The Box

This is what his mother tells him:

"*The night you were born, you were almost not born. You came sideways, not head to earth, but hip to groin. A contrary child. Troublemaker."*

"Don't fill his head with such foolishness," his father says, tutting at her words. "You will make him fachacht in the head. A mother should not say such things."

"And then who should say them?"

"No one!"

"You would like that, no?"

"Yes."

"Some peace and quiet?"

"Yes!"

"You know nothing!"

This is what he remembers:

A cow in the field lulling its heavy head as he passes.

The look of the sun through the wheat.

The sound of the bell on the cow, a cla-clunk.

The feel of the wind through the wheat, a whisper.

The dirt on his shoes.

The rock that he kicks.

His parents' voices raised in anger.

The beginning, in the beginning, before the beginning. Where does one begin?

In the Torah the story begins with Adam. Then Eve. Then the sons. The murder. The exile.

In the Torah things are ordered. All the disorder of life given shape and form. In the Torah there are answers to the questions. In school there are only questions. “What did Moses say to Pharaoh? What is the reason we recline on Friday night? Who is the daughter of Rebecca? Why was it Lot was not supposed to look back?”

His father asks him these questions too. His father bent to his book in the evening, the golden glow of the candle casting shadows in his eyes; his father bent to his book in the afternoon, the white light in the window reflecting the lighter snow on the ground.

His father will look up and say, “And the sin that was in Sodom. How many honest men did Lot negotiate with God to find?”

The boy looks back, quiet, staring at the pores in his father’s nose, thinking of him leaving the house with his box. “One.”

“At the beginning or the end?”

“The end.”

“And in the beginning?”

He turns to the window, looking out at the snow, the white hill in the distance. “Ten?”

His father makes a sputtering sound, looks down.

“Go. You are not here anyway.”

He knows he is expected to say something, but he turns and leaves the room.

Outside the snow is bright, the sky less so, a soft swirl of cloud hanging above him. The snow below shines in crystals almost blue. His breath is raw, white, clear.

He runs past the wheat, the breeze whistling through it softly. He hears the other boys off in the field. Sees the cow with its bell. Sees its eyes upon him as he passes, large, wet, peaceful. The

bell is silent as he runs and he hears his breath now and his feet on the rocks and the crunching, and then a jangling. A horse behind him, moving rapidly, then slowing, coming to a stop.

"Boy. Can you tell me the way to Kabryn?"

He looks up at the carriage, the driver looking down at him, behind the driver a shade drawn across a window.

"There," he points.

The driver nods and the horse sets off again, a jangling and snap of leather. He has never seen such a carriage before. He stands looking after it, stunned. It moves slowly, listing from side to side on the rutted dirt road until it is so far it is like a rectangle in the distance. He runs after it to find out where it is heading, catching up with it just as it pulls around a corner and comes to a stop in front of a house.

It is his house.

The man driving the carriage remains in his seat, staring straight ahead, much like his horse. At the side of the carriage, a curtain parts, then a man emerges, his hair white, his face red, his mustache large enough to serve as a broom. "This is it?"

The carriage driver grunts.

"How much?"

The carriage driver snorts and continues staring straight ahead.

"How much?" the man says as he descends from the carriage.

"Go," the carriage driver says. "Hurry." He snaps the reins so that the horse moves one hoof with reluctance.

"Ach!" the man with the mustache spats, waving his hand. "And you'll return?"

"I'll return," the carriage driver says as he moves off.

The man with the mustache shakes his head and sighs. The boy looking after the carriage driver sees the back of his head rising like a moon. Then he sees the man with the white mustache looking down at him.

"You live here?"

He nods.

"Your mother, she needs help?"

He does not know how to answer.

"Do any of you people know how to speak? Ach!" The man spits again. "Can't ride on your Sabbath, can't take care of your own ill. A man walks all the way to tell me this only to turn around and walk back. Another brings me out only as the sun's about to rise. Meanwhile your mother…"

He stops himself, looking at the boy.

"Come," he says, walking toward the house.

But the boy remains where he is standing. He has heard the screams. He has stayed outside to keep away from them.

Afterward they will say, "She is resting now." So they won't let him in to see her, even though he can hear the moans through the door.

"She's sleeping," they'll say.

"Dreaming?" he'll ask.

They will look confused, these women who guard the door. They bring pots of steaming water and have fresh linens draped over their arms. When they emerge from the room the linens are in the now cooled pot. He's seen a droplet of red spill over the edge once. Since then, he hasn't looked again.

It goes on for days, two, three, four, five.

All the while his father mutters downstairs. His father who has quizzed him even as his mother has groaned.

"You must learn. Even now. Life is hard. You must learn."

Does his father mean that he must learn even though life is hard? Or that life is hard and that he must learn that?

He doesn't dare ask. Even more than usual his father is focused on his book, staring into it unblinking as the women pass.

Only when the moans grow loud enough that the women stop and shake their heads, does his father make any sign he hears, blinking, then rubbing his eyes.

But it is only for a second, and then he is wetting his finger and turning a page so hard it sounds as if the paper might rip.

On the sixth day the moaning lessens. On the seventh it stops.

At first the boy is frightened, wondering about the silence. Is his mother still in there? Is she worse than before? Is she … gone?

He rises before everyone else, as he has done these past few days, creeping toward the door while the others sleep. He presses his ear to its side, straining to hear. He can feel the rough grain of the wood against his cheek, the cold of it, the lifelessness.

That was a tree, he thinks, but now it is a door.

That was my mother in there, but now she is …

He does not know how to finish the sentence.

He wanders into the front of the house, standing before the embers of last night's fire, feeling his tears hang like drops over the window when the icicles melt. He can feel his throat tightening, his lips turning. He can imagine his father telling him not to be a child. He can see the remaining embers,

light orange in the white flaking ash. He wills himself not to cry, to be strong, to stand still. Then it occurs to him that even if she's dead she is free of the moaning. No longer in pain. No longer trapped in the bed.

He begins to cry.

"Chochkala, what's wrong?" It is Mrs. Sapperstein. She is carrying something steaming again. But it is not a pot, he realizes. It's a cup of tea.

"My mother—"

He stops, unable to say anything else.

"Oh, she's much better, much much better. She's just so thirsty, the poor girl. You wait here and I'll get you some breakfast. You'd like some breakfast, no?"

He nods even though he doubts he could eat a thing. He is too happy to eat. He is standing still, but he feels like he is running.

Before he can see his mother he must have breakfast, Mrs. Sapperstein insists. And then he must bathe. And then his mother must too.

By the time they finally let him in, he is all but exhausted by the waiting. But he is happy and perhaps calmer than he would have been. He feels older as they open the door.

Then he sees his mother's face.

She is paler than he remembers. And thinner. And her eyes look tired, but shiny. She waves him over, her hand so slight it looks like a leaf on the wind. He moves to the side of the bed. She puts her hand on his and clears her throat.

"You have been a good boy?"

He nods, thinking his father might not agree.

"Your father, he has been good to you?"

Mrs. Sapperstein coughs behind him. “Come Shmuel, let your mother rest.”

“But –”

“It’s alright…”

“No,” Mrs. Sapperstein says. “There is too much to do and you need all of your strength. Your son has been a good boy. And he can be a good boy a bit longer, yes?”

She looks at him, nodding slightly.

“Yes,” he says.

“Good,” Mrs. Sapperstein says hurrying him out. “Tomorrow, there will be plenty of time.”

“There will be no time at all,” his mother says.

But the door is shut.

All that night the women come and go, bringing plates of food and baskets of rolls, jars of jam, a brisket that steams near the stove.

He wants to ask what it’s for, but he’s uncertain if he should. Mostly, he’s just relieved to see all this movement so different from the back and forth of steaming pots and red-stained linen. And a little bit too he’s afraid that it might have something still to do with that, all this food for his mother because maybe she’s still sick.

Then he hears the crying in the next room.

At first he fears the worst, imagining his mother in tears, her teeth clenched above the pillow, her black hair a spilled thing around her head.

Then he hears the cry again and realizes it is much higher pitched.

“Such a hungry little boy, your brother,” Mrs. Sapperstein says.

He looks up into her eyes, confused.

“Little Oskar. You have seen him, yes?”

He shakes his head.

“Oh, of course,” she says, touching his brow. “You will.”

“When?” he asks.

“Tomorrow.”

“What’s tomorrow?”

She starts to laugh.

“Yes, tomorrow,” she says again. And then she leaves the room.

The next day when he gets up he sees that the guests have already begun arriving, the men congregating around the baskets of bread, the women ladling broth into bowls and arranging small fishcakes on a large plate.

The crush of bodies is almost overwhelming and as he pushes his way through the legs of the men and waists of the women, he feels as if he is crossing a great distance. His father is staring into the fireplace.

“Poppa?”

His father doesn’t answer.

“Dahveed,” another man says clapping his father on the back. The man is much larger, his hand almost the size of his father’s head, and as he smiles his father appears unsteady.

“Morton,” he mumbles in his soft voice.

“A fine day, Dahveed. A second son. And a fine boy here.”

The man smiles at Shmuel, but his father continues staring at the flames.

“And Sarah?” the man says, lowering his voice.

“Ach,” his father frowns, waving his hand.

The man nods solemnly and moves away. Shmuel takes another step toward the fire. The warmth is almost too much now. Yet his father, even closer, appears to be shivering.

"Poppa?"

His father doesn't reply.

"It is time," the big man says from behind.

Shmuel waits for his father to answer, then realizes the man is speaking not to his father, but him.

Near the fire, before the hearth, a table has been draped in a cloth. And above it, in a basket of wicker, a small child dressed in white kicks its legs. It is his brother.

"Go," the big man says, pressing his giant palm against Shmuel's back.

Shmuel sees the flames behind the head of the child and hesitates.

"Come, come," a familiar voice chides. And Shmuel turns to see the Rabbi, his grey beard almost as long as Shmuel himself. He is a little man with a wrinkled face and a smell seems to rise from his beard and lips.

Another man approaches the table. It is Mr. Steinberg, Mrs. Steinberg's round husband. He is a bull next to the Rabbi's thin stalk. Still, the firm line of his lips can't hide their feminine fullness, nor his narrowed eyes, which are as warm as the cow's in the field.

The big man who urged Shmuel forward also comes to the table. He and Mr. Steinberg now stand at either side of the basket.

Shmuel looks down into the baby's pink face, pinched as if struggling with some internal question. The cheeks are smooth and the top of the head soft, the arms at the sides of the white gown full and meaty as sausages.

"Quite a boy," the big man says.

"Your mother should be proud," adds Mr. Steinberg.

The two men exchange glances and cough.

"Come, come," the Rabbi says again. Shmuel looks up to see his father now approaching the table. His eyes are looking down, but vacant.

"And now we are gathered," the Rabbi says.

The low murmuring of the other guests fades, only the sound of the women and their dishes in the background.

"We gather to celebrate a new addition to our community, our people, this family."

The Rabbi nods at Shmuel's father. Then, surprisingly, at Shmuel.

"A mitzvah is birth. It binds us and brings us full circle in our lives. It is the beginning that belies the end, God's answer to Sarah in her barrenness, to the children of Israel in the desert wandering. A new generation, that's what God demands. Be fruitful and multiply."

He nods meaningfully toward the guests and a man steps forward. He carries a small black box and has a beard that is just as black. He is large too, especially next to the Rabbi, his cheeks a ruddy red as if he's been standing by the fire.

"A covenant with God, we mark upon our flesh," the Rabbi says. "A people of destiny, chosen, wiling to do as God wishes."

The man with the box places it at the edge of the table. His clothes are black as well, his heavy coat matching his jet-black pants, his eyes black too, as if all pupil. Only his shirt is white.

"Oskah Melech Gersham, child of Dahveed Gersham and Sarah Gersham Olam."

Shmuel senses a movement in the crowd and looks to see where everyone has turned. His mother is in the far corner, near her bedroom, in a chair.

"Baruch atah adonai…"

The man in black begins chanting, all but drowning out the Rabbi's high-pitched whine, his voice so deep Shmuel can almost feel it rattle in his teeth.

"…elohaynu melech ha olam…"

The chanting continues, but Shmuel is barely listening. He is staring at his mother, a blanket thrown over her even though the room is so hot the man with the dark eyes has drops of moisture across his brow. She is swaying to the music, her eyes closed, almost as if she is falling asleep. Shmuel tries to catch her eye, but she is lost to him, in some other place. She appears to be looking out from far away at the far end of the room, and when Shmuel glances at his father only to see him looking at her too, he feels a shiver despite the heat. His father is not himself. His face is not his.

"Asher barchabanu mekol haolem, venachtan lanu et torah toe, baruch ata adonai, notain ha torah."

The chanting stops and Shmuel turns back to the table only to see the dark man open the black box. Inside there are silver tools, instruments. They lie arranged on a mat of red velvet. They gleam like fish from a stream, caught and on a riverbank.

The dark man's ruddy hand reaches in and briefly fingers one of the silver pieces. Then it emerges, and both seem to float from the box to a place just above his brother's midsection.

What is it his father does when he leaves with his own box? Shmuel has wondered for almost as long as he can remember. He has watched from the corner of the room, knowing his father will not tell him. And now he watches his father watching the hand of the other man as it brings the knife-like tool down in a place Shmuel turns his eyes from not to see, a movement like sawing beginning, his father's eyes cold as Shmuel looks up, the other men's eyes slightly averted, their palms pointed downward, pushing against his brother's tiny shoulders and legs.

"Take this."

The Rabbi is pressing a cloth into his hand.

"Dip it here."

He motions to the silver cup in his other hand filled with wine.

"Then touch it to your brother's lips. It is a blessing. An honor."

Shmuel dips the cloth slightly in the red, watching it stain, thinking of his mother's linens, his mother who is watching from the opposite side of the room.

"Now touch it to your brother's lips."

Shmuel brings the cloth closer to his brother's face, trying not to see what is happening, but his brother's mouth is wide and he fears he will smother him.

"Touch it," the Rabbi says.

The old man's fingers clasp his wrist, guiding him. As soon as they let go, Shmuel's hand falls away.

"Closer."

The Rabbi forces his hand again, covering his brother's crying mouth. There's a gurgling.

"He can't breath."

"Closer!"

The gurgling continues, but Shmuel can't tell if it is from his brother or himself. He tries again, but he can't look, can't bear the expression on his brother's face, turns to look toward his mother again, only to see the door to her bedroom closing.

He looks back at the table and sees his father turning from the door too.

"Closer, Shmuel! Can't you do anything right?!"

There's a gasp. But it isn't from Shmuel or his brother. Mr. Steinberg's eyes are wide. The big man frowns.

"Here, son," he says, taking Shmuel's hand.

Together the two cover his brother's mouth, their fingers interlaced, the gurgling silenced.

"Amen," the voices say. And his brother's mouth is free, his mother's door closed, the men heading toward the food, one of them clapping his father on the back.

"Too bad you can't cut your own son, still he did a good job, yes?"

But his father merely glares and walks off as the dark man closes the box with a click.

That night in bed Shmuel sees the scene in his mind again and again, clearer even than when it was happening, the thing he thought he couldn't watch now something he can't stop watching.

He sees the silver instrument floating above the table where his brother lies, the hand at the end of it blue-veined, long-fingered, red around the nails; the silver's moving then hovering above his brother, the middle of his brother where the cloth is, another hand, gnarled and claw-like, moving over the clean and white and his brother's small and pink pizzle out in the open. Then the silver's coming down from above, like the lamp above the ark in the synagogue that always hangs there, its lip of flame licking around the edge so that the black line of oil smoke rises, mixing with the other scents in the synagogue, the stones, the damp of them, like the well where they draw the water, a crank, a rope, a pail. But the water is so soft and reflecting under the sky while the silver thing touching his brother is sharp. It's like something at the end of a line when fishing and hooked, Shmuel, knowing this having seen the same in his father's wooden box, the one that sits on the shelf and which he is never supposed to look in though he has, thinking it has something to do with the pointer in the synagogue, the silver stick with the tiny sculpted hand and the index finger at the end pointing. But why a hook?

"It's to guide you while you read," his father had said.

"Why not use your real hand?"

"It is too sacred," his father had smiled. "The scroll cannot be touched."

"It will break?"

"No," his father frowned. "It is made from parchment."

"Parch-ment?"

"Animal flesh. A cow. Like the heifer in the field."

Shmuel had looked toward the window, thinking of the one with the big eyes, the friendly eyes.

"A cow?"

"Yes," his father had said returning to his book.

So the scroll was from animal flesh. The book from life now dead. And it was too holy to touch. Must be treated gently. That was a commandment. But his brother, they touched him, the dark man, with the silver tool of his own, like his father's, so sharp. Shmuel knew. He'd felt it. And he can feel it now, can see his brother, his pudgy legs out, his little boy's *thing*, the other thing pressed down and moved back and forth on it, like a sawing, a red welling, a red fleck on the white cloth, his brother's mouth wide, and the men holding him, Shmuel holding the cloth to his mouth, his red mouth, his reddening face, his face almost purple and swollen. They did that, right there, in the middle of the room. And then they put the cloth back, said amen. And ate.

He had to run from the room and close the door to where he slept. Had to breathe deep to keep from being sick. Had to tell them that he was too sick to eat when the women came knocking. And now finally they are all gone and he is alone, and able to think, to forget them, forget about them knocking, coming for him. To relax. Though he's not relaxed. He keeps seeing it, the silver line descending, the silver hand pointing, the silver hook catching, the fish, the blood, the vein, the cloth. The oil smoke, stone grey, water rising, reflecting in a wooden pail. The dark wooden box that his father keeps on the shelf. The books he leans over, talking low to himself, seeing nothing but them even as Shmuel and his mother pass, his books that he closes with a softness that is silent yet seems to Shmuel like a thud, the books he closes only to eat, to glare at Shmuel, or ignore him, the door

behind his father clicking closed, the box his father has and the box the man had and the red welling and his brother crying and the dark and his room and his own *thing* and the women laughing and the people eating, like it's nothing, something they've all seen before.

Which he finds the next day, after he talks to his friend Naphtali, the one with the older brother, they have. They all have.

"How do you know?"

Naphtali looks at him sideways like he expects Shmuel is going to say something else. Then he laughs.

"You've never seen a briss? Never heard of it? It's a … thing. A ritual. They do it to everyone. Every boy."

Shmuel just stares.

"You. Me too. All of us. All Jews."

Shmuel narrows his eyes.

"My father too?" he says.

Naphtali just laughs.

"Of course."

"And my moth—"

But he doesn't even have to finish the sentence, Naphtali is laughing so hard and pointing at him with his finger.

"Your mother? Your mother has a pisher?"

Shmuel shoves him, but Napthali can't stop laughing, so he pushes him again until his friend falls over, looking up at him, quiet. But still smiling.

Once he knows, he knows. Knows there are tools, sharp things, hooked things, for hurting the flesh, the boy place, that the women laugh, and the men take part, then they eat.

He knows. And he can't believe that they did that with him. That they all sit in the room now with him as if it were nothing. As if they hadn't held him down, prayed over him, put a wet cloth to his mouth. As if they didn't know. And it makes him feel he can't look at them or meet their eyes. Can't be in the room with them or trust them.

Then something else happens and that all seems like nothing.

Because then there is another box, even shinier, and smoother. A larger box, one that they lower into the ground.

"She is in a better place," his father says. "Don't cry. You are a man almost now."

He tries not too, sniffling hard.

He remembers his mother in the bed only the night before, the way her eyes seemed both to look at him and above him, bright with wet, her words a raspy whisper, his ear close to her lips so as to hear her. "Like this you came into the world. This room. I remember. And I was weak then too. So tired. Backwards. Your feet rather than your head. Like an onion. Growing backwards. Coming backwards. That's what the doctor said, pulling you into the world. 'Just relax,' he said, as if he knew anything. 'Just relax.' I am so tired. So tired." They took him from the room then and he heard the familiar coughing, though fainter. The wet of it, like something pulled from the mud. A shoe covered with it. A rock. A bone.

"Baruch ata adonai…"

Another prayer. They raise the box, their hands on either side of it. He is there too, reaching up, his fingertips barely touching the wood.

"Eloheynu melech haolom."

They raise it before they lower it, a kind of mocking gesture, he thinks, first one way and then the other.

"Ashes to ashes."

Ashes are dry and his cheeks are wet.

"Dust to dust."

Adam was dust and his mother's cough was wet.

"Amen."

And then the clods of earth hitting the suface. A hollow sound.

"Go," his father says, nudging him.

He grabs a handful of dirt. Drops it. It scatters like rain over the surface. A softer sound. Not a thud. He's glad of it.