

A Study in Red

Connie Gault

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Press

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

Spring and Fall:

To a Young Child

*Márgarét áre you gríeving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leáves, like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?
Áh! ás the heart grows older
It will come to such sights colder
By and by, nor spare a sigh
Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
And yet you will weep and know why.
Now no matter, child, the name:
Sórrów's spríngs áre the same.
Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
It ís the blight man was born for,
It is Margaret you mourn for.*

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

1880

PREVIEW

Amy

PREVIEW

I LEFT HATTIE'S PLACE after everyone else left. I left the cabins empty, the pool drained. I'd like to say I took off without a backwards glance. But I did turn and look one last time before I drove away. After that I stayed in a hotel in Edmonton for a while. I forget how long I stayed in the city. It was long enough to buy a property in southern Saskatchewan through a real estate agent. It was long enough to buy a cottage on a squirt of a lake. Clare Lake. I'd never been there. I'd never been anywhere in Saskatchewan except on number one highway speeding through, but the lake looked remote and I didn't want to take any time over the decision.

I'd already given notice at my apartment back east. I hired movers to clear it out, donated the contents to the Salvation Army. I drove my fiancé's car to his cousin's house in northwest Edmonton. A sunny day, top down, scarf over my hair. I still have that scarf. Might be the only thing I have from that time. It's silk, mossy green mottled silk. Different greens in it, like the forest I'd just left behind. It has a paler green square around the edges. The edges are rolled so it feels nice in your fingers. My fiancé's car was a '61 Corvette. It was red. He liked red. I parked it in his cousin's driveway, threw the keys onto the seat. I had a taxi waiting, motor and meter running. The

cousin came out onto the steps, looked as clean and suburban as the house. Fluffy hair, skin like an apple polished for the teacher. Red pedal pushers, big button earrings to match. She was going to love the car. The insurance policy too. I didn't know if he'd had any savings. He told me he'd done the paperwork but he hadn't.

"Hey," she yelled.

I waved, climbed into the back seat of the taxi. "Some car," the driver said. I might have made that up. I felt he was impressed.

I'd have liked a Corvette of my own. There was one at the Chevy dealership but I bought myself a different car. I bought one you'd see every day, a blue 1960 Impala. Two years old. Not the convertible. Even so, the receptionist at the dealership watched me with envy. Her eyes followed me across the lot, didn't want to let me go. Just because I was a woman able to buy a car.

In a car you're inside a world you own. You can lock the doors. It was better getting around Edmonton once I had the Impala and could drive to places. When I'd had to walk everywhere I heard footsteps. I caught myself looking over my shoulder. Funny thing, it was my father I most expected to see following me down the streets or in and out of the business establishments I needed to visit. He was a big man. You'd feel him coming up behind you. He'd be after money, which is why neither he nor my mother were going to find out who I was now. Or where they could ever find me. My mother agreed to this plan. The last time I saw her, she knew she wouldn't see me again. I have a vision of her bent over a table, signing a form, but nothing like that happened. There weren't any tears. Definitely no eye contact.

Only one person knew my identity. The one who arranged it all. She used her Canadian lawyer, who didn't know the details and really, really didn't care. Got it done in three days, a process that normally took months. No questions asked. What money can do. Even a driver's licence, bank account. It was Hattie who put it through, got her efficient lawyer to put it through. It was Hattie who gave me my new identity and all the money I'd ever need to live on. It was Hattie who suggested where I should go. She said it would be isolated enough in the southern part of the province yet the weather would be bearable. Most of the year. I did everything she told me to do. None of it mattered at all to me.

Hattie wouldn't choose the name, the one I was going to be called for the rest of my life. She said I had to do that. Had to own it she meant. Not the kind of thing people said back then but it was what she meant. I didn't plan to own it, not then, not ever. But she wasn't to know. So Amy Bell, short at least. I didn't take much time over that decision either.

I decided I'd go to Aquadell on the way to the cottage I'd bought. Don't ask me why. I knew it was somewhere in southern Saskatchewan, couldn't be that far from Clare Lake. I bought a map, opened it up in the gas station. It didn't show the town. The guy behind the counter fell all over himself being helpful. Said he had a magnifying glass. As if he knew a way to find something that wasn't there. He got right down on his knees to look into the cupboards under the counter. For the magnifying glass. I stood there looking at the top of his head, the hair in oily strands, the dandruff sprinkled on his shoulders. The service station made him wear a shirt with their name on it. Gasso I think it was. Embroidered in thick yellow thread. The shirt was navy so the name stood

out. And the dandruff. The kid who'd filled the tank came in, smelling of fumes. He said to try the public library.

I went to the library in downtown Edmonton. A woman with her hair teased into the tallest beehive I ever saw found an old map and a grid map for me. They both had Aquadell on them. I sat down at the table there, traced the parts I needed. She gave me the thin paper. She told me not to push hard and not to tell anyone she'd let me trace the maps. She'd be about forty. No rings on her fingers. I had my own mechanical pencil with me. She stayed at the table to be sure I didn't press too hard. I complimented her on her hair. It was the colour of beeswax but it looked like fine netting. She said it took her an hour in the morning. So much backcombing. A considerable amount of hairspray too.

I'd left the Impala in front of the library. There was a ticket under the windshield wiper. I dropped it into the gutter. I was leaving Edmonton that day. My suitcase in the trunk, my mind on the route to the highway south. At a red light I revved the engine and a guy on the sidewalk waved. Behind him was a beauty parlour. As they were called those days. Gold lettering on the wide windowpane said Bea's Salon. Made me think of the beeswax hairdo on the librarian. I yanked the car over and parked right in front.

A girl named Louella was free. The one who's free is the one you don't want. Plus she snapped her gum every ten seconds. But the others smoked. I'd recently quit. My fiancé didn't like it. Come to think of it, a reason to start again. "I need a change," I said. Louella said she could bleach it. Halfway through the process she could see I was restless. More movie magazines wasn't the answer. I had a pile at my feet. She tried asking for advice on her love life.

"I'm bleached enough," I told her.

“Okay . . . you’re the boss.”

Snap. Snap. That was her while the toner went on. God what a stink it all was. Like Igor got loose in the chemistry lab. Louella had her resources. My hair is wavy. It’s got its own bounce. I didn’t need rollers. But she coaxed it this way and that and set me under the dryer. Offered me a stick of gum. As if chewing would pass the time.

Back in Louella’s chair, under her brush and comb, I had to agree I looked different. The colour was blonder. She’d parted it more on one side, teased the other side wider, nestled in a few curls. Then she assaulted me with spray, whirled the chair and shoved a mirror into my hand. There was the back of it. “Good job,” I said. Now she was looking right at me instead of at the me in the mirror. Her mouth fell open. Her eyes got big.

“What?” I said.

“You know who you could be?”

I shook my head. I liked her now.

“Just a sec.” She pawed through the magazine pile, found what she wanted, twirled me back to the mirror and held up the full-page photo next to my head. “Holy cow,” she said. “I was right. Shelley! Shelley, come here. Come look.”

Shelley came. Shelley looked. Shelley said, “Jesus H. Christ. Hey, Midge, come here! Who’s this, eh?”

Midge came over, exhaling Macdonald’s Export “A.” Midge said, “It’s Jayne Mansfield.”

“No!” Louella screeched. “Look again. Look at those *bed-room eyes*.” The girl had read those magazines.

Midge couldn’t get Jayne Mansfield out of her head. Louella gave her what for. She was still giving her what for when I left the shop. “Marilyn Monroe, you idiot!” was the last I heard of the girls at Bea’s Salon.

CONNIE GAULT is the recipient of the 2025 Cheryl and Henry Kloppenburg Award for Literary Excellence. Her most recent novel, *The Rasmussen Papers*, was shortlisted for the 2024 Toronto Book Award. Previous fiction has won several Saskatchewan awards and has been shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize for Best Book, Canada and the Caribbean, and longlisted for the Giller Prize. After living most of her life in Saskatchewan, Connie now resides in London, Ontario.

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