

Missing in Action

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Honourable Mention

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Nora wished she were watching for Gil in this parade past City Hall, as ragtag and sad as it was.

“Mommy, there’s Uncle Earland!”

Mother and son were near the end of the parade route, standing on the sidewalk in front of the Burns Building. Row upon row of men in worn shoes and cloth caps filed by in their almost-silent march of protest against unemployment, against poverty, against the indignity of relief.

Her brother-in-law broke ranks when he saw them, leaving the column to plant a kiss on her cheek and swing his five-year-old nephew into the air.

“You seem cheery,” Nora said.

“Misery loves company.”

Earland looked back over his shoulder as the marchers disbanded and spread across Ninth Avenue, making it impossible for traffic to pass. Protesting their misery or sharing it? He was glad to see Nora and Stephen, glad for an excuse to get away. While the marchers had assembled, their talk had echoed the headlines

from the newspapers being passed around. Few could afford to buy even a bloody newspaper out of their relief allowances. Anyway what did you get for your nickel but bad news in bold print: *1.2 million Canadians on relief; Sit-down strike marred by violence; Bethune attacks fascism; MPs approve trade deal with Germany.*

When it was his turn for two cents worth of news, a small item from Albacete, Spain, caught his eye: *The Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion, composed of Canadian volunteers, is mustered into the XVth English-Speaking International Brigade to fight for the Republicans on the front lines of the Spanish Civil War.* He had wondered if Nora knew.

Earland held Stephen as he searched Nora's face with its delicate features. "You have your best hat on. Where are you off to?"

"It's my only hat." She paused, and Earland knew the answer to his question.

"I guess you can get a sandwich and a cup of tea there," he said, lowering Stephen to the curb.

"Yes, and maybe good news."

He couldn't blame her, he didn't blame her, he blamed his brother, Gil.

"I'll walk you down," he said.

"Are you sure?"

Nora didn't have the energy to rehash Gil's decision to fight in Spain. What good did it do? But it was what Earland invariably did when they were together. And the letter in her handbag, she wasn't prepared to talk about it yet—not even to Earland. Especially to Earland. Not until she understood what Gil's fine words really meant.

"It's a long walk for shorty here." Earland took Stephen's small, sweaty hand in his, smiling when the boy scratched the calluses on the palm of his uncle's hand with his tiny nails. "There were commies in the march . . . stirring things up as usual." He glanced at Nora.

"Why tell me about it? Before he left, Gil didn't ask for my opinion and neither did you. Me and Stephen might as well have been invisible while you two battled over ways of looking at the world without seeing it." Nora looked straight ahead into the distance.

Earland stared at her in surprise. In his experience, Nora had never spoken in such a forthright manner. He was saved from appearing rude by Stephen's tug on his hand and his squeal of "swing, swing."

The boy ran a few steps, expecting his mother and uncle on either side to cooperatively lift him by the arms and swing him back. They weren't ready and he stumbled. Before he could skin his knees on the sidewalk, they tugged him back on his feet and he sang the "weeeee" that should have come from them.

"How are you two doing, anyway?" Earland was aware of how thin Nora had become in the eight months Gil had been gone. "I have a few dollars . . . If you need anything."

Nora knew Earland meant well, his concern honest, not born of guilt. But he couldn't be his brother's keeper—he was jobless and living hand to mouth like everyone else. She looked at Stephen and mentally counted the days since he had had milk or eggs or vegetables. They lived on porridge and weak tea. "We're fine. And you're right, there will be sardine sandwiches at the Party meeting."

"And news?"

"Sometimes."

"What do they expect of you, Gil's comrades?"

“Nothing. They have what they want. They have my husband.”

The man, woman and child stood outside the gate of the old Deane House stained by the rich light of an Indian summer. Earland studied the two storey converted prairie mansion left over from the Fort Calgary days. It had been the family home of North-West Mounted Police Superintendent Deane. In 1929, when Earland was twelve years old, the Deane house had been moved across the Elbow River to rest on the east bank. His father had come in off the ranch especially to see it done, and he had brought Earland and Gil with him. An engineering feat for its time, it got a write-up in *Popular Mechanics*.

There was hope in those days. Now the paint was a memory, the siding warped and the boarding house sign so faded that all Earland could make out for sure was the word LET. ROOMS FOR LET. Yes, he thought, LET. We Canadians *let* it happen; we *let* the fat cats in the east take care of themselves at our expense. You didn't have to be a communist to see that.

Nora noticed Earland's jaw tighten. Well, too bad. She went to the Communist Party meetings in her husband's stead, and her brother-in-law would have to accept it. They respected Gil, his comrades, and they acknowledged her sacrifice.

Earland looked from the sagging veranda to Nora. “I was thinking how far down in the world this house has come.”

“Oh, you were. Well, it has its ghosts, I'm told.”

“Wooooo,” Stephen imitated the old man that told him scary stories while his mother talked to other people when they had visited the house before.

Earland raised an eyebrow. “What do you know about it, short stuff?” He tickled his nephew and found a miniature washboard of ribs below the boy's sweater.

Nora sensed reluctance in Earland. "Do you want to come in with me?"

"No," he said, automatically.

"There may be news."

"You'll tell me." He kissed her on the cheek and walked away.

Nora entered the parlour off the front hall with Stephen in hand. They all turned to look at her. The old man reached for Stephen and lifted him onto his lap. The chairman continued his announcement: "The Canadian unit of the International Brigades has deemed to call itself the Mackenzie-Papineaus in honour of William Lyon Mackenzie and Louis-Joseph Papineau, leaders of the 1837 Canadian Rebellion. The Mac-Paps cabled Mackenzie's grandson, Prime Minister King, the following words: 'We implore you from the depths of our hearts to do everything possible to help Spanish democracy. In so doing you are serving your own interests. We are here for the duration until fascism is defeated.' Our Prime Minister has not replied. Fifty-four Canadians from the Mac-Paps Battalion are dead, and thirteen missing in action at the battle of Fuentes de Ebro. And our country's leaders remain silent . . ."

Nora stared at the familiar handwriting in the letter she had taken from her handbag and unfolded in her lap. In Gil's hand were the unfamiliar words *Fuentes de Ebro*.

Darlene Quaipe is the author of three novels, a book of popular culture, a collection of short stories, two plays and numerous freelance articles for newspapers, magazines and journals. Quaipe's novel Bone Bird won a Commonwealth Writers Prize. Her story "Missing in Action" is about the fight for democracy during the Great Depression.