



# OTHER WAYS BESIDES THE DOOR

by Traci Skuce

**THE** mountains were gone. And the water beneath the bridge was also gone. Only the bridge seemed to exist, lines penciled against a sepia sky. An abstract entitled: From Nowhere to Nowhere. As far as Nate could tell, the cars, including his, were creeping across the Lion's Gate into an abyss, oncoming traffic emerging from it. If Misty were here, which, of course, she wasn't, she'd attempt to forge this all into a poem or song or even a painting, something about the end of the world. The sun, still visible, bled through the smoke, a fiery apocalyptic red, and Nate could taste every incinerated tree in the province, even with the windows up and the A/C blasting.

The car in front slowed and stopped, so Nate slowed and stopped. Particulate floated by his windshield and he hoped for rain. Who didn't hope for rain?

His cell phone went off and his sister's voice filled the car.

"You at the ferry," she said.

"On the bridge."

"Finn gets in in, like, two minutes. His boat is pretty much there."

"Ramona. I'll get him. Don't worry."

"I've sent two texts and called. He's not answering."

"He'll be there. Why wouldn't he be?"

"I'm just... he wasn't very happy when we said goodbye."

Finn was fifteen. Had she forgotten fifteen? Beginning of the Goth epoch—years she caked on ghostly foundation and caged her eyes in black eyeshadow and liquid eyeliner. Hardware through her septum and lower lip. All the snubs and put-downs any time Nate, five years her junior, dared to cross her path.

"You weren't happy at Finn's age," he said. "Like, ever. Don't you remember?"

Nate managed to pull two car lengths ahead without her saying a word. She was probably practicing non-reaction, something she'd counseled him in after the whole Misty/airport debacle. Finally, a resigned huff gusted through the speakers. "Yeah, but it's Finn." She sounded teary. Maybe she imagined Finn lured into some cult or running away to fight the fires. He couldn't blame her—people could be there and then not be there, vanishing into another life.

"Listen," Nate said. "his battery probably died. We'll call once he's in the car. Promise."



Traffic didn't ease. After the bridge, it was still start and stop. Nate texted Finn to say he was running late, and seconds later a thumbs-up emoji zoomed back.

A week ago, Ramona had called to report Finn's misdemeanor. Apparently, he'd been hanging out with what Ramona called a band of hoodlums over the past months, slouching around the gas station and post office of their small town, sucking back giant Slurpees and pegging off

cars with spitballs. Nothing exactly criminal until they tossed a rock through the window of an elderly widower's garage. Finn swore it wasn't his idea and Ramona chose to believe him. Ditto after the boys' joyride down the lake road on what Finn insisted were borrowed bikes. But the most recent crime had her panicked; she'd recounted the story in such a breathless hurry for Nate that he'd asked her to repeat it. Apparently, Finn, on some dare, had slipped through the book return slot at the library (Nate was still working out the physics of that one) and swiped a couple graphic novels from the shelves. His buddies had recorded it, uploaded it onto Snapchat, but by the time Nate heard about it, the video had dissolved into the ether. Anyway, Finn had been caught, and though they'd dropped official charges, Nate had been roped, albeit willingly, into Ramona's makeshift rehabilitation program.

Now Nate wondered if all this acting out had to do with Finn's dad, who'd spent exactly ten days with Finn after he was born. Then bailed on those colicky nights to work in the oil patch and never came back. He sent money and gifts sporadically, and then, not at all. Nate could only remember a single discussion with Finn about his dad. At three, when Nate babysat five times a week, Finn had said, "Are you my dad, Uncle Nate?" And when Nate explained how no, no, he wasn't, Finn had shrugged his

little shoulders and said, “It doesn’t matter. You’re better than a dad.” Even the memory of it made Nate weepy.

So maybe *he* was Finn’s problem. The deadbeat uncle. More insult than Finn’s dad leaving before they’d ever bonded. In the past months, Nate had basically dropped out of Finn’s life. Not so much as a text or Instagram like since last September, let alone a phone call or visit. He’d mired himself in work, and if not work, then pot and Netflix. Hardly an excuse. After all, he’d known and loved Finn through diapers, Lego and dinosaur obsessions, through a new stepdad and twin baby brothers. And when Ramona moved her new family to the Island, when Finn was five, Nate arranged to visit at least once a month. Which he did until Misty entered, and then exited, the scene.

So, when Ramona had spoken to Nate about Finn, he’d offered to take the week off work and give Finn a break from the hoodlums. Himself a break from himself.



By the time he reached the terminal, the main ferry traffic had dissipated. There was still a taxi or two, and a few cars dropping off passengers for the seven o'clock boat. Nate parked, got out of the car and into the smoke.

Finn didn't glance up as Nate approached. He'd contorted his body over and around a whale statue, thumb and gaze glued to his phone. He hardly looked a hoodlum, his shorts had splashes of neon orange on them, his t-shirt bunched high up his back and exposed the xylophone of his ribcage. There'd been a shift in his face since Nate had last seen him. A familial topography: nose from a great-grandfather, and the begrudging brow from Nate's dad.

"Hey!" Nate said, and grabbed the bag at Finn's feet. Finn pried his stare away from the phone and looked up. He had the same pragmatic blue eyes they all did—Nate, Ramona, their mom and all her sisters—only his were fresher, more curious.

"Uncle Nate!" Finn said, and disentangled himself from the statue. He straightened his shirt and beamed. He was now a full inch taller than Nate. Not exactly an accomplishment since most everyone had an inch on him—but Finn didn't mention it. Nor did he allude to the ten months of no phone calls, visits, or Instagram shares. No, Finn only braced his scrawny

arms around Nate, pinning Nate at the elbows so he could only flap his forearms to pat Finn on the waist.

All the way back to the car Finn's voice alternated between boy and man registers as he talked about how the smoke was bad on the Island, but not this bad, and how he'd read that the fire near William's Lake burned at over four-thousand hectares. "That's, like, four thousand football fields." Finn took the pack from Nate and hoisted it over his shoulder. Then said, "Why do they compare everything to football fields?" Nate laughed and left the question alone. A survival technique he'd learned from when Finn was little and asked *why? why? why?* a million times an hour.

Nate beeped the car doors open and they both slid in and buckled up. Finn unzipped his backpack and rustled through it. "Mom wanted me to give you this," he said. Nate thought it might be money, a little cash toward groceries and entertainment, but Finn plopped a jar into the cup-hold. "Raspberry jam. From last year. She's making room for new stuff."

"You gotta call her," Nate said. "Or text." Something flickered over Finn's face, a scowl or grimace. "Come on, dude," Nate said, turning the key. "She's gonna call in two minutes anyway..." Sure enough, Ramona was on the speakers again, asking if Finn had eaten on the ferry, if his phone battery had died, if he'd given Nate the jam, and if he'd meant to leave



behind the book she'd given him. He answered in a short survey fashion: yes, no, yes, yes. And when she signed off with, "I love you, Sweetie," he rolled his eyes and said, "Yeah Mom, I know."



Nate lived west of Main between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>. A first-floor suite, though they had to go around the side and down three steps to the entrance, which meant it verged on basement. Aside from the six-foot ceilings, it didn't feel too subterranean, thanks to good-sized windows and French doors that opened onto the back garden. Sometimes water seeped beneath them during winter rains and puddled on the tiled floor, leaving behind faint traces of mildew and mould.

Right away, Finn seemed to zero in on the low shelves under the front window and climbed over the couch to get there. A cluster of Star Wars action figures next to one of Misty's lopsided vases. He picked up R2D2 and wagged it at Nate. "You still have these!"

"Something to drink Finn?" Nate leaned over the kitchen counter. It jutted out, suggesting a division between living room and kitchen, and

served as a dining table. Currently it was crowded with an archeological record of Nate's past few suppers. Salsa smears, popcorn kernels and desiccated ramen noodles. He stacked the bowls and set them in the sink, squeezed a healthy dose of dish soap over top and ran the hot water. He left the dishes to soak and opened the fridge, grabbed the remaining IPA. "There's apple juice," he shouted to Finn. Then noticed a Canada Dry bottle lying next to the mayo. How long had that been there? "And flat ginger-ale!"

He cracked open the beer and turned. Finn was right there, waving a *SuperMario* game case. "Can we play?" His eyes fired up like little slot machines and he hopped up and down as he'd done at five, six, seven, eight, desperate for the video games Ramona had forbidden, though now his head almost hit the ceiling. Then he lapped the kitchen conga-style, and out to the living room next to the 3D TV—Nate's one big indulgence after Misty had left. He dropped the case onto the Nintendo console and rummaged through a few other games, and then jogged back into the kitchen. "Do you have GTA 5? My friend Tyler says it's totally dank."

Nate had forgotten about Finn's perpetual motion.

"Dank?" Nate said. "Like mould?"

Finn filled himself a glass with Britta water and gulped as though flushing a drain. “Nah,” he said, gasping. “As in awesome.” Then he chugged the rest of the water and submerged the empty glass into the suds. “So?”

“So what?”

“Can we play?”

Nate raised his beer to imply he just wanted to drink it. Finn opened the fridge and closed it. Opened the fridge and closed it. Opened... “How about we set up your room first?” Nate said, and placed his beer on the counter.



Nate hadn't blown up the mattress yet, only pulled it from the closet earlier that morning and tossed it onto the carpet. The pump was in a Rubbermaid tote, along with wet suits from last summer's Long Beach trip, plus a campfire toaster, Bocce balls, and Misty's field guide to birds of the Pacific Northwest. He handed the pump to Finn, who jammed the nozzle

into the valve, raised the piston, and launched into a frenetic up and down movement, a blur of elbows and knees.

Nate left him to it, perched on a stool to drink the IPA. Not as hoppy as he liked, but the cool bitter of it cleared the scrim of smoke from his tongue. He checked his email on the iPad: only his mother's forwarded notes from her book club, and one petition to stand up against the pipeline. He opened his Facebook and scrolled down his feed. Filler and more filler. He entered Misty's name into the search in case, by some miracle, there was a post. Not a single photo or status update since their picture at the airport, and the caption: *newlyweds at the boarding gate!* Almost daily, he widened that photo until it filled the frame, and studied her face—the brown, slight Cleopatra eyes, lashes clumped with mascara (he remembered her quibbling with the mascara wand that morning) and her glossed lips curled, her eyebrows raised, more on the right than the left. And there, beside her, his own hapless mirth. He wished the screen could peel back like a sardine can and he could crawl into it, back into that moment, and warn that poor bastard. Maybe then he could rewind the whole event and convince her to stay. Or at least jolt his airport-self out of the seat, linger outside the women's washroom, and cut her off before she decides to leave.

“Uncle Nate?” Finn called from the other room. The wheezing pump had stopped. “What are all these presents?”

Nate’s heart jerked like a hooked fish. *Shit*. He’d forgotten about the presents, all quiet in the corner, away from his day-to-day he’d neglected to hide them from Finn. Plus, he hardly stepped in that room anymore, sometimes imagining Misty in there doing yoga on her pink mat or collaging in her scrapbook and not wanting to disturb her. Now he hurried to the spare room. The mattress was blown up most of the way, though Finn had abandoned the pump and was on his knees between a narrow bookshelf and a three-tiered stack of presents, running his fingers through silver ribbons and peering into gift bags.

“Leave them, Finn,” Nate said.

“Why don’t you open them?” Finn presented Nate with a slender box wrapped in shimmery blue. Nate fumbled with the tag: *Nate and Misty. A heavenly couple...* A familiar rage rushed around his chest and he dropped the box on top of the pile. Inhaled in an obvious, huffy way. “No, Finn,” he said. “Leave them.” He didn’t want to explain how Misty had suggested they wait until after their honeymoon to open the presents, how she’d wanted to write real old fashioned Thank You notes, and how they’d obviously never gotten to that part of it.

Finn loosened a ribbon from around the handles of a bag embossed with wedding-bells. “Stop,” Nate said. “Leave it.”

But Finn didn’t leave it. He pulled that ribbon loose and rummaged through a festoon of tissue paper. Removed a pie server Misty must’ve had on the Bath and Beyond registry (for all the pie they never ate) and stretched it out toward Nate. “What are you going to do with all this anyway?” he said. “Give it back?”



If Misty were still around, the gifts would’ve been open already, integrated into cupboards and drawers, or hanging in closets. Instead they’d become a mocking mass. Though Nate had searched them for clues in those first brutal weeks without her, hoping a card or wrapping style might reveal something, *anything*, about why she’d left.

She did marry him after all. Organized the wedding and sailed happily through it. The ceremony had gone well, unless you counted the way he’d stammered out his vows. And then the reception where she’d bawled during her father’s speech, and smeared snot on her wedding dress sleeve.

Three days later, they'd still been married. Misty stacked the gifts in the spare room while Nate locked every window and called a cab. They'd arrived at the airport with ample time before the flight. Security was painless and they set up a home-base with their roller suitcases and book bags in a corridor near their boarding gate. Misty snapped that newlywed selfie and posted it. Then Nate left her for a twenty-minute lineup at Starbucks for cappuccinos. Maybe this gap, this brief separation, was the culprit. The time when her doubts bullied her into cleaving one future away from another. Though she didn't betray anything when he handed over the coffee. Nor in the time it took her to finish the coffee, to stand, stretch, and volunteer to toss their cups.

Nate had settled into his iPad by that point, attention splintered between a Messenger chat with Ramona, an article about the upcoming Canucks season, and an underlying anxiety about the long flight. So, he hadn't noticed if she'd debated over taking her suitcase, or if something in her demeanor had shifted, only that she'd slung her book bag and purse over her shoulder, kissed the top of his head and said she was off to the ladies' room.

He'd like to edit the next few hours from his life completely, though they came back unbidden at any given hour. The recognition of her too-

long absence creeping like a spider on his neck. The rapid-fire rationalizations—her stomach's off, her period's come, she's gone for another coffee, a magazine, she's calling her mother, exchanging dollars for euros... Then the first boarding call when she still hadn't showed. The tightness in his chest. Frantic texts and calls. Her voicemail kicking on again and again. And the way he'd dragged those suitcases around like small children, thinking she'd dropped dead or been kidnapped. How he'd shouted into the women's washroom, begged a stranger to check under each stall. Had them page Misty at the gate. Twice. And the service agent's eyes flushed with pity; her hand light as a sparrow on his wrist as she said, "Last call. The plane is leaving."

Everything swayed and spun. He vomited pure acid and coffee into a garbage can. A plane engine shrieked. It was leaving without him. Without *them*. He dropped onto his knees and held his face in his hands. His future lost. Gone.





Finn was lifting and repositioning the soy sauce in the exact centre of the table. He'd slipped down the chair so his head was on the back of it. Nate had reamed him out. Tossed the bed sheet meant for Finn's air mattress over the gifts. Then wagged his finger, yelling something about other people's property and prerogatives, something about respect, not catching himself until Finn retreated to the mattress like a scolded dog. He'd never yelled at Finn before, nothing more than a stern voice, and now he felt squirmy, sick. Like he wasn't Finn's revered and beloved uncle, but a bad-tempered and forsaken asshole.

The server brought menus and Nate snatched one up to shield his face. He found strange comfort in the overly banal and familiar images of tempura prawns and tuna maki. He peeked over at Finn, also hiding behind a menu wall, and asked Finn if he'd like sashimi. No answer. The server returned and Nate ordered, Finn piping in to add gyozas and ginger-ale. Then the server took both menus and disappeared into the kitchen.

They both studied the fuzzy air outside the window. The sun was lower; the small ashy motes morphed into something pinkish and brown. The street, though full of people and lined with cars, seemed ghostlike, as though a tumbleweed might blow by. Instead there was a dog, terrier or spaniel, hitched to a parking metre. Nate pointed to it, hoping to coax back

Finn's enthusiastic side. When that didn't work, he suggested they check out the neighbourhood comic bookstore after dinner. Finn only unsheathed and broke apart his chopsticks, rubbed them together as if hoping for a spark.

The miso soup came and went without a word. Then Finn polished off the dumplings and tempura with astonishing speed. By the time the sushi appeared, he was sitting taller. He lanced some salmon sashimi and leaned his head back like a gull, dropped it into his mouth and swallowed without a single bite.

Nate dabbed wasabi into his soy sauce. "Raw salmon was your first solid food," he said.

Finn pierced a piece of tuna and said, "You say that every time we go for sushi." At least he was talking. "Besides, Mom says bananas and avocados."

"Then sushi," Nate said. "For sure."

"Maybe."

Was that a smile? *Please*, Nate thought. *Let that be a smile.*



The next morning was Saturday, and Nate woke to the upstairs neighbours pounding above him. Misty had called them the heavy-footed progeny. Though Darlene and her husband, Boris, also clomped around, whipping up pancakes or some other happy family weekend fare. Nate lifted the blinds hoping the world might've returned to contours and sharp relief. No such luck. Dusty particulate hung in front of the lawn chair outside his window and obscured the branches of the cherry tree; it rendered the apartment building across the alley mute and distant. Despite his dwindling faith in the atmosphere, he drew in a deep breath. It scratched his throat. He stabbed at the weather app on his phone. Smoke and more smoke. Since when was that even *weather*?

Ramona called before Nate had time to piss and brush his teeth. He thought about letting it go to voice mail. Then he thought better. "Is Finn awake?" she asked.

He plopped back onto the end of the bed and rubbed his face.

"Don't let him sleep past ten, okay?" Nate heard the twins squabbling in the background, "Let it Be" on full blast.

"Why?"

“Because he’ll waste his entire day if you let him.” For her, a day had to be productive. Their mother was like that too. If you didn’t walk briskly for at least an hour, brush up on your French, practice yoga, read (or write) an entire novel, build a shelving unit, or engage in interesting conversation with three other people, you may as well have crushed the hours into oblivion.

“Then why don’t you call him?” Nate said.

“Fine. I’ll call at ten. But if he has his ringer off...” Nate waited; with Ramona, there was always more. The music disappeared from behind her, meaning she’d probably locked herself into the upstairs bathroom. She adjusted her voice to a hush. “Anyway, did he tell you more about the library thing? He won’t talk to me about it. I hoped he’d talk to you.”

“I haven’t asked,” Nate said.

“Would you?”

Nate remembered his mother’s relentless prodding the one time he’d been caught igniting firecrackers behind the school with Josh Winters and Calvin Broadfoot. No explanation aside from it had been fun. Shoving those little dynamite sticks into the backsides of stuffed animals, lighting them and watching them blow to bits. He’d been swept up and for one

intoxicating moment hadn't cared about rules. "I'm not going to hound him," he said.

"I don't want you to hound him," she said. "I just want to know what he was thinking."

"My guess is, he wasn't."

He ended the call rankled. Ramona didn't trust him to get Finn up and out of bed? How many times had he dropped Finn off at preschool back in the day? Fine, now he'd let Finn sleep the morning away. They'd still have the afternoon. Besides, they'd patched up the whole gift fiasco by levelling up through all eight worlds in *SuperMario* after sushi, and he didn't want to botch it by playing psychologist on Ramona's behalf.

Still, he didn't entirely trust Finn with the gifts. Part of him believed Finn's curiosity would lead him to unwrap at least one more present. Another part, the bigger part, realized he'd evolved into a male version of Miss Havisham. Some freak who never gets on with things. Someone Finn could write a story about, or worse, and more likely, post as a meme.

So Nate composed an email in his head. It sounded okay until he wrote it on his iPad and the predictive text kept jumping in. The marriage hadn't gone forward. It'd been a shame (delete) shock. And he was sorry he

hadn't connected (delete) contacted them earlier. He couldn't, in good condition (delete) conscience, keep their gifts. These measly sentences went out to a group list Misty had sent him before the wedding. Just as he pressed send, he wanted to say more about how it had been her decision, not his, and something about the misery that had followed.



After a humiliating exchange at the Air France kiosk—tears, rage, the whole shebang—Nate had hoped to discover Misty back at the house. The heavy-footed, sweet natured Darlene was dousing the dahlias out front and looked surprised when he'd emerged solo out of the cab. Darlene shut off the hose and it dribbled over her bare toes. Nate breathed hard, trying not to lose it. “Misty,” he said. Words crumbled off his tongue. He spit them out one by one. “She...? Here...?” Darlene stepped back so her heel dropped into the garden soil. He couldn't look at her face. “I thought you were... I mean... Paris?” He simply said, “Thanks.” But for what?

The apartment was exactly how they'd left it. He checked the bedroom to see if she'd returned to collect her things. Dresses and shirts still hung in

half the closet, underwear and socks, minus those in her suitcase, in the top two drawers of their dresser. Nothing disturbed. Including the gift pile.

He called Misty's mother. Choked out the story, and expected her mother to indulge in the panic, but she only sounded disappointed. "She's prone to it," she said.

"To what?" Nate said.

"Cold feet. She's quit so many things. Ran away from summer camp after begging us to send her. Dropped her part as Cornelia on opening night of an amateur King Lear. Hitch-hiked home from tree planting after only three days. Art school. Don't get me started about art school."

"But this wasn't camp. Or art school. She was there. At the airport. With me."

"We didn't think... not after the wedding... Maybe before, but not after." There was a long disappointing silence. "We'll let you know when we hear from her. First thing."

Nate thought of things Misty had picked up and quit in the two years since he'd known her. Pottery. Yoga teacher training. Goddess kitchen blog. Ukulele. Calligraphy. But those were things, hobbies. He was not a hobby.



That first night he lay on the floor beside the gifts, not sleeping. Next night too. Eventually she contacted him via voice mail. She'd been crying, speech punctuated with hiccups. She loved him, she'd said, would always love him. It was her, not him, etc. Then she went on to explain how she'd gone to the washroom, as she'd intended, but when she emerged, she stood in the terminal watching the hoards, each person looking dazed, sleepwalking, deadened, and she had a moment of clarity, that if the marriage continued, it'd be like stepping onto a conveyor belt, that they'd go forward the way everybody went forward, driven by external conventions and traditions, jumbled by modern assumptions... and she couldn't, just couldn't. She wanted an annulment. She'd figure that all out, send him papers. Then she'd go into a contemplative period. Quit her job, disable her email, avoid social media. She'd already left the country, having swerved through security and into terminal two where she'd bought a ticket to L.A.; she'd be leaving the next day for Thailand. "Please don't try to find me," she said. "Please get on with your life, Nate. You deserve good things."

Modern assumptions? External conventions? Good things?



WTF?

He'd listened four or five times to figure out what she meant. Then called Ramona and repeated the whole message. Ramona had said, "Did she read *Eat, Pray, Love* or something?"

His phone still had a crack down the screen from where he'd thrown it. From where it hit the wall.



Coffee worked him into a frenzy, and he checked his email every minute on the minute for wedding guest responses. Only newsletters from charities he'd once donated to, plus a petition prefaced with words like *climate change*, *forest fires* and *unprecedented*. He signed it and then received thanks for signing.

At precisely ten, Finn emerged from his room, walked toward Nate as though wearing flippers on his feet, hair poking out in all directions and a white crust in the corners of his mouth. He folded over the back of the couch and then slithered over it onto the floor. His ribs seemed to collapse

as he slinked under the coffee table, and Nate could now picture how he had fed himself through the book deposit slot.

“Why’d you break into the library?” Nate said.

Finn popped up on the other side of the table and drummed his fingers on the glass. “Are you really asking?”

“No,” Nate said. He picked up one of the game controllers they’d left on the table, wound its cord tight, and set it beside his phone. “Well, yes. It’s not really your thing. Break and entry.”

Nate’s phone went off with a notification. He tried to stay focused on Finn. The crust still clung to Finn’s mouth, and a stale, brackish odour emanated from him. He writhed his bony shoulders. “Did you know that before microbes evolved, trees burned for thousands of years? Like non-stop?”

Nate shifted the controller to expose the phone. Ramona’s text: *Is he up?*

“Does it have anything to do with me not being around?” Nate asked. “You know, like do you feel I abandoned you?”

“The trees fell to the ground and never decomposed.” Finn karate chopped a stack of magazines. “Total kindling. Then lightning would strike and *boom*, fire. Burning and burning.”

“And that’s why you slipped through the library slot?”

Finn snapped his fingers and then pointed them like guns. “That’s why there’s coal on planet Earth.” Then he jumped up and marched over to the bathroom.

With Finn in the shower, he replied to Ramona’s text with a bright sunshine smile. He checked his email again, discovered one from Sarah Gordon, one of Misty’s best friends. She had another wedding next weekend and would gladly re-gift the serving plate she’d given them, since he’d offered. In a hasty postscript, she wrote about how sad she was things hadn’t worked out. Nate felt mildly irritated, and then irritated for feeling irritated. What did he want? More sympathy? Whatever it was, he didn’t want to see Sarah Gordon, so he told her he’d hide the gift in the barbecue for her to pick up any time. They’d be out all day. Where, he didn’t know, though anywhere to avoid face-to-face contact with the one friend whom Misty had probably consulted and knew more than he did.

The shower went on and on. Nate didn't want to think about what Finn was actually doing in there. Instead he slipped into Finn's room and unsheathed the gifts. He dug through three layers to unearth a flatish rectangular box with Sarah's bubbly handwriting all over the card. The wrapping was scrunched in the corners, and the box dipped slightly, from months in the pile. He had a great urge to slam it on the floor.

But Finn appeared in front of him, towel wrapped around his waist, droplets streaming down his cheeks and over his shoulders. Nate clutched the box to his chest. He hadn't heard the water shut off. "Can I get dressed?" Finn said. There was an interlude of silence. Nate felt mildly incriminated, had hoped to move stealthily without Finn asking a single question until every gift was gone. He stammered out an explanation. Finn frowned, then smiled, then crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue.



They spent the day traipsing through heat and smoke. Nate didn't notice until they came home that his clothes reeked as though he'd been roasting marshmallows and singing campfire songs. Really, he and Finn had spent a

couple hours at the Aquarium (Finn oddly nostalgic for it) uploading a billion pictures to Instagram and Snapchat. Nate posted a few goofball selfies of the two of them to show, in case anyone cared, namely Misty, how he'd gotten on with things. Then they stopped at the English Bay beach and ate gelato and tossed stones at logs and into the water.

Throughout the day, Nate's inbox filled with follow-ups. He'd checked during the sea lion show, at the octopus tank, and yet again when Finn did an annoying victory dance on the beach. One guest after the other said how sorry they were and how it was either not worth the postage to return whatever they'd given, and/or they figured he deserved to keep the platter, the crockpot, the engraved salad tongs, etc., after such an ordeal. He felt relieved because the final humiliation was over, yet disappointed because he'd finally decided to sever the last tethers to the wedding, and no one seemed to care.

When he and Finn got home, the upstairs kids were playing badminton in the backyard without a net. Finn did a clumsy cartwheel between them and they both went into fits of giggles. Nate peeked under the barbeque lid. Sarah's wrapped gift still there, like an unpalatable cut of meat. Maybe he ought to email her, ask her to help herself to the whole pile, distribute them to all her engaged friends. Or post on one of those

Facebook groups, cash in with an ad for prewrapped wedding gifts, give the money to Finn. Or... he could clear them out tonight.

After dinner, they drove with a loaded trunk to Main and Terminal. Nate couldn't remember exactly where he'd seen it, so he had Finn on Google, directing him way up Cambie. Then, a donation bin appeared, size of a commercial fridge, in a parking lot corner of a mini-strip mall—7-Eleven, Chinese restaurant, dental office. Just as Nate pulled in and turned off the ignition, Finn's phone rang and rang.

“You going to answer it?” Nate said.

Finn glanced at the screen and shrugged. “It's my mom,” he said. “I'll call her later.” He tucked the phone into the console and sprang out of the car.

Nate popped the trunk and fumbled with the keys. The donation box, framed by the windshield, looked like a smudgy painting. Red edges blurred into the smokescreen background, and no sun, only a weak glow behind the fence, plus a nearby dumpster, its lid open, plastic bags and wrappers dappling the ground. Too-large items leaned against the red box—a grubby toddler car seat, a ten-speed without wheels, a mess of tent nylon, and a kitchen stool with a busted leg. This seemed less a charitable endeavor and

more a charnel ground for unloved and broken things. Not that Nate thought himself charitable, though he'd believed, even as he'd driven here, that someone might benefit from, even delight in, what had been his misfortune. Thanks to Misty, a single mom might pick up a brand-new crockpot for a mere ten bucks. Some legacy.

Finn was already shuttling gifts from trunk to bin, shaking boxes as he went, opening the drop-box flap and tossing them in, when Nate finally stepped out. The air stank, regular smokiness infused with a greasy, bile stench from the dumpster. End of the world: everything burning and rotting.

Nate joined Finn at the trunk, where they each grabbed an armload and trudged over to the bin. Finn threw his bundle in first, and then Nate passed Finn what he had. Once they were gone, Finn pressed his face into the dark opening so that Nate thought he might climb right in.

“It wasn't a dare,” Finn said, his voice muffled by the donation bin void.

“What wasn't?” Nate said.

Finn turned and blinked a couple times. “The library,” he said, his voice pinched, almost shy. They both headed toward the trunk.

Finn heaped another several gifts onto Nate's outstretched arms, then grabbed the largest box and teetered a smaller one on top. "I'd just always wanted to try it." At the bin, he had to crush edges of the big gift so the wrapping paper tore—white with black roses—and the ribbon, which lost its curl months ago, slipped and fell to the ground. "Whenever we returned our library books, I'd ask Mom to put me in." He sounded brighter again, more himself. He shoved the box and they heard it drop onto a soft pile. "I like that there are other ways into buildings, besides the door."

Now Nate recalled how Finn had loved the milk box in Ramona's apartment, elven-sized doors on either side of the wall, Finn crawling in and out when he was two or three. His heart spasmed with a kind of joy. He wanted to squeeze Finn and spin him around until they were both dizzy.

Instead they stood peering into the trunk: one remaining gift, a thin square in brown wrap sealed with yellowing cellophane tape. Nate noticed ballpoint scribbled at an angle across one corner and debated whether or not to close the trunk lid, let the present kick around with the tire chains and rolled beach mat for another month or year. Finn flicked his fingers one by one and then dove for it. Nate grabbed it from his hands.



He couldn't remember seeing this one before. The inscription: *My loving husband, love, your darling wife.* The parlance Misty had played with in those brief hours after the wedding.

"It sucks that she left," Finn said.

It did suck. Nate started to peel at the tape, exposing the edges of what he figured must be a picture frame. Maybe, *finally*, this would tell him why. He glanced up at Finn, feeling a bit like a game show contestant, excited for the big reveal. Then a fat drop fell between them. A few more. On the asphalt, the brown paper, the back of Nate's hand.

They both looked up. The sky still hazy and gritty with smoke. Rain fell nonetheless, slow and unhurried. Coming from clouds they couldn't see.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Traci Skuce currently lives in social isolation in Cumberland, B.C. with husband, two grown sons and son's girlfriend, and new dog, Molly. She has a brand-new collection of short stories called *Hunger Moon*, released by NeWest press. She wishes she could go on her modest book-tour, but for now will offer readings on Facebook and Instagram. Follow her on IG @traciskuce.thewritingjourney or check out her website at [www.traciskuce.com](http://www.traciskuce.com).

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