

Three.

HAUNTING CHARLOTTE

BY CORINNE CLARK

PIECES OF AN ENDING

BY GWYN MACKENZIE

NAILS

BY NATALIA ZDANIUK



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES

Three.

THE 2018 PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE OF CANADA
STUDENT AWARD FOR FICTION



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES



Penguin
Random House
Canada

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All pieces in *Three* are works of fiction. Most names, places, characters, and events are the product of the authors' imagination, and any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. In those few instances when the authors mention real persons and reported events, it is within a similarly fictionalized context and should not be construed as fact.

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Introduction

From Dickensian England to the American Civil War to an uncertain time and place in post-war Europe, the 2018 winners of the Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction guide us on journeys far and wide in space and time. Corinne Clark takes the \$2500 first prize for her gritty and gothic depiction of 19th Century London. Her novel excerpt “Haunting Charlotte” brings the London of the Industrial Revolution to life. The excerpt you’ll read here will leave you hungry for the rest of the novel. The complete version of “Haunting Charlotte” feels destined for publication.

Gwyn Mackenzie and Natalia Zdaniuk each win \$1000 for their short stories “Pieces of an Ending” and “Nails.” The stories are vastly different in tone and style, but both make us feel into the hearts of their characters and leave us feeling we’ve visited somewhere new. All three winning pieces show evidence of our excellent instructors, a few of whom you’ll find listed with the finalists.

Thanks to the jury of Sarah Jackson, Penguin Random House, Steven W. Beattie, Quill and Quire, and writer Derek Mascarenhas, a graduate of the Creative writing Program here at SCS, and a former finalist for this contest. His story collection *Coconut Dreams* will be published in 2019. Watch for it.

Thank you also to Gina Pieroni, Tracey Turriff, Beth Lockley, and to everyone at Penguin Random House Canada for their generous support of emerging Canadian writers. And thanks to Lihua Gui, Karen Fraczkowski, Benjamin Wood, Luba Zisser, Emily Sanford, and Dean Maureen MacDonald at SCS for all your help in getting these words on these pages. Read on!

Lee Gowan
Program Director, Creative Writing
University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies



Each year, we continue to be inspired by the learners of the Creative Writing Program at University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies (SCS). The passion, dedication and commitment to their writing and to each other is a hallmark of this unique community.

The strength of the creative writing community is why SCS is honoured to recognize the 2018 Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction. From a collection of incredible submissions, the jury has selected Corinne Clark's "Haunting Charlotte" as the award recipient, and Gwyn Mackenzie's "Pieces of an Ending" and Natalia Zdaniuk's "Nails" as honourable mentions.

We are proud to play a part in developing Canadian talent and connecting writers to industry leaders like Penguin Random House Canada. Of course, the accomplishments of our learners would not happen without the talents of our celebrated, engaged instructors, to whom we are grateful for sharing their experience and insights.

Congratulations to the award winners, Corinne, Gwyn and Natalia, and to all who provided submissions. You have shown true dedication to pursuing your passion, and we hope you continue to see the rewards that come with doing what you love. Thank you to our instructors; your guidance, expertise and devotion influences learners and colleagues alike. Finally, a sincere thank you to Penguin Random House Canada, whose long-standing commitment and leadership makes this award possible.

I wish you all the best and commend your commitment to lifelong learning.

Sincerely,

Maureen MacDonald, PhD, MBA, JD, BA

Dean, University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies



It is my great pleasure to congratulate the winner and honourable mentions for this year's Student Award for Fiction on behalf of Penguin Random House Canada.

"Haunting Charlotte" by Corinne Clark, "Pieces of an Ending" by Gwyn MacKenzie, and "Nails" by Natalia Zdaniuk exemplify the type of new, bold, and exciting work that so interests an engaged reader. We hope you'll feel the same way.

There is such talent evident in *Three* each year, and we are deeply proud at Penguin Random House Canada to support both the discovery and development of emerging Canadian writers, and the important work of the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies' Creative Writing program. Along with the winner and honourable mentions, we would like to congratulate the finalists, and thank all of the award applicants.

We also recognize the hard work and dedication of Lee Gowan, in his leadership of the Creative Writing program, and give special thanks to this year's jurors Sarah Jackson, Steven W. Beattie, and Derek Mascarenhas, as well as Gina Pieroni who helped make *Three* possible.

Enjoy!

Katie Saunoris
Director of Communications
Penguin Random House Canada



Finalists for the Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction 2018

NAME OF STUDENT	TITLE OF ENTRY	NAME OF INSTRUCTOR(S)
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\$2500 WINNER:

Corinne Clark	Haunting Charlotte	Kelley Armstrong
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HONOURABLE MENTIONS (2 \$1000 Prizes):

Gwyn Mackenzie	Pieces of an Ending	Michel Basilières Amy Jones Ibi Kaslik Sarah York
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Natalia Zdaniuk	Nails	Michel Basilières Dennis Bock
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FINALISTS:

Paul Barbuto	A Rose for Ikea	Michel Basilières
Diana Catargiu	Fisheye	Amy Jones
Sean Conforti	futuristic television emissions	Damian Tarnopolsky
Rachel Gerry	Crave	Amy Jones
Amy Kaufman	A Growing Up	Laura Lush
Deepa Rajagopalan	Geese	Danila Botha Marina Nemat
Jess Spaude	Little Rice	Ken Murray



HAUNTING CHARLOTTE

CORINNE CLARK



CORINNE CLARK loves telling stories, though not all of them are true. She is a highly impressionable member of the Ghost Club (circa 1862), and after reading Gothic masterpieces by Daphne du Maurier, Sarah Waters and the Brontës, amongst others, she was inspired to write a ghost story of her own: *Haunting Charlotte*. Aside from a few years spent in the UK learning all the bloody English expressions she could, she has been a life-long resident of Mississauga, is a recent graduate of the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies' Creative Writing Program, and thanks to a serendipitous twist of fate, is represented by Barbara Berson of the Helen Heller Agency. www.corinneclarkwriter.com



ONE

I remember a room with yellow striped wallpaper where the walls were straight and true with no bulges or cracks. The brickwork wasn't crumbling, and the floorboards weren't rough and creaking. There was no stink of blocked drains or decaying rubbish, and the gutters weren't thick with sewage. I lost count of how many coals the maid Nancy put on the fire, and how many wax candles we burned. The sitting room had a cabinet full of books—proper books, with covers and knife-edge pages, and we read them by blazing gaslight. Jane Eyre was my constant companion, and her story—even now—I know by heart. Curled up on the window seat, hiding behind the curtains, I planned my future, and it was just like hers, with a gloomy old mansion in the wild countryside, and my own Mr. Rochester by my side.

In those days my red hair sparked like the brightest part of a flame. My nursemaid brushed sugar-water through it, so it sizzled when she twisted with a pair of hot tongs. "The curls will last longer this way," she said.

My step-father, Jonathan Swan, was a clockmaker who invented extraordinary things: a silver skull with a watch face grasped between its jaws, and a mantle-clock that sang like a canary on the hour. He had special tools, and spectacles with goggly lenses he wore when fiddling with tiny springs and gears. His young son Ben—who became my brother—tinkered alongside him, though he was too impatient to do the delicate work.

One autumn, when Jonathan had his Christmas orders coming in, he began to make small errors, then larger ones. He squinted, and rubbed his

eyes, bringing the parts closer to see them better. He hardly noticed at first, but his creations were not as fine as they once were, and though Ben did what he could, the sales became fewer and his workshop grew quiet. Before long, he couldn't see well enough to fashion any sort of timepiece at all, and every watch hand, gear and tool went off to the pawnshop.

Gradually, my things—all our things—were taken and sold bit by bit. After the family silver went from the cupboards, it was the pastoral paintings from the walls, then the tufted furniture from the sitting room, followed soon after by my soft leather boots; my printed linen frocks and the shining gold ring my step-father had made for me. In the end, I couldn't even keep my beloved copy of *Jane Eyre*. That loss I felt most keenly, for when it was taken to the bookseller, all my hope went with it. We were a different family back then, in that house. We were happy, and I wish I had torn off a scrap of that yellow striped wallpaper when we left. I'd look at it now to remind me of what we once had—that it wasn't a dream after all.

Then there was London. I first saw it lying on the horizon—a miserable creature: grey, dirty and bloated, with its backbone protruding—all church spires and ships' masts. A smoking dragon with the citizens roasting in its belly. My family and I approached it by carriage and entered through the gaping mouth of it, then settled into its darkest heart: the slums of Seven Dials in the parish of St. Giles, where the crooked streets turn in on themselves, and we are smothered by fog and cloaked in soot.

That was seven years ago. Since then I have learned the ways of the Dials: the tangled layout of alleys and passageways, how to lose myself in them if it suits me; the fastest route to Covent Garden; the best price for a hot potato or a hand-me-down shift. I'm wise to the tricks of thieves and dodgers, and I can flummox the pickpockets. London is in me down to my bones. You may as well try to pull up the cobblestones or drag away the sagging houses—that's how hard it would be to shift me now. Outside of London, there is nothing.

Not more than half-an-hour ago, a frock hanging outside an old-clothes shop on Floral Street got me into a spot of trouble. Luscious as crushed cherries, it had a neat, pin-tucked bodice and flounces round the bottom of the skirt. The hem had come down in the back and it was a bit

frayed but there wasn't much wrong with it I couldn't mend myself. So fine it was, I sighed at the sight of it hanging alongside the other duds of grey and yellow-brown. It didn't deserve such shabby company, and I longed to rescue it from the terrible fate I foresaw for it: ending up muddy and torn on the back of a coarse coster's wife, or sweeping through the gutters on a gin-soused dollymop. But more than all that, it wasn't the stinking, black crape I'm forced to stitch into mourning clothes day after day, and every night too—drowning in a tide of dull black weepers and dour gowns, that aren't blue-black like a raven's wing or deep as a starless sky, but black as coal tar, black as mud.

In my pocket was a penny made warm by the flesh of my hand curled round it. It wasn't enough for the frock, and I was meant to be buying supper with it. I turned it over and over wishing I could magic it into two, though it still wouldn't have met the price pinned to the collar. I'd have done nearly anything to get that frock—except nick it. I wouldn't have done that. But try telling that to the old boiler who owns the place.

I'll touch the silk, I thought. Only that. I took it between my thumb and fingers and stroked the fabric gently enough not to leave a grubby fingerprint. When a sudden gust of wind made the skirt billow, it gave me a start, for I thought it might be a ghost, and it caused me to cry out and lose my balance. The frock slipped its peg and ended up in my hands just as the shopkeeper looked up. A brute of a woman spit-polishing an old boot, I knew she had it in for me when she met my astonished expression with her own, then her eyes narrowed. I reckon my look of fear and surprise made her think I was about to scarper with the thing. I dropped it in a heap at my feet, but the damage was done.

"Help! Thief!" She bellowed.

Crikey, she was loud.

She lunged and made a grab for me. I dodged and sprang out of reach, but before I could make my escape a powerful hand caught me by the upper arm.

"Don't worry Sally, I've nabbed th' wretch!"

The long fingers of my captor squeezed me so hard I thought my bones should crack. It was another old-clothes dealer, much wider and

more florid than the first. She pulled her lips back in a grimace showing her stubby brown teeth. I struggled mightily against her but the bitch had me tight.

“Thought you could pinch it, did ya?”

A cloud of her foul breath made my eyes water.

“I wasn’t nicking it—”

“That’s wot every thief says.”

“Oi, gibface!” A thin voice called out. “Bet you can’t catch me!”

A boy of no more than eight swooped past the boots lined up along the pavement and snatched up a pair that were too big for him by far. He shook them at the seller who had me fast, making their leather tongues tremble. The woman opened her mouth in surprise and let go of me, then the boy and I did a runner—me hooking it towards the market, and him vanishing like a spirit into the heaving crowds. He was a nimble one—trained I expect. He had rescued me from being nabbed, no doubt thinking we were of the same shifty occupation. That’s how it is in the slums—you help your own, for no one else will.

Grasping my cloak tightly at my throat and with my hood shielding my face, I legged it along a thieves’ route down narrow alleys and shadowy laneways towards Covent Garden until I was swept into the crowds spilling into the market square. I slowed down to traipse amongst the shoppers flocking round the fruit and veg stalls like curious rooks, lifting my skirts to avoid the foul puddles left by melting snow.

Now I am in front of St. Paul’s Church, with my nose cold and running, my fingers stiff and red, and my stockings soaked with gutter water thanks to the gaping soles of my boots. I look up to the arched roof of the chapel thinking of the days I sold watercress on its steps. If I spit from here it would land exactly where I once stood, swinging a tin-lined basket heaped with ha’penny-bunches of wilted greens. I arrived every day before the sun peeped out and stayed till the gaslamps were lit, but never made more than six-pence. So although I’ve always hated sewing, I took up my needle and began to work for Grimshaw’s Mourning Warehouse alongside my mother for the sake of a few shillings more. We make clothes for the dead and the grieving, and since then, I’ve seen shadows where there shouldn’t be any, heard footsteps when I was alone, and

caught the whisper of my name carried on the wind.

Weaving amongst the barking street sellers peddling everything from jellied eels to Yarmouth bloaters, baked potatoes, and pies of all sorts. I squeeze my penny and consider what to spend it on, my nose twitching at the smell of baked apples and hot chestnuts, winter pears, muddy onions and carrots, and underneath it, the ever-constant stink of horse droppings and rotting cabbage leaves.

As I turn towards home, I spot a pie-man with a sign on his large wooden box: William Thompson, Champion Pie Maker. My stomach twists with hunger. There must be a million pie sellers in London—in the Dials we hardly eat anything else. But a champion pie-maker, now that’s rare. “Two pies for tuppence! Hot, hot! All hot!” He roars.

I stamp my feet against the cold as I walk towards the champion’s box, the smell of floury potatoes and onions wafting into the air.

“Mutton pasty, please.”

The pie-man reaches into his great wooden box and emerges with a pasty folded in a greasy bit of paper. “There, now. A penny,” he says.

With a glum face and some sorrow in my heart I hand over my only coin, for I would rather have gone hungry and had the frock, but my mother says it’s important to keep our strength up with all the sewing we do.

“Cheers,” the pie-man says. I watch the penny drop into his great coat pocket where it jingles against the others. Over his shoulder I see a pair of lamplighters trudging down the street with their long ladders slung over their shoulders. Damn. I should’ve been home long ago. Mother will be filled with dread, imagining me lying in an alleyway with my throat cut, or left in a heap, strangled to death by a gang of garroters, never mind that I’ve got nothing worth nicking. Except the pie, I suppose.

Rehearsing an apology under my breath, I hurry home with the hot food wrapped up in my skirts. And although I am late, I stop at the corner of Mercer Street and tilt my head back, gazing at the fading light in the winter sky, filling my eyes with it before plunging back into Seven Dials, where it seems to be perpetual night.

By the next morning, my mother still hasn’t eaten anything. After I brought the pie home last night I served her a slice with the gravy leaking

out, but she didn't touch it. As the evening wore on the meat turned grey, and the crust went mushy. Ben left it alone for ages, but kept shooting long looks at it, until my mother told him he could have it. In an instant he scooped it up and shoved it into his mouth, stuffing his cheeks till I thought they would burst.

My mother hasn't eaten much at all the last few days, except for a nibble of bread and swallow of weak tea. She takes her food by the fire, so as not to get crumbs in the seams of the garments we make, or leave fingerprints on the silk. Her pinched face is shaped by the prominent hollows of her eye sockets and cheekbones. Her drab hair falls loose from its pins, and there are circles under her eyes, dark as bruises.

Every day she and I sit for hours on end with our knees nearly touching, sharing the light from a greasy, smoking candle. We sew mourning wear and grave clothes for those who can afford them, from five o'clock in the morning until eleven o'clock at night. Drowning in a sea of black fabric for a funeral this Saturday, she doesn't notice the rest of us, nor the passage of time. There is nothing but silence and endless stitching.

This morning—five hours have passed already—my eyes swim with tears as I bring a half-finished skirt up under my nose to finish the seam. The crape fabric is horrid: its stinking dye flakes off and stains my fingers purple, and no amount of scrubbing will remove the marks. After a few hours, my throat burns and I struggle to take a breath.

I squeeze my eyelids closed, blinking hard, but when I open them again the effect is the same. The thread is black, the fabric is black, and I shall go mad if I continue for five minutes more. To break the drudgery, I pluck the iron thimble off my finger and drop it on the tabletop. It rolls away with a dull rattling sound I find satisfying, but even that doesn't attract my mother's attention.

"Fancy a drop of tea, Mum? There's still a few leaves in the tin." My mouth is as dry as wool; I haven't spoken in ages.

My mother doesn't stop stitching—her needle darts in and out of the fabric draped over her lap like a tiny silver fish. I don't know whether she's heard me or not.

"Have a bite of something, my love." My step-father lifts his milky eyes, his forehead creased with worry. He explores the tabletop with his

fingertips, setting aside his brush and pot of paste. Newly assembled matchboxes are stacked in front of him like bricks. "I'll fetch a pie from Dickie's stand. I'll be back in a blink."

My mother shakes her head. "Don't waste a penny on another pie."

Wracked with guilt over our misfortunes, Jonathan is often more generous than we can afford. Sometimes I take advantage of it, but only for something small, like a polished apple from a market stall or a cone of roasted chestnuts. He does his best for us, pasting matchboxes together and sifting ash at the dusty yard, where he collects bits of glass, bone or rope to sell, and he does it all by touch. I try not to be too hard-hearted toward him but if my mother had never married him, we wouldn't be in such a state. She refuses to tell me anything of my real father, but I feel in my heart we'd be living a grand life if he were with us. And although I don't yet know how, I swear one day I will find my real father and escape this misery.

"The kippers are nearly cooked." Ben stretches his legs out beside the fireplace hearth, with his toes so close to the grate he is in danger of singeing his socks. A square of sooty carpet hangs over the broken chimney breast to guide the smoke upwards so it doesn't billow into the room and make us cough. He watches over a string of scrawny herrings smoking over the flames; I hope they've got more flesh than bones. A local fishmonger takes pity on us from time to time, offering us the scraps of fish he hasn't sold by week's end. The salty smell of the herring wafts over to me, making my mouth water.

"You'll have a kipper or two with a bit of bread, won't you mum?"

"Perhaps," she murmurs, without slowing her needle. I bite my lip in frustration. It's always Ben that softens her, not me, even though I am the one related to her by blood.

"That's my girl," Jonathan says. He smiles as he wipes his sticky fingers on a rag, then stuffs it into the pocket of his waistcoat and leans back in his chair.

As I stand to fill the kettle, the saucer with the candle stub in it slides across the tabletop, with no hand to have moved it. The flame wobbles and the wax hisses when it catches the wick. A breath of air brushes my cheek, and I shiver, for it is not an ordinary draft, the kind that blusters

down the chimney or gusts through the broken window panes, but one that brings an apparition with it.

Usually the phantoms that haunt me are nothing more than shadows, sighing and drifting around the room. They blow coldly across the back of my neck and put my candle flame out, but it's gotten worse since I've started with the grave clothes. They're a terrible nuisance, and it's hard to ignore them, though eventually they fade into the shadows like a wisp of smoke; I reckon they've got other places to go once they're put into the ground, though whether it's up or down is nothing to me. This time something's different though. Never before has a spirit pushed a candle along the table, nor moved anything at all.

The temperature plummets and the deep freeze sinks into my bones. I rub my hands up and down my arms to warm them. Every exhalation of my breath hangs in the air like a cloud of silver. The fire in the grate sinks low till there's only smouldering embers. Ben stabs them with a poker.

"It's gotten awful cold," he says. "Must be a storm coming."

My mother looks up and frowns. The wavering light from the candle flame casts queer shadows over her face. I try to steady my breathing and meet her gaze, to pretend that I'm not afraid, even as my heart thuds in my ears.

My mother says my visions aren't real, only symptoms of the close sewing in low light and long hours without sleep, as though sensing spirits is an affliction, like a fever or a wasting disease. There's no cure though. I've tried to shut them out, but still they come to me, like the drawing in of a breath.

"You must stop with this foolishness about spirits—there's no such thing. You'll be dragged to the madhouse if anyone hears your stories of ghosts. They will chain you to a bed, and there would be naught I could do for you then." Her eyes flash with fear whenever she speaks of it.

I fetch the kettle to make tea, my hands shaking so much I have to put it down before I've put the water in. I stare at the blister in the peeling wallpaper that swells when the rain trickles in. When I screw up my eyes, the brown stain becomes a great, toothy mouth and a crooked, beakish nose.

"Charlotte," my mother says. "Come here." Her voice is calm but

there's an edge to it I know well. Though my legs are weak, I gather my courage and go to her.

"What are you up to?"

"Nothing."

The candle flame winks out as though someone has blown on it. A thread of smoke curls up into the darkness. There is no light now but the glow from the fireplace shining upon Ben's cheeks.

Jonathan stops stacking his matchboxes. "Alright, Katherine?"

"Course," my mother answers lightly. "Don't mind our nattering."

Across the room Ben mutters to himself, his hair falling in his eyes as he stirs the embers in the fireplace, trying to coax the flames back to life. The herring sway and gleam in the soft light.

A match scratches across sandpaper, and my nose fills with the smell of sulphur. The flare of the flame leaves spots in front of my eyes as my mother touches it to the wick of her candle. She holds it up against the shadows, but the feeble halo doesn't dispel the gloom.

A sigh tickles my ear and I shudder, leaning back against the table so that it scrapes across the floor. My mother cries out in shock, nearly dropping her candle. The wax drips down her skirt but she doesn't notice.

"Katherine, what's happening?" Jonathan's voice is sharp.

"It's alright, Jon. All's well." The candlelight's reflection wavers in her eyes. "Are you trying to frighten me?" She whispers.

I can't answer her. My tongue is pinned down with fear at the sight of a small, pale face emerging from the darkness behind her. My mother catches the direction of my gaze and turns abruptly. She searches the shadows, trying to see what I see. But when she looks, there's no one there.

TWO

My mother glances at me uneasily. Pulling her shawl close around her shoulders she tries to ward off the biting cold. No matter how many coals Ben heaps on the fire, it won't banish the chill—not with a spirit here. But the small face vanished so quickly I wonder if I really saw it. But the candlestick moved on its own. I'm sure of it.

The room is quiet, other than an odd snap from the fireplace and the rattle of a carriage going by in the street. My thoughts are interrupted when Ben says, "Da, are you alright?"

I look up to see Jonathan coughing and retching into a rag. When he takes it away, there is a blossom of blood on the fabric. Ben and I exchange a worried look as he goes to Jonathan's side. My step-father struggles to stand, clutching Ben's hand so tightly his knuckles go white.

"It's nothing son, just need to catch my breath." His wan face glistens with sweat.

My mother watches, needle in hand, her brow creased with worry. She puts her sewing down to help Jonathan into bed.

"My boxes—" he says weakly. His shirt falls open, displaying his narrow ribcage.

"Shhh, don't mind your boxes for now. Ben will see to them." My mother eases Jonathan on to the straw mattress and adjusts a flat pillow under his head. She pulls his threadbare blanket up to his chin, then lays the back of her hand against his forehead. Her sombre expression and the creases around her eyes tell me Jonathan's got a fever.

"Ben, put another coal on the fire, it's still awfully cold. And get me a

cloth and some water.” She strokes Jonathan’s hair, smoothing each lock into place. A stab of jealousy cuts through me: I wish she would stroke my hair that way. Once fiery, my curls have turned the colour of a dirty copper penny. She doesn’t like the colour much—always urging me to cover my head. Gingers bring bad luck; most everyone says. I have begun to think it’s true, after all we’ve been through.

Jonathan wheezes, struggling to breathe, but before long he drifts into sleep, the whites of his half-open eyes showing under his long, dark eyelashes.

“Keep sewing, Charlotte,” my mother says, without looking at me. “Stephen comes tomorrow. Half-past-two.”

Stephen, the pock-marked bully from Grimshaw’s Mourning Warehouse—our employer—will come for the frocks and blouses we’ve sewn, and if they have so much as a crooked stitch or a pinprick in the fabric he will toss them at our feet and shout, “Defective! I ain’t takin’ that rubbish to Grimshaw’s.” Such a loss would ruin us.

Looking at my basket overflowing with crape, I cringe at how much sewing is left. If we can’t get the order done, there will be no more work, but even if I pinned and stitched from now until Stephen shows his face tomorrow, it’s an impossible task. Besides, Ben needs time to check the seams for fleas.

My thoughts are disturbed by a series of raps upon the door: one, two—and after a pause—three, four five. I flinch at the sound, but when I’ve had a moment to get my wits about me I realize it’s only Jemmie, no one else knocks like that. We had to come up with a way of knowing it’s him, or my mother might forbid us opening the door. She has covered all the windows with paper, she’s that fearful of the outside world looking in, though sometimes she lifts a corner of it to peer down into the street. One of her favourite pastimes—when she isn’t sewing—is to watch for footpads or ruffians lurking about, or anything out of place, though I can’t imagine why anyone would bother with us.

“Hallo Swans!” Jemmie’s voice is loud in the close room. He takes his cap off and hangs it on a peg by the door, then scrapes his fingers through his hair so it stands up rakishly; I quite like it like that.

“Benny, my boy,” Jemmie claps Ben on the back. “How’s tricks?”

Ben nods towards Jonathan in his bed. "My Da ain't well."

Jemmie sucks in his breath and becomes serious. "Sorry, mate," he says. "Anything I can do?"

"Nah." Ben says. "Me mum's taking good care of him. That's all that can be done."

"Right-O. Well, I've brought you somethin' better than those kippers, in anyroad." He reaches into one of the large pockets sewn into the inside of his coat, and produces something bundled in a handkerchief. He sets it on the table by Jonathan's matchboxes. "Eel pie," he announces.

My stomach grumbles. "You didn't pinch it, did you?" The words tumble out of my mouth before I can stop them. It's just that I want Jemmie to get a proper job. He tries—banging a fence together now and then, or scrounging day work at the docks. He even works as a grave digger when he can, but it's hard to make a go of it with honest work when it isn't steady.

"Come now, Charlie. I won it fair and square. I tossed for it. The pie-man called heads and it were tails." Jemmie loves tossing the pie-man—or any bit of a gamble, really. If he loses the coin toss, he has to pay a penny for nothing, but if he wins, he gets the pie for free. He does pretty well at it, or else he's lying about how often he wins. He is awfully fond of pies.

Ben is already stabbing the eel pie with his pocket-knife. He hacks off a quarter of it then picks it up and shoves the dripping slice into his mouth. "Mmm . . ." He closes his eyes for a moment then takes another bite.

"But this, I did nick." With a flourish, Jemmie produces a length of ribbon from his coat sleeve. It unfurls like a great tongue—a flash of sunlight in a world of fog. It's the same yellow as the striped wallpaper I can still picture in my mind—the yellow of sugared lemon peels and daisy hearts. I want to reach for it, to feel the silkiness between my fingers, but my hands stay frozen by my sides.

"I wish you hadn't," I say, my voice thick.

"What? Ain't it pretty?" He dangles the ribbon in front of me. "I ain't askin' for anything in return."

I open my mouth to speak but nothing comes out.

"Make yer pal happy, will ya? Take the damn thing."

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. How can I tell him it reminds me of

everything I've lost, of everything I don't have? Of all the possessions I own that have been stolen, I want this one, this perfect gift, to be paid for, to wear it woven in my hair with pride.

"It's 'cause I nicked it, ain't it? It's just a ribbon, for God's sake." He looks hurt and embarrassed as he stuffs it in his pocket. "Never mind, then."

I want to say something to make him cheerful again, but the words catch in my throat. Then in an instant, the moment passes.

Jemmie turns away and points to the remains on the table. "Who else is for pie then, before Ben bolts it all?"

Ben has resumed his seat by the fire. "It's good," he says, spewing crumbs from his mouth. Once finished his supper, he wipes the gravy off the plate with his fingertips, then noisily sucks the grease off each finger down to the knuckle. As a finale, he licks the palms of his hands, making me cringe.

Jemmie puts his cap back on and yanks it low over his brow. I think he's trying to hide his face from me. I've mucked things up—he thinks I'm cross with him. The quarrel has left a hollow in my stomach and ruined my appetite. He pulls a chair up to the table.

"Come on, Benny, let's have a bet." He digs through another pocket and out comes a pack of playing cards snipped from the pages of a newspaper. He plays with them even though he's missing the Jack-of-spades and the eight-of-hearts. Fanning out the grubby scraps of paper on the table face down, he says. "Pick one, any one you like, and I'll guess it. A farthin' a go."

Ben narrows his eyes. "What's your rig?"

"I ain't got a rig; you're my pal."

Ben moves his candle closer to the cards to see the suits properly. He bends forward and rubs his chin, carefully deciding which one he'll choose.

A draft stirs the hem of my skirt, and my scalp prickles with the sensation of being watched. There is an odd scraping sound, and after a moment I realize that my mother's sewing box is inching across the sewing table all on its own.

Blimey.

As I watch in horrified fascination, it nudges closer and closer to the edge of the tabletop, then tips over and crashes to the floor. The lid flies

off and the pins and needles scatter; a spool of thread rolls away. My heart slams against my chest as everyone looks my way.

I stoop to pick up my mother's sewing things and put them to rights. "It's alright, I've got it," I say, brightly, sweeping all the odds and sods into my hands. What the dickens is going on? My gaze slides over the room but I don't see anything queer.

After I set the box on the table, I notice a card under the toe of my boot. It must have fallen out of the box. I scoop it up to examine it. In fancy curling letters it says: "From the photographic studio of Dore & Co. 232 Mare Street, Hackney, London". On the other side a young woman perches upon a high-backed chair set in front of a backdrop with a painted willow tree. A small girl stands at her side, and another child rests against her breast, her eyes closed, her hands in her lap. I squint at the image, wondering why it seems so familiar, then all the breath rushes out of me. For the woman in the chair is my mother, and I am the girl at her knee, but the child resting against her breast isn't sleeping at all.

The poor little thing is dead.





PIECES OF AN ENDING

GWYN MACKENZIE



GWYN MACKENZIE was born and raised in Toronto, where she spent much of her extra-curricular time training in dance. After moving to New York to earn a BFA in Dance, she worked as a professional dancer, touring to Europe, Canada, and across the United States. Gwyn has recently returned to Toronto to focus on writing. In her spare time, you're likely to find her watching NBA basketball or professional grand-tour cycling, depending on the season.



THE DAY ROLAND FINISHED THE PODCAST

It was 10 am in New York, and General Lee finally surrendered his forces to Union General Ulysses S. Grant.

Roland had been listening to the Civil War podcast for an hour already that morning. He was well aware that Lee had actually conceded defeat more than a century earlier, and several states away—but the podcast brought the events from America's distant history vividly into Roland's present. He'd spent his last 209 mornings listening to hosts Tracy and Rich painstakingly describe the events of the American Civil War. On this morning, the 210th, Tracy announced the aforementioned capitulation, and Rich went on to describe the meeting of the two generals in Wilmer McLean's parlour to discuss the terms of surrender. Roland listened to the hosts' comforting voices passively, as he was also thinking of other things.

He thought of Rich and Tracy, waking up together every day. Maybe Rich made the coffee, while Tracy scrambled the eggs up with some spinach and tomatoes, a few strips of bacon frying in the adjacent pan. They sounded like bacon people. After eating, Roland thought Rich might freshen his wife's coffee. Then, perhaps he sat down beside her, and there, at the kitchen table, they reviewed their scripts. Only when they felt confident enough would they record the day's episode of their Civil War podcast.

Every morning, Roland listened to the next episode of Tracy and Rich's podcast from the bed that he used to share with his wife, Uma. The bed sat in the space where the dining room met the living room, its length measuring the distance between the kitchen table and the couch. Its placement

might've seemed curious to visitors, but Roland didn't ever have any visitors so it was curious to no one.

THE TIME ROLAND AND UMA TOOK A SPONTANEOUS TRIP TO GETTYSBURG WHEN HE WAS SIXTY-TWO AND SHE WAS SEVENTY-FIVE

Ten years before Roland finished the podcast, he and his wife Uma went on a driving trip to Gettysburg. They were getting on in life, *Or at least I am, anyway*, Uma said, and she wanted to see the Civil War re-enactments that she'd gone to as a child, but she could no longer remember. She wanted to remember.

Roland was happy to oblige. He liked most things.

They spent five days in and around Gettysburg, staying at local inns and bed and breakfasts. They went to the re-enactments, but stayed for only forty-five minutes on the first day because it was disturbingly hot and a young man asked if they wanted to buy a gun for \$400. They didn't go back the next day. They did a driving tour instead, guided by an educational audio CD, of the monuments and battle sites.

THE DAY ROLAND FINISHED THE PODCAST

Roland sat up in bed and looked to Poppy, curled up at his feet. The dog possessed a few of the good bodily qualities that had belonged to his lost wife. A warm, soft body. A propensity to take up space in a bed. Uma had snored every night, Roland remembered. It kept him up, but he never woke her up or turned her over, because it made him happy to think of her resting so deeply, a happiness that sustained him more than his own sleep ever could. Roland had never imagined that waking in the morning from an uninterrupted sleep could feel so melancholy. Poppy, bless her heart, her back ribs pulsing with the quick and steady breaths of petite animal lungs, helped. Her aliveness reminded Roland of his own, which had been useful up until this point.

"The monuments in Gettysburg make the abandoned battleground the largest outdoor sculpture park in the world. Did you know that, Poppy?" The dog ignored him, and Roland lay back and smiled to himself. Uma had loved that little piece of trivia. The monuments, spread out over Gettysburg, a gallery of loss.

“What’s that, Poppy? No comment?” He reached for the dog and pulled her to his stomach, holding her close to him as she wriggled into a new comfortable position. “It’s okay, Poppy. It’s not your fault you’re just a dog.”

THE TIME THEY TOOK A SPONTANEOUS TRIP TO GETTYSBURG WHEN HE WAS SIXTY-TWO AND SHE WAS SEVENTY-FIVE

Uma and Roland started listening to Tracy and Rich’s podcast as soon they finished the driving tour. They searched “Civil War” on the podcast app and the couple’s program was the first to show up. After five minutes, Uma looked to Roland in the driver’s seat.

“This is the worst podcast I’ve ever heard,” she said.

“It’s fucking terrible,” Roland responded.

“It’s so obvious they’re reading from scripts.”

“Their voices!”

“Oh, *Rich!*” Uma tilted in an exaggerated and poorly executed southern drawl.

“Now, *Tracy* . . .”

“Really though, we’re hilarious but I don’t know how much more of this I can stand,” Uma said. They agreed they would at least stick the first episode out. The next episode played automatically after.

Contrary to their initial instincts, both Uma and Roland found themselves privately warming to the program, though their embarrassment for this surprising truth kept them both silent. Neither Uma nor Roland *wanted* to like the podcast hosts. They were uninspired speakers, grossly campy in their delivery, and altogether not very imaginative—qualities that Uma and Roland loved to loathe. But as their car ate at the road in front of them, and as Uma and Roland continued to neither speak nor suggest a change of listening material, a picture began to form, behind the screen of words and their contents, a picture more vivid and emboldened with each soaring second:

Tracy and Rich. An aging married couple, masters of American history, having met in the process of becoming masters of American history, sitting in their modest but comfortable kitchen, all different types of shared love and passion swirling around them. Tracy and Rich, contemporaries, the perfect match.

Roland thought that they must be very much alike in almost every

way, and this thought gave him an uncomfortable itch in his stomach—a sensation that someone less cunning in the art of denial might recognize as jealousy.

Uma thought that though she and Roland were in the same car, they were in different cars. It's not that Uma's car was moving faster than Roland's. She'd just left the gate earlier. Tracy and Rich, the lucky bastards, were in the same car. Uma thought about how age is just a number. Until she dies and Roland gets left behind.

How nice it must be, to be very much alike in almost every way. How nice it must be, to be in the same car. How nice it must be, to have an easy love.

By the end of the third episode, due to a wistful union of hope and resignation, Uma and Roland had grown to love and revere Tracy and Rich.

"They're kind of sweet," Roland said, carefully wading through the body of silence. "And, they sure know a shit ton about the Civil War."

Uma smiled in relief. "I'll be damned if it isn't the best Civil War podcast out there."

"How many episodes do we have to look forward to?"

Uma scanned through the queue. "God, hundreds! And they're still recording, they added one two days ago. And they've only just gotten to *Anteitam*."

Roland whistled.

Silence filled the car again, and Uma looked out the window.

"This podcast is going to outlive me," Uma said. "Their voices will take me to the grave."

Roland rolled his eyes from the driver's seat. "I hate when you say things like that."

"When I die, find Tracy and Rich, and have them speak at my funeral."

"Enough."

"You have to be prepared, Roland. You have to be realistic. You promised."

Roland blinked rapidly, and inhaled. "What a find, this podcast, huh?" Uma put her hand on Roland's thigh, and turned her eyes to the road, where she saw herself in the distance, miles ahead. They listened all the way home, and though they said they would, they never got around to listening to the podcast again.

THE FIRST TIME THEY MADE LOVE

It was Roland's third time at Uma's house, and they made it to her bedroom on the third floor. His first time, they'd shared a bottle of wine in front of the fireplace on the first floor. His second visit had brought them to the second floor, where they shared another bottle of wine, while listening to music on her record player.

On the third, they sat in lounge chairs in her bedroom, drinking wine and learning about each other. Roland's nerves snaked electricity through his body. He didn't know what she could possibly see in him, what could've compelled her to tell him that when she first saw him, she felt that she knew something important about him. *I can't explain it, but I know*, she'd said. No one had ever said such a thing about him before.

As they looked at each other across the moonlit room, Roland felt his heart muscle unclenching. It was the feeling of being seen for the first time as nothing more and nothing less than himself.

His newly freed heart was suspended on a cloud of disbelief. He wondered how a woman like Uma—beautiful, brilliant, successful—could care for a young fool like him. Uma designed buildings that millions of people saw, and needed. Roland took photos that no one looked at. Uma had a grand three-story house. Roland rented a one-bedroom apartment, where he often heard the neighbours, through the walls, revising their list of people they planned to shoot. Uma had a career, an ex-husband, a child. Roland had an ex-girlfriend and a lot of painfully free time. They'd met each other, Roland and Uma, both bearing heavy hearts.

Yet, there was Uma, across from him, looking at him, beautiful and strong, terrifying and safe in equal part.

He admired to her the softness of the sheepskin chairs they sat on.

"I love soft things," she said. "They remind me that I'm home." Uma took Roland's hand and guided him to the adjacent room, her office, and pulled him to the floor to sit on the rug, beside her drafting table.

"This is my favourite thing in the whole house. The softest thing I've ever touched." She plunged his hand into the fur of the plush white rug. After a moment, she looked up from the rug, into his face.

"I keep thinking," she said, "that you must be so much better than everyone you're around. In any place, in any room." And then they kissed, not

for the first time, but in a new way, as if being like that with their mouths pressed together was their natural place, and being apart was nothing but bitterly wrong.

They went to Uma's bed and made love, and at age twenty-eight, Roland felt sure for the first time in his life.

THE DAY ROLAND FINISHED THE PODCAST

By 11 am, Jefferson Davis had been captured, and Roland had pressed pause. He stood at Uma's daughter's door and pressed the doorbell twice. Poppy, on her leash, stood beside him, whining as she heard feet moving on the other side of the wood. It opened and there was Eloise, looking quite like Uma, as Roland liked to remember her. Not the Uma that had a tube sticking out of her chest, and not the Uma of their first meeting, but the Uma of the in between.

"Anyone ever tell you that you look nothing like your mother?" Roland asked, smiling.

"Roland." Eloise leaned across the threshold to hug him. She'd never called him Dad, as she'd already had one of those by the time Roland came around.

"Thanks for taking Poppy."

"Of course, Roland. Any time." She took the leash from him, examining his face. He was looking at her oddly, as if seeing her for the first time, while simultaneously looking through her, not seeing her at all. "What do you have on today?"

"Errands. I didn't want to bore Poppy with them. I feel too selfish already, keeping her to myself, depriving her of interactions with other exciting dog specimens."

Eloise smiled.

"Rufus will be happy to see her."

Roland thought he might cry. When Eloise's face came to life like that, Uma was reincarnated. Eloise's smile folded to a concerned frown in seeing the watery sheen on Roland's eyes, and the vision of Uma faded into the likeness of her daughter once again.

"Do you want to come in for a moment?" Eloise asked, her eyes kind. She'd been seeing less and less of her stepfather since the passing of her mother.

"Oh no, it's okay. Lots to do."

"Alright, then," Eloise said tentatively. The two hugged again, and Roland turned to walk back to his car.

"Oh!" he said, turning back around. "I'm finally going to finish that podcast today. The one your mother and I started all those years ago."

Eloise unclipped Poppy's leash and the dog ran into the house. "Good for you, you've been chipping away at that podcast for, what, how long?"

"An eternity, it seems." *Too long*, Roland thought.

"Well, I can imagine that might be . . ." she thought for a moment, choosing her words carefully, "a relief." She didn't like to think of her stepfather sitting alone all day, dwelling on the past, entrenched in memories of his life with her mother.

One side of Roland's mouth turned up into a half smile. "A relief," he said, looking to his feet. "Quite."

Eloise and Roland said their goodbyes, and Roland walked back down the driveway.

THE DAY ROLAND MOVED THE BED

When Uma fell and broke her hip the year before her death, Roland was asleep. He woke early in the morning to find her side of the bed empty, and called out for her. He found her on the ground floor, in the space between the kitchen and the dining room, her face wet.

"Why didn't you call out?" he asked her.

"Because only old people fall in the night and can't get up."

"And you're not old."

"So you say."

The ambulance came and took her to the hospital. When she came back, she was fresh from surgery and couldn't walk up the stairs to the bedroom. Roland moved the bed to the space between the dining room and the living room.

For the rest of her life, Roland brought the world to her. He bought a Polaroid camera and took photos of everything. He brought Uma the weather, the accident on the corner of Bowery and Delancey, a drunk man on the subway tracks, the sunset. He taped the polaroids to the walls

and when he ran out of wall space he taped them to the ceiling.

"It's a dream come true," she said to Roland, as she looked around at their gallery.

"What is?"

"This. It's New York City, without the people."

When she dies a year later there is no one to bring the world to Roland.

THE DAY SHE WARNED HIM

When Roland asked Uma to marry him, he asked her every day for a month. Every day she said no, but she didn't tell him why. He wore her down.

"I'm going to die long before you."

"You can't know that."

"I'm going to leave you alone."

"I could get hit by a car tomorrow."

"It'll ruin you."

"I'll just pick up smoking."

"That's disgusting."

"I don't care about what happens then. There's so much time until then."

"You will care. Time disappears. Like my ass will."

"I won't care."

"This will end. Don't you get that?"

"If you don't let it start, then it's already over."

"Okay, I'll marry you," she said.

"I know," he said.

"I'll marry you if you promise me that you'll keep living after."

"Enough of this or I'll start smoking, and I'll do it somewhere else and I won't blow any smoke on you."

"Promise," she demanded.

"I shall treat this as a bad promise, and break it, whenever I shall be convinced that keeping it is adverse to the public interest. But I have not yet been so convinced." Roland grinned.

"What is that?"

"It's Abraham Lincoln."

"Don't quote Lincoln at me."

"To that injunction, all I can offer you is a bad promise."

THE DAY ROLAND FINISHED THE PODCAST

Roland knocked on the door again and Eloise answered it quickly. She must've not made it very far. He wasn't sure how much time had disappeared before he'd turned back.

"I didn't say goodbye to Poppy," he said frantically as his stepdaughter opened the door. At the sound of her name, Poppy ran towards him, and jumped up to lick his face. He hugged her around the middle, indulging in the affection. "Happy day, Poppers." He rubbed the top of her head. He stood up and wiped his damp face with the back of his hand.

"Are you sure you can't come in, Roland? I just made some coffee."

"Oh no, oh no," Roland bumbled, rummaging in his pockets for nothing in particular, avoiding Eloise with his eyes. "Lots to do."

"Well, how about some time this week? We miss seeing you."

"Absolutely. Great idea."

He got into his car and drove away, and in the rear view mirror he saw Uma standing in the door, watching him leave. *I'm tired*, he said to the mirror. He pressed play on the podcast, and Rich's voice continued to narrate the tying up of loose ends.

THE DAY UMA SKIPPED OLD AND WENT STRAIGHT TO DEAD

The day she died, Uma lay in a hospital bed with a tube in her lungs that drained yellow mucous. She'd had a second fall and a second surgery, and while recovering from that surgery she'd contracted a lung infection in the hospital.

"Are you in pain?" Roland asked her.

"I told you," Uma said hoarsely.

"Told me what?"

"That I'd go first."

"You're not going anywhere."

"You never let me be old."

"Uma. You're not old." Roland didn't know when the tears had started falling, but he noticed them then.

"Tell me I'm old, Roland."

"I won't."

"Tell the dead lady she's old."

Roland sighed. "You're old, my love."

"You're old too, now." She smiled.

"Yes."

"But you're not dead."

"No."

Uma put her hand to his face. "I feel so sorry for you, Roland. I feel so sorry."

Roland put his hand over top of hers, and pressed it into his cheek.

THE PHONE CALL WHEN ROLAND TOLD HIS MOTHER ABOUT UMA

"Well, it makes sense to me that you'd end up with an older woman. And it hardly matters now, you're both still young enough. My friend Ralph is married to an older woman named Jane and they've always had a lovely relationship. Of course now she's in her eighties and he's in his sixties and she has all these health problems that Ralph has to deal with, but their relationship has always been lovely and that's what matters. Yes, their relationship has always been lovely."

"You don't need to draw attention to her age, Mother. I know all this, it's not as if I don't know." Roland sighed, rubbing his forehead with one hand while pressing the phone to his ear with the other. "Your backhanded encouragement is not at all helpful or welcome with me."

"I'm not criticizing, Roland. I just want you to be happy."

"I'm happy, Mom. Uma, she's . . ." No matter how many times he tried, he was never able to find the words to describe his love for her. The feeling was too strong and the English language too blurry and inarticulate to even sketch the truth. "I love her to death." Roland smiled.

His mother, on the other end of the line, furrowed her brow. "Okay, Roland. But, as someone who has been married for a long time, I feel that it's my duty to tell you that love is not the same as happiness."

"I know," Roland said.

But it was a lie. He didn't know, and he didn't at all agree.

THE TIME THEY TOOK A SPONTANEOUS TRIP TO GETTYSBURG WHEN HE WAS SIXTY-TWO AND SHE WAS SEVENTY-FIVE

"Did you hear that?" Uma asked.

"Which? What?"

"The audio tour guy, did you hear what he just said?"

"I wasn't listening, I think we're going in circles, I keep seeing the same sign for stop number six." Roland wrinkled his forehead.

"And you have bad ears."

"Sure."

"He said that because of all the monuments, Gettysburg is the largest sculpture garden in the world."

"Nice."

"I love that." She sighed.

"I love that too."

"You're not even listening."

"We're lost."

THE DAY ROLAND FINISHED THE PODCAST

Roland lay in their bed and observed the world he'd built for Uma. He looked at his phone. There were ten minutes left in the podcast. What would he do with his last ten minutes?

THE DAY HE PRESSED PLAY ON THE PODCAST AFTER NOT LISTENING FOR NINE YEARS

He was out of Candy Crush lives. Poppy was asleep in a room Roland had forgotten, somewhere in the big, barely utilized house. He wasn't hungry, and he hadn't listened to music since Uma died. He opened the podcast app and found Rich and Tracy.

"Look, my love," he said to no one. "Remember them?"

He scrolled through the episode queue. Two-hundred-and-ten episodes left. The last episode was dated a few years prior. They'd finally finished. He hoped that Rich and Tracy, wherever they were, felt proud of what they'd accomplished. He hoped they weren't dead. He hoped that if one of them was, the other was also.

He decided to listen to one episode of Rich and Tracy's Civil War

podcast for 210 days, one episode a day, and at the end of that journey he'd happily end his own. After all, they'd never officially settled their terms of surrender.

ROLAND'S FINAL ADDRESS

He held the bottle containing his newly filled anti-depressant prescription in his hand. One swift swallow and though he couldn't believe he'd ever be with Uma again, he'd no longer be without.

"We meet this evening, not in sorrow, but in gladness of heart," Roland said, smiling and looking up to his reconstitution of New York City's sky, exactly as he'd taped it to the ceiling years before.

"And if you don't mind my paraphrasing," he continued, asking the permission of Uma, Tracy, Rich, and Abraham Lincoln, *"May this surrender give hope of a righteous and speedy peace, whose joyous expression can not be restrained."*

THE DAY UMA SKIPPED OLD AND WENT STRAIGHT TO DEAD

"You promised," Uma said.

"Promised what?" Roland asked.

"Promised that you'd try to make something of it, when I'm gone."

"I actually didn't. You're old and you have a terrible memory."

"Promise now," she said.

"Unlikely."

"It's for you, not for me."

"There's no such thing."

"I'm sorry that there is."

THE DAY THE WAR ENDED

There was no single day on which the war ended. It ended in pieces, over many days, until it stopped ending and something else started.





NAILS

NATALIA ZDANIUK



NATALIA ZDANIUK recently completed her MA in human geography at the University of Toronto and has since turned her attention to creative writing. Through her writing she frequently explores the subjects of gender, sexuality, relationships, and sense of place. Her own ties to place are varied and include a strong connection to her family and life in Poland, her upbringing in Pittsburgh, and time spent in Vancouver and Toronto as an adult. She currently lives in Toronto, working as a research coordinator and freelance editor.



In the summer the high school boys ruled the village streets. They gathered on stoops, on corners, and arranged themselves along the edges of canal bridges, staring and yelling at any girl who walked by. To Malina it felt as if the boys were on duty, and she sometimes thought of her grandmother walking the same streets as a child, under the gaze of Nazi soldiers. "They hurt anyone they wanted to on a whim," her grandmother had told her once, "even women and children."

Walking to Hania's salon, Malina kept her head down as she crossed the bridge where the boys perched like birds on the railings. One of them called out "I give her a four," and the others yelled in agreement. "What an ugly lesbian," another said. She glanced up long enough to see all of them laughing except their leader, Tomek, who stared at her with the lightest smile on his lips, as if savouring her discomfort. He looked her up and down and she forgot how to walk, her legs like heavy loads of lumber.

Malina had acquired breasts that summer, which, from what she heard from other girls, automatically placed you as a 6 on the boys' scale. And, according to the girls that relayed this information, a rating of 6 and above deemed you "fuckable". Terrified of this designation, she raided her father's closet and found his large t-shirts to wear, hiding her new body successfully.

Hania's beauty salon was a house that looked like all of the other houses in the village: a plain brick two-story with a pointed slate roof, the walls covered in pastel stucco. This house was a peachy-pink colour, with a plastic sign above the front door that read *Hania's Beauty* in curly kelly-green letters, framed by flying pink flowers and a slender hand showing off polished nails. Like her neighbours, Hania had a garden around her

house that was once used to feed a whole family—or, during the war, to feed the German soldiers—but now it was filled with sunflowers, lilies, and roses.

Malina was greeted in the usual way: her face smushed into Hania's cleavage that was well coated with knock-off Chanel perfume. When she released her embrace, Hania looked her up and down, taking in the baggy shirt, the long cut-off shorts and dirty shoes.

"Ah, Malina, have you finally come for your makeover?"

"No, Mrs. Hania, just here for my mom's cream."

"Oh, right, right. Come in and I'll find it for you."

Inside, Hania's husband sat at a table cluttered with eyelash extensions and powders, dipping his thick moustache into a cup of milky coffee while deeply absorbed in a football game on the small TV screen mounted on the wall across from him.

"Hi Mr. Pawel."

He glanced at her, but quickly returned his gaze to the screen.

"Oh, hi, hi Malina. Here to get dolled up?"

Before she could answer, he began to yell profanities at the referee. Malina stood waiting for Hania, unsure of how to hold herself. She looked at the row of dismembered hands embedded with colourful acrylic nails. In front of each was a taped piece of paper with an English word printed in three-dimensional font. Malina read each word out loud.

"Natural nails . . . square nails . . . rounded . . . stiletto . . . coffin nails . . ."

"Jola looked all of those up for me and printed them out. Isn't she a sweet girl?" Hania said, while bent over a box, rummaging through tubes and jars.

"Coffin?" Malina looked at the long square nails slightly rounded at the edges, trying to remember the word from English class. "As in coffins in a cemetery?"

"Yes, because those things are deadly," Pawel exclaimed and laughed to himself, his eyes never leaving the screen.

"Don't listen to him, he doesn't know what he's talking about." Hania waved her hand forward as if swatting his comment away. Having found the right cream, she stood up and placed it on the counter. She walked towards Malina, lifted up the girl's hand, and observed it.

"And what about you? How about we do something about these ragged nails? You haven't bothered to file them or paint them or anything." With her other hand she lifted Malina's chin lightly. "Or I could sell you some concealer for these pimples. Some mascara might be nice too, to darken your lashes."

"I'm okay." Malina withdrew her hand and turned her head away.

"Leave the girl alone, Hania. At least she's not asking for it like those other girls."

Hania tutted and shook her head vigorously left to right, but Malina couldn't tell if it was in disapproval of her husband's comment or uncertainty about where to focus her eyes. Malina followed her to the counter, taking cash out of her pocket to pay for the cream.

As she walked by the boys again on her way home, she tried not to hear the comments and kept her head down to avoid Tomek's gaze.

Normally she felt the relief of solitude once she reached the small unpaved road that led to her home. But this time she heard footsteps behind her and before she could decide whether to look back or not, there at her side was Tomek. He looked at her with the same intensity, but he didn't seem to be mocking or laughing at her anymore. He reached for her hand, which made her stop, and the two of them stood in an awkward frozen handshake.

"I know you're actually pretty," he said.

He pulled her towards him and kissed her. It felt as if tree leaves were being blown around inside of her. The softness of his lips on hers was disturbed by his tongue pushing through her mouth, struggling to reach her throat and suffocate her. The tree leaves inside her began to whip around in a fury, and she felt the pain of desire blooming, which made her try to keep the softness of his hand on hers, his lips on hers, but made her fear his furious movements, wishing she could take a breath.

He pulled her into the yard of an abandoned house, behind a chicken coop. The wood of it was soft and grey from neglect, the chickens long-gone, but the smell of stale chicken shit still reached her nose and poured into her mouth mixing with the warmth and wetness of his, making her feel sick. The urgency with which he fell on her began to terrify her but

she didn't know how to backtrack to the softness of the moments before. Her heart began to race like when she stood by railroad tracks, just inches from the train raging furiously past her to its destination—a beast that could flatten a penny or dismember a body with no afterthought. She began to move her hands along the wall, seeking a brake to make it stop. She turned her face away from his.

“Please, don’t,” she said.

As if her voice could not reach him, as if she wasn't there at all, he pushed her abdomen in to squeeze his hand through the tight waistband in her shorts. The leaves in her stopped moving.

“No,” she gasped.

He pushed in more, spreading her thighs with his hand.

“No, Tomek, please don’t.”

She grabbed his hand and pulled it out. He lunged at her and kissed her more aggressively, pinning his shoulder against hers. He unbuckled his pants while still blocking her breath with his mouth, and then moved towards her with all the fury of metal on tracks.

That was when she began to scratch.

Both hands left the eroding wood and ran ragged nails sharp across his face. She heard him scream. She didn't stop. Like a chicken carving the dust beneath its talons, like a cat in a moment of fury attacking the couch, she scratched and scratched from the top of his forehead down to the slope of his chin, where the hand would fall off and swing itself back up to the top. She saw the skin peel, embed itself in her nails, the blood beginning to fall, forming red rills and tributaries across his face.

“You crazy bitch!” he yelled, stepped back, and pressed his hands to his face. Feeling air in front of her again, seeing the world in solid forms again, she ran.

That entire night, Malina didn't sleep. Her mind replayed the sweet rustle of leaves ripped up by his force. When the early morning light appeared through her window, while still lying on her back, she brought both of her hands, with her fingers bent forward, in front of her face and studied the flecks of dried blood behind her dirty nails. She had stayed in her father's shirt throughout the night. When she got up she ripped it off and

threw it in the trash, ridding herself of its betrayal. She pulled on a dress that turned her into a certain 6, maybe a 7, and headed outside.

The village boys were in their usual station, but the lack of their leader made them more lethargic. It was a hot day. When she passed she glanced at them, but they all looked away, occupied by the rushing water beneath them and the rock they were kicking back and forth.

Through the window, she saw Hania dying a woman's hair, covering it in thick white cream and squeezing it between strips of tin foil. As she entered, she heard Hania say,

"The boy's face looked like it was turned inside out. His mother said he got attacked by a rooster. A rooster! Can you imagine? I mean, I've gotten some chicken scratches on my legs myself but . . .," she tutted. "Idiot boy, he won't be able to leave the house for weeks!"

Malina greeted them, and they both looked over at her in surprise.

"Malina! Don't you look nice in that dress. Was your mother not happy with that cream?"

"No, she liked it. I just . . ." she hesitated for a moment and looked at the plastic hands along the counter.

"I just came to get my nails done."

After Hania finished her customer's hair, she brought a range of pink polishes over to Malina.

"No, I want those." Malina pointed to the acrylic nails marked *stiletto*, the sharpest of them all, like the tips of precision knives, coated in a candied glaze.

Hania looked at her intently. "Are you sure, honey?"

"Yes. And I want them bright red."

"Well alright then." Hania got out glue and a nail file.

After embedding the acrylic nails into Malina's small fingertips, Hania put some concealer on the girl's face. Without asking, Malina grabbed a tester lipstick that matched the colour of her nails, and swept it slowly across her lips. She felt like they were coated in a sheath and she didn't want to stop moving the lipstick back and forth. Like desiring the weight of more blankets in the cold, she longed for more weight of the colour on her lips.

She stood in front of Hania's large mirror, the shopkeeper looking worried behind her.

“You know, sweetie, sometimes it can be too much. It stops being pretty. You’ll seem aggressive with all of that on.”

Malina glanced at her through the mirror briefly and then focused in on her new face, brushing her bangs into place with the long bright talons growing out of her fingertips. She pulled her chin up, straightened her posture, and smiled seductively—even dangerously—at herself.





The Judges' Comments

Corinne Clark has an exceptional gift for vividly setting a scene. In her prose, the reader feels the suffocating bleakness of London and Charlotte's monotonous, long workdays making clothing for the dead and the bereaved. Charlotte's family's own loss is marked by overwhelming blackness, and even Charlotte's formerly fiery hair has turned muted and dull. Clark's dreary London, painted with exquisite detail, is the perfect setting for suspense to build. This excerpt is carefully plotted, and the fright creeps in at just the right moments. Corinne Clark has crafted an atmospheric gem in this excerpt of *Haunting Charlotte*.

Sarah Jackson, Editorial Assistant, Knopf Random House Canada

Gwyn Mackenzie's *Pieces of an Ending* offers a gorgeous, yet contradictory view of love, and the moments that matter in a relationship. I know very little about the American Civil War, but was drawn to the exploration of Roland and Uma's connection, and how it differed from the dominant narratives around marriage, age, and wisdom. With subtle humour, slow-building tension, and a non-linear format, this podcaster's dream explores how the "episodes" of two lives fit together.

Derek Mascarenhas, Author, *Coconut Dreams*

Natalia Zdaniuk's story couldn't be more timely. The author depicts masculine sexual aggression and female retribution in prose that is direct and propulsive, hurtling her main character through a traumatic encounter

from which she emerges stronger, bolder, and more assured. *Nails* takes its place as a plank in the cultural reckoning that is the #MeToo movement, but it also exemplifies a take-no-prisoners stylistic approach to the short story that is refreshingly shorn of ornament and self-consciousness. The central metaphor—the stiletto nails that resemble knives—is a perfect symbol for a story about a young woman who refuses to live by men’s degrading and dehumanizing rules any longer. This is a powerful gut-punch of a story.

Steven W. Beattie, Review Editor, *Quill and Quire*











