

## "The Box"

Afterward, when she heard its mewling, newborn cries, Anna helped her mother clean up the blood on the bathroom floor. They used the good towels, their only towels, to sop up the birth, carefully scrubbing the grout in between the tiles, the forgotten area behind the toilet, and the cracked and peeling linoleum that did not want to let their secret go easily, having sucked up the life that spilled onto it like a giant, chintzy leech.

"Does it have to cry so much?" Anna asked her mother, worried that the neighbours might hear and tell her father. Then there would be terrible trouble.

"That's what babies do, Anna," her mother said. "You cried when you were born and so did your sisters. It's a good thing, it means he's healthy." Anna doubted this part very much. His *thing* — she knew it was his *thing* because it was right between his legs where her *thing* was — was dark purple and withered and Anna wondered if it would eventually shrivel and fall off like what her mother told her would happen to the tube attached to his belly button. She watched as her mother brought the baby to her breast and let him take the full circle of its tip into his mouth. He quieted and drank, sounding like her big sister Abby wherever she had a Slurpee. But there was no Slurpee coming from her mother's breast, Anna was almost sure. Something milky yellow pooled around the baby's mouth and he seemed happy with it.

She saw water in her mother's eyes and Anna wondered if the baby was biting her, but then her mother wiped at her face, sniffed and let out a long breath. "Would be nice having a boy around here, don't you think?" Her mother asked.

Anna thought about this, about how what little there was to eat would be rationed and part of her already meagre portion would go to his mouth, how her hand-me-downs — so thin

from wear that you could see her elbows and knees through almost everything that was supposed to cover them — would be mended and made not new but wearable and suitable for a boy. Then she pictured her father in his oil-stained overalls with his sour whisky breath creeping in on the baby when it was dark, taking the liberties of the damned. She shuddered. "No," Anna said, "we can't keep him."

"I know," said her mother, hugging the baby tightly, letting him get his fill. "I know, but in another life it would be a wonderful thing, a real blessing. Here, take the rags and put them in the tub and fill it with water and no more than half a cup of bleach. Can you do that for me?" Her mother removed the baby from her breast and swaddled it, naked, in her little sister's Dora the Explorer pillow case. The baby slept.

Anna filled the tub with water and bleach as instructed and swirled and mashed the bloodied towels together. Rusty pools of birth sloshed out of them and tinged the water a sickening, dying color that turned her stomach, but she was strong and so she scrubbed and ran new water until the towels were an unburdened white yet again. She put what looked like a thick white sponge onto her mother's panties and helped her bring them to her hips. Her mother reached for her, held her to her chest and kissed her head, sobbing into Anna's hair, kissing, hugging, and sobbing. "Sorry, Anna," her mother said. "It's just not a normal thing for a mother to give away her baby, it tears a little piece of your heart out and it will never beat the same again. And you, you're too young to have to see this, Anna. You're my baby, too, and it's not fair of me to rely on you like this. If you hadn't been sick from school today..." she stopped, not wanting the child to feel at fault, and kissed her again. "But I'm lucky you were with me, Anna. So lucky. You're my angel, baby."

They dressed into clean, unsoiled clothes and set the others to wash with the towels, again. Outside, the air was cold and their sole-flattened boots slid and skidded on the fresh dusting of frost, making the going slow and treacherous for the baby, who was bundled snugly inside his mother's coat. They walked toward the hospital, where her mother told of a *baby box* where they could secretly put him. "It's warm and lit up like a small little room with blankets and everything," her mother said.

"Will he live in the box?" Anna asked.

"For a little while, a few minutes maybe, but they'll know he's there almost as soon as we drop him off and they will pick him up and take good care of him until they can find him a nice home. He might even get to have sisters or brothers and a dog or cat and could even go to school with you one day, but you'd never know that he was your brother." A blaring, neon white hospital sign seemed to interrogate them as they walked past, but they continued beyond it, toward a nondescript jutting of brick near a side entrance. Behind the brick wall, a clear microwave-sized box was set into another wall. Dim light flooded a nest of blankets inside the box and overhead, engraved on a plaque just above the clear plastic read the words, *Love is life, life is love...because you wanted the best for me, I will live in love.*

Her mother shook with the great flood of tears, coming so hard and fast they created a small pool in the triangular hollow of her neck. Anna held her mother's leg, feeling helpless and sad, the kind of sad little girls should never be allowed to feel, but she felt it anyway. And she cried, too, cried because her mother was crying, cried because the baby was silent, cried because it would be a childhood-long struggle to conceal this day from her father, from her sisters. Mostly, though, Anna cried because she would be returning home, to her father, and her brother would be free.

Her mother unzipped her coat and removed the sleeping baby, hugged it and kissed it one last time, then held it out for Anna, who kissed the soft, fur-covered folds of his neck. They sang quietly to him, "I love you, you love me", a song Anna would never be able to sing again without remembering her brother, the loss of him. For a moment, Anna was jealous of him, knowing that he would go somewhere magical and safe and she and her sisters would be left to their father, again and again. She wondered why her mother didn't love her enough to put her or her sisters into the box but then thought of how hard it was for her mother to hide her pregnancy, even though she barely showed at all. Anna wondered if would have been different had she been born a boy.

As her mother laid her brother on the blankets, covering him and tucking him in, Anna felt she was still small enough to fit in the box, maybe with her knees tucked to her chest. She could *make* herself fit and then she would be taken somewhere magical, too, maybe even with her brother. The thought comforted her.

They walked away, empty handed, but for the knowledge of the box. Anna held her mother and her mother held her, but not for long. It wouldn't be long.