

As Abraham to Isaac

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Abe didn't want Misha to grow up so fast. Be a boy a little longer, what's the hurry? As if it's so easy to be a man, as if it's fun? But with no school, what else for him to do but work alongside Abe at the sewing machine?

And now the baby was coming. And the midwife already gone, one of those possibly not coming back. And the orders for Jews to stay in their houses, soldiers goose-stepping past their windows day and night. Abe heard, even in his sleep, the crack of boot steps. Every now and then a different crack, something worse than boots. Sometimes, a scream.

Today, no screams, not outside and also not inside, where who could have guessed Abe would have welcomed a scream, wanted a scream, prayed for a scream. With his Manya on the bed, Manya who never screamed like the other wives, not when Misha was born, not when the twins came. And not screaming now, but moaning, her face red with pain and something more, writhing on the damp bedding, gripping her belly with both hands, holding tight to the child inside.

"*Nit itst,*" she groaned. "Not now. Not today." A child shouldn't come into this world, not right now, maybe later, some other day, some better day.

But a child doesn't know to listen.

So Abe sent the twins upstairs with heels of bread and cheese and, for toys, wooden spools from his sewing table, empty spools he had plenty. But every time he looked up, there the twins were on the landing, not playing, but watching. He had to shake a hand, send them back to their room. Should he move a bureau to block their bedroom door? Which was worse, let them see or lock them in like prison? Manya would never forgive him if he locked them in. Not now. Not today. Not with prison a word that hung in the air outside, threatened to seep under the door like smoke. Prison or something worse.

And Misha? “Boil water,” Abe said. “Mama’s soup pot. Stoke the fire.” And Misha did as he was told. Misha, not yet Bar Mitzvah, dragging the heavy pot from the pump to the stove, stronger than Abe remembered, or maybe arms get strong as needed.

When Misha was coming, Manya had walked the floor with the midwife. So strong she was, that first time, too strong to scream. Or maybe too scared barely to whisper, her voice stuck in her throat. The midwife had hushed and soothed, sent Abe for wood for the stove, never mind they had already enough wood for ten days, ten babies. By the time Abe had returned, there was Manya, stooping, pushing down with both hands on top of her belly, gloriously naked below her shirtwaist. The midwife reached between Manya’s legs, her hands easing, touching, stretching, manipulating. And, God forbid, it was as if the midwife was stroking between Abe’s legs. The sight of it. When Manya pushed, Abe had to push too, could not hold back, had to run outside, ripping at buttons, swollen, bursting, pumping seed into the dirt. Thank God he wasn’t Catholic like the Poles in town. He’d have had to run straight to confession. Lucky Jew, instead of looking on a punishing priest, he got to kiss his Manya and look on the innocent face of his son, wrinkled, like an old man already wise.

With the twins, not so easy, but the midwife knew what to do. Manya on the bed that time, like now, too weak to walk the floor, too weak to scream. Two days moaning, whimpering. The midwife again with the hands, stroking and prodding every inch of Manya’s belly. How she knew there were two in there? By the feel of it, here a hand, there a knee. And that belly, so huge and white and frightening, no wonder the midwife sent Misha down the street to Rivka the baker’s wife. Don’t tell anyone, Abe would have liked also to go, like a scared little boy, let Rivka take care of him too. But he stayed, stoked the fire, boiled the water, handed over clean bed linen as

needed, new sheets Abe had stitched and Manya herself had washed and bleached and pressed, then folded and stacked in joyous preparation.

After two days, Manya stopped moaning, which Abe had thought was good. Finally, a rest. Two days nobody had slept. But the midwife was suddenly wide awake and all urgent business, once again with her hands between Manya's legs, this time not just to catch. This time reaching in, actually in, where once Abe had wanted only to be, to stay, his private place, now the midwife's place, her fingers, her hand, her wrist. And Abe not swollen this time, but shriveled like one of Manya's dried plums, if a plum could feel fright. Then came the water and the blood and the girl and the boy.

Yetta and Yisroel, but not yet, bad luck to name a baby just born. For the girl would come later a quick prayer in shul and a name. For the boy, a bris on the eighth day. Before that, no guarantee the baby would live. But on the eighth day it was safe, and Reb Shmuel the moyl would cut the boy's foreskin and give him a name, like every Jewish son and father and grandfather all the way back to Abraham the Patriarch.

The midwife didn't need names, cooed at the babies, *Mamaleh*, *Tataleh*, gave Manya and the babies a soothing bath with a cloth dipped in warm water—finally some use for that water Abe had been heating for two days in Manya's big pot. Then she dressed the babies in cotton gowns stitched by Abe himself, with hand-rolled hems as fine as linen hankies for the Tzar, and set one babe on each of Manya's breasts, the boy on the left and the girl on the right. The girl, soon to be Yetta, with her startling fringe of red hair peeking out from her swaddling blanket, no need to open diapers to tell this girl from her brother.

At last, the midwife took that pot back into the kitchen where she washed out Manya's blood and the babies' mucousy membrane, scrubbed and boiled and scrubbed again, and put up to cook a fat chicken for some soup. Her fingers proved as deft with dough as

with the secret skin of mothers, kneading and stretching to form meat-stuffed kreplakh, dumplings shaped round for the circle of life, you'd think she was making Rosh Hashanah soup. And while this holiday soup simmered on the stove, filling the air with its nourishing smell, Manya held one tiny head in each hand and guided two open mouths to suckle, nourishment only she could give. A miracle.

Where was the midwife now, when Abe needed her? Where was a miracle now?

Twice Abe had seen, and he knew Manya was not doing it right this time. Arching backward instead of bending forward, grasping and pulling up on her belly with both hands from below, when she should be pushing down from above. “*Nit*,” she insisted through clenched teeth. “No, no, no.”

Even when the water gushed out onto the bed, a sign, Abe knew, that soon would follow the baby, she refused to take off her skirt, her undergarments. Not from modesty, Abe understood, despite young Misha’s wide, watchful eyes. Manya crossed her legs tight and held on. As if keeping her underpants on would keep this child safe.

But it could not be done.

“Quick, Mishky, a clean sheet,” Abe shouted as the fluid continued to gush and soak. Together, he and Misha rolled Manya to one side then the other, stripped off the wet sheet beneath her, lay down the clean and dry, not new this time, but Abe had patched and laundered, Manya having refused any part in these preparations.

“My scissors,” Abe demanded, and Misha ran to fetch them from the sewing table. Then Abe was cutting off Manya’s skirt, her underwear, and already he could see the head bulging between her legs. The red hair, like Yetta’s, slick and dark but undeniably red against a tender pink scalp, thanks God, must be another sweet baby girl.

“Push, Manya, push.” But she refused to help. Closed her eyes and gritted her teeth. Might have refused to breathe if she could.

Never mind determined mother and inept father. This baby would come on its own. On his own. Another boy in Abe's surprised hands. A strong boy, opening his mouth to give a lusty geshrei.

"Here, boil," Abe said, thrusting the scissors into Misha's hands. "Hurry." And then he was cutting the cord with the clean, hot blades, then pushing on Manya's belly the way he'd seen the midwife do, pushing and catching the bloody mess that came after. Then it was Misha, poor Misha, dipping dishcloths into the pot for Abe to clean the baby, to clean Manya. Misha, his shirttails untucked and spattered with blood, watching Abe wipe Manya's face, Manya's bottom, parts of his mama that a boy should never have to see.

The last thing that needed to be done, Abe had never seen firsthand. The father was always sent straight outside after the birth, as if an entire forest of wood must be chopped for a baby, some things a man should not see. That's when the midwife would scald a sharp sewing needle, measure a length of strong silk thread—maybe, for Manya, needle and thread from Abe's own sewing table—then stitch up the new mother's torn flesh down there, as easy as Abe might tat together a torn lace collar. He'd never seen it done, but he didn't have to see to know. First time after childbirth when he tried to be together with his Manya, then he saw, with his fingers if not with his eyes, the midwife's fine needlework. Abe also was handy with a needle, but not like that. He pulled down Manya's nightgown, covered up the flesh that needed mending. Would be all right. Would have to be all right.

One more time Misha helped. They rolled Manya this way and that, pulling out the soiled bedclothes, spreading and tucking the last clean sheet. She would not look at Abe, would not look at Misha, hardly looked at the baby, guiding its mouth to her nipple by instinct, the way a mother knows. Now Misha looked away, never mind all he had seen and done today, still a boy suddenly embarrassed by the sight of suckling at the breast.

"So go," Abe said, "bring the children." And Misha charged up

the stairs. How easily he carried down the twins, Yetta with one thin arm around his neck, Yisroel sucking a thumb, not even holding on. They knew Misha would not drop them. A good strong boy.

This time, Abe had been hoping for a girl.

A boy needs a bris in eight days. But Reb Shmuel the moyl was like the midwife, one of the gone. Reb Shmuel had circumcised Misha and then Yisroel. Each time, a big party, friends and relatives and even the hungry young learners from shul. Abe had bought herring and schnapps. Manya's mother and sisters had baked pastries rich with butter and cream. For Misha, Abe's father held the baby as Reb Shmuel brandished his knife for the ritual cutting. Manya's father had to wait until Yisroel for his turn to hold. For a bris, everyone knew, the father's father came first, that invisible thread of covenant tethering son to father to father to father, through all the generations of Jews.

This time, there wouldn't be a party, not with Jews forbidden to walk the streets, and besides, who was left? Grandparents gone with the gone. Aunts run off to the forest with the last of the young learners, prayer books scattered on study tables in the empty shul, cake pans abandoned in kitchens, fires left smoldering in ovens. Abe might have taken Manya and the children to the forest, too, if they hadn't been waiting for this baby, trapped by waiting for this baby. Now the baby was here. And the bris was a commandment, could not be skipped or postponed. Who would take a knife to this nameless little one's penis eight days from now?

Abe's hands trembled just to think about it. They shook at his sides. Those hands so steady near the flying needle of any sewing machine. Give those hands a scissors, they would cut the fabric for a pair of trousers in one cut, never once needing to fix a mistake. With a baby, no mistakes allowed. It was supposed to be a mitzvah to cut your own son, ever since God commanded Abraham to circumcise his son Isaac. Of course later, that same God commanded Abraham to take a knife to Isaac's neck, then changed His mind. A test. Life isn't hard enough, a father needs such a test?

It was dark out, long past suppertime, and the twins were whining what's to eat. Manya needed red meat, on account of the blood she had lost, but there hadn't been meat for weeks, her soup pot still red from her own blood, no chicken on hand for a soup. Where was the midwife when soup was needed? Where were her hearty stuffed kreplakh to fill empty stomachs? "Just because you dream of kreplakh," Manya would tell him, if she were talking to him, not closing her eyes and turning away, "it don't mean you got kreplakh." Manya didn't believe in wasting time on dreams.

There were some eggs Abe could boil for supper in another pot, a small pot, a clean pot, except he could not face any more boiling water, not today. He would pour everyone a glass of milk, slice more bread and the last of the cheese. Just yesterday, Manya had baked this bread, moving about this kitchen as if her time would never come, making for her family a miracle out of spelt when the flour bin yawned empty.

Abe pulled a bread knife from the dairy drawer, felt the weight of it in his hand, and wondered. Which knife would he use for the bris? Meat or dairy? What would God have to say about this, God and His rules about keeping kosher? Such a question, Abe must be crazy. What father would ask such a question, and what God would require it?

But what choice did he have? The miracle of spelt into bread was yesterday's miracle; today, no miracle of soup and kreplach, and also no miracle coming in eight days. Reb Shmuel the moyl was not coming back. It would be up to Abe.

Eight days from now, Abe would pick the sharpest, finest blade he could find, hone it on the stone he used to sharpen his sewing scissors, boil it in Manya's soup pot like today. And then he would say the prayers, the blessings, and give his new son a name, make him a Jew, as Abraham to Isaac.