THE DEPOT

Virginia Sorensen

Driving slowly past the house she knew that her resentment was unreasonable. The new owners had every right to change it; if she had felt so strongly, why had she let it go? But how could they think an unrelieved expanse of stark red brick better than Mamma's shrubs and vines? What would the deer do when snow covered the mountains and they came down to find protected greenery in the town? Other houses had shrubs, of course, but of a much inferior order; Mamma's had grown rich from the ministrations of her affectionate green thumbs. And most people actually drove the deer away.

At the end of the block she turned into Depot Street. Then, outraged, she pulled to the side of the ditch and stopped. The old depot had disappeared. There was no platform, nothing but the double tracks laid high on cindered ties. The street had no proper end or beginning. Fields lay beyond and a derelict barn. When the sun set there would be nothing remarkable, no peaked silhouette. Had they taken down the marvelous old watertank too?

Slowly, she drove on. She had just seen her father's grave for the first time, having been half across the world when he died. Then the house. And now the missing depot made her feel part of a protracted private funeral. Near the tracks she stopped again. Yes, the tower had disappeared too.

At least the tracks were the same, she thought, sweeping past the cemetery and around the mountain south, diminishing northward into a silver point. Childishly, she decided to get out and walk along the ties. Just as in childhood, her legs were too short to take two at a time, too long for one, so she must leap or mince. For a few seconds she felt an old exhilaration, then turned back heavily, kicking gravel. Nothing, absolutely nothing was left. An archeologist might find signs that a charming little depot had stood here for almost a century. What might have survived? Indelible pencils sharpened by Dad's pocketknife, wires from baggage tags? Perhaps the skeleton of a railroad lamp. Or a worn telegraph key.

There had been no cellar; demolition had simply scraped the ground. Even the two little triangular gardens that had flanked the building had vanished utterly.

Right there, she thought, and stood square on the spot. Built during a period of railroading that was eminently Victorian, Dad's depot had been sturdy, a dark red brick with gingerbread fancies beneath the corners of its eaves. The windows were deepset, no stinting in their carpentry; a child could sit upon the sills. Outside, at either end, somebody possessed of Denver & Rio Grande pride had set two triangular plots of grass. They were encircled by low iron bars to protect them from wandering sheep and cattle. The first day Dad brought the family to see the finest depot of his career, Mamma had noticed at once some stunted rosebushes, one in each corner of the triangles. "We must tend these," she said, and so had water and fertilizer sent before night. After the job felt really Dad's, after a year of watering and cutting and weeding, she planted some of her flamboyant zinnias and marigolds. One summer her Shasta daisies grew so tall she had to tie their stems together for support. Against the baggage-room side where there was only one small window, she set a huge earthen pot of Virginia Creeper. Before many seasons it covered most of the wall and twined itself up to the roof and wound seductively around the gingerbread.

"This is the prettiest depot on the whole railroad!" they always said. Passengers said so too, stepping down during loadings and unloadings.

Mamma always saw to it that they tried the pure cold water of a fountain that ran perpetually, and they'd say, "You'd think it had ice in it!" And she'd say, as if she made it herself, "It comes right down from the snow."

Springville had been an important station then. It was fun to go down and watch ripe animals milling and complaining in the corrals along the sidings. It was exciting to stand on the fences and feel the shudder of hooves on the ramp. Nearby was that splendid water-tank, huge and red, with a long metal nose which came down to appease the thirst of panting engines. Once, magically, it had appeased the thirst of circus elephants while brilliant cars stood by, trembling with the roar of lions. There merry-go-rounds had disembarked amid the bright seats of ferris wheels.

But most important was the fruit. Thousands of crates of cherries and apricots and peaches and apples and pears went out of the valley by this gate. Some went on fast freights, but ripe cherries went swiftly to Denver and Chicago aboard the Zephyrs. Dad and his help threw crates like firebuckets from baggage trucks while passengers emerged to watch. Dad always worked with his sleeves rolled up, laughing and talking with conductors and brakemen who stood by and sometimes with white-coated porters from the Pullmans.

For half an hour sometimes the place was humming. Then the baggage trucks were drawn away, the conductor called "All aboard!" and swung himself up as, the train began to move. Dad stood waving with his kids and his crew; the engine hooted goodby and cars swooshed by, tick, tick, tick, faster and faster and disappeared around the bend.

Where had the fountain been? No sign of it now. But underground somewhere that sweet cold water must be running. She remembered Dad uncoiling a hose kept in the baggage room, sprinkling his grass and flowers on hot summer evenings. Sometimes he hosed down the platform and the trucks as well and then the hot red brick, so that his depot stood bright in the fresh and fragrant circle of its private rain.

She stood still as if listening, remembering another magic—signals from The World.

The World was anywhere outside The Kingdom of God to which had come the intrepid Pioneers, not so much from the West (which had some Mormon Country of its own) as from Back East. Practical English and sturdy Scandinavians had come to Utah by the path the sun used every day. And it was from that direction Dad's orders came over the railroad telephone and the telegraph. Unceasing voices and tappings kept him constant company. Her brothers had practiced the Morse code but she preferred to believe Dad clever beyond ordinary mortals, bringing, like a dove, secret messages from the sky.

"My signal—" and he would tap out his reply and somebody would tap back. He copied messages on his old typewriter with two index fingers. Blunt and thick with flattened nails, they moved unbelievably fast on the keys, leaving lines that were—Dad said—as crooked as a dog's hind leg. He would fold the yellow telegram into a matching envelope that had a window to show a name. "Whose turn?" he would ask. All the kids liked to deliver and pocket the fees; now and then an affluent citizen would add a tip.

The time came when the senders themselves took shape. All telegraphers belonged to The Brotherhood and arranged over the wire yearly mountain picnics. They knew each other's families; their children raced each other while their wives cooked over fragrant campfires. I was once, she thought, the Champion Runner of the Ten-Year-Olds.

But there was one year the picnic happened and they didn't go. Later, in deep winter, Dad went to bed early, sometimes even before supper. She had children of her own before she knew the whole truth of it. How he hung onto his desk with both hands to keep from yelling. Not only pain, but shakes that felt like pain all over. "When a train came highballing, there for a while, it was all I could do not to jump under. . . ."

How had they not known? During his extremity they led their blissfully busy lives, only sometimes missing the laughs. And of course the picnic. And one day The Helper came.

The Helper was Roger. Dad had known him before he went off to business school, a kid crazy about anything to do with railroading. He came to the depot to learn telegraphy during his holidays. Little and quick and terribly sincere, Roger was exactly what the doctor ordered.

Roger was not only fascinated with this depot but with every depot beyond, and not only with the Denver and Rio Grande but with every railroad everywhere. He had started to build his model road when he was ten; one evening he took the whole family to see it in the cellar of his father's house. With reverent fingers he picked up little cars, pointing out perfect details of engines, cabooses, freights carrying tiny animals and lumber and coal and machinery. People sat with their hats on in his miniature Pullmans. He could set the whole train moving. It rushed through valleys, up and down painted hills, around curves, hooting. It stopped at tiny depots complete with swtiches and boards and watertanks and crossing signs.

He had built an amateur telegraphy set. "I called it The Mystic Key," he said. But that was old stuff now. Now he pulled real switches that ordered real trains to stop or thunder through. He wore the most fatuous happy grin you could imagine when he first took real messages. By spring Dad came home to early supper and ate it while Roger watered at the depot. That summer there was not only the picnic but a whole fishing trip. It seemed no time before Roger was a general Relief Man who came and went for visits. Then he had a station of his own. And another. Always better. Dad had never been more proud than he was the day he heard Roger was going into the office in Salt Lake. Years later he wrote that Roger was in the central Denver office: "His heart was always in it."

The time came when she herself was a traveler on trains. Then she shared window seats with her children. Coming around that final curve they'd yell, "There he is! There's Grandpa!" And there he would be, ordering their train to stop, smiling and waving from the platform, between his little gardens, still blooming and green. Growing up, they felt disloyal when they must fly.

When Dad was left alone and she came to stay with him for a while, he was still working at the depot. But it was not like the old days. Provo The Steel Center was only a few miles away, but trucks thundered on a distant highway. Silver Zephyrs no longer so much as paused; passengers were only a blur of faces. Mailbags took to the air.

"Lucky," he said. "I couldn't handle that much business at my age." He still received and delivered those yellow messages. He reported the exact time trains went through. The Mystic Key still clicked away but he had plenty of time for visitors.

He kept hearing of stations closed over the heads of much younger men and worried about when his turn would come. But he retired right off the Springville job, receiving his Golden Service Pin at an elegant dinner in Salt Lake and wearing it proudly in his best suit. For a long time, even after Mamma was gone, he walked down Depot Street to sprinkle the grass and flowers. Then the doors of the depot were locked and the windows boarded over. Depressed, he began to use his Life Pass now and then to visit his children. He wrote that the depot gardens were dead and gone. "I sure as hell hate to see that place go down," he said.

But it did not go down. One year. Two. There it stood. It had one more rather splendid flutter of true life. Some film-makers from Brigham Young University in Provo were given funds to make biographical documentaries on Utah history. The director came over to see Dad about some scenes that required an old depot. "We wrote to the company," he said. "They told us to come over here, that you'd give us all the dope we need. We want it authentic. There's a scene where they telegraph about the meeting of the East and West up at Promontory."

Delighted, once more Dad handled the keys to the front door and the baggage room. He was down there every minute the day they took the boards off the windows. He didn't like it that they took down the sign *Springville* and put up that said *Great Salt Lake City*. But with deep pleasure he sat at the old desk, intact and dusted, and even supplied with yellow paper and envelopes from the same old drawer. The director was a man of considerable wisdom; he realized he couldn't find better hands for his purpose if he searched the world over. So Dad's blunt fingers were memorialized on the key.

In three days boards were nailed once more over the windows. Nobody thought to take down the Salt Lake sign, and there must have been many a doubletake by the passengers rushing by.

And now—she was cold, sitting there in mountain twilight. And old, she thought, remembering Dad feeling old. Driving back toward the town she had to flip on her lights, and on the corner of Depot and Center Street she saw one of Dad's old friends. He had been a section foreman; she remembered him calling by for the paychecks on Saturday nights.

"Well! Never thought I'd see you around here now your Dad's gone. Looks awful, don't it, no depot on Depot Street? City Council should have

kept it for a museum—could've put in all those old models Roger offered 'em. But they said they couldn't afford to keep it up."

They shook their heads together. They shook hands again. "But you've got to hand the railroad one thing," he said. "Acted real human about your Dad. Boarded the depot up, sure, but didn't knock it down till the week after he died."

A train whistled. The two of them watched it highball through. "Must've been somebody pretty high up that knew how he'd hate to see that depot go down," he said.