

The Horse Spoke

by Eamon Walsh

It was a Sunday morning. Two carriages set off from the small town of Babbitine toward the larger town of Broom. The two towns were twelve miles apart, separated in the middle stretch by a lake on the east of the track and desert on the west. The train ran four times a day, twice on a Sunday.

The first carriage held only one passenger, Sebastian Pori. He lived in Babbitine but, as on most Sundays, he was on his way to have dinner with his parents and younger sister in Broom. He was forward-facing and not happy with his life, not aware that he had just under twenty minutes of it to go. Sebastian Pori was unhappy because that morning his girlfriend of two years had ended their relationship. She told him that she was tired of him going with other women and making a fool of her around the town. He denied it, although they both knew it was true. He had slept with four other women in the time he had been going out with Eve Borum. Despite his reputation as a small-town gigolo, it was the first time any woman had taken exception in the way that Eve had. His mother liked Eve, and so did his sister, so he decided not to tell them, not yet at least.

The second carriage held only two people.

Cecile Aptos was riding backwards toward her end. She too had her complaints. One was that she had not been asked to be a bridesmaid at her friend's wedding. She had supposed that, after being friends with the bride from the age of four, she was certain to be asked. But no, two more recent friends were asked instead. One of them, the bride had barely known for a year. Her mood was not brightened by the fact that she was on this train rather than in bed, as would be more usual for her at this time on a Sunday morning, because her boss had asked her to cover for sickness at the beauty parlour where she worked. It was not the first time

that she had had to cover for the sick person who, Cecile suspected, made more of her migraines than was reasonable.

Grenille Grand was seated, forward-facing on the opposite aisle to Cecile Aptos, next to the sliding door. She was nervous because she had an interview at eleven in Broom for a job in a supermarket. She wondered what they would do if she didn't get it. It was only her and her mother now, since their father had left them for his fancy-woman. And they were coming to the end of their state money. After that, it was vouchers and daily humiliations. She was desperate for the job and had spent money she didn't have on a new jacket.

The driver, also unaware that he was coming to the close of his life, was Paul Boem. He had been on standby that day and had been called in after his colleague didn't show up for his shift. Not expecting to be working, he had spent the previous evening in his local bar, not getting to his bed until after two. As they approached the section of raised track which bent west between the lake and the desert, he was thinking about a joke someone had told him. He was repeating it to himself, rehearsing it in advance of his own telling. It involved two men—rural types, with rural accents—and the sale of an old horse.

Within a mile of the wide arc, he should have eased the lever back and reduced the speed of the train from eighty to thirty. There was a 30 sign to remind the drivers, but as he approached it, he was reaching back into his jacket for his cigarettes. He was also trying to remember the run-up to the punchline. He knew that the horse spoke, and knew roughly what it had said, but when?

Sebastian Pori, Cecile Aptos, and Grenille Grand did not know each other but had all travelled on this train many times before. So, coming up to the lake, they knew that something was different, but they did not realise that it was the speed of the train; not until on the leftward curve they each felt themselves leaning away from their concerns and toward death.

Just before coming into contact with the seat in front of him, Sebastian Pori had decided to spread rumours about Eve Borum being a whore. She was not a whore, but he would tell people that he had ended it with her because she was selling herself to other men. It was a story which might bring his mother and sister round to his side.

Seconds before having her head crushed by the luggage-rack, Cecile Aptos decided that she would not attend her friend's wedding, and

would not send any greetings. She decided that it would be too humiliating to play any part in the thing and that it would be better to cut all ties with the bride. She would get herself other friends, friends who might be more loyal.

Grenille Grand, just prior to being thrown like a rag around the rolling carriage, said a short prayer. She prayed that the supermarket manager would be a woman, a kindly woman who would comment on her jacket and give her the job. She made a promise to herself and to God that she would go to mass for seven consecutive days if she got the job. She did not know what they would do if she did not.

Before the brake lever entered his chest, Paul Boem smiled as he remembered. The horse spoke after the buyer had asked three questions of the seller. Was the old horse still strong enough for farm work? Had it had any disease or injury? And was it an intelligent animal? Upon the last enquiry, the horse came in with the punchline. At the moment his life ended, Paul Boem was wondering if the horse, too, should have a rural accent.

For a long while, after those people and their concerns were taken with suddenness from the earth, the air creaked and was filled with dust. In the shale ten feet below the track, the train looked like a big animal taking a long time to settle. But then when everything was still again, silence returned to the lake and the desert. And the silence seemed profound and mysterious, as if what had just happened might mean something, rather than nothing.

After an hour or so, as if a respectful period had passed, a bird landed on the second carriage.

Then another, and then more.

Later, from many miles off, the sirens. Some sounded like they were coming from Babinine, some from Broom. They would come along the narrow track that runs alongside the lake. And they would see a line of birds watching them from the upturned train.

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