Silver & Blue

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Did you hear that the railway built Canada? That's probably all you heard

I can't remember exactly when we first saw each other. I think it was in the late afternoon that first day. I think it was that time because the porter had started making our beds—the upper and lower berths in train car number 11—which she never started doing earlier than that. If you were in the previous car (car number 10), you had to pass through ours to get to any of the social areas—the bar car with steps to the dome (windows all around, often full); the activities car (often not full, save for a lone puzzle maker); the dining car. He must have been staying in number 10 because he passed through a few times over those three days and three nights. I assume he also had a berth, since he seemed to be travelling alone. But maybe he had one of those rooms that looked tighter than a prison cell, with a toilet smack in your face. I was standing next to the porter watching the bench-to-bed transformation she kept calling a "workout" when he first passed by. I turned around for a better look, and that's when I noticed he had turned around too.

This is what I saw: big blue eyes, lots of freckles, sandy hair in that messy, feathery kind of cut a certain ilk of boy seems to favour, a kid made for sport socks and hoodies and way too many boxes of cereal. I don't know what he saw when he looked at me, neither the first time, nor the second. I was wearing my new hoodie though. This hoodie is a magnet. I bought it specifically for the train and people have not stopped mentioning it since. It sticks out, this bright red, fleece-lined Hudson's Bay Company (I know) sweatshirt covered in patches—an Olympics 2012 one-off. Maybe that's what caught his attention that first day. Or maybe it was my shaved head. What caught my attention was his face—the kind that ignored me countless times growing up. His face noticing mine, as mine noticed his.

At this age, the age I now was—middle age, the age of crisis—you go forward or you go back. And here it stood, the past, staring right at me, asking me to redo it.

"I shouldn't be looking at a teenager like that," I whispered to the porter. Her face went red, and she let out one of those gasping, soundless laughs.

This is about trains, I swear. I had to get to my family on the West Coast from the East Coast that summer, and I didn't want to fly. I hate to fly. I wished Canada had transnational trains. And we do, we have one: The Canadian. From Toronto, Ontario, to Vancouver, British Columbia, it takes four days and four nights and costs $2000. Even if you're only travelling from Toronto to Jasper, Alberta, like I was, in high season it still costs $1700—not even for a room, just for that bench, the one that's so hard to turn into a bed. Via Rail runs it because of course it does—it's the one and only company operating passenger rail nationally in this country. A salesperson who had worked at the Crown corporation for almost twenty years explained that travelling The Canadian in winter is half as expensive as summer and it's one of the few trains in the world that offers overnight sleepers that aren't luxury. The class (middle) I eventually booked, Sleeper Plus, used to be called Silver & Blue for the azure line at the top of its metallic cars. This train operated twice a week and was once forty-three hours late. This train sounded stupid. I wanted to take it. So I applied for a writing residency to which I could take this train so I would have an excuse I wouldn't have to pay for (freelance tax write-off). I did the research. I went to the library. I talked to railway experts. I got bored. The history of trains in this country is boring. A bland cover for the slow, steady exploitation rumbling beneath it all. Did you hear that the railway built Canada? That's probably all you heard. Everything else is bureaucracy—bureaucracy and incompetence.

I wanted this residency because I wanted to write this essay because I wanted to make people understand how important trains are. I want trains to be more important than cars and planes—there are too many cars, and too many planes, and also planes scare me. But the way the history was laid out, the way it was told, it was like it was daring me to care. Like this was none of my business. Like trains were the business only of men who made decisions about them and men who wrote history books about those decisions. Canadian trains felt like a closed door with men smoking behind it.

This is about the railway lines connecting this enormous country—forming it, really—in the nineteenth century, connecting land, but more importantly, people, from coast to coast, and how Canada was one of the first places to do that, to be nationally stitched together like that. This is about how that founding identity laid the track (if I can already use a pun this early) for the railways' decline. This is about a transcontinental train, established seventy years ago, using the same cars to this day. It is about how trains became a relic in our national mind, which is how they came to be invisibly trundling across the country, slowly connecting products rather than people, as the rest of the world surpassed us with better versions of what we left behind. "We are the world's leading laggard when it comes to passenger trains," is how Anthony Perl, who once served on the board of Via Rail, put it to me on the phone from Vancouver in his aptly flattened cadence. (I wanted to speak to him because he researches transportation and policy and has advised multiple governments and says things like, "On good days Via can be something that almost makes you happy.")

This is the kind of history that's reserved for classrooms no one wants to be in—it's vending machines, it's cramming, it's no sleep.

This is about a vast country of people yearning for connection. But Canada has never, in its infinite practicality, accommodated yearning. This country actively (the rare actively) refuses to reach, for fear of faltering. This country will allow one rail company to monopolize its tracks, one airline to monopolize its skies, highways to be blocked blocked blocked built built built, because that was the future and the future is here and this is what we committed to, even if it no longer works. Even if it never really did.

This was going to be about my fear of planes. This was going to be about a country underwriting that fear. "What do you do when the thing you fear most is the only way to get to the people you love most?" I wanted the answer to be simple, and in a way it was: You grow the fuck up. You make a

Image on previous page: Mickey Meads, Containers 2*, 2017, archival inkjet on paper*

decision. Like taking the fucking train across the country instead. An expensive choice, but a choice I made. (The rare actively.) I didn't check with my mom. With my brother. With some guy. With some friend. Just me. Finally. On a track I chose by myself, for myself. Why the fuck did this take so long? And why did it feel like it was coming too late? The real question underneath all of this wasn't about planes. Or trains. The real question was the one I didn't want to ask: how do you go forward when all you want to do is go back?

It was that freckle-faced kid. He had me staring in the face of my own mortality.

When you're on a passenger train in Canada, it becomes abundantly clear how much less important you are than cargo.

He wasn't a kid. I figured that out pretty fast. Not directly—we didn't speak for ages. We mostly just looked. Three looks. Four looks. Five. Time accommodated each glance, like some slow-motion scene in a hackneyed romance; three seconds . . . stretching . . . to . . . ten. But we were rarely alone. He was often surrounded by older white-haired women who seemed to be looking after him. I overheard one of them saying he was cute and that he reminded her of her son. Did she remind him of his mother? I caught bits of their conversation while working on my laptop. He was from the South of France, which explained the accent I couldn't place (and how he might be attracted to a woman twice his age). He was studying to be a Phys. Ed. teacher. Something about a scholarship. This trip—a reward for finishing his final year at university—

Twenties. He was in his twenties.

Okay. The history of the Canadian railway—don't skip this. I want to skip this. We all want to. This is the kind of history that's reserved for classrooms no one wants to be in—it's vending machines, it's cramming, it's no sleep. Ahead of the trip, I researched trains on my laptop in the dimness of my study (my apartment gets little light even during the day and this was going into the night) and then researched trains in book after book in the dimness of the Toronto Reference Library, that enormous orange sprawling space, with windows too high up and too far away to correct the gloom of fluorescent light and obligation. I tried to be interested, the way I tried to be interested when I had a test and had to memorize what I would immediately forget the second I handed it in: the Canadian Pacific Railway was built from eastern to western Canada between 1881 and 1885 to fulfill a promise to British Columbia so that they would join the Confederacy, the last spike was driven in the same year Banff became a national park and—oh, wait, wait, wait, that's actually important because that's where the residency is, that will get me in for sure.

It took less than two hours for a freight train to interrupt us. I counted. I'd been waiting for it. Not that there was an announcement explaining anything. None of us ever really knew what was going on on The Canadian. When I first boarded in Toronto I had a Tim Hortons bagel and half my bag was apples and nuts. I didn't realize meals were included. Other people had granola bars and sandwiches; they didn't know either. I didn't bank on ever stepping outside because it was unclear when the train stopped or for how long. But I knew we shared the tracks. Anyone who has ever taken a train in Canada knows we share the tracks.

Via Rail has shared the tracks with Canadian National Railway's freight service since 1990, the year The Canadian became the sole cross-Canada train after budget cut after budget cut after cars and planes took over travel. Share is the wrong word. CN *owns* the tracks. Its freight DOMINATES them. CN, private since 1995, *permits* Via to use their tracks. But they never let them go first. Ever. Before 1990, this journey was far more frequent—seven times a week—and way shorter—three days, three nights. It takes so long now because Via built in buffer time for the ballooning number and sizes of freight. When you're on a passenger train in Canada, it becomes abundantly clear how much less important you are than cargo.

Perl compares it to mixing oil and water: "The intelligent way would be to build two pipelines,

one for water and one for oil." The unintelligent way is this: Via owns less than one per cent of Canada's tracks. More than a third of passenger trains late over two years (2022 to 2023) because the country once bought a bunch of trains without the tracks to go with them. Like buying a pair of ski boots without the skis—useless. Or not; one of the worst passenger rail services in the world must be benefiting someone. And, yes, those endless trains of multi-coloured boxes with unidentifiable branding, seldom moving faster than a car on a country road, one person at the helm, are a rolling gold mine. "That's the formula that works to bring in the billions for these freight rail operations," Perl said, becoming particularly animated when he told me that Bill Gates is the biggest owner of CN stock and not because he likes trains.

Our first real stop was Capreol. It was a small community in Greater Sudbury which appeared to be populated only by us. As I got off, I passed two men inhaling cigarette after cigarette. (No one wanted to deal with the smokers, so they were allowed off more often than the rest of us.) Walking along the train, the Polish-Italian oddball I'd befriended pointed out the wooden tracks with special interest like we had stumbled upon an ancient relic. This was his first time outside of Europe. In Europe, he said, they don't have wooden tracks anymore (they do). They're considered antiquated. I felt immediately ashamed. I didn't know how old those wooden ties were, but I knew the trains were some of the oldest in the world. I imagined other passengers like him coming from all over with some magnificent trip in mind only to be faced by a grand but parochial site. These tracks, these trains, exposed Canada for what it was: a country shoddily built on various levels of compromise.

"I believe that many in this room will live to hear the whistle of the steam engine in the passes of the Rocky Mountains," Nova Scotian politician Joseph Howe said in 1851. The room was in Halifax—the now-defunct Mason's Hall—but this was three decades before the train in question would be built, so I'm not sure how many of the people in that room did in fact live to hear it. But this is the thing with some of the very early history—there's spirit to it, there's passion. Howe sounds like a man who has just stepped off an actual train and is about to step back on one. Like a decision about trains might actually affect him, like he has skin in it and the elegance of his era's diction to express it. But it's easy to be poetic when you let the sound of a whistle drown out the noise of extraction—of Indigenous land, of Indigenous people, of Chinese immigrants, of Chinese labour. As time wore on, men like Howe seemed to lose their proximity to what they were talking about, and with it any of this materiality. Trains turned from something real, tangible, into protocol, theory. Less than two hundred years later, they are nothing but flat white documents, i's dotted, t's crossed by a bunch of grey suits crunching hypotheses so unwelcome no one bothers to even test them (see *High-speed Passenger Rail in Canada: A Feasibility Study Conducted by Via Rail Canada, 1984*). Whether trains are better than planes or cars for the climate, and therefore better for the economy, and therefore better for the people, and therefore more useful, is moot. They've been reduced to "infrastructure," existing only in rooms with artificial air and cardboard coffee. An entire country of people pulled apart by a national fiction from which they've become too alienated to question: that trains are over.

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I don't know why I couldn't be more direct with this guy—why I didn't try to talk to him when he was curled over his phone or sitting alone musing out the window. No, I do know: it was too confronting. Where was I gonna go when this jock I finally had the courage to approach rejected me? When this chance at redoing my teens became a repeat of my actual teens? When he shoved my actual age back in my face. How was I supposed to run away from that? This train was too confronting. An oppressive present, it bore none of the usual distractions—no Wi-Fi, no friends,

no family. There was nowhere else to go. It was just me, this train, these people. This guy. That past. A relentless togetherness. It was the kind of sustained proximity to strangers—a pushy intimacy—I recognized from school, but was no longer practised in, if I ever was to begin with. Surrounded by these people, outside reality, I felt unmoored. I lay on my back in my upper berth on the first night—no window, nothing to orient me—rocking with the car, my heart at triple speed, dizzy, almost vomiting, a ladder between me and the floor. I felt like I was dying. I knew I was not. But the next night I moved to the lower berth—a window, a horizon, the ground at my feet—and I felt better.

Canada is half the size of Russia and barely bigger than China. It is not bigger than Europe. But Canada feels huge, sprawling, like you can barely get across it. The longest high-speed rail route runs from Beijing to Guangzhou and is about half the length of The Canadian's. At its slowest it takes eleven hours and at its highest cost is $250. Using the same arithmetic, a high-speed train across Canada could take double the time at double the price. Instead, it takes nine times as long and costs eight times as much.

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"Canadians have put trains into a box that's back in the nineteenth century," Perl told me. Then why bother keeping them around? The Canadian dates back to 1955, when air travel and the Trans-Canada Highway hadn't yet taken over. But the years wore on, the passengers departed, and the money along with them. So why, now, was my only option, outside of a cheaper, *much* faster flight, to arrive three days early in Jasper, a town nearly 300 kilometres from my final destination (no Via to Banff)? Because this train that likely moves slower than locomotives did in the literal 1800s (after twenty-eight hours we were still in Ontario) is so weighed down by the past it is unable to move into the future. Not unable—condemned. By men in charge who created passenger rail like some political afterthought (Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau founding Via Rail in 1977). Modern men who thought freedom meant no rules (Prime Minister Brian Mulroney underwriting the "Freedom to Move" document in 1985). Because of them, the freedom not to go by road or by air meant spending more than anyone ever should to be stuck on a pair of termite-riddled tracks behind a freight train. Forever.

I think he tried to connect at one point. Maybe. On his way to lunch, he descended from the glass dome into the bar car where I was working at my laptop near the toilet and the only two plugs for miles (this train was built when plugs were only needed for men to shave their big faces). I sat at a table with a girl about his age from Korea who had discovered this train on social media and kept saying she was bored. There were other people in the car besides us, but maybe because I looked well ensconced behind my computer, he beelined to me. "Are you going to be here for a bit? Can you watch this?" Holding out his tablet, his blue eyes, his head, his body, took up my entire field of view, blocking out everything else around us. I took the tablet. "Unfortunately, I will be here forever," I said (cute). "I am sorry," he said with a smile (cute).

When he departed, I gave the Korean girl a knowing look. She giggled. I asked if she had noticed how handsome he was. She said she hadn't noticed shit. I flipped open his tablet. The Korean girl expressed mock shock. The wallpaper, a photo of Niagara Falls, would have been distastefully touristy if I hadn't found him attractive, which made it disarming instead. The battery was at only 65 percent. I plugged it into my plug (hot).

I sat with my back to the booth, my eyes following the prairies rolling by as people spoke around me, conversations conjuring and evaporating. Empty time with nothing asking to fill it. Nowhere else to go, just me, this train, these people, this guy. The sweaty, disarming chef who checked on us at every meal. The young porters cycling in and out, reminiscent of camp counsellors. The guy

who did the announcements, lacing his script with jokes so dry he told me his colleagues wondered if he might just be mean ("Saskatoon—Saskatchewan's biggest and therefore best city"). The retirees. The passengers from afar with more desire to see Canada than Canadians.

History rests on those decrepit tracks snaking across the country. It passes over bridges I didn't know had been built, through fields of crops I didn't know had been planted, into tiny towns populated by people I didn't know had been born. Those tracks, those trains, unchanging, immovable, insignificant . . . until you actually take them, and they quietly, unexpectedly drive you into a gloriously intertwined humanity you had forgotten even existed. Trains turn a country into a home. Their tracks stitch it together.

And then, just like that, at the last lunch (I got a wrap which got stuck in my teeth), he was seated right in front of me (with something huge that demanded cutlery) and the entire dining car fell into a black hole. All that was left of the world was him and those blue eyes—eyes that had the bigness of youth. His whole face did—that kind of sloppy, not-quite-settled slapdash of immaturity. I could see those protruding lips and that overbite lose their chaos as he aged, I could see the bump on his nose become more defined, his eyes settle in his head, his expression—those thick, raised brows—lose their perpetual question mark. "I like your hoodie," he said, dropping the *h* and extending the *o*'s the way the French do (that hoodie, man). I explained that it was thrifted and that I knew nothing about sports ("I mean, I jog"). I asked him about studying here, which seemed like an acceptable segue, since I knew he was studying sports. He said he remembered wanting to be a Phys. Ed. teacher since he was three. His parents were teachers too. He had that quality of people who spend their entire lives being of service to others, who are invigorated by it—a selfless energy.

I told him I had studied French literature, that I hadn't practised speaking the language in forever, but I used to visit France in the summer, the Pyrenees. He asked where else in Europe I'd travelled. I told him all the places I could remember, and he said: "That's nice." He repeated "That's nice" a few times to various things I said in that quaint way you return to a familiar phrase when you don't know a language enough to comfortably elaborate. I then explained that this trip, for me, was a project, an ornate plan, like a miniature heist, enlisting a writing residency as a way of getting across the country without flying. "Wow," he said, looking moony. He asked if I was doing "portraits" of the passengers. Portraits.

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I imagined myself sitting in a car with an easel drawing those terrible cartoons you come across at carnivals. "No," I said. "It's about me." I don't know why I said it like that. I heard myself say it and I hated it—the selfish in front of the selfless. I said I might add stuff about other people. "You might be in it—sorry." He said he didn't mind.

I suddenly felt a distinct urge to tell him my age. Like a moral thing. Like not telling him was lying. But less like I was lying to him, more like I was lying to myself. "I'm forty-four," I said. Not out of nowhere. It was apropos of something, but not so apropos that I could have not said it. No response. Not even a flicker. A man of service. I would later tell the older woman in my car that I did this and, dropping her head into her hands, she'd say: "WHY DID YOU DO THAT? YOU LOOK TWENTY-FIVE!" (I don't). To be generous, I may have said my age to provide context for what I had told him about journalism, how I had entered it decades ago just at the start of its descent. I don't know why I felt compelled to even tell him that. Maybe to temper his "cool" (long *o*'s again) when I told him I was a journalist. Or maybe I just wanted to own up because that's what grown-ups do.

I think the real reason I said my age is because in front of him I felt nothing but it. You are perfect and I am forty-four—that was how it felt.

How could something so imperfect still feel so much better than everything else? The symphony of overturned teacups vibrating on tiny plates in the dining room as I charged my phone; so many communal meals spent talking about our lives and still learning nothing; the rain-splashed impressionist painting of a window blurring the fields that we would never walk; the framed storm clouds and oncoming downpour on one side of the train, clear bright skies and white clouds on the other—a split Magritte. The fraternity of anonymous humanity crashed into it all, creating an opening of possibility within an otherwise fixed life where everything is decided, the end written in the beginning.

We were alone together once. It was close to the end. When the train stopped in Edmonton, we all got off but somehow I ended up walking side by side with him in silence. We sauntered toward the edge of the station, away from the others, the darkness pregnant, and we both stopped—a pause that quickly swelled to hold the weight of infinite possibility. I just needed permission—another look like that first look, like that second. Another anything. He was so much taller than me. *Just give me something, dude.* So I wouldn't have to make a decision alone. So I wouldn't have to be the adult. How do you go forward when all you want to do is go back? The answer was standing right next to me, refusing to be the answer. And I couldn't do it. (I know.) I just stood there. (I know.) At the risk of making the wrong choice, I made none. (I know.) And he turned and walked the other way.

I can't believe I never even asked his name. I can't believe I never asked anyone's name (if only to have his). But anonymity was everything. It was the amber preserving his perfection. The Via employee told me it's rare for people to give their names on these long trips, in these suspensions of everyday reality. And I wondered why Canada didn't care to preserve that? That little bit of magic? Any of this magic? I wondered why Canada was happy instead to power through its own mid-life crises, one after the other, as those tracks slowly deteriorated, all of those connections fragmenting into nothing.

It's about me, I had told him, and in the end it was. On the last day, I was sitting with the Pole, with whom I had been talking for hours about nothing much, just where he was from and where I was from and what we were doing and not doing with our lives. At some point we remembered that after four o'clock you were allowed to walk all the way to the back of the train, to the very last car (which up until that moment belonged exclusively to the wealthy Prestige passengers).

"Wanna go now?" We got up as I said it, even though it was already becoming too dark to see outside. Maybe that's why the Pole moved so fast. I think he didn't realize how much shorter I was, or how much smaller my stride, so as he proceeded to glide through narrow passageway after narrow passageway, I had to almost run behind him, through car after car, berth after berth, cabin after cabin, narrow corridor after narrow corridor, all the way to the end, as the train's interior changed from off-white to blood red.

By the time we reached the shimmery bar car that opened onto the panoramic lounge, a compartment lined with windows and plush couches and vases full of flowers, it was pitch black outside. We collapsed into the seats in one big exhale, exhausted. We had passed through nineteen cars. It took so long that the end wasn't even the point anymore. In all that darkness, it didn't look like we were even connected to a track. All I could see through the window was me. All I could feel was forward motion. I guess you would call it a kind of peace. *How do you go forward when all you want to do is go back?* In that moment, the question didn't even occur to me, but this felt pretty close to the answer.

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