

EXCERPT FROM

THE CARPENTER FROM MONTREAL

BY GEORGE FETHERLING

The muzzle flash was so beautiful, like the explosion of a bright five-pointed star, that it tempted the triggerman to continue firing a few seconds longer than necessary. But he was a professional, controlled, *réserve*, even *timide*, and did not allow himself to linger or be distracted. The racket, the yellow petals of pulsating light, the screams of the woman inside the expensive automobile, the man dead on the pavement—it was all part of a single event. It was three hours past midnight, three hours past New Year’s Eve 1937, and snow was coming down like ashes after a fire.

Cynthia McConnell:

I’ve been away.

But now I return to the city, though not to the city as it used to be. Like so many of them, it has decayed and is dirty and dotted with monuments to the heavy industry that no longer exists. It’s not much of an exaggeration to say that it’s a ghost town, though I realize that you might find it odd that I’m the one saying this.

If I myself was in any way complicit in the collapse, I plead absence, though I admit to being at least associated with it, but distantly. After Father died, and with Mother incapacitated and overseas, my brother took control of the family business. Eventually he had to merge it with a bigger one, and we ended up with thousands fewer workers of our own. Then, in a few years’ time, the amalgamated company was put up for sale just when the contract with the most powerful union was about to be renegotiated. You see, the union became angrier the more blood it lost. Both sides were so weak that my brother gave in to demands that the workers have the right to say yea or nay on any proposed sale. There were two offers, one from Europe and the other from South America. Everybody chose the wrong one. The new owners folded up the whole operation when it couldn’t make any profit paying American wages.

What used to be the McConnell plants didn’t need to remain vacant long before turning a rusty brown. During my family’s long reign, some steel was made from scratch, so to speak, and other steel was made from scrap steel. The mills themselves became scrap for somebody else to buy and melt down. Before long, downtown began to follow suit while slums such as the Triangle became even more evidently what they always had been. I suddenly find myself thinking these odd words: “The sins of the fingers are visited upon the toes.”

When I was growing up, nothing struck me as odd. That’s how innocent (or naive, distracted, indifferent or isolated) I was. It never occurred to me to ask why people named McConnell, only four generations at most from what was no doubt some kind of thatched hut in Scotland, should be Episcopalians rather than Presbyterians. (The answer, for any younger people who might be hearing this one day, is simple: we made a fortune and so graduated to “the high church”—a term with a double meaning.)

I was never a popular girl, not a leader, not the one with the perfect figure and the perfect friends, but neither was I an outcast at school. I had fun yet I was prone to a kind of melancholy, as though I were somehow remembering a different sort of life than the only one I actually knew, in fact knew far too well for my liking. Before I started at the Academy, when I was still at the Country Day School, where we were beginning to study Latin and boys, subjects equally indecipherable, a small band of us would visit the cemeteries and eat prepared sack-lunches there. I remember once going to the Catholic cemetery on a lark, eating whatever Hedy had prepared for me, and then wandering about, reading the names and dates of all those poor people from Ireland and all those sad Italians. The frolic turned to sorrow and I had to keep the others from seeing my tears by hiding behind a sort of cenotaph for the departed Humility of Mary sisters. There was a Jewish cemetery as well, but I never even knew of its existence when I was growing up.

Mostly we went to *our* cemetery, as Father, and probably my brother too, called it. My final home was like a vast spread-out city, with orderly streets and lanes, a living city for the dead, located in what has become just the opposite, a dead city for the few who still persist or insist on living here. Neatly kept-up little dollhouses of granite or some lesser stone, a community of many thousands of smug Protestants, some of whom, to use an expression I once heard Pete say, “died standing pat.” Some more pat than others. We would giggle about great-grandfather’s monument. Actually it was the family mausoleum but the statue of Old Pig Iron, as he used to be called, stood atop it. His marble self sported a lengthy beard and a frock coat. He was raising one arm as though to indicate Heaven or the direction in which the stock market should be heading. The mausoleum door is immediately below his feet. It has a tiny window, an iron-grilled one about the size of a sheet of typewriting paper, through which you can peer in at the creepy old caskets, including mine, supported by shelves on either side. There always used to be chipmunks playing nearby. No dogs allowed, you see, and plenty of mature oaks with acorns galore. Little white-tipped tails poking up everywhere. Life goes on. Somewhere. It is the same with humans.