did you move the people to the garbage cans again?”

“What?”

“Hey, the skirt kinda looks like the holiday skirt Eva wore, and who’s the guy? What’s he got in his hand? Sort of looks like—” Gardiner’s eyelids peeled back, and he sucked in his breath. “He’s holding a tool. He’s—”

“What?” Nails clattered to the floor as Leo’s fingers shook. His hand free, he scooped up the chubby figure and brought it close to his face, then let out a piercing scream at the top of his lungs.

Gardiner grabbed his brother by his shirt and shook him hard. “What’s going on, Leo? Why did you set the model up like it was the night Eva was murdered? Why are you torturing me?”

With every shake, Leo felt his head bobbing from side to side as if it were on a spring. “I wouldn’t...I didn’t... You’re ruining my layout!”

“Oh yeah? I’ll show you. How do you like this? And this!” Gardiner shoved him against the wood. Cars skittered. Buildings toppled.

All Leo could think of was the fact that his beautiful creation was falling apart. “Stop! Please stop!” Leo wailed.

But Gardiner only rammed him harder onto Broadway. Again, and again. The wooden structure creaked, then groaned, and Leo let out a yowl of despair. “All right! I did it! I killed Eva with my nail gun!”



Gardiner slammed him with his whole body, and the wood let out an ear-splitting snap, sending most of the structure collapsing onto the floor, dragging tracks, wires, figures, houses, trees and cars in its wake.

As the dust and fake snow settled, the only sound was the sporadic electric crackling of the train control box.

Leo felt thick tears slip down his cheeks as he surveyed the mess surrounding him. He clutched the nail gun to his chest.

“Boys!” Ma stomped into the room, thrusting herself between Gardiner and Leo. “What’s going on in here? You’re making so much noise I couldn’t hear them singing Jingle Bells.” She stopped, held up her glasses and scanned the room. “Huh! Don’t expect me to clean this up, Mr. Big Shot!” She glowered at Leo, then knocked the nail gun out of his hand. “Where’d you get that? The doctor said no power tools. You’re not well enough. You could hurt yourself.”

Gardiner leaned against the wall, weeping. After a last shuddering sob and a wet sniff, he lifted his head. “Ma, Leo has something to tell you about how Eva was killed. And if he doesn’t tell you, I will.”

“Forgive me, brother dear, but I’m perfectly capable of addressing our mother. No need for you to step in. First, I’d like to apologize to you both. I’m afraid Leo’s reluctance to confess necessitated this little contretemps.”

Gardiner and his mother turned to the heap on the floor. Ma whispered, “Leo? Is that you?”

He stood up, dusted off his pants, twitched his shirt cuffs and smoothed his hair with a flourish. A hint of a smile played at the corners of his lips. “I prefer Leopold, mother dear. The son you know as Leo is...” He seemed to search for the right word, and finally purred, “Indisposed.” He arched an eyebrow. “Tut, tut! Poor lad, he’s overwhelmed with remorse and guilt. Until he’s well enough—if ever—I’m pleased to introduce myself.” He executed a neat bow. “Leopold—Leo’s better self, you might say.”

Gardiner scratched his head, and Ma stared and said, “Huh? What? Stop talking funny.”

Leopold waved his fingers in the air as if to brush her words away. “I assure you there’s nothing funny in what I have to say. Leo struggled with coming to grips with what he had done in a moment of anger. Dear me, his emotions get the better of

him.” He touched his forehead. “At last, I came up with the idea of the layout and created this veritable tableau of Christmas Eve a year ago. If I may stray from the topic for a moment, Leo was quite right this is a most enjoyable hobby.” His arm moved with elegant grace as he gestured at the caved-in diorama. “I found crafting Leo and Eva in their various positions splendidly relaxing. The hard part was distracting Leo long enough to move the figures here and there. Yet I managed it with a little ingenuity. If I say so myself, I was rather clever, and he never suspected.” He hitched his chin.

Ma threw up her hands. “I don’t understand a word he’s saying. I’m calling the doctor.”

“Such a pity you don’t catch my meaning, mother dear.” He shrugged, then held out a fist to Gardiner. “Nevertheless, I think you understand, don’t you?” He opened his fingers to reveal a figure, then he carefully placed it on a still-standing street.

Gardiner examined the little chubby man aiming a tiny nail gun as if to shoot someone.

*The End*

