

# One Last Ride on the VIA Rail

N. J. Lindquist

Molly Kauffman, an elderly lady with more extra pounds than her doctor liked and vast webs of varicose veins, ceased walking to shift her bulging purse from the left to the right hand. When she was satisfied, she resumed trudging along the uneven sidewalk until she reached the path leading to the tiny railway station. The path wasn't the main sidewalk; it was a narrow strip of dirt worn hard over years of use, and it cut its straight channel across the grass that Mr. Weaver kept neatly manicured.

Molly had taken this path at least twice a week for as long as anyone could remember. She preferred to do her shopping in a larger town. In fact, she had always felt she was a little too good for the village. After all, her father was a well-to-do land-owner in England. She could have had her choice of any number of eligible young men. Why she allowed a brash young soldier from Canada to sweep her off her feet...? But she had never regretted her choice of the man. His country was a different matter!

Today, Molly's step was slower than usual, approaching the reluctant walk of a prisoner facing his execution in the days before murder in Canada became a slightly less onerous crime. But the path was not that long, so in a short space of time Molly found herself on the platform at the back of the station.

She shifted the purse again, and made her way heavily to the small window where Mr. Weaver's charcoal head could usually be found relaxing with the current month's crossword puzzle digest.

Molly watched him. He shifted and said, "Be one minute. Need a seven letter word for 'ignorant.'"

"Government," she said in her high-pitched voice.

"That's more than seven letters," Mr. Weaver said as he set the magazine face down on his desk and stood up. He walked over to the small window. His name was Joe, but no one had called him that for at least eighteen years. Not since his wife died.

"What'll it be?" he asked.

"Ticket," she replied.

"Where to?" he countered, and they continued the worn conversation, as if Mr. Weaver didn't know where Molly wanted to go, where Molly always went.



At last, ticket purchased and held in her arthritic fingers, she stood on the platform and waited. From time to time she shifted the purse, for the weight of it made her shoulders and back ache.

She was not alone on the platform. Pete

Grumanski was there, sitting on the weather-beaten bench against the station wall, smoking his pipe, his hands and face gnarled and permanently darkened from the farm work he'd done for sixty-odd years. Tom Bridges was there, too, all dressed up in a brown tweed sports jacket and grey pants. Tom had been a conductor on the train for forty years, until his retirement several years ago. His wife had been so pleased to have him at home with her for a change! Now Tom stood alone near the tracks at the end of the platform, looking down the long lines of iron as if seeing the countless trains of his past.

And there were a few others. Sightseers. A family with young children. Molly heard the father say to the mother, "They'll always remember this."

Molly sniffed to herself. Her mind dropped years as she remembered sitting in a buggy with a fancy canvas top. She was wearing a long dress with crinolines. Everything was fine until suddenly a steam engine sped by on the neighbouring tracks, and the horse shied and nearly broke free with fear. She remembered her father swearing and, with fist raised after the long-departed train, declaring, "I won't forget that!" Then he turned to Molly and said, "Those monstrous devils! Don't you ever go in one of them!" That was a long time ago. Molly had forgotten all about it. She would have been seven then, for she was ninety-one now.

And now, after all those years when she had depended on this passenger train, the VIA rail had decided it was expendable.

A long, low whistle brought the group to attention. Molly shifted her purse for the last time and took a step closer to the tracks. Pete removed his pipe, stared at it hard for a minute, then knocked it against the bench before carefully fitting it into his jacket pocket. Tom continued to stare down the tracks, his hands clenched tightly at his sides.

The mother of the family with young children gathered her little ones together as a hen would gather chicks. Until the train had stopped, they remained in a tight circle.

The rest of the onlookers, none of whom Molly knew except by sight, just waited.

Mr. Wheeler stood and put a black jacket over his shirt and vest. He came out of his tiny office and carefully locked the door. He turned and stood waiting.

Ed Sawchuk got out of the second last car and put down the steps.

Then, as if by mutual consent, Molly led the way.

She allowed Ed to assist her in climbing the three steps up to the back of the car. Clutching at the seats, she waddled from side to side as she made her way to the fifth seat on the right, against the window.

Mr. Wheeler came in with Ed Sawchuck and stood against the window next to the door. Pete went to the very front seat. The others distributed themselves about the car.

Ed carried out the ticket-gathering ritual. Pete made his usual joke, accusing Ed of "breaking his train of thought" by asking for the ticket. Today, no one smiled, not even Pete.

The whistle blew, and the train started.

Molly remembered another old joke she'd often heard Pete use on Mr. Wheeler. Pete had always accused him of being afraid to ride trains, and said that was why he was the stationmaster and not a conductor. But, today, Mr. Wheeler had become a passenger.

The train picked up speed and flew along the farmyards, groves of trees, and small hamlets of south-eastern Ontario. Sugar maples appeared in all their crimson glory, and other trees added their golden and russet hues. The sightseers on board talked about the beauty of the countryside flashing by, and thought but little of the clickety-clack of the rails beneath their feet, which was central

in Tom Bridge's mind.

But Molly's thoughts were none of these. She was remembering other times she had taken this ride. The time she was going to Sam Porter's funeral and the train had been late. The time she bought new clothes when her son, Bob, was given a bonus and sent a good share of it to her as a kind of payment for all the hard work she had done cleaning houses so he could get an education. The many times she had gone with her husband Roy, who couldn't see well enough to drive a car because of his war wounds, and who always made the trip seem like a lark.

And before that, when they'd come here from Halifax after the war, and the train had been full of laughing soldiers and their young wives, all looking for a better life now that peace had come. They had all had their dreams, then.

She remembered how shocked she felt as a young war-bride being overwhelmed, first by the vastness of this enormous, rugged country, and then by the isolation of the little village Roy called home. And there'd been no moving him.

The compromise was that she could go twice a week into Peterborough and once a month into Toronto. She came to think of the rails as her link with sanity.

The forty-two kilometers (twenty-five miles to Molly) flew by, and the train gave a long whistle and then slowed as it approached the Peterborough station. The people in the passenger car sat there, staring out, conversations ended in mid-sentence.

The train came to a noisy, rumbling halt in front of the station.

For a long moment, no one moved.

Molly fumbled inside her purse for a handkerchief. When she found it—a man's white one, frayed and yellowed, with a barely legible embroidered monogram saying R.K. in one corner—she blew her nose.

Ed was already putting down the steps. Mr. Weaver sat alone, staring into space. So did Tom. The family with the young children bustled about and laughed and chattered, as did the other, younger passengers. Noisily, the others left, but the four old people lingered.

Finally, Ed came inside and coughed.

As if a spell had been broken, Pete stood up. His hands trembled as he began to walk down the aisle, clutching at each seat as he passed. He came up level to Molly's seat, and said, "Well, old girl, I guess now she's officially put out to pasture."

Molly sniffed and refrained from answering. She had never been friendly to Pete or any of the farm workers, and she wasn't about to encourage him now.

Tom got up. He left his seat and walked down the aisle, but his eyes were sightless, his movements purely instinct.

Mr. Weaver stood, turned, and went through the door.

With a last glance at Molly, Pete followed.

Ed came to help Molly out of her seat. She was breathing hard, and leaned heavily on his arm, almost stumbling as she made her way down the steps.

Then they stood on the platform, each lost in his or her own thoughts.

Tom finally broke the silence by walked over to touch the rough side of the car. "She was a great one, she was," he said to himself.

"I'll sure miss her," Mr. Weaver said quietly.

Molly unashamedly wiped tears from her flowing eyes.

Pete sniffed a couple of times before pulling out a cheap red handkerchief. He took a swipe at his eyes before blowing his nose.

Ed put up the steps and stood there, unsure of his role. He was forty-eight, and for him, there would be another job, perhaps a more demanding, more interesting one. But at this moment he felt he was participating in the funeral of a very dear friend, and he himself, though he had a part, was really a stranger.

When he judged it time, he walked down to the engine and quietly told Frank Rawlins to take the small train off the tracks and drop the passenger car in its assigned location. Then the engine could hook up to a freight train.

The train chugged slowly away, and the four still left on the platform watched it go. When it was out of sight, Tom began to walk away. Halfway to the sidewalk he stopped, looked back as if weighing something, and then returned to offer his arm to Molly. Surprised, she shifted her purse to the left arm and placed arthritic fingers against the rough tweed of his suit jacket.

Pete fell into step. Molly glared at him, about to ask where he thought he was going, but for some reason held her tongue.

The three covered about twenty metres; then, as if by command, stopped to look back. Mr. Weaver stood alone, staring into empty space.

Pete cleared his throat. "Coming, Mr. Weaver?"

Mr. Weaver hesitated, as if trying to figure out the meaning of the question. Nervous fingers opened and shut. Finally, he nodded and began to walk toward them.

The four reached the street. "How were you planning to get back?" Pete asked.

"There'll be a bus late tonight," Mr. Weaver said.

"Won't be the same," Pete said. "Cramped. Unfriendly."

The others nodded agreement.

"Why don't we get some lunch?" Pete said.

Tom came out of his silence. "Maybe we could take in a movie."

"Long as it ain't one of these `modern' ones," Pete said. "All sex and fighting."

"Like it was in the war," Molly cackled.

The others laughed, though the laughter sounded forced.

Tom diffidently mentioned that there was a restaurant down the street if the others wanted to go to it.

Pete said, "That one's fine with me. How about you, Molly? Mr. Wheeler?"

Molly had to think now. It was one thing to walk down a street with Pete on the other side. You could always say he was tagging along. But to sit in a booth with him? And what about the others? What did she have in common with any of them, except living in the same village and caring about the same passenger train?

But maybe that was enough. After all, wasn't that what this country was about? This big, sprawling country. Like Pete, it was ugly and brash and sure it knew everything. She had been here seventy years, but never had she thought of it as home.

The old lady took a deep breath before tucking her free arm around Pete's. The purse dangled between them. Funny how a common pain draws people together, she thought. Just like in the

war. Out loud, she said, "Roy and I used to go to that restaurant all the time. Of course, it's changed now."

Beside her, Tom said in a faraway voice, "Doesn't everything change? Eh, Mr. Wheeler?"

Mr. Wheeler said, "Why don't you all call me Joe?"