

# The Finishing School

by

Lena Ng

Father brought home the new woman and I tried to be on my best behaviour. He had warned me of her imminent arrival and I wore my Sunday best of black, high-neck dress, with a respectable number of frills down the front, and patent, low-heeled Balmorals.

Ms. Mara, as I was to call her, swept in with a dancer's slouch and long pearls to her waist.

After we were seated upon the velvet-covered chairs, she watched me as I ladled the consommé from the turned-lip tureen. I had not put in much pepper since I was advised she wasn't fond of spices.

With a pointed glance at my father, she gave a slight shake of her head. The tsk-tsking started as soon as I began sipping the soup as slowly and quietly as I could. They spoke of the new production of *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, moved onto the proposed parliamentary act of exclusion, and touched upon the economic policies of Minister Grendlebaum and how it would affect the security of the poor.

Soon after the sixth course, Ms. Mara asked, "How old is she now?" as though I wasn't in the room.

"Soon to be seventeen."

"You've left it far too long."

"Her mother died when she was young."

"That's no excuse."

I lowered my head and studied the ivory china. The flames flickered over the silver, seven-armed candelabras, another example of Father's extravagance.

Father stared at me with those black eyes of his. "Can't you teach her?"

She gave a rattling sigh. "There's far too much to learn. I went there and it did me a world of good."

Father nodded in agreement. He reached his hand over the table, grasped mine, and it was decided.

The carriage the school had sent for me likely doubled as a hearse, carved with skulls, cavorting cambions, and death lilies along the elongated, ebony frame. William, the coachman, kept a placid face as he looked me up and down and thankfully made no comment. He held my hand to help me into the carriage.

"Mind the bones," he said, cheerfully.

Gingerly, I stepped over them and propped my feet onto the horse rib foot rest. Despite the frayed crimson plushness of the seat, I felt every bump and pothole on the road. Not a modern carriage with elliptical springs which I gathered was a new advancement. I guess the carriage's usual passengers couldn't care less about the vehicle's lack of shock absorbers when being ushered into the underworld.

Living in the city was much different from country living. I took only one satchel with few changes of clothes since I didn't know what was fashionable in this area of the country. My seamstress always enjoyed an extra dart or pleat, and had a good eye for buttons, so her work

was very fine. I had brought several skirts with crinoline and accompanying blouses, some for day and others for evening. Today I wore the Hawksbury blouse, with the upturned collar and flounces at the wrist.

The short-haired carriage dog ran beside the coach, easily keeping pace with the four plumed quarter horses. The sky was grey and moody, but the countryside was rolling and lush, and I was proud to be a part of this country with its grand traditions.

This would be my first time away from Father. He had done his best to educate me with a series of nannies and governesses, but eventually they would have hallucinations or start setting fires. One nanny, Mildred, began to sleepwalk and disappeared into the night. Father claimed she had eloped, but he couldn't say it without a twitch of his nose. Her ghost never appeared so there might have been some truth to what he had said. Anyway, as a man, Father didn't recognize the deficiencies in my upbringing which, gratefully now that I've time to consider it, Ms. Mara had called to his attention.

The scrolling iron gates were open and the carriage travelled up the long pathway to the school. I stepped over the bones again as William helped me from the carriage. He carried my satchel up the wide, stone steps, tipping his hat in farewell.

(End of preview)

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Lena Ng is from Toronto, Ontario. She has short stories in close to three dozen publications including *Amazing Stories*. Her 2019 current and forthcoming publications include *Hinnom*, *The Literary Hatchet*, *Dying Earth*, *We Shall Be Monsters*, *Colp*, *Beer-Battered Shrimp*, *The Little Book of Fairy Tales*, *Mortal Realm*, *Zooscape*, and *Mother Ghost's Grim*. "Under an Autumn Moon" is her short story collection. She is currently seeking a publisher for her novel, *Darkness Beckons*, a Gothic romance.