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Moving Out

Laila Halaby

Nora shuffled around her house, her body stiff like the cedar chest she'd held onto all these years for its quality craftsmanship, and because it provided storage space for her four handmade quilts. For years the cedar chest had been gathering dust under a window in her living room, one soft circle glued to each corner of its underside so it would not scratch the wood floor should someone choose to move it, which no one ever did. Together she and her cedar chest had grown cumbersome and did not find a place in today's always busy world.

Nora wore leather clogs with rubber soles her daughter had given her so she wouldn't fall, \$100 shoes usually worn by nurses or people who had to walk long distances, no-slip pads protecting her as she walked from her bedroom to the kitchen to the porch to the living room to the kitchen and repeated these commuter trips throughout the day. She who had once crossed the country several times in a week, who walked across the Atlantic in high heels, now shuffled from one room of her silent house to the other in bulky clogs, serving no one except a sweet old mutt.



Nora didn't mind being alone and relished the quiet of the morning before she put in her hearing aids, before the neighbours began their bustle, before her dog began her self-appointed guard duty. She couldn't hear the crows or the gulls or the squirrels and when she stood still to watch the nature around her, she sometimes felt she was in a silent movie without the cheery score playing overtop. On good days—warm days when her bones didn't hurt too much—she stepped out onto her porch overlooking the bay; she watered her plants while enjoying the sun on her face and her back. On those sunny days the water looked as though a giant had opened up his fist and thrown a handful of glitter across the surface. When she lay in her bed and looked at the ceiling, the reflection of the water shook as though a film was being run through a projector.

She often thought of her dead sons and grandson on such occasions, the son who had died as a baby, the musical son, and the grandson who had loved movies and birds. She would turn toward the wall when these memories appeared, as it was too much for one moment to hold such beauty and sadness in the same breath. She spent a good deal of her days facing the wall and this disturbed her remaining two children.

The dead followed her, could be found scattered on the two oval braided rugs flanking her bed, though more so on the blue one where she set her aching feet each morning. The dead were inside her house and on her porch stretched out on wooden chairs and nestled deep under the rocks she had collected on her walks. The dead stretched



themselves to form glorious cloud shapes. They rode on the wings of the cardinal couple that visited each morning, tucked themselves as stowaways under a crow's feathers, or slipped like magic into an egret's bill. They were neither comfort nor terror, simply part of her every day.

Their presence had grown stronger and clearer as she aged, but she no longer talked about the spirits she felt close to her, nor did she mention feeling anyone's presence or catching glimpses of dearly departed friends or family or movie stars. The effort to be heard had become almost as much of a strain as the effort to hear. The years that separated her from her living relatives had become a moat filled with crocodiles.

Sitting on the other side of the moat lived her family who loved her and showed their love by desiring her things. Eighty years of life had allowed for a lot of possessions, some of them valuable. No one called just to call; they called if they remembered something they wanted or needed. They called to remind her of something she had to do. The fervour and frenzy of phone calls and emails and texts increased as moving day approached. Her children and grandchildren and niece and nephew were clamouring for a favourite piece of furniture, a favourite dish, a best memory wrapped in porcelain or gold or silver or mahogany or woven this way, painted that way. They each called more frequently than in the last many years combined, empty and sometimes desperate years.

She had taught herself to be the regal heron standing with its toes in the water, only vaguely

aware of all the busyness surrounding her. It no longer bothered her but it continually disappointed her. How to raise children so different from you? Perhaps it was the three decades of life that sat between them, or the thousands of miles she had covered in the air that gave her something they would never understand. Or perhaps it was the simple product of being an old woman. *Nobody likes an old woman. They've burned us throughout the ages.*

Nora kept her television on even though she had never been much of a television person and she couldn't hear it clearly unless she was wearing her hearing aids, and its volume was so high anyone outside could listen as well. The once-loathed television had become her predictable companion, a boring husband who did not require too much attention as he blathered on about this anniversary, that hurricane, this nuclear threat, or the horrors of having a maladjusted man at the helm. That was another story. While she leaned on her eighty years as an excuse to not do anything in the larger realm of the world, this current situation had her thinking twice.

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Nora settled onto the couch with the dog at her side to watch her Sunday night movie, part of her routine to keep out the chaos. Even with unpredictable flight schedules or life happenings, there were actions that grounded her, like stretching for five minutes every morning. Stretching was something she could do in her new home, though the

view would not be as pleasant as this spot on the bay. And Sunday night movies.

Six weeks remained hers until the moving van was due to come and retrieve the forty years of life she had not forgotten, donated, or sent to the dump. Just over forty days to pack the vestiges of forty years, four children, and four husbands.

Like a table or chair with its symmetry and balance, her life had four corners, four seasons, four score. She liked to play with these numbers.

When she mentioned four husbands and four children, her two living children would correct her. “Three husbands, Mama. Three husbands and three children.” They thought she was starting to lose her mind when in fact she was just opening all the doors and letting everything she had stored up for years mingle with what they already knew, which did not include her first husband and first child. She supposed that by today’s standards they would feel they had a right to know. What did it have to do with them? In what way would their lives improve if they knew they had had another sibling? He was dead, so what was the point?

I am the cedar chest with secret compartments, she thought. Under the false bottom are my first husband and dead son. Tucked in the bottom quilt is the reason I lost my second husband after only a few weeks of marriage. My third husband, the father of my children, fills the cedar chest. My fourth husband is on the half-shelf attached to the lid. My dreams are slipped between the panels of wood and in the tiny cache my first husband built, an entire space in the lid to store all that is mine and mine alone.

Each child and grandchild and great-grandchild had at one point in the last years gone to the corner of the living room under the window and opened the cedar chest. After varying degrees of time and varied levels of inspection, each child or grandchild or great-grandchild had closed the lid in disappointment, concluding there was nothing of interest in the four quilts and miscellaneous household items nestled between them. Her movie grandson had been the only one to return to it, to unpack its contents, and to use one of the quilts. Using the quilt had started out of laziness—she had been washing the fleece throws and he was cold and walking over to the chest was closer than going all the way to the hall closet where the blankets were stored. It started a new routine for him. On anything but hot summer days, he would go to the cedar chest and take out the top quilt—the one that was made for his father—and nestle under it while watching a movie. Even once the soft throws were returned clean and fresh to the back of the couch, he would opt for the quilt.

Nora had not opened the box since her grandson died, and she had removed the quilt he had loved to cover himself with on those Sunday movie nights and placed it on the couch. He spent so much time wrapped inside it that it still carried his scent: a mix of cologne and cigarettes and skin.

Over the last months, loose blankets and plastic bins had gotten piled on top of the cedar chest so it was largely ignored, like a diamond ring hidden under the rocks under the water that no one sees or notices except the heron looking over beyond his reflection for fish.

She was the heron with a sharp eye to spot the magic within the mundane, the lichen that grew between the planks on the outside deck, the acorns that wedged themselves there, toads between blades of grass, and her neighbour, Blaise, with his giant shock of white hair and his tiny decrepit wife. Every morning he would lift her off the dock and down to his tiny rowboat and they would go around the harbour while he checked his traps. She had had a stroke a few years ago but still rejoiced, in her silent way, at the trip around the harbour, and so they went. Nora couldn't see either clearly without binoculars, but she knew their routine and could make out his giant poof of white hair. *This is love*, she thought.

Her remaining son and daughter had pretended to fight over who would get to have her at home with them, but she knew that neither wanted her. As things now stood, she would be going to a tiny apartment in an assisted living home in a town she did not know that was equidistant from the two, "where you will be safe."

"I don't want to be safe. I would rather be dead." Her children couldn't bear this kind of talk, which was why they had increased their frantic push of assisted living facilities until she had finally relented. She admitted her house was too much for her to deal with, even with a cleaning person and someone to help with the yard. Easier to let go of the whole mess of it.

There were routines that came and went. This movie watching on Sundays was one of her favourites—a legacy of her dead musical son. He

had been very strict about television with his only son and had made a big production of family movie night every Sunday, which Nora was usually present for. When her son had fallen ill, these routines solidified in importance. When he died and his wife fled leaving Nora to raise another young man, she made sure to stick with it religiously.

What was a routine for her grew into a genuine love of movies for her grandson. She often thought that over the years the movies took the place of his parents. After he died, Nora couldn't bring herself to break the routine and would sit down to watch one of the movies he had given her while wrapped up in his quilt. For the last few weeks she had chosen *Gran Torino* and wished she had a cause worth going out in a blaze of glory for. Clint Eastwood was still rugged and appealing and was a good part of the reason she watched the movie every Sunday. Her grandson had been famous in their family for his movie gifts, for picking the most apt movie, one the recipient might not appreciate until later. *Gran Torino* was one such gift. Every time she watched, she found her dead grandson on the underside of a clever phrase, in the sleek lines of Clint's *Gran Torino*. In the purity of his final act. He was everywhere.

* * *

One more week until the movers came.

Her stuff was mostly still in the house, but with the help of her neighbour Genna it had shifted to different rooms, different piles. There

was her son's pile. Her daughter's pile (substantially larger). There were sub-piles. A corner of her room was devoted to the items to go with her to the new apartment. There was a huge pile to be donated and another huge pile to throw away. Today Genna was there with her boyfriend and her granddaughter to deal with the latter two piles. Genna had been a good neighbour since she moved in a few years ago. She was church-going, from a difficult background, and talked a mile a minute, which often drove Nora to sneak out her hearing aids in mid-conversation.

Even though Nora was in her own house and this was being done at her instruction, she was most definitely in the way. The dog was already locked on the porch so she wouldn't get out. While Nora couldn't help with the lifting and carrying, she also couldn't just sit while all of this was happening, so she put on her clogs and began her commute, but rather than going into rooms and participating, she leaned against walls and watched.

They were all polite enough. "Hello, Miss Nora." "Hi, Nora." "How are you, Nora?" She wanted to believe they saw her—I am eighty years old and throwing all of my belongings away and moving out of the home and place I love—but she knew they were focused on tasks and couldn't take her in. And so she smiled and nodded as they walked past with boxes of her life.

As the morning wore into afternoon, she found a box she had forgotten that still needed to be sorted. It had been upstairs and contained notebooks and papers. She hadn't been upstairs in

years and had no idea about the state of things there, though her daughter had said months ago that she had cleared out all non-essential items, as though it were an embassy in a hostile nation. Nora took a small stack from the box out to the porch to leaf through.

Up and down and thumps and *careful* and *do you have that end?* Non-conversations as they took all that was hers away.

Genna's boyfriend rolled a bicycle out from the basement and Nora called out that she had intended that for her great-grandson. "Please put it in my son's pile."

Genna turned her back to Nora and spoke to the boyfriend in words Nora couldn't hear but with tense shoulders and stiff hand gestures that made it clear she had intended to take it. Not malicious. Not in a thieving way, simply as someone with opportunity. And now she was irritated because this had been thwarted and she was blaming the boyfriend's timing.

Nora watched them and imagined throwing up her hands and kicking them all out. She envisioned shutting all her doors to the outside world and hunkering down in her house until she starved to death or fell and died on the spot. Or pulling a Walt Kowalski. Any of these was a death preferable to the prolonged dying that was ahead of her in a landlocked apartment among strangers.

* * *

They had finished the living room and upstairs and basement and were ready to take the boxes

out of her room. Nora had let her exhausted dog back in and she had settled on her pillow in the corner. Nora sat on her bed with her back to the entrance and leafed through a notebook. She was wearing her hearing aids so she heard the foot-steps. She was wearing her hearing aids so she heard Genna's granddaughter say, "It smells like Black people."

Nora froze.

She was wearing her hearing aids so she heard the quick movement and hiss of air that she knew to be Genna's.

"Nora, this is all what we are taking from here, yeah?" Genna asked her as though her granddaughter's comment had not been uttered.

Nora sat up straight and turned. She did not look at Genna, who was pointing to a short stack of boxes, but at her granddaughter.

She knew the girl was sixteen years old. Her mousy brown hair combed straight. Her heavy framed glasses square on her face. Four corners. She wasn't so special and yet here she was, talking like she knew a thing. The girl turned from her, but not out of deference or shame.

"Yes," Nora replied.

After the pile of boxes had been removed, Genna had instructed her granddaughter to clean off the shelves. Nora sat on her bed in a heightened state of awareness and continued to read through the notebook—her grandson's college English notes were peppered with lists: great movies, presidents, great leaders, worst companies—while the granddaughter cleaned. When she

turned around she saw the girl hard at work on the layers of dust that stretched across the shelves. Rather than taking a paper towel or rag and redistributing it in different form, she had gotten a brush and was systematically going from shelf to shelf, scraping, then sweeping, then wiping.

Nora smiled. *I am like those shelves. I have dust settled across my surfaces, not the easy kind that can be whisked away with a collection of underbelly feathers but the kind that mixes with the oils in the air, the years of disagreements, and almost requires scraping to remove.*

“It smells like Black people,” the girl had said.

Her son would have kicked them all out on the spot while shouting a righteous diatribe. She glanced down at the dog curled up on her pillow. If the dog had heard her son shouting, she would have barked at him in agreement.

Her daughter would have come up with a clever response and wouldn't have paid the girl or her grandmother or the boyfriend.

Years ago her daughter had been interviewed for a job at the hospital. She had not been hired even though she had been highly qualified and the two physicians who had interviewed her had liked her and found her impressive. They told her they could only hire one person and the other person who was up for the job was more culturally appropriate. Normally her daughter would have taken issue with this, would have gone above the doctors and screamed discrimination, but her nephew had just died and everyone had been shaken out of their daily shoes. A month later one

of the doctors asked her if she would be interested in doing training for free. “This will open you up to being hired when this position comes open again,” the doctor said, “which it will, soon.” The doctor made it out like she was being offered a great opportunity, but it was a lot of training and if she had gotten the job, she would have been paid for it. Her daughter had seen through it immediately and was furious and indignant and had refused the position. Nora realized the difference between them: she would have done the training, hoping that it put her in a better position to be hired later. Sometimes her daughter’s confidence seemed reckless, while other times it filled her with envy.

Nora thought.

This girl’s comment had shocked her and in her surprise she had said nothing, had done nothing.

Even though she knew the answer, she asked the girl scrubbing her shelves, “How old are you, honey?”

“Sixteen.”

“Come here, would you?”

She could see the girl hesitate and glance through the doorway toward Genna who was in the other room. Nora patted the space beside her on the bed in encouragement. The girl moved slowly toward her, but Nora had seen her put on an invisible safety harness and tether herself to Genna, as though she might need rescuing from an eighty-year-old woman.

“It’s very kind of you to come help,” Nora said, knowing it had nothing to do with kindness and

the girl would get a portion of the money she was giving to her grandmother.

“Of course. I am glad to help.”

“How are you keeping busy this summer?”

“I work in an animal shelter.”

“And do you like this kind of work?”

“I do,” said the girl, losing a bit of her fear, her facing lighting up. “I help animals, mostly dogs, who have been abandoned or whose owners can’t care for them anymore.”

“I see,” said Nora. “And what does this kind of work do for you?”

“It makes me feel like I am helping.”

“That is good. It is very good to help others, just as you are helping me now.”

The girl smiled, pleased with her goodness.

“I am wondering if you can tell me something,” Nora asked, putting her hand on the girl’s arm.

“Sure, what is it?” asked the girl, eager to show some of her animal knowledge, animal kindness.

“How is it that Black people smell?”

She watched the colour rise in the girl’s porcelain face. She knew the girl wanted to run but wouldn’t, given Nora’s hand on her arm. Nora remained smiling and quiet watching her.

Neither said anything. The girl’s head was bowed.

As they sat together in silence, Nora’s dead grandson leaned against her back and whispered. “You go, Grandma, put some *Do the Right Thing* on this *Birth of a Nation*.”

She could feel his power and let loose a deep laugh that startled the girl to looking up. Nora saw the tears in her eyes.

“Thank you for your help, sweetie. Come back to me when you have an answer to my question. You are doing a superb job on those shelves.”

Laila Halaby is a writer
and counsellor. Email:
lailahalaby1@gmail.com