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# TRAIN

# DREAMS

**DENIS JOHNSON**

**GRANTA**

## 1

In the summer of 1917 Robert Grainier took part in an attempt on the life of a Chinese laborer caught, or anyway accused of, stealing from the company stores of the Spokane International Railway in the Idaho Panhandle.

Three of the railroad gang put the thief under restraint and dragged him up the long bank toward the bridge under construction fifty feet above the Moyea River. A rapid singsong streamed from the Chinaman voluminously. He shipped and twisted like a weasel in a sack, lashing backward with his one free fist at the man lugging him by the neck. As this group passed him, Grainier, seeing them in some distress, lent assistance

and found himself holding one of the culprit's bare feet. The man facing him, Mr. Sears, of Spokane International's management, held the prisoner almost uselessly by the armpit and was the only one of them, besides the incomprehensible Chinaman, to talk during the hardest part of their labors: "Boys, I'm damned if we ever see the top of this heap!" Then we're hauling him all the way? was the question Grainier wished to ask, but he thought it better to save his breath for the struggle. Sears laughed once, his face pale with fatigue and horror. They all went down in the dust and got righted, went down again, the Chinaman speaking in tongues and terrifying the four of them to the point that whatever they may have had in mind at the outset, he was a deader now. Nothing would do but to toss him off the trestle.

They came abreast of the others, a gang of a dozen men pausing in the sun to lean on their tools and wipe at sweat and watch this thing. Grainier held on convulsively to the Chinaman's horny foot, wondering at himself, and the man with the other foot let loose and sat down gasping in the dirt and got himself kicked in the eye before Grainier took charge of the free-flailing limb. "It was just for fun. For fun," the man sitting in the dirt

said, and to his confederate there he said, "Come on, Jel Toomis, let's give it up." "I can't let loose," this Mr. Toomis said, "I'm the one's got him by the neck!" and laughed with a gust of confusion passing across his features. "Well, I've got him!" Grainier said, catching both the little demon's feet tighter in his embrace. "I've got the bastard, and I'm your man!"

The party of executioners got to the midst of the last completed span, sixty feet above the rapids, and made every effort to toss the Chinaman over. But he bested them by clinging to their arms and legs, weeping his gibberish, until suddenly he let go and grabbed the beam beneath him with one hand. He kicked free of his captors easily, as they were trying to shed themselves of him anyway, and went over the side, dangling over the gorge and making hand-over-hand out over the river on the skeleton form of the next span. Mr. Toomis's companion rushed over now, balancing on a beam, kicking at the fellow's fingers. The Chinaman dropped from beam to beam like a circus artist downward along the crosshatch structure. A couple of the work gang cheered his escape, while others, though not quite certain why he was being chased, shouted that the villain ought to be stopped. Mr. Sears removed from the holster

on his belt a large old four-shot black-powder revolver and took his four, to no effect. By then the Chinaman had vanished.

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Hiking to his home after this incident, Grainier detoured two miles to the store at the railroad village of Meadow Creek to get a bottle of Hood's Sarsaparilla for his wife, Gladys, and their infant daughter, Kate. It was hot going up the hill through the woods toward the cabin, and before getting the last mile he stopped and bathed in the river, the Moyea, at a deep place upstream from the village.

It was Saturday night, and in preparation for the evening a number of the railroad gang from Meadow Creek were gathered at the hole, bathing with their clothes on and sitting themselves out on the rocks to dry before the last of the daylight left the canyon. The men left their shoes and boots aside and waded in slowly up to their shoulders, whooping and splashing. Many of the men already sipped whiskey from flasks as they sat shivering after their ablutions. Here and there an arm and hand clutching a shabby hat jutted from the surface while somebody got his head wet. Grainier recognized

nobody and stayed off by himself and kept a close eye on his boots and his bottle of sarsaparilla.

Walking home in the falling dark, Grainier almost met the Chinaman everywhere. Chinaman in the road. Chinaman in the woods. Chinaman walking softly, dangling his hands on arms like ropes. Chinaman dancing up out of the creek like a spider.

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He gave the Hood's to Gladys. She sat up in bed by the stove, nursing the baby at her breast, down with a case of the salt rheum. She could easily have braved it and done her washing and cut up potatoes and trout for supper, but it was their custom to let her lie up with a bottle or two of the sweet-tasting Hood's tonic when her head ached and her nose stopped, and get a holiday from such chores. Grainier's baby daughter, too, looked rheumy. Her eyes were a bit crusted and the discharge bubbled pendulously at her nostrils while she suckled and snorted at her mother's breast. Kate was four months old, still entirely bald. She did not seem to recognize him. Her little illness wouldn't hurt her as long as she didn't develop a cough out of it.

Now Grainier stood by the table in the single-room

cabin and worried. The Chinaman, he was sure, had cursed them powerfully while they dragged him along, and any bad thing might come of it. Though astonished now at the frenzy of the afternoon, baffled by the violence, at how it had carried him away like a seed in a wind, young Grainier still wished they'd gone ahead and killed that Chinaman before he'd cursed them.

He sat on the edge of the bed.

"Thank you, Bob," his wife said.

"Do you like your sarsaparilla?"

"I do. Yes, Bob."

"Do you suppose little Kate can taste it out your teat?"

"Of course she can."

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Many nights they heard the northbound Spokane International train as it passed through Meadow Creek, two miles down the valley. Tonight the distant whistle woke him, and he found himself alone in the straw bed.

Gladys was up with Kate, sitting on the bench by the stove, scraping cold boiled oats off the sides of the pot and letting the baby suckle this porridge from the end of her finger.

"How much does she know, do you suppose, Gladys? As much as a dog-pup, do you suppose?"

"A dog-pup can live by its own after the bitch weans it away," Gladys said.

He waited for her to explain what this meant. She often thought ahead of him.

"A man-child couldn't do that way," she said, "just go off and live after it was weaned. A dog knows more than a babe until the babe knows its words. But not just a few words. A dog raised around the house knows some words, too—as many as a baby."

"How many words, Gladys?"

"You know," she said, "the words for its tricks and the things you tell it to do."

"Just say some of the words, Glad." It was dark and he wanted to keep hearing her voice.

"Well, fetch, and come, and sit, and lay, and roll over. Whatever it knows to do, it knows the words."

In the dark he felt his daughter's eyes turned on him like a cornered brute's. It was only his thoughts tricking him, but it poured something cold down his spine. He shuddered and pulled the quilt up to his neck.

All of his life Robert Grainier was able to recall this very moment on this very night.

## 2

Forty-one days later, Grainier stood among the railroad gang and watched while the first locomotive crossed the 112-foot interval of air over the 60-foot-deep gorge, traveling on the bridge they'd made. Mr. Sears stood next to the machine, a single engine, and raised his four-shooter to signal the commencement. At the sound of the gun the engineer tripped the brake and hopped out of the contraption, and the men shouted it on as it trudged very slowly over the tracks and across the Moyea to the other side, where a second man waited to jump aboard and halt it before it ran out of track. The men cheered and whooped. Grainier felt sad. He

couldn't think why. He cheered and hollered too. The structure would be called Eleven-Mile Cutoff Bridge because it eliminated a long curve around the gorge and through an adjacent pass and saved the Spokane International's having to look after that eleven-mile stretch of rails and ties.

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Grainier's experience on the Eleven-Mile Cutoff made him hungry to be around other such massive undertakings, where swarms of men did away with portions of the forest and assembled structures as big as anything going, knitting massive wooden trestles in the air of impassable chasms, always bigger, longer, deeper. He went to northwestern Washington in 1920 to help make repairs on the Robinson Gorge Bridge, the grandest yet. The conceivers of these schemes had managed to bridge a space 208 feet deep and 804 feet wide with a railway capable of supporting an engine and two flatcars of logs. The Robinson Gorge Bridge was nearly thirty years old, wobbly and terrifying—nobody ever rode the cars across, not even the engineer. The brakeman caught it at the other end.

When the repairs were done, Grainier moved higher

into the forest with the Simpson Company and worked getting timber out. A system of brief corduroy roads worked all over the area. The rails were meant only for transporting timber out of the forest; it was the job of the forty-some-odd men whom Grainier had joined to get the logs by six-horse teams within cable's reach of the railway landing.

At the landing crouched a giant engine the captain called a donkey, an affair with two tremendous iron drums, one paying out cable and the other winding it in, dragging logs to the landing and sending out the hook simultaneously to the choker, who noosed the next log. The engine was an old wood-burning steam colossus throbbing and booming and groaning while its vapors roared like a falls, the horses over on the skid road moving gigantically in a kind of silence, their noises erased by the commotion of steam and machinery. From the landing the logs went onto railroad flatcars, and then across the wondrous empty depth of Robinson Gorge and down the mountain to the link with all the railways of the American continent.

Meanwhile Robert Grainier had passed his thirty-fifth birthday. He missed Gladys and Kate, his Li'l Girl and Li'l Li'l Girl, but he'd lived thirty-two years a bachelor before finding a wife, and easily slipped back

into a steadying loneliness out here among the countless spruce.

Grainier himself served as a choker—not on the landing, but down in the woods, where sawyers labored in pairs to fell the spruce, limbers worked with axes to get them clean, and buckers cut them into eighteen-foot lengths before the chokers looped them around with cable to be hauled out by the horses. Grainier relished the work, the straining, the heady exhaustion, the deep rest at the end of the day. He liked the grand size of things in the woods, the feeling of being lost and far away, and the sense he had that with so many trees as wardens, no danger could find him. But according to one of the fellows, Arn Peeples, an old man now, formerly a jim-crack sawyer, the trees themselves were killers, and while a good sawyer might judge ninety-nine times correctly how a fall would go, and even by remarkable cuts and wedging tell a fifty-tonner to swing around uphill and light behind him as deftly as a needle, the hundredth time might see him smacked in the face and deader than a rock, just like that. Arn Peeples said he'd once watched a five-ton log jump up startled and fly off the cart and tumble over six horses, killing all six. It was only when you left it alone that a

tree might treat you as a friend. After the blade bit in, you had yourself a war.

Cut off from anything else that might trouble them, the gang, numbering sometimes more than forty and never fewer than thirty-five men, fought the forest from sunrise until suppertime, felling and bucking the giant spruce into pieces of a barely manageable size, accomplishing labors, Grainier sometimes thought, tantamount to the pyramids, changing the face of the mountainsides, talking little, shouting their communications, living with the sticky feel of pitch in their beards, sweat washing the dust off their long johns and caking it in the creases of their necks and joints, the odor of pitch so thick it abraded their throats and stung their eyes, and even overlaid the stink of beasts and manure. At day's end the gang slept nearly where they fell. A few rated cabins. Most stayed in tents: These were ancient affairs patched extensively with burlap, most of them; but their canvas came originally from infantry tents of the Civil War, on the Union side, according to Arn Peeples. He pointed out stains of blood on the fabric. Some of these tents had gone on to house U.S. Cavalry in the Indian campaigns, serving longer, surely, than any they sheltered, so reckoned Arn Peeples.

"Just let me at that hatchet, boys," he liked to say. "When I get to chopping, you'll come to work in the morning and the chips won't yet be settled from yesterday . . .

"I'm made for this summer logging," said Arn Peebles. "You Minnesota fellers might like to complain about it. I don't get my gears turning smooth till it's over a hundred. I worked on a peak outside Bisbee, Arizona, where we were only eleven or twelve miles from the sun. It was a hundred and sixteen degrees on the thermometer, and every degree was a foot long. And that was in the shade. And there wasn't no shade." He called all his logging comrades "Minnesota fellers." As far as anybody could ascertain, nobody among them had ever laid eyes on Minnesota.

Arn Peebles had come up from the Southwest and claimed to have seen and spoken to the Earp brothers in Tombstone; he described the famous lawmen as "crazy trash." He'd worked in Arizona mines in his youth, then sawed all over logging country for decades, and now he was a frail and shrunken gadabout, always yammering, staying out of the way of hard work, the oldest man in the woods.

His real use was occasional. When a tunnel had to be excavated, he served as the powder monkey, setting

## TRAIN DREAMS

charges and blasting his way deeper and deeper into a bluff until he came out the other side, men clearing away the rubble for him after each explosion. He was a superstitious person and did each thing exactly the way he'd done it in the Mule Mountains in south Arizona, in the copper mines.

"I witnessed Mr. John Jacob Warren lose his entire fortune. Drunk and said he could outrun a horse." This might have been true. Arn Peebles wasn't given to lying, at least didn't make claims to know many famous figures, other than the Earps, and, in any case, nobody up here had heard of any John Jacob Warren. "Wagered he could outrun a three-year-old stallion! Stood in the street swaying back and forth with his eyes crossed, that drunk, I mean to say—the richest man in Arizona!—and he took off running with that stallion's butt end looking at him all the way. Bet the whole Copper Queen Mine. And lost it, too! *There's* a feller I'd like to gamble with! Of course he's busted down to his drop-bottoms now, and couldn't make a decent wager."

Sometimes Peebles set a charge, turned the screw to set it off, and got nothing for his trouble. Then a general tension and silence gripped the woods. Men working half a mile away would somehow get an understanding that a dud charge had to be dealt with, and all work