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LAST CALL

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smashed through the heart of Lac-Mégantic*

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

LAST CALL

*It was a 'perfect' night at the Musi-Café, when a runaway train
smashed through the heart of Lac-Mégantic*



BY JUSTIN GIOVANNETTI
PORTRAITS BY MOE DOIRON

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JULIE HEON and LUC DION

Luc had been staring into Julie’s eyes for most of the evening.

They had been chatting online for weeks, the exchanges heartfelt and hackneyed – what you’d expect from love-struck high-school students, not two grownups pushing 40. But neither had planned to run into the other at a local bar: an accidental first date, one of the dangers of living in a small town. They sat side-by-side on a leafy terrace, at the end of the first warm day of summer in Lac-Mégantic. A large crowd had streamed past, heading home just after 1 a.m. on July 6. Julie’s friend Karine got up and left the two alone, winking at them as she walked inside the bar. As the pair chatted, their knees brushed. Two fresh pints of Belgian white beer sat in front of them, untouched.

At 1:14 a.m., both Luc Dion and Julie Heon noticed a blur at the edge of their vision. They heard a strong wind, the ground began to shake. They knew what was coming; the shape was unmistakable. The lights on the train were off. No horn had sounded its approach. Freight typically crept through the centre of town at 10 kilometres per hour, but this train was moving 10 times that fast.

The sound of the level crossing was muffled as thousands of tonnes of locomotives and rail cars blew past the dormant lights. Luc and Julie leaped to their feet, just as the piercing cries rose around them: “It’s going to derail!”

THE ENGINEER

Thomas Harding

Locomotive No. 5017 rolled into the messy marshaling yard on the morning on July 5 for a crew change. The stop in Farnham was among the last in Quebec, a long grind hauling oil from North Dakota to New Brunswick's Irving refinery. A veteran engineer, Thomas Harding, was due to take over by noon.

Behind a gang of five idling diesels, 72 tankers and a lone buffer car stretched into the distance. The serpentine rig spanned more than 1.4 kilometres and carried eight million litres of crude, but neither metric made it remarkable. Over the past five years, oil shipments by rail had increased by 28,000 per cent across Canada, from 500 to 140,000 carloads a year. Across farmland, prairie and granite shield; along highway, bridge and backyard, they travelled the same lines they always had. The trains were just longer, and more frequent.

The Montreal, Maine & Atlantic reaped the rewards: The short line between Montreal and New Brunswick was all that kept the railway's ledger in the black. The boom garnered little more than peripheral attention outside the worlds of oil production and transportation, save for a sporadic complaint from a trackside community or the sigh of a motorist waiting

impatiently for a chain of tankers to pass at a crossing.

Locomotive No. 5017 would change that. The train, rolling unchecked after its brakes had been improperly applied, would derail at the centre of Lac-Mégantic hours after leaving Farnham. A flood of burning oil would kill 47 people, orphan 21 children and destroy most of downtown in the worst rail disaster in modern Canadian history.

More than half of those who perished were gathered at a popular nightspot called the Musi-Café, embracing the evening buoyed by alcohol, music and small-town camaraderie.

Mr. Harding was a stranger in Lac-Mégantic, though he'd passed through before. His job that day was to transport the 10,287 tonnes of steel and oil from Farnham to Nantes. It was slow, tedious work. The tracks were in a state of disrepair; weeds grew through the railroad ties, many of which were missing altogether. The engines strained to pull the oil over the steep inclines at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains. The 200-kilometre run took close to 12 hours.

Just after 11 p.m., Mr. Harding stopped the train on a plateau outside Nantes. The engines hacked as the engineer climbed out of the locomotive and walked into the darkness to set the brakes on the freight, an anachronistic procedure that involves

spinning an iron wheel with elbow grease. He climbed up a handful of tankers to perform the ritual. He then called a taxi to take him to Lac-Mégantic, the next town down the line.

The cab driver noticed sparks and dark smoke coming out of the front locomotive. He mentioned it to Mr. Harding, who reassured him that he had reported the smoke to the office and was told to leave the locomotive running, a standard practice that left the airbrakes engaged. Although Mr. Harding didn't know it, a piston was broken and leaking oil.

As the two men drove downhill into Lac-Mégantic, the lights from town danced on the lake, a dark blue pool framed by trees and jagged hills. Just before midnight, thick plumes of white smoke belched from factories and lumber mills, carrying a heavy scent of sawdust.

Mr. Harding checked into his room at the Eau-Berge Hotel.

THE BAR OWNER

Yannick Gagné

Peering outside, Yannick Gagné saw the thermometer attached to his Lac-Mégantic home had already hit 20 C; it wasn't yet 8 a.m. The day would be one of the summer's warmest, which promised brisk business for the owner of the Musi-Café and its large terrasse. It was also the final evening

of a three-day stand by two modern-day chansonniers who had been drawing large crowds.

Yannick was up earlier than usual, as the sun struggled to peek between the hills in the scenic town of 5,900 people a winding three-hour drive east of Montreal. He had two young children and a pregnant wife, and he spent a few minutes with his kids as they ate cereal and watched cartoons. A Sleeman's beer truck was due soon at his bar several blocks away.

He was only 35 years old, but his face was etched with a dozen years' worth of long nights and the emotional swings of building a business that had become the pumping heart of Lac-Mégantic's downtown. The establishment opened in 2002 as a small café on the main street, Frontenac. With a few cheap chairs and bare tables, it was meant to supplement Yannick's income as lead singer of My Last Name, a struggling bar band working the regional circuit.

Within weeks of opening, he realized his plan had backfired. He and his first wife worked from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day, with little but exhaustion to show for it. His band was fraying. His marriage was falling apart. He was on the verge of a breakdown. After three years, he was nearly destitute. When his wife gave birth to their first child, he was desperate and decided to expand. He added a bar in the



YANNICK GAGNÉ

middle of the café and built a stage; he hosted local acts and called on old friends to play.

The new bar, with a chic décor that would become Yannick’s hallmark, was a success. But the strain of running the business never let up. By June, 2007, he had had enough. He got a divorce and left Lac-Mégantic.

During his time in the wilderness, Yannick took a number of trips, including to Cuba, where he met his second wife, Lisandra Arencibia. A year-and-a-half

later, he received a call from his ex: The Musi-Café was on the market but no one wanted to buy. “I’m closing it up,” she told him. “The Musi-Café will be finished.”

Yannick deliberated, wondering if he could avoid his previous mistakes. In February, 2009, he bought the bar back. “How can I make this bigger?” he thought.

He began a series of extensive renovations that went on for years. In the final one, workers tore down walls and toiled around the clock to beat the summer

rush. The Musi-Café reopened in June, but the reno wasn't done until July 4. The bar, Yannick noted with pride, looked like a "small Spanish fortress" on a street dominated by turn-of-the-century red brick.

The next day, the scent of freshly brewed coffee greeted him as he arrived at work. The manager, Sophie L'Hereux, and waitress Karine Blanchette were already there. Most mornings, the three would review the day's plan over a quick breakfast of coffee and bagels. In the kitchen, the chef was beginning to prep.

Yannick loved the wood in his bar. Surrounded by thick forests, Lac-Mégantic sits in a region built on the lumber industry, and all the wood in the Musi-Café was locally sourced. The booths and bar were made of oak strips alternately stained dark or light; deep mouldings ran along the floor and ceiling. In the centre of the room, heavy brass shelves held the coffee beans. Yannick used a venerable Saeco machine picked up in Montreal's Little Italy.

"We had the best coffee in town," he said.

Then there was the beer: The bar had 20 on tap, from oatmeal stouts to lemony whites. In an area where few establishments carry anything beyond Canadian and American standards, the rich array of India pale ales, lagers, browns, imports and ciders stood out. The bottle cellar

held 60 more brews, personally selected by Yannick, that represented nearly every beer-producing country in the world.

The Musi-Café had become a fashionable, and profitable, establishment. Among the lunchtime guests on July 5 was federal industry minister Christian Paradis, and that evening was bound to be busy. Around 5 p.m., Yannick went home to see his children and to persuade his 23-year-old wife to help out. The bar was short-staffed. The two musicians cost the Musi-Café \$3,000; to defray the expense, Yannick was charging a \$5 cover.

He was tired from the renovations. He arrived around 8 p.m., but didn't work the floor or speak with many of the regulars. The place was packed, with about 80 patrons inside and 40 on the terrace, enjoying the 27 C heat and last hints of sun on Mégantic Lake. Yannick sat outside with four friends.

"I told them, once the waitresses have this under control I'm going home. ... I went into the bar to leave and everyone wanted to talk. I did my tour and I remember where everyone was sitting. The Bolduc gang was celebrating near the terrace. The Lafontaines were sitting in the booths near the door. Maxime Dubois and his three friends were sitting at the corner of the bar and wanted me to down shooters with them. I told them I might come back later; they were teasing me."



KARINE BLANCHETTE

Yannick told his wife to come home soon; she promised to leave around 1 a.m. As he spoke with her, resident Melissa Roy came by and started rubbing his wife's swollen belly. "You're lucky, you've got a little baby," she said.

There were smiles and laughs as he left around 12:30 a.m. to pick up his children from the babysitter. "I was sitting at my computer and I had iMessage up. I told her to come home, they didn't need her anymore. She said okay, she promised she was coming."

In the distance, four minutes before 1 a.m., the train began its dark descent into town.

THE WAITRESS

Karine Blanchette

For five years, Karine Blanchette had called Paris home, studying theatre in the 9th arrondissement. But she felt a call back to Quebec and returned. After a few years teaching in a suburb south of Montreal, she was done with

the bustle of big cities. She moved to Lac-Drolet, a peaceful village near Lac-Mégantic, in 2011.

She had known Yannick for more than a decade and went to work for him. Charming and gregarious, with dark bangs and large green eyes, Karine maintained an agent in Montreal and drove back frequently for acting jobs, but the Musi-Café was ideal for her.

“When you’re an actress, you don’t know your schedule ahead of time – so the flexibility was very practical,” she said. “It didn’t feel like work, it felt like I was still at home, with people who loved me.”

Karine, 35, arrived at the Musi-Café at 8:30 a.m. on July 5. She wore a no-nonsense outfit of jeans and a fitted T-shirt, and as usual changed into her uniform at work: a black T-shirt with the Musi-Café’s logo on the back. A cup of coffee was waiting.

“We were a little family,” she said of her breakfast ritual with Yannick. “We knew that Christian Paradis was coming. We wanted him to enjoy the food and service.”

Weeks earlier, the industry minister had been invited to the newly renovated Musi-Café via Facebook. It wasn’t his first visit to Lac-Mégantic: Mr. Paradis would try to make the drive to the southern end of his sprawling riding at

least once every three weeks. On July 5, after enjoying coffee and a sandwich, he told his wife they had to go back. “It was so trendy, the kind of place you find in a metropolis.” He described the petite waitress as fébrile, overflowing with nervous energy.

Karine didn’t know why she was nervous. “I’m not superstitious,” she said. But a friend told her it’s good luck to break clear glasses; she broke several that day. “I remember bantering with him, ‘Maybe it’s bringing me luck but I’ve broken enough.’ I don’t typically break glasses, ever.”

At 5 p.m., Karine left work in a hurry. She was expected onstage in nearby Marston for a performance of Tuxedo Palace, a Quebec-written comedy set in the South Pacific. Every Thursday, Friday and Saturday, the curtain lifted at 8 p.m.

After the 10 p.m. curtain call, a group of actors and stagehands went to drink at the Eau-Berge Hotel. The performers arrived at the hotel bar at about the same time as the taxi dropped off the train’s engineer.

Karine, though, didn’t go to the Eau-Berge. She planned to return to the Musi-Café, as she did most nights, to help the waitresses at the end of their shifts. She had promised to fold napkins.

“It was really a perfect evening,”



ESTEL BLANCHET

Karine said. “The weather was perfect and people had an attitude that was atypically happy and positive. Everyone was floating.” She drove past the Musi-Café at 1 a.m. “Everyone was on the terrace and they were in a good mood,” she said. “My car windows were down and I heard laughing along with loud conversation. I waved and people started yelling back.”

She was tired and couldn’t find parking near the bar, so Karine turned her car north and drove away.

THE DAUGHTER

Estel Blanchet

Estel Blanchet had just returned to Lac-Mégantic on July 1, after finishing her last year of high school living with friends south of Quebec City. She was set to leave in mid-August to start CEGEP, the Quebec college program that prepares students for university. That didn’t leave much time to patch up a difficult relationship with her mother, Natachat Gaudreau.

A single mother with two children,

Natachat, 41, set an example of hard work. She toiled part-time for Statistics Canada, the local school board and at city hall in a neighbouring town. Over her five years in Lac-Mégantic, she developed a love of hiking and sailing, and the proximity to nature made her stay longer than expected. She tended to change locations and career paths every few years. According to Estel, 17, her mother was planning to move again and open a gîte – a hostel that caters to backpackers.

On July 5, her mother invited her to have some lemonade at the Eau-Berge. “We ran into Jean Paradis,” Estel said. “He’s a guy she’s known for about a year, but I’d never met him before. He was hitting on her in a joking way.”

The mother and daughter talked as the sun set. Natachat was a recovering alcoholic and had been a pillar of local Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. For as long as Estel could remember, her mother had avoided alcohol.

“We both had a strong character and that sometimes led to sparks,” Estel said. “I told her everything. She had confidence in me. She was letting me live my youth. She only got involved to ensure that I didn’t go past the point of no return. As we bonded, Jean was hitting on her and she wasn’t too interested in it. We both got a very good laugh out of it.”

Still, Jean convinced Natachat to

accompany him to the Musi-Café that evening. She loved music. She kept a set of hand drums and guitars on the walls of her home; her daughter grew up to steady diet of Jimi Hendrix and Pink Floyd.

Later Natachat went to watch her son play tennis. Just after 9 p.m., Estel was heading to a friend’s house when she ran into her mother in the driveway. “She just said ‘bye’ to me,” Estel said. Her mother was running late.

Escorted by Jean, Natachat took a seat near the Musi-Café stage at around 10 p.m. Estel was at a friend’s house until 11 p.m., waiting for a call from her mother. Natachat didn’t own a cellphone, typical in Lac-Mégantic, which suffers from bad reception. She normally would call from a pay phone to see whether her daughter needed to be picked up. That night, Estel got a ride with a friend.

By 1 a.m., Natachat was still near the stage, sitting alone.

Estel was lying in bed when she heard honking and sirens rushing by on the street. She thought nothing of the commotion.

THE MUSICIAN

Yvon Ricard

Yvon Ricard stood drenched in bright artificial light, his new Music Man Silhouette guitar in hand. Guy Bolduc



YVON RICARD

nodded alongside him. The two men had been playing in bars for 22 years, and, on the night of July 5, they drew an enthusiastic crowd to the Musi-Café.

They started the evening with a beautiful duet, the classic Rosie by French singer-songwriter Francis Cabrel. By the end, the audience was on its feet. “People loved the song and we enjoyed playing it,” Yvon said. “Our voices complemented each other’s. Everyone listened and cheered; the ambience was fantastic.”

Yvon had known Yannick for years and, at winter’s end, called him to offer their services from July 3 to 5. With Yvon in Quebec City and Guy based in Montreal, both enjoyed booming solo careers but rarely played together anymore. Lac-Mégantic, though, was their musical home: Now in their 40s, they got their starts two decades earlier playing bars along the town’s main street.

“When I play in Mégantic,” Yvon said, “it’s like playing in my living room. It isn’t work.”

The duo arrived on the evening of July 3 and stayed with Yvon's mother-in-law. Only a few dozen feet from the house ran the railroad tracks leading into downtown.

Yvon's wife, working in Quebec City, came down with their two daughters on Friday afternoon. The girls, aged 2 and 4, toted Dora the Explorer bags. Guy's wife drove from Montreal later that evening with their two teenagers.

"We got to the bar at around 8 p.m., the same time Guy's wife [Caroline] arrived," Yvon said. "We were tuning our instruments and I told Guy that I would bring Caroline to the apartment to drop off her bags while he kept tuning the guitars. I left her the key and she brought it to us later. We were playing at that point so he couldn't say 'I love you' or anything like that. She dropped off the key and left."

In the small group of musicians who made a living singing in Quebec bars, Guy was considered one of the most gifted. His repertoire of nearly 500 songs covered everything from head-banging metal to soft folk. After building a studio in his home, he recorded fledgling artists to help them get their start. "Guy loved to fool around after songs; he'd play solos and drag it out," Yvon said. "He wasn't set on a single style of music. He accepted everything as long as it was well played."

On the evening of July 5, Yvon's wife

and some female friends ate at the Musi-Café. The group stayed until 1 a.m., and Yvon waved at them as they left. While the women would often chat outside, they were exhausted that night and went right home. "That evening all the guys stayed in and watched the kids," Yvon said. "If they had been there, they would have partied until dawn."

Twenty people were at the Musi-Café that night to celebrate Stephane Bolduc's 37th birthday. A long-time welder, he had seen his life tumble out of control when his then-girlfriend died from a blood clot. In the two years since, he had found a dream job selling cars and fallen in love with Karine Champagne.

Early in the evening, Karine appealed to the musicians. "I can still see the party in front of us," Yvon said. "His girlfriend came up to us, 'It's my boyfriend's party tonight and I don't want you to mess him up too much. He's working tomorrow. Not too many shooters or birthday tricks, take it easy.' I told her not to worry."

Soon after the musicians started in, the area in front of the stage became a dance floor. They played from 9:30 p.m. until 1:10 a.m., when they decided to take a half-hour break, tired but in high spirits. "Guy hopped off the stage and looked at me, 'Man it's so much fun to play with you,' we were having a lot of fun," Yvon recalled, punctuating his sentences with

the French Canadian swearing that was typical of their banter.

“I told Guy that I was going to change my shirt, it was completely drenched. He said he was going for a beer and went to the corner of the bar. I went to the bathroom and changed. I dropped my shirt on the stage and went to see Guy at the bar. I told him that I was going to smoke outside. He was chatting with Maxime Dubois, le petit [Éric] Pépin and Mathieu Pelletier. I went outside and [waitress] Maude [Verreault] was seated on the patio. She had taken a break and was eating a plate of wings. I was leaning on the railing chatting with her.”

Luc and Julie were sitting nearby. Luc, 40, was a French teacher at the high school who had moved to Lac-Mégantic five years earlier. As he flirted with Julie that night, he felt sure of his recent decision to remain in town, only unpacking the last 20 boxes from his move a few weeks earlier.

Yvon searched through his pockets for a cigarette. The following day, he and his family and some friends were planning to take a boat out on the lake. “I started lighting my cigarette,” Yvon said, “and told Maude, ‘Tomorrow’s going to be a lot of fun.’ I took a puff and she answered, ‘Yeah, tomorrow’s – ’”

They were cut off by the insistent ding-ding of the level crossing.

THE HOCKEY STAR

Mathieu Pelletier

His first love was hockey. Mathieu Pelletier had been awarded a full hockey scholarship to attend Ferris State University in Michigan, but never went. He played for the Junior A Cornwall Colts for a season and, two years later, while skating for Lac-Mégantic’s senior team, Le Turmel, met his wife Alexia Dumas-Chaput. Now Mathieu, 29, was a math teacher at the Polyvalente Montignac; Alexia, 30, worked with students with behavioural issues. School was out and summer stretched ahead of them.

Two items were already crossed off his to-do list. In the two weeks before July 5, Mathieu visited his sister near their hometown St-Louis-du-Ha! Ha!, Que., and built a wooden deck in his backyard with his two best friends, Maxime Dubois and Éric Pépin.

Maxime and Mathieu met when the latter played hockey in Lac-Mégantic while studying at Laval University in Quebec City. Mathieu didn’t own a car, so team officials found a driver – Maxime – who made the trek between the two cities every weekend. Mathieu never missed a practice.

On the evening of July 5, Maxime arrived at Mathieu’s house just after 6 p.m. The two drank beer and talked about



ALEXIA DUMAS-CHAPUT

Maxime's partner, Joannie Proteau, who was pregnant and due any day. Despite being transferred to Quebec City for his job, Maxime was a frequent visitor. The two often played cards while watching the Montreal Canadiens.

Mathieu also coached a local Pee wee hockey team. When parents worried he might drop out because he wasn't getting paid and didn't have a child on the roster, his answer was typical of him: "This is only practice for when my kid is going to play on this team." While shopping for

a house, Mathieu had a single criterion: a calm area so that their three-year-old, Édouard, could eventually play street hockey. "When we first visited this area," Alexia said, "we drove past kids playing street hockey. He was decided."

The couple's son has three hockey sticks: a stuffed stick to play in the living room, a second for the basement and a third for outside. "When he was a baby, only six months old, Matt put Édouard on his back and showed him how to skate," she said. "Édouard got his first stick when



BAR AT THE MUSI-CAFÉ

he was 14 months old and took it in both hands. Matt was so proud his son took the stick properly. I was trying to tell Matt, ‘Don’t be disappointed if he doesn’t like it and gets bored.’ Oh boy I was wrong.”

Mathieu took the same spirit into the classroom. While he was only in his second year of teaching, students asked to be transferred to his math class. “He was always there, any time you needed someone to volunteer,” said Sylvain Brier, an associate principal at the high school. “We have an expression, ‘Qui vous apportez à

la guerre,’ who you would bring to war. He would be one of those guys.”

“He was just a great guy,” said English teacher Heather Gordon, “the type of man who is charming without being flirtatious.”

On July 5, Mathieu and Maxime left for the Musi-Café around 9:30 p.m. Alexia stayed home with the couple’s son. “They said they were going to go out for a couple of beers and come home,” she said. “They called Éric and asked him to join. The party must have taken off because at 1

a.m. they were still there.”

Éric Pépin was one of Mathieu’s neighbours on Sevigny Street, an upscale sector of Lac-Mégantic. The three also spent the evening with another friend, David Lacroix-Beaudoin, who was visiting his hometown and had packed his suitcases before heading to the bar. He was flying the next morning back to Switzerland, where he had moved three years earlier.

“I was told the four guys took up station at the bar and people kept coming to see them over the evening,” Alexia said. The bar’s last call was 3 a.m., and Mathieu and friends would often go to a restaurant at 4 a.m. for poutine and snacks.

Around 11:30 p.m., Sylvain Brier was returning from a party with his wife and passed the train on the outskirts of Nantes. It was on fire. “We drove into a big cloud,” he said. “I thought it was fog, but it was black and smelled like fire mixed with oil – like an engine that had burned out. I was going to call 911, but as soon as we got out of the cloud I saw the firemen.”

He watched as a half dozen firefighters moved around the lead engine. In the half-hour since Mr. Harding, the engineer, had left the scene, engine oil had spilled and the locomotive had caught fire. In his rearview mirror, Sylvain could see dark smoke so thick that headlights couldn’t penetrate it.

After 2 a.m., Alexia woke up to find the light pulsing blue at the top-left corner of the smartphone she shared with her husband. The digits on the alarm clock beside her bed were also flashing. She was confused. The wind outside wasn’t strong; a power failure seemed unlikely. She looked at the first text message, addressed to Mathieu: “Are you OK?”

THE ART TEACHER

René Simard

Over two decades as an art teacher at Lac-Mégantic’s Polyvalente Montignac, René Simard saw thousands of students come and go. He continued to see many of them daily as successful adults.

A native of the province’s north, René was inching towards retirement. Soft-spoken and dapper, he stood out in rural Quebec, wearing polished brown leather wingtips and furnishing his home with cream leather chesterfields. He planned to spend the evening of July 5 at the Musi-Café, but first he went to a cinq-à-sept, where he was joined by a friend, Melissa Roy.

Melissa, 29, and her partner Emmanuel Tossel were due to celebrate their fourth anniversary two weeks later. The pair had been planning to start a family, but in December of last year Melissa miscarried. The loss weighed heavily on the couple;



RENÉ SIMARD

months later the baby's room was still stocked with a bottle and rocking horse.

The two worked in the industrial park on the edge of town – Melissa at the door factory, Emmanuel at the particleboard plant. On that Friday, Emmanuel drew the late shift at work, leaving Melissa to go out with René.

“I just bought a new Mini Cooper and Melissa wanted to see my car. She was really pretty,” René joked, “so I told her to come. When we arrived at the Musi-Café we found parking right in front and

I told her that she was my little cheeky blond girl – we had fun laughing about that.”

Many of René's friends were at the Musi-Café that evening to celebrate Stéphane Bolduc's birthday. Most belonged to the Boat Crew, a group of boat owners who travelled on Mégantic Lake as a flotilla.

“The crew was divided in two because we had to celebrate Stéphane's birthday on Friday and Nathalie Lafrance's on Saturday,” René said. “Our group was a

bit smaller. While 20 people showed up that evening, the attendance could have been twice that much.”

By 8 p.m., most of the group had arrived and perused the eclectic menu, the majority ordering the Mexican-style panini. Soon Karine Champagne was pleading with the musicians to go easy on her boyfriend. While the two agreed not to ply Stéphane with drinks, René and another man “decided that we were going to make him start taking shots even before dinner, just to tease a little,” René said. “We also wanted to mess with Karine a bit.” He didn’t know what shooters to order, deferring to the waitress who had been his student a few years earlier.

“There was a nice ambience that evening, it was really magical,” he said. “Everyone knew each other, exchanging kisses and taps on the back. It was a well-lubricated evening, a party night.”

René also knew Mathieu Pelletier, a colleague from school, and had taught two of Mathieu’s drinking buddies.

At midnight, a number of Stéphane’s guests began leaving; they planned to meet early the next morning and take 10 boats out on the lake. Frédéric Fortin, a Lac-Mégantic native who had moved to Montreal to work for an engineering firm, was in town to attend the party for Stéphane, a childhood friend. He and René “were smoking together all night,”

Frédéric said. “But I had the cigarettes. Each time I went out I would offer him a cigarette.”

He eventually gave René his pack and stayed in the bar. As people left, René decided to go outside and smoke, but he was constantly interrupted by old friends, colleagues and students wanting to talk. “Jean-Pierre Roy was sitting there,” René said. “My daughter used to date one of his sons, so he looked at me with a big smile, shook my hand.” Jean-Pierre was on a first date and had just ordered a final round of beer.

“The whole way out of the bar took a long time,” René said. He passed Geneviève Breton, an aspiring singer who had appeared on *Star-Académie*, a popular Quebec copy of *American Idol*; studying in Sherbrooke, Geneviève was visiting her hometown and was at the bar ordering a bottle of water for a late walk. René stepped out into the warm night to find a small crowd of smokers on the terrace. Frédéric spotted his friend outside and joined him – he didn’t know why, he just went.

A moment later, both he and René felt something. “Under my feet I could feel vibrations like an earthquake, and then the train came very fast,” René said. “I said to myself, ‘Christ! He’s crazy. He’s out of his mind. He’s coming way too fast.’”



CHRISTIAN LAFONTAINE

THE LAFONTAINES

Josée and Christian

Josée Lafontaine was angry.

Earlier in the day, her brothers Pascal, Christian and Gaétan Lafontaine were called to nearby Lac-Drolet, along with her partner. The four principals of Lafontaine Excavation had to supervise some emergency repairs – and would miss most of her 40th birthday party at her home. It went ahead anyway, but as the sun was setting at 9 p.m., a squadron

of mosquitoes dive-bombed her party guests, forcing them inside. She surveyed what was left of an evening that had gone wrong.

“I really didn’t have my heart in celebrating, I don’t know why,” Josée said. “When I went outside to the party, people saw that I wasn’t doing well. My head and heart just didn’t feel right.”

When Christian and his brothers finally arrived, less than a dozen people remained. They heard that guests had departed and met up at the Musi-Café.

“People left because the ambience wasn’t good,” Christian said.

By midnight, nearly everyone had gone. Christian, 45, went to the bar with his wife, Melanie Gerard, and his brother Pascal’s wife, Karine. They could hear the music from outside. They met up with Julie Heon and Marie-Noëlle Faucher, a secretary at the company, and later with his brother Gaétan and his wife, Joanie Turmel. On Sunday, Gaétan planned to run a Tough Mudder race – a nearly 20-kilometre test studded with serious obstacles.

Inside the Musi-Café, Christian, a businessman, was constantly networking. One of the people he spoke to first was Stéphane Bolduc’s girlfriend, Karine Champagne.

“We spoke for 15 minutes and we were really happy to see each other,” he said. “It was the loveliest discussion I’d ever had with her. I told her that I loved her and admired how she raised her children. Our last moment was smiles and laughter. We were real friends.”

By 1 a.m., Christian and his wife were getting ready to settle up and leave. They were standing at the end of the bar, far from the front exit.

Several kilometres to the north, Josée was preparing for bed. She had picked up the bottles of wine and beer that littered her backyard and living room, and was

going to put a bad day behind her.

“I was lying in bed with my lover talking and he said, ‘Stop. Listen to that train going by. It doesn’t sound like it normally does,’” she recalled. “I live near the tracks. It sounded like a whooshing sound instead of the typical slow chugging sound we’re used to. There was no whistling either, which the train normally does at level crossings. We were stumped and then we turned off the lights.”

‘I started crying like a child’

It happened at 1:14 a.m., and Christian Lafontaine didn’t understand.

“There was a first vibration,” he said, “and I looked at my wife and asked, ‘Did you feel that? It felt like an earthquake?’ She had. By the time she answered, we were shaken a second time, it took maybe five seconds. It was much more violent the second time.”

He glanced over at his brother Gaétan, whose wife had gone to the bathroom. Gaétan’s eyes darted toward the back of the bar. He was going to get her. “He would have never left without her. If he had left, he would have gone nuts,” Christian said.

Christian told his own wife it was time to get out. They started walking. Marie-Noëlle was standing alone near the bar’s front door. “She looked at my wife with

terror on her face, she just couldn't comprehend what was happening," Christian said. "The two of them were best friends. Melanie told her, 'We don't know what is going on, but we're getting out.' That's when the power failed."

The entire bar went pitch black, then turned orange – "brighter than the middle of the day, a blinding, lively orange," Christian said. The tall buildings around the Musi-Café were reflecting the light through the big windows that lined the front of the bar.

The lead wagons of the train had blown past the level crossing. The five locomotives at the front navigated a sharp bend behind the bar – despite going 10 times the speed limit, they stayed on the tracks. Following the last locomotive, an empty buffer car flew off. One oil wagon after another derailed. Momentum pushed the pileup three storeys high, the twisted wreck of steel carrying more than seven million litres of oil. Inside the bar, someone yelled, "Fire."

Only 15 seconds had gone by since the first rumblings.

"I was just afraid I'd get separated from my wife in a panic," Christian said. "She just wanted to hide, everyone wanted to hide." There was no screaming, but with the orange light coming through the windows, many people mistakenly thought the area in front of the bar was

dangerous. Christian's wife wanted to move to the back and take cover, but he pulled her out the front door.

"That was the last time I saw any of them," he said of other patrons. Had he waited 15 more seconds, he would have died.

Outside, Christian saw his car parked across the road, and a wave of fire as wide as the street coming toward them. "Asphalt doesn't burn, buildings do," he said. "When I saw the fire coming down the street I knew it was oil. I just started running, racing south."

Yvon Richard saw chaos, the train flying past the terrace and exploding. "A big mushroom cloud went up – I couldn't believe it," the musician said. Stunned, he stood with his mouth open, trying to make sense of things. Soon, the heat of burning oil jolted him to action and, along with four other people, he took off.

"We were running around houses and through backyards," Yvon said. "We demolished a fence. We eventually got to the lake. We stopped running when we couldn't feel the heat on our backs." Turning, he saw a scene of devastation. "The entire town was on fire to my right. It was hallucinating; wires were falling, transformers were exploding."

Running around the back of the train, as unexploded rail cars were slowly pulled by gravity towards the inferno,

Yvon went searching for his family. He found them standing on the porch outside his in-laws' home. His wife's gaze was fixed on the flames downtown, her hands pulling at her hair as she screamed in horror.

"She knew that it hit the Musi-Café, she was certain we were dead. When she saw me, she jumped into my arms," Yvon said. His musical partner's wife was also standing on the porch, preparing her teenagers to evacuate. She waited all night for news about her husband, Guy Bolduc. Dawn arrived – no news came.

René Simard was disoriented as he began running from the Musi-Café. He stumbled on the steps and fell. Frédéric Fortin turned back and picked up his friend, pulling him onto the town's main street. "The heat, the smell, the noise was so loud, like a tearing sound," René said, describing the rolling-pin-like motion of the burning oil as it flowed down the street. "It was like big waves coming to get you. They rolled, the sound beating. Then, explosions everywhere."

As René sprinted towards his new Mini Cooper, the car exploded. He had parked on the south side of the bar, away from the rail line. At that point, he knew his friends inside were dead. With Frédéric, he ran away from the fire and didn't stop until he reached a bridge spanning the

Chaudière River several blocks to the south. Standing under a massive lighted cross erected on a hill overlooking Lac-Mégantic, the art teacher watched as his adopted town burned.

Luc and Julie had jumped over the side of the terrace and run toward the lake. Luc ducked between two tall brick buildings and dashed through a narrow passageway between houses. By the time he got down to Mégantic Lake, the long park along the water was already burning. Oil had started spilling into the placid water. He looked back down an alley to see four blocks of downtown burning.

He and Julie were separated. She ran north towards her home, crossing land that moments later would be on fire. Luc headed south towards the Chaudière. Standing near the Eau-Berge Hotel, he called his mother and left a message on her answering machine: "When you turn on the TV tomorrow morning you'll see that downtown Mégantic is burning. I'm safe, I'm alive."

Inside the Eau-Berge, engineer Thomas Harding was awakened by the explosions. He pulled on his clothes and bolted for the door. A waitress, standing on the terrace as consecutive blasts shook the hotel, saw Mr. Harding's first reaction as he spotted the wagons: His eyes widened and colour drained from his face.

He headed towards the flames, helping first responders pull wagons from the fire before they could rupture.

As they ran away from the Musi-Café, Christian Lafontaine's wife fought his grip – she wanted to go back and get her purse from the car. “Forget the money,” he yelled. Behind them, fuel tanks began exploding as buildings crackled in heat growing more intense by the moment.

His wife, Melanie, stopped to remove her high heels. Christian caught a breath and saw the flames, several storeys high, rapidly approaching. He tugged her arm again and she ran barefoot. The two reached the south end of town without a singed hair. They were ready to cross the bridge, fearing downtown would turn to ash.

“We saved ourselves and the wave of flames washed over the Musi-Café,” he said. “Some tried to leave from the front and couldn't, others tried to exit by the back and that was a sea of flames.” The Quebec coroner's office told the families of victims that moments after the initial exodus, the rapidly expanding fire began to consume all the oxygen in the bar. The doors and windows soon imploded. Anyone left inside was asphyxiated.

Gaétan's body was found near his wife Joanie at the back of the bar. “They were together, they found each other,” Christian said. “That makes me feel

better.”

Moments before the train derailed, Yannick Gagné's pregnant wife arrived home. Lisandra Arencibia went to the couch and soon fell asleep.

“I started closing the windows,” Yannick said. “While I was looking towards downtown the ground shook, the electricity cut out and a fireball turned the sky orange. I thought a meteor had hit.” He dashed outside to see what was going on. Other people were running. They said wagons were exploding and everyone should leave town.

The proud owner of the Musi-Café felt a double pull of responsibility, personal and professional. He told his wife and kids they had to go. He took out his phone to call the restaurant, but it was already ringing.

“One of my employees was calling,” he said. “She was screaming, telling me that she was running away, that everything was on fire, it was chaos, the restaurant was gone, everything was gone, and people were still inside. I told her to calm down, that I'd go see.

“I got into the car and turned towards the Musi-Café. I saw the wagons blocking the road. I couldn't pass. There was a wall of fire hundreds of feet high. My kids were screaming and crying. I turned the car around. Then I started crying like a child.”

Epilogue

Thomas Harding: Following the derailment, Mr. Harding was interviewed by the Quebec provincial police. He has stayed out of the public eye and is on medical leave from the MM&A as it struggles through creditor protection. He has not been charged with any crime.

Luc Dion and Julie Heon: Five months after the disaster, the couple is still dating. Luc has returned to teaching French at the local high school; Julie runs a daycare.

Karine Blanchette: Karine still lives in the Lac-Mégantic area and continues to audition for acting parts.

Estel Blanchet: The morning after the derailment, Estel took to social media looking for her mother, Natachat Gaudreau. Estel's brother, Édouard, provided police with the DNA sample that identified his mother. He now lives in Sherbrooke with his father; Estel has moved to St-George-de-Beauce to start college.

Yvon Ricard: Yvon headlined a benefit concert in Montreal on Aug. 13. Despite returning to playing music, he still sees images of the Musi-Café when he closes

his eyes. Dozens of Quebec's most famous musicians attended Guy Bolduc's funeral.

Mathieu Pelletier: The bodies of Mathieu Pelletier, Éric Pépin, Maxime Dubois and David Lacroix-Beaudoin were identified near the stools where they sat most of the evening. Maxime's daughter Anais was born on July 10, four days after the train derailed.

René Simard: Shaken by the loss of so many friends, René has not returned to teaching. His friend Melissa Roy died at the Musi-Café.

Christian Lafontaine: Three members of the Lafontaine family perished in the fire. Gaétan Lafontaine's portrait now hangs at the headquarters of the family construction company, along with photos of his wife Joanie Turmel, Karine Lafontaine and secretary Marie-Noëlle Faucher.

Yannick Gagné: After the loss of his bar, Yannick launched the Musi-Café d'été, a popular six-week series of musical acts under a tent that gave the grieving community a place to meet. Despite struggling with insurers, he plans to rebuild – bigger.

