

—† **CAROL MATTHEWS** | Trains

JUST AS I WAS SAYING GOODBYE to my parents for the last time, I saw Tauno, dressed all in black, slouched against a pillar. Knowing he was there made me uneasy and also excited, in a helpless sort of way—a feeling between vertigo and seasickness.

This was February 1963, Vancouver. I wore a black turtleneck, black pants, black leather boots, and a sage-green corduroy coat. I had what was then called an Italian cut, short hair with shaggy curls, which I'd tucked under a knitted black hat stitched with black sequins. I wore very pale lipstick and green eyeshadow and I'd painted a streak of black eyeliner across my eyelids in a style I thought of as French.

I'm almost certain I'd made love with Tauno six weeks earlier. We'd met at my friend Vicky's Christmas party, and we'd all had too much to drink and smoke.

*John, John, the grey goose is gone
And the fox is on the town-O, town-O, town-O,
He'd many a mile to go that night
Before he'd reach the town-O.*

He had an unusually deep voice that I thought sounded Russian, remembering the bass voices in my father's old records of the Don Cossack Chorus. But he said I couldn't be more wrong. He was born in Tallinn, Estonia, and had lived in England, Sweden, and Argentina before moving to Canada as a teenager.

"Town-O," I said. "Tauno."

"Very good." He smiled and passed me a joint. It was my first experience with marijuana, and I think that's why my memory of him is intense and delineated, like a photograph on a record album. Tall and slim, high cheekbones, pale skin, long dark wavy hair. Greyish green eyes that were endlessly deep. Lagoon, I thought. Something sequestered.

Earlier that evening I'd played the piano at a recital. It wasn't an important occasion, only a small concert organized by my piano teacher at a little room in the art gallery. My mother had given me a couple of her Phenobarbital so my hands wouldn't shake. At the party I still wore the white dress with long tight sleeves, a low square neck and a narrow skirt with little tucks around the waist.

I'd pinned a huge, red velvet poinsettia to my right shoulder and when, fuzzy-headed from barbiturates, gin, and marijuana, I spilled my drink, red dye streaked across the bodice of my dress.

"You look like a wounded deer," Tauno said. "A blossom, white as a lily flower, and a berry red as blood. Like the running of the wounded deer."

"I didn't play well. At the recital."

"It's the way you look. Irresistible. It's shit, this music." He pointed to Vicky's portable record player.

"It's OK," I said. I didn't know much about popular music, but vaguely recognized a song I'd heard before on the radio.

"It's shit. I don't believe you like it at all." He took my hand, pulled me to the bedroom where he'd left his jacket, and showed me Chet Baker's *Italian Sessions*.

"This is real music. I'll play it for you, you'll see. But you can tell just by looking at his eyes. He lives it, and it comes out of his horn."

I said Chet Baker looked like him, and it was true. They had the same high forehead, the sweet, unhappy smile.

"Ha! He looks like James Dean."

"Yes, and so do you."

He snorted, but I could tell he was pleased. He was right about the music, I thought, listening to *These Foolish Things*, as we danced together, hardly moving, holding each other close.

"Better than Acker Bilk," I said, and he laughed.

I danced and smoked and drank and talked with Tauno. He told me that when he was a few years old, his father went to fight against the Russians, leaving his wife and small son to live with relatives in the countryside outside Tallinn. As the war progressed, his mother arranged for them to escape on a boat destined for Sweden, and the two of them spent more than a year looking for his father. Eventually they were reunited in a refugee camp. Then Argentina. Montreal. The Allan Memorial Institute. Shock treatment. I wasn't really listening closely. I'd never heard of Estonia before, and it was not a place that interested me. Paris, Rome, Madrid, these were my destinations.

The evening was a blur, and the next morning I awoke, naked, on Vicky's couch, a blanket over me, a cushion under my head, my clothes neatly folded by the side of the bed next to my overnight bag. No time to do anything but shower, dress, and rush to the bookstore where I worked. When Tauno phoned later in the day, I was dizzy and faint and said I couldn't meet him.

“You mean you don’t remember anything?”

“Don’t,” I said, embarrassed.

“You’re as innocent as a baby,” he said. “It’s true. Your face, when you sleep, is unmarred. Naïve, like a child.”

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“IS THAT A FRIEND OF YOURS, DEAR?” my mother asked, when I turned to look at Tauno. I could tell she liked him when he came over and handed me a small parcel to take on the train. He greeted my mother with a slight, almost courtly bow, shook my father’s hand, and chatted about the adventure of travelling by train, then left us to our last good-byes.

“Nice chap,” my father said.

“And handsome,” my mother added. They looked so apprehensive, my thoughtful, decent parents. My father in his good grey suit, my mother in her gabardine coat and feather-trimmed felt hat. I realized that had I been staying in Vancouver, my parents would have been pleased to have me go out with Tauno. They’d seen something fine in him, something they respected.

Inside my cosy roomette, I opened his parcel and found a small pink pacifier and a book of Thomas Merton’s poems. On the frontispiece of the book he’d written his name and mine, linked with a red streak. It looked like blood. A wave of nausea swept over me, but I memorized several of the poems, remembering my mother telling me that once you’d memorized a poem, even if they put you in prison, they could never take away that poem.

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THE FIRST ROOM WE SHARED was in an enormous old house called the Embassy. We were on the ground floor on the perimeter of the observatory, a large round area just beyond the grand staircase. The Embassy’s main entrance and staircase were always crowded with people collecting mail, putting on muddy winter boots, taking off fur hats and woollen gloves, meeting friends. For two or three months a film was shot there, and often we had to make our way through a collection of lights, cameras and crew, actors. A wild young man carrying a limp woman down the oak staircase. A cluster of people fighting and shouting on the landing.

In the observatory area it was quiet. We had one of three tiny cubicles made larger by huge glass windows but only big enough to hold a single bed, a dresser, and a lamp. On the curved ceiling outside our room there were tiny stars painted on the ceiling. Some people dragged out blankets or a sleeping bag so they

could spend a night under the stars. Tauno and I just stayed in our room, reading, listening to jazz on his portable record player, sleeping tightly entwined in the narrow bed. Sometimes Tauno would play Spanish songs on the guitar, songs he had learned as a boy in Argentina.

I have never felt so utterly absorbed as I did in those first months after he joined me in Montreal and we found our room at the Embassy. We were connected in a way that left no room for others. Everyone else in the house organized parties and cooked meals together in one of the two common kitchens, but only rarely did we stop to chat or have a beer with them. When we weren't in our room we were out for walks, climbing up the side of the mountain that looked over the city, exploring "The Main," strolling along beautiful St. Denis.

We discovered Montreal together at the coldest time of year, immersed in snow, and it seemed our whole world was made white and new. I sang Tauno songs I'd learned at the fundamentalist day camp I'd attended when I was five years old: *Black, black was my heart. Red, red was Christ's blood. White is my heart, washed with his blood.*

"Ah, the three primary colours," he said, and I suddenly realized they were the only colours I'd seen him wear.

"Just one," I argued. "Because the white covers everything. Look around!"

I can still see his face, lit up against the lightest of blue skies yet veiled by a screen of large light snowflakes that seemed to hang suspended in the air, like moments about to change or disappear. I remember the snow on my cheeks, lips, eyelashes as we walked and walked, my face tingling and reddening, my body coming alive in a new and electric way, as though I'd lived under water until Montreal. It was as though in our submerged lives we had found a current in each other that changed the world in a way we had not imagined. Every day we saw surprise in each other's eyes at being together, discovering each other and our New World.

One day as we walked along Pine Avenue, Tauno pointed at the Allan Memorial Institute.

"A very bad scene," he said. "Some of the people I saw there were practically zombies. They didn't know who they were anymore. They'd forgotten everything."

"You've been there?"

"I told you."

"When?"

He shrugged. "Memory is important," he said. "It's who you are. Although some people find it convenient not to remember things, don't they?" He was

laughing, like it was all a joke.

“Really, Tauno, I’m serious. I want to know. What happened?”

“I tried to kill myself. Or, rather, I had a gun and someone found out about it.”

“But why did you want to kill yourself?”

“Don’t ask me about that now.” He put a finger to my lips. “It’s behind me.

Now I want to live.”

On weekday mornings we walked downtown together, he to the Classics bookstore, I to a temporary secretarial job in the Place Ville Marie. After work we’d meet in an underground bar by the CN station that was set up to look like a train and was called the Club Car. We’d have a drink and then walk home to another night of making love and sleeping with our arms around each other, face to face.

“When we are old, we’ll nestle together like spoons,” Tauno said. “It’s too soon for that.”

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IT WAS MAY WHEN I FOUND THE GUN. We’d passed through that abrupt and miraculous transformation when the snow suddenly disappears and you can practically hear buds popping all around as the world turns green and springy. Tauno was restless and had gone for a walk by himself. He’d been away for a while and I couldn’t find a match to light my cigarette, so I began rifling through drawers and cupboards. I didn’t really expect to find anything but when my hand came up against something hard and smooth and cold, I felt the danger instantly, so maybe on one level I did know what I was looking for. I held the gun in my hand and stared at it.

“I needed to be prepared,” he said, when he came in and saw me holding the gun. “I could feel you moving away from me.”

“You have to get it out of here, Tauno. I can’t stay with you if you have a gun.”

I remember how calmly I spoke when I made him promise to take it away, and he promised to tell me about the things that troubled him.

That night we talked a lot, mostly about fragments of memories that kept coming back to him. Sunny days in the Estonian countryside, playing with his cousins, two clever girls a few years older than him. Being fussed over by his beautiful mother and aunts because he was the only male around. The songs his mother sang, putting him to sleep at night. The torpedoes in the harbour. The patriot who defiantly hoisted the Estonian flag on a tower as the ship sailed off full of desperate survivors. The desolate travels through ravaged Germany, the crammed trains, the unspeakable days in the refugee camp until finally they found his father. He

was only six years old when his father, a stranger, stole away the affections of his mother.

"What were you doing in a German refugee camp? I thought you said you escaped to Sweden."

"My father was fighting on the Russian front. Don't you understand? We had to go to Germany to find him."

"Sorry. All the fathers I've ever known fought against the Germans. That's what it was to have a father in the war. They fought against the Germans. Not with them."

"My father didn't fight with the Germans, he fought against the Russians."

His beautiful mouth strained as he spoke about how the Estonians hated the Russians. For centuries, and for good reasons. He recounted the stories his parents and grandparents had told. The Russian atrocities in 1917. The soldiers tossing babies in the air and catching them on their bayonets. He sang the song his mother had sung, about how little boys had to do men's work because the men had gone away to war and died.

"I don't want to hear any more."

"But that's how it was. Sometimes when my aunt was very angry with me she would say I was born with a Russian flag in my hand. It was the cruellest insult she could give."

"Please let's stop."

"In Argentina, there was a man with a camera, following me, keeping track. I could never catch him, but I knew he was there. That bastard. With all the photographs, all my memories."

"You know that's not true."

"So you say, but he still follows me. Nothing can stop him. Not booze, not drugs, not shock treatment." He cupped my face in his hands. "For a while I thought you might be able to do it."

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AS SUMMER CAME, OUR SMALL ROOM GREW HOT at night and I began to spend more time in the kitchen where it was cooler. I would even join some of the others at a party for an hour or so. Or go next door to drink a cold beer with our neighbour, Kevin. Tauno never came.

"You go," he would say. "It's good for you."

The heat and humidity made it hard to breathe. Walking through the front door of the house I would feel faint with the dampness, the airlessness. One Saturday night in August the people on the third floor had a big party, which simply meant dragging tables out in the hall, loading them up with beer and chips

and dip, and blasting music from someone's record player. I'd had my hair cut very, very short and bought a thin cotton dress with spaghetti straps. I wanted to go out, and said the party would do us good. The heat was getting to us, I said, but he said he'd rather stay in the room and listen to cool music.

"Go," he said. "If that's what you want."

"Come with me," I replied, "if that's what I want."

To hell with him, I thought, when he simply turned away. As I opened the door of our room I ran into Kevin and he walked upstairs with me, loudly joking.

"I'm glad you're getting out. This is the most I've ever seen of you," he said, leering. "It's very elegant the way that dress reveals so much and is still quite modest."

At the party I talked to a girl I'd seen a few times in the kitchen, and she introduced me to some English boys who'd moved in a few weeks earlier. After dancing with one of them, Gordon, for a little while, I went downstairs to try to persuade Tauno to join us. The room was dark and quiet and it looked like he was sleeping so I went back upstairs by myself. Gordon and I took some beer to his room so I could hear his Bessie Smith records. We talked for a while, and danced some more. When I awoke I was alone in a strange room, with sunshine streaming through the curtains, and a moment later Gordon bounded in with two cups of coffee.

"I must go," I said. I hunted for my shoes, ran my fingers through my hair and rushed downstairs to my own empty room.

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SOME MOMENTS HAVE AN AIR OF INEVITABILITY, as though a number of strands have woven together to create exactly that instant. I was sick with dread, and yet resigned, waiting to see what would happen next. I did what I could to pass the time. Had a shower, put on a linen dress Tauno had bought for me at the start of the summer. It was yellow and white, with a full circle skirt that reminded him of a dress his mother had worn when he was a child. I made coffee and polished my nails. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer and decided to go looking, and I wasn't long on the street before I suddenly realized where he'd be. Of course! I saw him as soon as I entered the station, sitting on a bench where we'd always met before going to the Club Car.

"You look beautiful," he said, when he turned and saw me. "Virginal." He looked as though he'd been sitting there for days, a displaced person, his face drawn with pain. "It's soothing watching the trains. They come from nowhere,

and go nowhere. People arrive and depart. There's always another train."

"Nothing happened last night."

"Nothing you remember, in any event. It's happened before." He smiled without looking at me.

"You think I'm a slut, don't you?"

"What are you talking about? You're the centre of my world. It's not you I'm angry at. I'm the one. You are innocent." He jumped to his feet, angry for a moment, and slumped back, pale and deflated, like a fallen bird.

I remembered lines from the Merton book he'd given me at the Vancouver train station: "The trains go through the summer quiet as paper,/ And, in the powerhouse, the singing dynamos/ Make no more noise than cotton."

Tauno smiled and added, ". . . Like white birds shot to death."

"Let's walk," I said. "It's too hot for train stations. Let's walk to the water."

We headed south down Peel towards the old Bonsecours Market, past the Old Sailor's Church and along the waterfront until we found a place to sit where we could watch the freighters.

"Where would you go, Tauno, at this moment, if we could just take off?"

He paused, and his eyes were green and distant, like a faraway sea.

"I would take you to Tallinn, and show you the house where I was born. I'd show you the University of Tartu, where my father studied philosophy. And my grandparents' house, made of stone and brick, with an elegant weathervane and two carved, wooden doors."

"We'll go there, Tauno." I said. "One day we'll go."

"The Russians are there now, foolish girl. Did you ever hear of the Iron Curtain?"

"I wish I could dive into the river and swim away."

We sat quietly on the dock, not speaking. The heat was murderous. After a while Tauno took off his shirt and spread it out so we could lie down and rest our heads on it. We were both tired and slept until we were awakened by the sound of objects hitting the wood beside us. Looking up we saw men on the deck of a nearby freighter laughing and flinging oranges at us. We called to them and they shouted back in a language I didn't understand. We waved, gesturing for them to join us. They shrugged, exchanged a few words and then, one after another, began throwing more oranges.

"Look, Tauno. The world is coming to us now," I laughed, gathering the fruit in my skirt. The oranges rose up in the blue sky and floated down into our outspread hands.

The sun blasted down as we began to walk back through the narrow stone streets. From a window above a French restaurant, a little girl blew perfect bubbles that floated, round and rainbow-coloured, hovering overhead and then rising above the pretty rooftops. Seated on a low wall by the old market, a very thin, dark man played a tenor saxophone.

We made our way up steamy St. Lawrence Boulevard, passed the sex shops, the clubs featuring exotic dancers, the Montreal Pool Room with its three-for-a-quarter hot dogs piled high with sauerkraut and fried onions, passed the French Casino and the Crystal Palace. At the Canasta Club we stopped for a quart of beer. Because it was Sunday we were supposed to order food, but the waiter just threw down one of the plates of greenish cold cuts and wilted lettuce that were moved from table to table throughout the day. There was a desperate energy about that hot August evening. Men tore off their shirts; women bared their midriffs. It seemed as though everyone was half-naked. As we walked home, cats howled in dark alleys. People were dragging mattresses out onto balconies and drinking beer on their doorsteps.

It was too hot to sleep in our room that night. We just lay on the bed, listening to a scratchy record of Coltrane and Hartman, *My One and Only Love*.

"Maybe we should get a bigger place." I imagined a bed-sitting room in which we could move around and have enough space to leave the record player out permanently. "Wouldn't that help?"

Tauno was silent, staring at the ceiling. When he turned his pale face towards me, his dark eyes unreadable, I saw again the seriousness in him that I did not possess.

"Shhh," he said, stroking my hair. "Listen to the music. Just follow it, one note at a time."