

Chapter 7 - The Train Ride to Montreal

Growing up in a bird's nest environment of Hong Kong I was suddenly transported within a short period of time to a land of majestic beauty and boundless landscape of this vast country called Canada. I didn't know much about Canada prior to my arrival. The choice to come to Canada was mostly influenced by a pair of neighborhood twins, the Wu brothers, who went to McGill two years before me. But the most decisive factor was the fact that Canada had one-quarter of fresh water supply of the world, so I learned in my brief high school geography lesson.

In the mid 50's Hong Kong, there were severe water supply shortages sometimes lasting for days and even weeks. We lived on the 4th floor of an old apartment building up on the mid-hill district with no lifts. During water restriction periods, the city water supply to homes was shut off for 3 or 4 days before being turned back on for one day. During the dry days the whole family would be lining up at the street corner with buckets and anything that could hold water and waited for our turns to fill up from the city tap. The hard work followed in lugging the heavy containers back up to our floor level to use for cooking and essential washings. I lived through those exhaustive and unbearable days and emphatically vowed to free myself of this harsh environment if I ever had a chance. And the chance came when I heard about Canada.

At last I stepped on the soil of Canada and I felt the magic of – The Encounter of The Fourth Kind - like entering an unknown kingdom of strange beings. Looking around us everything took on a different kind of new look. Unfamiliar and graceful structures adorned the town square while the radially winding streets glittered with smooth pebble stones but not congested with pedestrians. We took our time to savor every inch of this fresh environment before we hopped onto the east-bound train.

Once we boarded the train we soon entered another world of breath-taking kaleidoscope. Multitude of trees and plants in various shapes and colors first greeted us and quickly whisked by. Hidden behind were huge brown boulders and chiseled mountain slopes with hardy vegetations growing out from their cracks. On the other side of the train steep descending slopes flanked our tracks but disappeared quickly down into deep chasms as the train seemed to float on air and glided its way among the blue engine smoke mixed with the white morning haze. Once in a while the scene opened up to reveal stretches of blue-green waterways and mirror-surfaced lakes lined with uneven bushes of the wild. Majestic bridges of mighty elevations suspended us over deep canyons as we wound our way through mountain passes and dark tunnels.

Suddenly someone pointed to a distant mountain range where huge columns of black smoke could be seen rising from the mountain tops. Beneath the smoke we could spot

ferocious tongues of raging fire dancing violently and being fanned by high winds with expanding forces. We learned from the train conductors that forest fires were not uncommon and they were a constant threat to Canada's wilderness in dry seasons.

We also learned that this Trans-Canada railway was once built by hundreds upon hundreds of Chinese labourers in the early 1900s, who had dearly bought their ways to earn a meager living but had encountered hardship, abuses, discrimination, poor living conditions and poor health; as a result many had lost their lives in this foreign land. It was recorded that for every mile of railroad built a Chinese person died during the construction from ill conditions and mal-treatments.

Four of us bought the least cost tickets which allotted us in the same cabin with only bench seats but no sleeping facilities for the entire 3-day trip. Throughout the journey we occupied our time by watching the ever-changing sceneries. We chatted about our past and future lives. We played games and rested on the benches. The train made short stops in small towns and villages and we were utterly mesmerized by the sights of various doll-house dwellings with locals resembling images we had only seen in movies. We passed through borderless Provinces marked only by welcoming signs and sometimes with quite distinctive styles of early settlement quarters. The train took us through vastly contrasting landscapes from narrow mountain paths to wide-open plains of edgeless wheat fields.

Suddenly our train made some strange whistling noise and abruptly ground to a halt which jolted us up from our drowsy sleep in the middle of an endless stretch of corn fields. There were people shouting back and forth and we saw conductors running toward the front of the train. Our instructions were not to leave the train until the incidence had been cleared. Some anxious moments kept us in suspension until a train attendant came by and announced that there was an accident at the railroad crossing where a farmer's truck was stuck on the track and a collision resulted. Luckily the farmer jumped off before his truck was hit and he was not injured. We had been telling ourselves that the train ride so far was very smooth and uneventful, until now. But we were glad nothing too serious had happened that might have significantly delayed our trip. Several hours later the track was cleared and we were once again back on our way as the sun set for another day.

The train ran non-stopped throughout the night and by the next day we passed the flat land of the wheat fields and into another stretch of unoccupied barren land with rugged hills and deep gorges. There were thick forests of tall pine trees and evergreens and once in a while we saw large wild animals roaming in the distance. Sudden thunderstorms erupted in the approaching darkened sky. Soon our train cut through thick sheets of rain interspaced with bright flashing swords of lightning and loud

clapping thunders. The storm dissipated quickly behind us and we were once again bathed in the rays of the golden sunlight.

By the end of the third day we entered larger cities of significant populations as we passed through the Province of Ontario and approached its major city of Toronto. The suburban cities clustered along the railway with strings of businesses and stores. Store signs were illuminated with bright flashing and dancing neon lights. I was so **thrilled** by the ever-changing patterns of multicolour light displays in a sea of commercial kaleidoscope - a scene I would not have the opportunity to witness while living in Hong Kong. Let me explain why.

Back home in the 50s no outdoor advertising signs and lights were allowed to flash or make dancing patterns. My young and innocent mind could not fathom the reasons why Hong Kong was so backward (*technologically incapable of installing dancing lights ?*) in contrast with other civilized countries with all their lively and beautiful neon light displays (I only saw them in many Hollywood movies like *Guys and Dolls and others with scenes of Las Vegas, etc.*). Surprisingly I learned in later years that the lighting restriction was enforced in compliance with Hong Kong's traffic safety laws for a long period. Looking back, I realize how powerful a childish spark of internal fire could become a tremendous driving force in pursuit of one's ambition; and this was one of many naive notions that strongly motivated me to pursue advanced technology abroad

Toronto was a city of early British settlement with minor European descendants that made up the bulk of the populations. Old hard Christian customs and traditions prevailed firmly in the Province. We overheard a joke that very well described Ontario's ultra conservatism. It was said that in the early years in Toronto all social activities were to shut down and business forbid to open on Sundays, the Lord's days – including parachutes!

We had no time to disembark and after a short stop the train left Toronto late at night without much fan-fare. We were told by next morning we should be arriving in Montreal at the train's scheduled final stop. Our spirit grew high with excitement with every moment the speeding engine carrying us forward towards our final destination after three long grueling weeks of non-stop transit traveling. And life's reality would soon confront us at the entrance of the Great Hall for the Pursuance of Excellence called the University