

On September 24, 2012, Gladys Comeau climbed aboard the Northlander and was never again seen in Swastika, which is not even a town, not even a village, just a community along the railway line.

So began our journeys, both Gladys's and mine, because this is the tale of the travels of Gladys Comeau on the trains of Northern Ontario and Quebec, which took her south, then west, then east, then back north. An erratic journey that no one understood and that was tracked by many from the moment the old woman's disappearance was reported. There were many eyewitness accounts, opinions too; some pointed the finger at her, condemned her, called her a monster. My purpose here is not to put her on trial, but to follow Gladys on her frantic journey by train, to collect the scattered pieces and figure out what may have motivated her. Because while we now know about the detours and U-turns, the nomadic journey of the woman from Swastika, as she would come to be known, has been subject to many interpretations.

The shockwaves spread beyond her circle of friends and acquaintances, but there was nothing in the paper, there was no police investigation. When people in Swastika tried to alert the authorities, Gladys would reappear on another line, and another call would follow to another conductor. The affair remained private, there was no public attention. Who is going to take an interest in a woman who left her life behind, an ordinary woman, with no great feats or misdeeds to her credit, and old to boot? Me, it would seem, running counter to common sense and my own circumstances.

I don't have the heart of a tracker, any particular talent for investigation, or a penchant for mystery, and yet this story consumed me for more than four years. I retraced Gladys's journey, and I met scores of people who knew her or spent time with her before or during her travels, not to mention the calls, emails, and texts to inquire about departures or arrivals on a particular line, double-check a detail, chase down a name I had missed, that escaped me. I have file folders and megabytes filled with a story that leaks in every direction.

How did a man who was in no way destined for such an adventure end up wandering off into lives not his own? As I write this, I still wonder whether, as the son of a railwayman, I would have set out on the trail of an old woman if there hadn't been at the start a lonely station, a train whistle, and the promise of the rattle of the rails lulling Gladys and me, each on our own journey. It is hard to fathom the power of steel gliding over steel. It is familiar music that lives inside me. I admit to being a fan of trains, and that's what is behind me setting off on the trail of Gladys Comeau. But there isn't only Gladys; there are all the others who hailed, hounded, and hitched me to this quest or inquest – I don't know what it is anymore – that I now have to chronicle.

I have to explore, explain, understand my motivations.

But I will tell the tale, I will commit it to paper, I promised. Will you still be of this world when I will have finished this chronicle, Bernie my friend?

Swastika is not an easy place to leave. The village has a population of two hundred, tallies its residents one by one, every one of them counts, so a departure does not go unnoticed.

Gladys Comeau knew that, having lived there for the past fifty-five years, and she left the way you would mail a letter, the only way to leave Swastika. No suitcase, no new clothes, nothing to suggest a journey or departure, she walked down Avenue Conroy, hung a left on the government road, a right on Rue Cameron, then climbed the eighteen steps to the promontory on which the station is perched. She could have kept going, walked along the platform to the viaduct that straddles the government road, and no one would have been surprised to see her up there, since her morning walk often took her that way.

The platform of the station offers a view of the whole village. The roads winding through the hollows, the houses huddled together: it is all there in a panoramic view. From this higher ground, you can see the foam of the river as it arrives, follow the water along a park, and then, right before you'd end up back at your starting point, you can see a tiny church in the palest of blues perched on a slight elevation. Swastika has a particular brand of charm, a beauty that is easy to overlook. The station is not part of this aesthetic. It is an ugly brick rectangle that has seen better days, set along the embankment. Back then, the trains would arrive at all hours, as would taxis, trucks laden with gold bars – not even armoured trucks, not even tarped trucks, just trucks – in an endless flurry of activity, and the station was perched on its

promontory, its grass lovingly maintained, forming a sort of skirt that descended to Rue Cameron, and, at the centre of its skirt, in red, yellow, and a symphony of colour, begonias, pansies, and marigolds, forming a huge swastika.

There is no grass anymore, nor other attempts at preening. The windows have been boarded up, and the station is closed except for one room that serves as the waiting area, deserted except in bitter cold, because there are no creature comforts, not even bathrooms, and people prefer to wait on the platform.

And on the platform that chilly September morning, there were two men and one woman, which pleased the conductor, because often there was no one, and he had to continue on his way. Gladys was a regular on the Northlander. The conductor, one Sydney Adams, recognized her immediately.

I say *conductor* knowing full well that the word is no longer used in the administrative jargon of the railway. In Ontario and Quebec, they are now called *service managers*, the railway employees who greet customers, see to their comfort, ensure everyone gets off at the right stop and that their luggage gets off with them. I have always known them as conductors, and that is what they will remain during this tale.

But I digress.

I imagine this story will be punctuated with digressions, flashbacks, personal notes, and other asides. I have a considerable amount of information, and I have to extract what is most credible in the accounts I've gathered over the years. Mostly vague, uncertain accounts, fragmented because they concern a disjointed journey that no one witnessed from beginning to end. Some parts are better documented, for instance the stops along the Sudbury–White River line, because these were stops with people she knew, long-time friends, 'children of the forest,' as she called them, who are as nostalgic as she is