



ELEPHANT SHOE

by Traci Skuce

THE night of the car crash, Gabe left for work in his usual way, taking a hit from the bong and offering one to Tess. She refused, asked him to please, *please*, blow the smoke out the backdoor. He did, said he always did, didn't he? The baby's sweet lungs were everything.

Tess held Willa, watched Gabe stuff earbuds into his ears and licorice into his pockets along with a lighter and a flattened pack of unfiltered Player's. When he leaned in, Beastie Boys thumping through the earphones, Tess smelled the baby oil in his hair and turned so his kiss landed right below her ear. Then he dove in for Willa, brushing her cheek with his, and Willa swiveled her head this way and that, as though trying to get away.

Tess hated how insistent he was, kissing Willa, blowing on her neck, rubbing his wiry chin against her skin, saying, “Who loves her Daddy?” until Willa either smiled or cried. If she cried, he’d storm out. If she smiled, which she was doing now, he clapped, performed his pirouette and said, “See you lovely ladies later.”

From the other side of the door, he tapped the glass, squinted James Dean style and mouthed *elephant shoe*. Then he disappeared down the zigzag staircase, clomping all the way.

Tess stared out the larger casement window. It was dark out. November with its purply-black sky and striations of city lights. Gabe reappeared in the road and looked up, Tess’s cue to wave the baby’s hand. Tonight, though, she buried her face in Willa’s neck, wishing he’d just go already.

When she finally lifted her head, Tess caught his fast-marching figure crossing the road, heading downtown toward his night janitor, twelve-dollar-an-hour job, at an upscale harbour hotel. Then he disappeared from sight and only her own image was left, rippling and distorting in the glass, elongating her already long limbs and neck, casting waves over her regrettable haircut and the baby’s bald head.

She dropped into one of two kitchen chairs and the apartment reconfigured the silence around her: rafters creaked under the upstairs neighbours' footsteps; a laugh track filtered from downstairs; the radiators ticked and water rushed through the plumbing. A half-eaten tray of nachos lay reeking on the table. The onions burned Tess's eyes, already stinging from a string of sleepless nights. Last night Willa had awakened every hour on the hour. Was it even possible to heap sleep deprivation on top of sleep deprivation? Plus, the doctor had told her her iron was low. For months, it felt as if she'd been breathing sand, as if sand had accumulated deep in her bones.

She blinked away the nightly assembly of tears, hugged Willa, who rubbed her face back and forth over Tess's collarbones, hooked her toes into Tess's ribs. Tess rose, patted the baby's back, hushing and saying, "There now." She kissed Willa's downy head, swayed, and sang the first and only verse she knew of *Amazing Grace*. She did this for the baby, yes, though lately, with earlier and earlier nightfall, she imagined herself a show-thing for passers-by and people waiting for the bus. The windows, tall and reaching the height of the twelve-foot ceiling, had never been draped. Tess rocked her baby in front of them, showing all those strangers how patient, how loving, how nurturing she was.

What they couldn't see, what they'd never know, was how foolish she felt. How she didn't mean to, or want to, end up here. She loved her baby, of course, but if she could rewind time, take it all back, she most certainly would.



The contract fell into her lap and she almost turned it down: three weeks in July on the border of the Northwest Territories. Two hundred and fifty dollars a day. She'd already worked a six-week stint in northern BC, and part of her had wanted to return to Victoria, find a waitressing job, take a late summer course at the university. But she couldn't turn down that kind of cash, so she flew to northern Alberta, farther north than she'd ever been.

It was Gabe who picked her up at the tiny airport in High Level. He'd printed her name in block letters on a piece of paper, waved it casually in front of the arrivals' door. He was lean and dark, his hair cut short then, his face clean shaven. He wore black Carhartt overalls, no shirt beneath, eagle tattoo visible beneath the strap. "You the cook?" he said, nodding,

pilot goggles perched on his head.

They drove through the town, past motels and silos and abandoned rail cars, then out along the flat roads. She slipped off her shoes, pressed her bare feet to the dash, watched the pickup's shadow cruise along jack pines and balsam. Gabe lit a cigarette with the truck lighter, asked if she wanted a drag. Then he mentioned the last cook. "Total nervous breakdown. Over bread or some shit," he said, fixing the goggles to his eyes. "Hope you're not like that."

He was a vegetarian, he told her, a rare breed in these parts. Only him and another girl. "But it doesn't much matter what you make—Greek, Indian—I put salsa on *everything*." He said the word loudly, enunciating each syllable.

"Even pancakes?" she said.

He smiled. "Sure. Even pancakes."

They turned onto a bumpy logging road and Gabe swerved around the big ruts and told her about the movie he'd been filming. Blocking it out, really. In his notebook. The truck-in-the-mud scene. The moose snagged in barbed wire. The end-of-contract party in spring, drunk planters walking through the bonfire. "Tree planting is non-stop," he said. "The perfect

movie pitch.”

He parked the truck alongside a cut block, the camp there behind a thin screen of trees, a collapsible village of tents and generators among stumps and fireweed. Gabe toured Tess through the cook shack, orienting her to the dried goods and freezers, water systems and coolers. Then he reached behind a stack of mixing bowls, presented a two-litre bottle of El Paso salsa. “My secret stash,” he whispered. “Take what you need.”

For the rest of that week, he rode his quad back to camp while everyone worked. His job was to deliver the seedlings, not plant them, so he took long breaks, smoking, imitating the voices of Clint Eastwood or Robert DeNiro while she kneaded bread, peeled potatoes, prepped salads and sauces. He asked if she’d seen this movie or that, and if she hadn’t, he’d say she *had* to, it’d be his personal mission to show her *Taxi Driver* and all the Dirty Harrys.

Sometimes he mentioned his ex-girlfriend, who’d never understood him. Other times he entertained her with slapstick routines, goofball reminiscences from his childhood. He told her none of his family ever graduated with anything beyond a high school diploma, and though he’d completed a year of community college, what he really wanted was to go to the Vancouver Film School. They’d already rejected him once, but wouldn’t

again when he blew their minds with the tree-planting proposal.

Tess would listen, cook grilled cheese, dump salsa into a shared bowl and chop a bunch of carrot sticks. These lunches were invariably interrupted by someone calling Gabe on the radio, and, sandwich in hand, he'd dash off. In quieter moments, she found herself wishing he'd return sooner than later. Just for the company, she thought, not wanting to read too much into it.

Into the second week, thunder rolled over the camp and lightning forked in jagged scrawls, rain pouring in a thick wall. After she'd finished with the kitchen, Tess ran with Gabe down a muddy path, through puddles, shirts soaked and sticking, all the way to the tree line. He'd pitched his tent between the two tallest pines, stretched a tarp to create an overhang. The rain hammered it. Tess yelled over the din. "What if lightning hits these trees?" Her teeth chattered, her arms covered with goosebumps. Gabe unzipped the door and she followed him in. He arched his eyebrows and smiled, and his front two teeth overlapped and hooked over his bottom lip, his whole face glistening in the bluish light. He wrapped her wet hair around his wrist, pulled her into him.

All her life, people told her she reminded them of someone else. She attributed it to her plain brown hair, her pale, reddish skin. But in that

moment, when Gabe stripped off her shirt and jeans, when he kissed her belly, her breasts, even before touching her mouth, her ordinariness slipped away. She didn't say, "Let's be careful." Or, "Hey, do you have a condom?" And though she'd thought about it, and though her mother had drilled safe sex into her, she didn't want him to stop.

And he didn't. Not for the remaining two weeks of the contract. And it exhilarated her, knowing she made someone feel *that* way.



As she rubbed the baby's gums, she thought how she hardly let Gabe near her now. Not without double protection. Even then, sex was the last thing she wanted, the absolute last.

Willa whimpered and fussed, two sharp ridges finally broken through. She clamped Tess's finger, her eyes drowsing and angry. Tess whisked her into the dark bedroom, the window there blocked by a mounted Klimt poster: *Mother and Child*. The hall light reflected off it and made a silhouette of the laundry basket. She groped through the clothes, clean or dirty she didn't know, for Willa's sleeper, and sniffed. Everything faint with soured

milk.

She lowered Willa onto the Queen-sized bed, built a pillow barrier on one side, reclined on the other, latching the baby to her breast. Willa gulped and drained the first side, suckled slowly on the second, pausing longer and longer. When Tess tried to eek her nipple out, Willa picked up speed, as though she meant never to stop. Tess prayed this wouldn't be a repeat of last night's marathon nurse. When she'd been roused for what seemed like the fifth or sixth time, her nipples already raw and the clock reading 2:07 a.m., she'd wanted to scream. Instead, she'd gripped the baby's ankle, jerked her down the mattress, then in her meanest, growliest voice told her own sweet daughter to fuck off. Not her finest moment. And what was worse, the yelling felt momentarily satisfying. Until Willa flinched and shook, her face contorted seconds before she wailed. Wailed as though Tess had thrown her or broken her bones. It didn't take long for regret to swoop in, for Tess to gather her baby close, both of them sobbing, and Tess saying, over and over, "Sorry. I'm so sorry."

When Willa had finally calmed and nursed back to sleep, Tess shut herself in the bathroom and wept. Gabe had found her there, fetal on the bath mat after his shift. Sitting beside her, he stroked her back until she could explain what happened. Then he filled the tub for her with steamy

water, perfumed it with lavender oil. He brought her scotch, which she didn't want, then kneaded her shoulders, circling one knot then another with his thumbs.

“Maybe you should let her cry it out,” he'd said.

But he was the world's deepest sleeper. Last week she'd left a full bottle, twenty minutes worth of hand-pumping, and went downtown to deliver resumes. When she'd returned, Gabe was passed out on the couch, the bottle full and the baby in the playpen with soaked pajamas, red-faced and screaming. Even after Tess punched his arm, called him an irresponsible motherfucker, he'd hardly roused.

“She must've just woken up,” he said, creases down his face and eyes puffed. Then he headed for the back porch, fired up the bong.

Tess had followed, Willa still nursing. “You can't do this if I go back to work,” she said. “You can't fucking do this. Someone might call social services. Think we left her alone. Or worse. She might choke.”

“Come on, Tess.” He held the smoke tight in his lungs. “She won't choke.” He exhaled away from her but a slight breeze blew it back. She returned to the kitchen, livid, hearing him say, “These night shifts, Tess. They're murder on my sleep.”



Tess slipped stealthily off the bed. She landed on hands and knees, peered over the mattress edge to watch the baby's arms fling up in surprise, her mouth searching for a nipple. Tess waited and waited until at last Willa settled.

Then she tiptoed backwards out of the bedroom, her sock snagging on the wood floor. Something jabbed her toe, sent her silently hopping and cursing. She leaned against the door jamb, plucked out a two-inch splinter. *Goddamn it.* They'd have to sand these rough spots before the baby started crawling. Already Willa rocked on her hands and knees, gathering momentum. The last time Tess went to the mom and baby group, she'd witnessed a dozen mothers crisscrossing the room, frantically chasing babies. "It's an exciting stage!" the group leader, a fifty-something nurse always said, and with that annoying cheer of someone who didn't live it twenty-four-seven. Tess, barely twenty-two, hated how they divided child-rearing into tidy phases and stages. When, she wanted to ask the nurse, was the stage she got her life back?



Maybe it was over beginning in ninth grade, when her breasts began to get tender. When she'd been seized by a foreign kind of tired. Then her first period coming on during a grammar lesson. Comma splices. She told that story to Gabe in the motel room, two days after the contract, somewhere west of Edmonton. Smoothing the sateen bedspread, staring at a painting of a bridge above the headboard, praying the test wouldn't be positive, that her body had just done something weird and irregular because of the electrical storms and the long northern daylight. Until now she'd always been a twenty-eight-day-to-the-minute girl.

The curtains had been closed except for a narrow crack. Gabe rolled a joint on the dresser, hair and forehead caught in the one sunbeam.

Tess wanted to savour the final moments when a negative result was still possible. If she wasn't pregnant, she'd smoke that joint with Gabe, then get rip-roaring drunk, toasting her life with a sense of relief and narrow escape. If she wasn't pregnant, she'd forget the road trip they'd planned, beeline it back to Victoria, find that waitressing job and register

for Fall classes.

Gabe poured himself a finger of Jack Daniel's. "Feels like fucking Christmas or something," he said, then opened the bathroom door.

"Wait two more minutes," Tess said.

He didn't wait. He passed her the wand without looking at it. The blue line ran straight and clear across the plastic window. She handed it back.

Gabe's eyes went electric, his voice ecstatic. "Fucking-A," he said, kissed her hard, then leapt up, did a James Brown spin. He giggled, circled his fingers around one eye, made turning motions with the other hand. "The perfect ending scene," he said, panning out. "And you, baby, you're the star."

Tess shook her head, felt nothing like a star. She curled her legs to her chest, sank her teeth into her knee tasting the motel lotion. What she felt was betrayal. By her body. By her own good sense.

"I'm scared," she said.

"Don't you get it?" he said, dropping his hands. "This was *meant* to happen." He tapped her forehead with his. She smelled the whiskey, cigarettes. "We're *meant* to be together and I'm totally with you on this one. I'll move to Victoria. We'll get married if you want. Shotgun style." He

grabbed her hand, pinned it to his chest, his expression a hybrid of earnest and ready to laugh.

She could feel his rapid-fire heartbeat, her whole life shifting with the very fact of him. She loosened her hand, said yes, yes, he could move in with her, they'd see how it went. Marriage, though, was too much too soon.

“No problem,” he said. “Elephant shoe.”

“What?”

Then he mouthed it—*elephant shoe*—and it looked like he said *I love you*.

“I don't get it,” she said.

“It's what we'll say until we're sure,” he said. “We'll keep it at elephant shoe.”

Then he lit the joint, smiled with what seemed hallucinatory joy. He tossed out names: Grover, Marley, Madison, Art, Bob. “It'll be so fun,” he said. “We'll have the best little monkey ever.”

Tess asked him to put out the joint or step outside, told him she had a headache. But what she had was not a headache. More a dull pulse nested in the back of her skull. Gabe exited, then stepped back in, grinning. Light fanning in behind him.



Tess ignored the dirty dishes, piled two days, going on three, and headed for the living room. The overhead light was on, also the two Y-shaped halogen lamps, their beams bouncing off the ceiling. She clicked off the one behind the scratchy plaid couch, noticed the baby bottle, half-filled with breast milk, on the table alongside the retro movie theatre schedule and Gabe's beloved bong. Earlier that afternoon, he'd fed Willa while Tess dashed out to fetch baby Tylenol and liquid iron, the first time she'd left him alone with the baby since last week's debacle. When she returned, he'd been spinning records on his turntable, calling them up like a DJ—Isaac Hayes, Miles Davis, Frank Zappa—and dancing with Willa in his arms. “See how happy she is?” he'd said. “See how she loves her old man?” Spotting Tess, Willa kicked her legs and whimpered, ready for a nap, and Gabe passed her over, looking snubbed.

The milk had probably curdled by now, and Tess, irritated, bent to pick up the bottle. Her sweater sleeve caught the bong which teetered, then toppled first onto the table, then the floor. The glass cracked, the fetid water spilling out. Tess retched, reached for a flannel receiving blanket and tossed it over the mess, the dark water leaching into the yellow print of

rattles and bowed babies. Then a sob released from deep within her body. This happened frequently these days, unexpected and primal, and now she covered her face, took a few stuttery breaths.

The phone rang, that obnoxious bell on their old-school rotary. She lunged for it, gulped hello.

“Did I wake you, Tessie?” It was her mother, whispering. “Sorry if I woke you...”

“No, Mom. I...”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, honey. I just had this—what do you call it?—a premonition about you and wondered if you were all right. That’s all.”

“The baby’s teething,” Tess said. Another swampy, putrid stench bloomed from the bong. She twisted away, into the corner of the couch, picked at the upholstery.

“And Gabe? Is he helping?”

“He’s working,” Tess said. “Is that why you called?”

“No, honey,” her mother said. “I just worry is all.”

Tess squeezed her eyes, her face. She wished her mother lived in the same town, and not across the border. She wished her mother could take Willa for a night, just from time to time.

“Tess? Are you there?”

“We’ll talk later, okay?” Tess’s voice sounded compressed and small and far away. She cleared her throat. “I’m just so tired.”

“Sure, honey. We’ll talk later.”

Tess set the receiver in the cradle, considered the disaster on the floor. In the halogen light the yellows were yellower, the soaked blanket almost sinister. She leaned forward, elbows on knees, head in hands. Back when she’d told her mother about the pregnancy, her mother, devoid of any excitement, said, “Are you sure? You’re so young. At least wait until you’re both twenty-five.” For whatever reason, Tess became more determined to go through with it. People had babies all the time. Why not her? Now she realized she knew none of those people, had become an anomaly among her friends. Friends who’d offered to henna her pregnant belly, cast it in plaster, transform her baby shower into a goddess ritual. They’d snapped pictures holding the newborn, begged to be godparents. Then, they disappeared, back into the world of their own lives. Tess had no one, not even from the baby group, those moms all older, more married and moneyed.

She picked up a blackened piece of glass near her foot. There was a

corresponding hole at the base of the bong, still lying on its side. How long would it take for Gabe to figure it out? Two minutes after he walked in the door? Three? Maybe he'd find a new hobby, though that she couldn't imagine. He'd been smoking pot since her pregnancy, said it boosted his creativity, helped him sketch kick-ass film ideas. It became the cure-all too for boredom at work, stress about money. He'd even encouraged her to take when the contractions had started. "Better than an epidural," he'd said.

She thought he'd tone it down after the birth but it only got worse. These days he scraped together whatever money was left over, sometimes postponing bill payments, to buy dope by the ounce. Just the other day he said he was going to grow it, or deal. Supplement their meagre income. He'd grown frustrated, scouring the classifieds for a higher paying job. Nothing but retail and service and minimum wage. Marijuana, he assured her, was the only way around here to make any real money.



Tess fought off the urge to sleep. Her bones, her head, everything ached

for it, but this was the only time of day she had to herself. So she abandoned the mess, wiped her hands on her jeans and slipped through the pocket door into the darkened parlour. The outside streetlight diffused through the darkness, and the traffic signal stained the south wall green.

In their search for an affordable apartment, the parlour with its window seat, the fir paneled walls and the wainscoting sold them on this one. “Six-thirty a month,” Gabe had said. “And with *character*.” Tess imagined this room had once housed an upright piano, a mantle clock, a silver tea service. Tiffany lamps, a butler, wing-backed chairs with footstools, and an easel with watercolours in various stages of completion. Now the room contained a salvaged futon in one corner, mildew stains and blotches of breast milk all concealed by heaps of newborn clothes already too small for Willa. Plus, that old computer, cord wrapped around the base, her last semester’s essays immortalized on the hard-drive.

There was an old coal stove, too, cast iron grill where fuel used to go. Quaint, except for the brick hearth overrun with garden gnomes. They looked creepy now, strange creatures lurking in the shadows like horror film tropes. Gabe had abducted each and every one from flowerbeds throughout the city. “If people are stupid enough to buy them,” he said, “they deserve to have them stolen.” He loved punishing people for their

stupidity, and when Tess had tried to convince him theft was theft no matter how kitsch, he said who cared, everything belonged to anyone anyhow. So now they were stuck with a dozen garden gnomes.

Tess perched on the built-in window seat, back pressed against the frame. The red traffic light tinted the wood, Tess's fingers, the tops of her knees. During the days a steady stream of stop-and-go cars rolled down Quadra Street, these corner windows vibrating from sub-woofers, busted exhausts. By late evening traffic became sporadic, the roads mostly running clear.

There wasn't much to the view, only a hodgepodge of apartments and commercial buildings—a grocer, a tire repair, and down the way, an indoor public pool. She wished instead for a moor, a river, a boulevard of broad-leafed trees.

Wind chimes clinked on the front porch and a car squealed to a stop. Right now Gabe was polishing floors, then he'd move on to the brass fixtures and posts. He hadn't complained in a while but she knew he hated it, wondered how much longer he'd stick it out. One day, when she'd been five months pregnant, he'd stayed in bed as though fevered. She'd gone to class, her job at the Student Union, a meeting at the feminist paper, then arrived home to find Gabe sitting in this same window, naked, drinking

coffee and violating his promise to only smoke outside.

“Shouldn’t you be at work?” she’d said. He’d been working as a barista.

“Yeah,” he’d said. He looked skeletal. Not bony but haunted, his pallor yellowed, even the whites of his eyes. “They rejected me again. No to the tree-planting idea. That fucking awesome idea.” He leaned back, hard-staring at her, his lips almost white with flaking skin. “I can’t do this,” he said. “I can’t keep working shit jobs with no future. I think you’d be better off without me.”

At that moment, something inside her collapsed, her bones and flesh flimsy, as if they were simply tent poles and canvas, ready for camp tear-down. She couldn’t raise a child by herself. She couldn’t. If he wanted to pack it in, she wanted to as well. Keeping the baby had been his idea, really. All his *it’ll be so fun*, his final scene in the movie.

Then the baby fluttered in Tess’s abdomen, reminding her that at five months abortion was no option. She stood speechless, wanting to drag Gabe from his despair, bring back his earlier, enthusiastic and animated self. The one who’d made her laugh and feel special, the one who’d called her beautiful. She knelt down, actually knelt, wove her fingers through his and said, “Everything will be all right.”

But things weren't all right. His moods fluctuated, peaking when he smoked pot and landed on another great film idea, then plunging again. He blamed it on the constant rain. On this goddamn city with no opportunities. If they lived in Vancouver he'd at least get work in the industry, production assistant, location scout, whatever. He felt useless as a barista, as a guy waiting for the baby's birth, as her partner. For weeks, she tiptoed around his darkness, pretending to friends and professors, and to her mother, that she was excited about the baby. Meanwhile, Gabe spent an inordinate number of hours sleeping or down at the retro theatre, while they lived off scraps of Tess's tree-planting savings, her part-time cafeteria pay, her student loans, her credit cards, until spring rolled around and with it the sun, and right before the baby was born, he found work again.



Outside the street had emptied of cars. A shopping cart rattled over sidewalk cracks and a homeless man appeared in Tess's line of sight. He trundled his belongings toward the public pool where she'd seen him sleeping over open grates. He stopped at a trash bin halfway down the

block and peered in, recovered a couple cans. Shook them, held one against his ear as though listening to the sea. Then he lifted a plastic cover off his cart, stuffed his treasure beneath.

Tess stared past him at the jagged configuration of lights and buildings on the downtown borders. At the hazy city glow in the sky.

She heard the car before she saw it. A metallic scraping along the pavement. An unmuffled engine growing louder. One headlight flickered, the other burnt out, on what looked like an old station wagon. She rested her chin on her knees, noticed the car listing to one side, its tires low or flat. It crossed the double centre line, half its wheels in that lane. The engine revved and Tess's windows shook. She cringed, wished it would hop back into the right lane, then hurry away. An oncoming car honked and swerved and the station wagon, unimaginably, headed straight for Tess's building.

The crash came next. Crumpling metal. Showers of glass. Followed by silence, a tinny pitch in Tess's ear. The traffic light switched from green to yellow, and the darkness broke around her into electrons and amber motes.

After a second or two, she hurried to the front porch, clanging the chimes as she hung out over the rail. Below, the car had rammed into the

corner, the hood crunched and pleated, the windshield webby and cracked with a hole in the centre. More a piece of installation art really, except for the stink—hot metal and gasoline. A dim light shone from the remaining headlamp, and the radiator, or maybe the engine, clacked and hissed. From where she stood, the car appeared to be vacant, though she knew that wasn't possible. She knew that she should call 911, that she should feel compelled to help. But she didn't, and this quietly shocked her. Later, she'd tell Gabe she almost ran to the phone. But now she only waited, the air in that moment charged with possibility. She waited, knowing everything in the aftermath would shatter.

Neighbours appeared in small numbers, some popping onto stoops across the street, others on the sidewalk. The homeless man lumbered toward the car, his shopping cart abandoned, yelling for someone to call an ambulance.

Tess watched the headlamp fizzle and extinguish, heard the driver's door clunk and creak, inching open. Out stepped a boy, maybe sixteen or seventeen, gangly and tall and suited up in denim, baseball hat on backwards. He jerked his head around as if he'd dropped from the sky and was attempting to get his bearings. People called to him, said, "It's okay! An ambulance is coming!" The kid froze, hunched, hands held wide as if

waiting for a basketball pass. For two or three seconds no one moved. Then a woman stepped onto the street and the boy bolted, rounded the corner at Empress, so fast his shoes squeaked. The downstairs neighbour, a middle-aged man with a beer gut, chased him.

The ambulance arrived, two cop cars and a fire truck. Lights swirled over the faces of witnesses as they pointed and recounted and shook their heads. The beer-gut man returned winded, empty-handed. Tess bit her lip. Her body contracted, and she hoped, though didn't know why, that the boy would get away.



In the morning, she'll tell Gabe about the car, the strange randomness of the accident. He'll ask questions, sorry he missed out. Even forgive the broken bong. For all that day and the week after, they'll live on the rush and mystery of the crash. They'll piece together what they can, chatting with the downstairs neighbours, asking if the kid was ever caught. Gabe will buy a paper too, a thing he never does, come across a tiny column devoted to the wreck: car stolen, the driver, the thief, unknown.

Then, closer to Christmas, Gabe will get ready to leave in his usual way. He'll kiss Tess and the baby, and say, "I love you." Tess will shift the baby from one hip to the other. And she'll know it's over. That she will never say it back.

Gabe will hightail it back to Alberta, leaving behind his garden gnomes and film sketches and the last of his dope. And Tess will sit in the welfare office, rent receipt folded in her pocket, along with her latest bank statement, telling the case worker the baby's father has taken off. She will cry. Snot and tears, not because of Gabe's absence, but because she'll be too exhausted to support herself, her baby. The case worker will pat her hand, exclaim over Willa's beauty, her fat healthy cheeks, and she'll say Gabe isn't the first daddy to skip town.

She'll say: "We're here to help you get back on your feet."

But on that night after the crash, Tess was still in bed.

Gabe's breath grew whistly, dovetailing into a snore and the baby was squirming, ready any minute now to nurse. And Tess. More awake than she'd been in weeks, stared into the dark, her mind crackling with thoughts of the kid thief.

She imagined him out there, crouched beneath someone's back porch

or deep inside a laurel hedge. Adrenaline buzz wearing thin. Neck hurting, head too. Cold would be seeping through his denim, his knees gone numb. And how long would he wait? Before emerging. And even then, Tess wondered, where would he go?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Traci Skuce lives in Cumberland, BC. Her work has appeared in *The New Quarterly*, *Prairie Fire*, *Grain* and *The Dalhousie Review*. Also, she won the 2016 Sheldon Currie prize for fiction, and she was a finalist in the 2016 CBC CNF awards.

© 2016 Traci Skuce. Published by **LITTLE FICTION** | **BIG TRUTHS**, October 2016. Cover design by Troy Palmer, using images from The Noun Project (credits: **Olivier Guin**). Edited by Beth Gilstrap.

Read more stories at littlefiction.com