

“Something On” by The Tragically Hip: A Canadian Winter Road Trip Fairy Tale

Amy Spurway

*“Your imagination's having puppies
It could be a video for new recruits
Just stare into the camera
And pretend that you got the flu
Or dream of impossible vacations
And get all teary from the wind
Look as though you're standing at the station
Long after the train came in.”*

It would take some magic—and by *magic*, I mean *lies*—to make it happen, but I was desperate. Late-January in the university town of Fredericton, New Brunswick, circa 1999 was something akin to Dante’s ninth circle of Hell. A frozen wasteland, teeming with a few thousand slick sinners, fresh from Christmas break with student-loan stuffed bank accounts and many a treacherous winter itch to scratch. Under ordinary circumstances, I’d have been right there with them, like the proper 22-year-old Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, girl-gone-wild that I was. Pissing away my newfound borrowed fortune on weather-inappropriate pick-up artist outfits, assorted intoxicants, and greasy food to mop up the poisons in my blood. All done, of course, with the ubiquitous Gen X understanding that Y2K was gonna save us all from ever having to pay one red cent of that money back. But this winter was different. I was in love. An all-consuming, soul-searing kind of love that didn’t jive with the myriad ways this town—this university student life imbued with such bleak debauchery—persuaded me to soften my morals and harden my heart. And now, the object of my desire was far, far away from this place and space of cold, white monotony that I was beginning to despise.

I called all my professors, stifling fake sobs. *There’s been a death in the family. I won’t be in class for a few days.* I conducted role play exercises with my roommates, to make sure they knew what to say under a variety of circumstances, should anyone call looking for me. Turns out that minoring in Theatre was not completely useless after all. I packed a wad of cash, a pack of smokes, a flask of vodka, my fanciest undergarments, and my little rainbow Fimo-covered pipe loaded up with skunk weed. Then, I headed to the bus station.

The bus ride to Toronto was a 20-odd-hour trip. In the parking lot of a greasy spoon on the outskirts of Riviere Du Loup, Quebec, me and some Newfoundlander-buddy-on-his-way-out-West huddled together to keep my pipe lit in the face of a frigid night wind. Despite the plunging mercury, we stood outside long after the weed was gone to blow the stink off us. Right courteous like that, we were. Leaning against the road-salt crusted bus, up to our sneaker-clad ankles in dirty parking lot snow, passing the flask back and forth, chain smoking, making stoned small talk in the moonlight. Mostly about music, but a bit about love. *The Tragically Hip, man. Heard the new stuff? Pretty wicked. Love The Hip...and this guy in Toronto. I think I love him too.*



The Tragically Hip

“Something On”

Phantom Power

07/1998

Universal Music Canada

*"And see how the space tautens
Like there's something on
And you're never more hot than
When you've got something on."*

The bus crawled along on roads smeared with ice, both black and white. Sleep ebbed and flowed with the degrees of darkness and silence, and in those waxing and waning moments of consciousness, I dreamt about him. The guy. The one I eyed in a Fredericton bar the winter before this one. He had a scuffed-up jean jacket, big black boots, and a pager. A sharp glint in his green eyes and a playful smirk of a smile as he studied the lay of the land on the pool table, making shot after shot after shot. I had a belly full of vodka and lime, and a well-honed flirty hair toss as I studied him. I elbowed my friend. *See that guy? I'm gonna marry him. And by marry I meant fuck.* Which I did. Until one day, he just couldn't take the claustrophobia, the stagnation of the limited life on offer in this little university town any longer, and he bolted off to a new world, a bigger world, far away. He left at the tail-end of summer, but it wasn't until the long, dark nights of that winter set in that it really dawned on me: I loved *that* guy. And I needed to see him, come hell or high water.

I called my mother from a payphone somewhere in Ontario. Told her about how I'd gone shopping for a new semester's worth of books. Went on at great lengths about how cold and snowy it was in Fredericton. Bought a coffee at Tim Horton's, jazzed it up with the last splash of my vodka, then I called the guy in Toronto to tell him I was on my way.

*"Outside there's hectic action
The ice is covering the trees
And one of 'em's interconnecting
With my Chevrolet Caprice"*

I arrived in Toronto, Uptown, on the 11th floor of a glossy, glassy high-rise apartment building, the way Atticus hopes to arrive at death: "late, in love, and a little drunk." Pleasantly surprised that winter wasn't a *thing* in this city like it was out East. From his sprawling bedroom window I watched the snow fall, white and crystalline, only to be reduced to grey slush and icy water by the frenetic hum of life on the streets and sidewalks below. Too much heat, too much movement for winter to ever really get a solid grip on a place like this. Meanwhile, back home was getting buried by a Nor' Easter. I called my mother in Cape Breton with the Fredericton weather report. Good ol' star-sixty-seven hiding the fact that I was in an area code that I wasn't supposed to be in. *Nearly froze to death walking to class this morning, Ma. Two feet of snow. Gotta go buy boots and mitts, I guess. I hear the storm's headed your way. Yep, 'tis the season.* Then, calls to my professors to say I was storm-stayed in Nova Scotia and wouldn't be back for a few more days. I hung up the phone, laughing hysterically. Toasty warm under the blankets with the guy I knew I loved. Hadn't been outside in days. Passing a joint back and forth, sipping too-sweet, too-creamy instant coffee, listening to the big city rock radio stations. *This is a new Tragically Hip song. "Something On." It's my favourite. Listen.*

*"Black out to phantom power
And like there's nothing on
And hammering the tower
And now there's nothing on"*

*We'll ride the monorail
Rocking gently home on the trail
You want to show me the moon."*

On the days when he had no choice but to show up for work, I hung out in his bedroom alone. Smoking. Dreaming. Listening to the radio. Writhing and dancing around the room in my fanciest undergarments every time my favourite new Hip song played. To hell with pulling the blinds, nobody knows me here. Nobody cares. I thought about staying forever, in this liminal space where my skin was warm and the world was fluid. Where reputations and winter had no real teeth. Where this guy and I could play house in the glossy, glassy high-rise. Be who we were meant to be: a slightly burnt-out dancing princess and her green-eyed pool shark prince. But there wasn't enough magic to hold me there much longer than a week. And by *magic*, I mean *foolish drive to drop out of university four months before graduation*. On my last day in the city, we went shopping. He took me to a record store, told me to pick any CD I wanted, thinking I'd take some time browsing, deciding. *This one. The Tragically Hip, Phantom Power. It's got my favourite song. "Something On." The lyrics are kinda cryptic, but Gord Downie's a poet and it's got a winter day vibe. I'll pretend it's a sad but sexy love song. About us.*

*"I know you're standing at the station
I know there's nothing on
I know that alienation
I know the train's long gone
I can see how your face tautens
Like you've got something on
It makes me feel just rotten
But you've got something on."*

Back on the bus, Fredericton-bound, face plastered with a look that compelled other passengers to sit absolutely anywhere but near me. I didn't talk to a single soul. No flask, no pipe, no payphone calls. Just silent, tearful prayers to a host of random phantoms and hypothetical powers-that-be. *Don't let me get stuck back in the cold clutches of that ninth circle of Hell for much longer, ok?* In the hours that would carry me back to the freshly blizzarded east, I closed my eyes to dream about the big city that winter didn't quite touch. About *the guy* there. About the two of us, wrapped in the cryptic beauty of "Something On," happily ever after. And by *something on*, I mean *love*.

Editor's note: make sure you read Amy's bio in the Contributors section (page 39) for the epilogue to this piece.