

It breathes. It's not alive but still it breathes. An ugly, menacing steel monster that even when at rest pulsates with life from the fire that burns in its belly. It exhales small, throaty chuffs of smoke and steam through its funnel-shaped smoke stack. The ~~the~~ Plains Indians called it an Iron Horse since they saw ~~it~~ <sup>with</sup> it the same type of transcendent spirit that they could see in all living things.

The tracks on which the train ran could represent the path of Claire's life. On the tracks ~~behind her~~ <sup>behind her,</sup> that brought her all the way to the Black Hills in Dakota, lay the sum total of everything that had happened in her life up to that point. For most of her seventeen years, she had never traveled further from her front porch than Mr. MacGregor's general store. That all ended when her mother died. As she recalled the memory of that tragedy, Claire slid her hand into her clutch purse and drew out a locket. It had <sup>whose picture?</sup> belonged to her mother and was now ~~about~~ all she had to remember her mother by. She drew strength from holding the locket in her hand. It was the next best thing to having her mother still beside her grasping her hand.

On the tracks stretching to the horizon ahead of her lay the final leg of her journey and the remainder of her young life. Waiting at the end of the track was her husband to be. She would be meeting him for the first time. All she really knew of him was that he was a mining engineer in Deadwood and his letters to her revealed a gentle soul. While it had been the most exciting trip of her life, it ~~was~~ <sup>would</sup> be a relief to finally reach her destination.

But the past is a statement, the future is a question. Centered between those two directions is the here and now. ~~And~~ the Black Hills forest setting at that instant of time was <sup>offered</sup> offering a bonanza for the senses.

The rising sun filtering through the towering conifers ~~that were~~ <sup>ed</sup> exchanging whispered secrets in the

wind over her head <sup>and</sup> bathed the area with magical long mottled shadows of morning light. Amid the riot of chirps and chatter of a host of different birds was the silken voice of two mourning doves debating the topic of whose situation was the more baleful. The evergreen smell of the Spruce and Fir trees <sub>5</sub> <sub>4</sub> melded with the distinctly morning smell of someone frying bacon. The pleasant chatter of the songbirds' chorus carried over to the actions of the people. A smile in their direction was always returned with another smile. She contrasted that with the glacial stares she got from the ladies in her old church, and with the looks she got from their husbands that resembled a dog regarding a fresh soup bone.

The morning calm was torn in half by a piercing scream from the train's steam whistle that called the passengers to board and caused Claire to nearly jump out of her skin. She hurried up to the train, climbed up on the wooden step stool put in place by the conductor, and ascended the remaining steps into the coach.

Once the train started moving, ~~she experienced frustration~~ at the narrow slice of scenery that she could see from the train's window, <sup>wasn't enough</sup> so she stood up and walked toward the observation platform at the rear of the train. To get there, she had to pass through the cigar smoke and conversation of the well dressed men gambling in the crowded club car, but the view from the narrow platform was worthwhile. The tracks behind the train were disappearing into a sea of green trees and blue sky. The view <sup>on either</sup> ~~toward the~~ side was a seemingly endless unfolding panorama. When the conductor came by to punch her ticket she asked him "What do those circular signs like that one that says [mileage] mean?"

"Those are mileposts," he replied nodding toward where she was pointing, "That one shows how many

miles we are from the beginning of the line in Edgemont."

Claire closed her eyes and ~~was enjoying~~<sup>ed</sup> the rush of cool air on her face when she was suddenly jerked backward by a strong pair of hands. Everything went black and her nostrils were filled with the thick acrid smoke from the train engine's fire box, ~~and~~<sup>T</sup> the pounding of the engines drivers surrounded her and coursed through her body. Her feet clawed the air in a vain attempt to find purchase.

The darkness evaporated as quickly as it had come on, and the platform was again washed with the fresh pine-scented air. Then she found herself looking into the face of probably the handsomest man she had ever encountered. He quickly picked her up and sat her on her feet as easily as someone righting a toppled vase.

"Begging your pardon, ma'am, but you don't want to be leaning out from the side of the train when it goes through a tunnel." He had a neatly trimmed mustache and was wearing a nattily tailored three piece suit, so different from the ragged bib overalls that she ~~was used to seeing~~<sup>saw</sup> while growing up. "My name's Bart Gunderson, I'm sorry we met under such unfortunate circumstances."

Once Claire ~~had~~ regained enough of her voice to croak out a reply, she gave a brief self introduction and explanation of how she happened to be on the train to Deadwood ~~inadvertently--or perhaps not--~~<sup>and</sup> leaving out the part about meeting her husband to be. Embarrassed, she hastily excused herself and returned to her seat. Once there, she reflexively reached for her mother's locket and discovered it missing. She must have dropped it during the kerfuffle on the observation platform. The last tangible link to her past was lying somewhere beside the tracks rapidly disappearing behind her.

*I'm wondering  
she didn't  
just hear  
him in*



\*\*\*

Although this story is fiction, it is typical of many such tales about the pioneers who came west seeking a better future. What they left in their wake is everything you see remaining. In places the prairie sod is still cut by the ruts from travelers dragging their overloaded wagons through a mire along the Oregon trail or other well-trodden paths.

long line  
the Oregon  
concrete

The railroad itself is gone, but in its stead is the George S. Mickelson bike, hiking and horseback riding trail. The trail follows the same scenic path as the heroine in our story, ~~It is~~ built atop the sum total of the experiences, hopes and dreams of all those who have passed the same way before. Visitors today can add their own experiences to the total. Along the trail are a number of items such as discarded rail road spikes and other artifacts from a century or more in the past and a geocache containing the locket that Clair lost. Traditional geocaches are located by means of GPS coordinates, but this one requires only a careful reading of this story. Add your name, and anything else you wish, to the list in the geocache, reclose it and replace it where you found it. The same goes for any other artifacts you may find. The general rule for exploring any of the open areas in the West is take only pictures and leave only footprints.