

Digging in the Dirt

MICHELLE HARTAI

Dans les premières pages du roman de Nora Sparks, la protagoniste éponyme rapporte les déboires et malheurs de ceux qui vivent autour d'elle. Elle n'a que neuf ans mais on sent chez Nora un esprit vif et tenace qui cherche à être vue comme elle se voit alors qu'elle vit dans le chagrin et l'incertitude.

We are on our way to Norwell *again*. Mom and Dad are building a house near Grandma Sparks' to rent out so we usually have to drive back and forth three or four times a week. The new house has to be finished and rented out before the fall, or Dad said the bank's gonna nail his ass to the wall and take the house we live in too. Mom said the bank will think twice about that when they lay eyes on what they're getting.

The drive to Norwell is an hour long and always feels like forever. I let my eyes zipper along the fence lines that section off property and hold in cows. The trees and grass are so green now, it's nice. Since we're off the dirt roads, I can have my window down and my chin on my arm. The wind is just perfect.

I think the people that live on the farms we go by are probably really different from us. They come from different places, and grow up living near different towns. They probably wonder what we're up to driving past their homes so many times. They probably wish they could get away as often as we do—go places all the time—instead of staying home all day, going to work or school, and doing house chores like laundry. People on these farms hang their clothes out to dry. We have a dryer.

"...Well, they don't call her Snakebite for no reason, do they?" says Mom in the front seat.

She's talking about Mrs. Grobe who lives across from the

Centennial Hall and ballpark in Parry. I've seen her about five times in the four years since we moved to Parry and I started grade one. Dad sees her all the time 'cause she's a Gowing Township Board Member and Dad is the Parry Recreation Director. All the board members give Dad a hard time 'cause they're full of themselves Mom says, but Snakebite's one of the worst 'cause she lives so close to where Dad works, she looks for anything that's wrong.

"What did Snakebite say?" I ask.

Dad laughs. Mom makes quick eye contact warning Dad, then turns to me from the front seat: "Don't you call her that."

"Is it about Dad?"

Mom and Dad look at each other but ignore me.

The last time I saw Snakebite, she was sweeping her walkway wearing light brown shorts and a grey shirt that was loose and boring. She stared at me biking by. "That's not a girl's bike is it?" she asked. I didn't want to, but I stopped. My bike isn't a girl's bike because girls' bikes look weak and I need a crossbar so I can steer with no hands while I eat Popsicles or drink pop at the same time.

"No," I said, "I don't like girls' bikes."

She chuckled with a straight face. "Is that right?"

I made my getaway when her stupid kid Grant came riding up the sidewalk and distracted her. He is a jerk at school. If you spill something on your shirt, he'll point it out, or if you bring something lame to *Show and Tell* he'll whisper jokes about it to other kids, and you can hear them laughing. And he's really strong, so as long as we're not alone, we'll tease him about failing grade three or having an old mom ... Snakebite's way older than my mom, and she has a droopy face so you can see the red

tissue under her eyeballs. My mom's face is round and still looks the same as it did in pictures from when I was a baby, except she perms her brown hair into an afro now.

I lean up to the front seat, "Tell me what she said, I won't tell nobody."

Mom looks out the window. "It's the same snide remarks about people she always makes ... somebody's drinking too much, so and so's spending too much time at so and so's." She looks at Dad. "Nobody's spending time with her, that's why. Hmph, and that *nobody* has gone and hooked up with another one who can't keep her mouth shut to save her life; although, I wouldn't want to run into her in a dark alley ...jeez."

Snakebite's husband didn't like her so much he divorced her. He owns Grobe Meat downtown. The new Mrs. Grobe is tall and square-ish, like if Fred Flintstone was a girl. She winks at me like a man when I come into the store with Mom to pick up meat. She was in the army so people call her *Sarge* behind her back and call Mr. Grobe *The Wife* now. I'd like to join the army to be strong but not to fight in a war.

"Just drop it will ya," snaps Dad. "Get me a Coke out of the back, Donna."

Mom reaches back around my feet and ruffles through the floor garbage and Dad's music papers for his half-finished case of Coke. Mom and Dad don't clean out the car—they're too busy. Our house is mostly messy too. And Dad always has his music papers in the back seat and his guitar in the trunk, in case he becomes "suddenly inspired to write the big one," or someone has a guitar and wants to jam. He always says, "you never know" about being prepared for stuff.

Dad's been in a band since 1966 and he was twenty ... about fifteen years ago. His first band was called Little Willy. In the band poster they dressed like CCR and my Dad looks like John Fogerty, except Mom says she got the shorter version. Little Willy almost made it big but the guitar player, Jay, stabbed Dad in the back. Dad said Jay is "one of those people who don't know they're stupid." So Jay wrecked the band, and Dad didn't get to tour with famous bands in Europe, otherwise, we'd be living the high life. I hate what Jay did. My Dad should've got his chance.

Mom finds a Coke. "It's not very cold."

"Just give it to me." Dad opens the can and presses the tab into his giant bristly moustache. He loves Coke. He has his first one at breakfast every day.

Matt sits behind Dad reading another *Hardy Boys* book. Even though he's a year younger than me, he's read way more books, and he always reads in the car. I can't or I get sick. I wouldn't anyway, it's boring and Dad doesn't like it. Matt loves to read but Dad thinks Matt should do something useful.

I've only read one book I liked so far and that was *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White. We had to read it for school last year in grade three. I thought for a long time about that book: how Charlotte had to give up her babies to Templeton, how Wilbur felt leaving his best friend to die alone at the fairgrounds, Wilbur crying and begging Charlotte's babies to come back and his hooves on the fence and tears springing out of his eyes. Even though some of Charlotte's kids stayed, the ending was still hurtful.

Next week my grade four class is going on a camping trip for two nights at the Erin Park Campgrounds because it's the last week of school. At first I was happy about staying overnight somewhere without my family and going camping, but then I thought about the things that won't be great, like that people will see me sleep, or see my underwear, or there might not be enough food that I like and I'll get my sick stomach from not eating enough. Mom says I snore with my mouth hanging open. So does she. My friend Amy Schwartz is excited about the trip for one reason: she's in love with Chris Lapierre and she thinks she can get him to like her for who she is deep down, because she's kinda fat on the outside. But Chris only likes the popular girls, Krista Bristol and Paulina Carrey. It's dumb. Having a boyfriend is retarded anyway but she won't listen.

The green sign says "Walmer, Population 1500." Dad has to say "*Wammer*." That's how you say it, if you're from Norwell. But there's an "l" between the "a" and the "m" so I think he's wrong. So I always say "Wall-mer," and he says "Wammer!" And I say "Walmer" and then he says 'Well, you're wrong.' And sometimes I tell him about the "l" and sometimes I don't care.

My Grandma Sparks lives on the corner of Allen and Elizabeth Streets in Norwell. Across the road—kitty corner—is the first house I lived in until half way through kindergarten. Dad bought the house from Great Grandma Sparks for five thousand bucks. Now he rents it out to people. First, he rented it out to a lady named KP. She stopped paying her rent, so Dad kicked her out. KP left a dress-fitting mannequin on the back steps that got damp from the rain. She looked like a Matilda. I pictured her in Mom's bearskin coat to keep her warm and I was going to make her a face out of something and put Dad's blonde Halloween wig on her head. I imagined her standing by my bed watching whether I was there or not. But Mom said she smelled all mildewy so I couldn't have her. It was awful seeing her lean up against the rotting clothesline pole, then Dad throwing her in the trailer for a dump run. How can people leave their stuff? It's sad to think about your things piled in a dump.

The house we're building is behind Great Grandma's old house. We dug out the foundation two years ago. Dad says

it's coming along but not fast enough. He keeps getting called back to work by board members for stupid reasons like the grass in front of the arena isn't short enough, or the ball diamond has to be raked, or someone wants to book the Centennial Hall. Dad shouldn't have given them Grandma's number. Mom agreed 'cause then we have to drive all the way back to Parry and go to Norwell all over again the next day after school. Dad said a few extra trips to Norwell is sure as hell better than a trip to the unemployment office.

When he was out, I'd sit at his table and think about how he lived in there since there was no electricity and his bed was so dirty. He still shows up at our place if Dad runs into him at the Parry Hotel, which usually means they did something drunk and embarrassing in town that me and Matt will get teased about at school for.

The only thing I like about Jerry is that he has a tonne of records. I used to sneak them into the house to play on Dad's record player. Dad taught me how to use the record player when I was three and a half. He liked that I wanted

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Dad hands his empty Coke can to Mom. She rolls down the window, leans out squishing her giant boobs into the window groove, and whips the can at the ditch. The wind catches it and takes it back diagonally dropping it into the long grass.

I still hate that we had to tear down the old barn to make room for the new house. I felt bad for all the friendly pigeons and squirrels living in the barn rafters, especially since we started the demolition just before the fall got cold. Dad's friend Jerry had to move out too. He was living there since we lived in Great Grandma's house. It wasn't fixed up either. There was straw and bird shit all over the place, and holes in the springy wood floors. Even though I liked being in there, I paid close attention to every board I stepped on. It felt like a warm shadow was always just barely touching my back.

But Jerry is *insane*. Back then he only ate peanut butter sandwiches. Now he mostly eats processed cheese slices on white bread and drinks beer and coffee all day. For spring and summer he wears cut-off jeans that he rolls up to where his legs start and running shoes with no socks. He keeps a T-shirt hanging out of his back pocket in case he has to go into a store or a hotel. In the winter he never wears a coat. And he does a hundred sit-ups and push-ups before he goes out every morning. When he lived in the barn, he slept behind the tractor door on a mattress he laid over milk crates. He had a metal table and squeaky folding chairs at the end of his bed, where sunrays swirling with specks of dust sliced between the barn boards in the afternoon. He used beer cases to set stuff on like his brand new *Realistic* record player, a broken mirror, his hair pick, his Brut cologne, and his *Playboy* magazines.

to listen to good music like The Beach Boys, Fleetwood Mac, and The Beatles, instead of stupid kid-songs. I was very careful putting the needle down so I never scratched a record once. I don't like automatic play.

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It's kinda funny though. They're like dumb farm animals with this duh-look on their face trying to figure things out, but looking right at you. Their hair is all smushed up and matted, their faces swollen. Mom will stop whatever she's doing loud in the kitchen, stomp in and threaten to call their wives if they don't get up and out fast enough. They always look at her stunned. Dad's friends worry about getting in shit by their wives, so they stand up slow and groaning, and Mom gets behind them like a border collie and herds them out the door. Dad sometimes gets mad at Mom for being so rude, then Mom gets mad at Dad for drinking and partying like a teenager, but Dad doesn't care if Mom gets mad at him. Mom cares if Dad is mad at her though, she'll go silent the whole day.

When we get to Grandma's, she's still working at the hospital. She's a cleaning lady but she doesn't mind it. She

said if she had to spend all day with Grandpa anyway, one of them would end up a patient in the hospital instead. Grandpa Sparks doesn't work 'cause a bomb hurt his legs in World War II and now his legs are pretty much useless. He has to walk *extremely* slow with his hands groping the wall. Usually he sits at the kitchen table smoking behind a newspaper when we're here, or he talks with Dad, or he takes a nap. He doesn't leave the house much. He says he doesn't give a good goddamn about nobody anymore anyway. Most of Grandpa's best friends and two of his four brothers died in the war. Grandma said he came back miserable and has been in a bad mood ever since, which was a rotten deal for her 'cause that wasn't the man she married before he went off.

Grandma and Grandpa Sparks say mean things and swear at each other all the time, but it's funny. Mom hopes her and Dad don't end up talking to each other the way Grandma and Grandpa do. Dad thinks Mom's mom and dad, Grandma and Grandpa Beale, have brainwashed my mom into thinking the way she grew up was normal, where nobody swears and everyone lives in La La Land and happy endings. Grandma and Grandpa Beale live on a farm about a half hour away from Grandma Sparks, but we're usually too busy to go see them.

Mom lifts our bikes out of the trailer and sets them against the house where the foundation meets the white siding. Dad backs the trailer out and they drive over to the new house to work.

Our whole family builds houses. Grandpa and Grandma Sparks built their house in the late forties when Dad was a baby. Because it's two storeys, it was probably harder to build than the bungalow Dad's working on now. Dad showed me ancient black and white pictures of them building their house: happy Grandma holding a two-by-four stabbed in a dirt hill, one foot on a cinder block—like the captain of a ship, pictures of Grandpa and his brothers sitting on the roof against blank white skies, cigarettes in the corners of their grins, grey skin, work pants, and black boots, a picture where the house was just wrapped in tar paper: a two story black block face with its neck stuck in dirt, dark empty windows for eyes, and the front door-hole like an open mouth saying "awww." There is one picture of the finished house. The massive oak at the edge of Grandma's lawn looks the same in the pictures as it does today. The maples we climb in now were scrawny babies. Trees have to survive through anything.

Michelle Hartai is inspired and supported by her family (even the strange ones), and resides in Guelph. This novel-in-progress is the focus of her current work in the Humber School for Writers Correspondence Program.

CLAUDIA COSTA

Do you remember?

Do you remember
How cold it was that night?
I do.
I could see my breath float away
The air frosty.

I remember the ground,
How hard it was.

I remember the speed,
at which your truck slammed
into my bike
The speed at which,
helpless, a rag doll,
my body was propelled.

Do you remember?

I remember the sounds:
The crunch of
metal hitting metal,
intertwining battling rams.
Bones snapping like twigs.

The sound of my voice.

Did you hear me?
My desperate whimper
The way it echoed
Down the canyon of that street?

Maybe you hear it now.
Only it sounds more like
The pounding of a gavel,
Minimal justice.

You may have also forgotten
picking up your keys.
Or how many times
you picked up that bottle.
But you will have plenty of time
to put the pieces together now.

Which is more than I
will ever have a chance to do.

Claudia Costa is a grade 12 student living in the Madawaskwa valley.