

BOXES

by Hiba Krisht

We are mopping the floors and sneezing.

“What if, there were someone here to appreciate this?”

She says it just like that: what if, comma. We move boxes around, spinning away when eddies of dust whirl up from under our feet. We flush water over the marble tiling and roll our pants up way past the knees. We have such sculpted knees.

Lama makes me admire her teetering box tower. “It’s a paradigm of modern architecture,” she says. She is long-legged. Her wrists are tawny and her blouses flare beautifully over her hips. She turns, on her toes, and gives a stiff, bobbing bow.

“Let me tell you why that is,” she continues. “It’s all about the internal structure. The brass and the glass and the filmy paper all stacked in rows. You know. All the juicy stuff inside. The prim and business-like brown is a lie.”

“A politician-like lie, or an eyewitness type of lie?”

Her smile is crooked. “Exactly.”

#

Lama’s mother is dead. She died when Lama was just outgrowing her ballet tutus. When Lama talks about it, it is with the air of one who picks honeysuckle over jasmine. It gives sunshine, she says, to graves. Our epitaphs are so mechanical otherwise.

Until this past weekend, Lama lived with her father, a 63-year-old used car salesman who sells his cars with acrylic-blue glass eyes hanging from the rearview mirrors. They ward off the evil eye. I have often watched their slick whites spin in the dust and the sun. He hangs them all around their little apartment in Ras Beirut. There is one in Lama’s kitchen. I have heard her say that she can’t take okra stew seriously when she feels there is someone nested in that eye, watching her through thick glass.

She can pick her flowers and violent shades of nail lacquer if she wishes, and when she walks across the lobby of Bank Audi to her

desk in the mornings, her tapered heels snap resolutely against the glossed floors. But this is not enough.

Which is why, this afternoon, while Lama is still at work, I am elbow-deep in packing paper, lifting out hand-painted saucers and teacups, squat octagonal saltshakers, and gravy boats that she uses for cream—relics of her mother.

Her father stands in the doorway, his shoulders looking unhinged, like they are waiting for someone to pop in the bones. “She’s calling it the Big Move,” he says.

“It’s just baby steps.”

He waits.

“It’s like a weaning process,” I continue. “She needs a lot of room.”

“Look,” he says.

I pause to examine a blooming crack in one of the saucers.

“Look.”

I look up at him. There is something spidery about his hands as his fingers curl up, and he plunges his fists into his pockets.

“People will talk.”

I place the saucer, unwrapped, on the glistening floor, and finish his sentence in my head: Because girls don’t move out.

#

My grandmother, Nana, has coffee cups that are brass and shaped like tulips. The blue-and-beige pentagrams painted in their swells have faded from seventy-odd years of holding hot coffee. Lama, Naji, and I balance them between our thumbs and forefingers as Nana folds soft cloth napkins and places them on our knees.

She looks at Lama. “Well, you could have come to live with me.”

“Nana, you are the darlingest.” She laughs a little, deep and well-strung, like hefty church bells.

Nana takes my empty cup and turns it between her hands. She begins to tell my fortune. She says that Naji and I will build a house on a hill in South Lebanon and oversee twenty-nine tangerine orchards. We will watch the sun brighten their tart orange rounds from our sweeping veranda with the scalloped parapet.

I look at Naji and cannot imagine this. Accountants do not build houses and do not own fertile lands. They marry girls from the city with bachelor's degrees and morning nursery jobs, girls who they like and have amiable friendships with, and who come from a long line of strong-hipped, square-shouldered mothers. He takes Nana's hand and kisses it. His face looks like it does when I suggest we get candied almonds *and* petit fours to serve our well-wishers, or when my father reminds him that he expects no less than three dozen perfect roses in my bridal bouquet. Naji has taken to asking if he needs to send *three* dozen little cousins to three dozen floral boutiques to pick those with petals like velvet.

"Why don't you tell my fortune, Nana?" Lama asks.

Nana's blue eyes sharpen and she licks her lips. "That," she says, "would be testing fate."

#

Sara, one of my toddlers at the nursery, offers me her painting. She has painted what looks like a chicken about to swallow the sun. It looks a little bit like Naji did when he yawned himself awake this morning. I whisper this to Lama as I start to scrub Sara's tiny hands with a star-shaped sponge. Lama, who always hangs out with me in the daycare on a Saturday morning, watches us with pent-up concentration in her inky eyes.

"Sara," Lama says suddenly. "Did you know that men are just like chickens?"

Sara shakes her head solemnly. She is focused on a persistent splotch of orange dotting her left thumb. She tries to push my hands away and picks at it with her fingernails.

"Well, they are. They eat and sleep and cluck. And ruffle their feathers. I think that's about all they're good for."

"Do they lay eggs?" Sara has now pushed my hands away completely. Her elbows stick out awkwardly as she rubs the sponge against the spot.

Lama turns to me. "Leila has a man. Do men lay eggs, Leila?"

I grin as I usher Sara and the other toddlers outside and into the waiting bus. I think of what will happen to them in the minutes they

are out of a woman's care. Soon the bus will rumble along, and they will lean over the seats to rip labneh-and-olive sandwiches from each other's hands, letting the filling spread all over their hands and mouths. They will crush juice boxes under their sneakered toes, and swarm all over each other in furious frivolity. They will do this all the way home. Then their mothers or their maids will meet them in front of their buildings and carry their small SpongeBob and Spiderman backpacks up four flights of stairs because the power is cut, as it is interminably throughout the long afternoon hours in years of post-war recovery.

I turn the lights off and lock up behind me. Lama is waiting in the hall outside and jingling her car keys.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"To the pharmacy."

"The pharmacy? Why?"

When we are there, we spend time browsing the rows. Lama picks up shaving cream and deodorant, and stares at the labels with unadulterated focus for about five seconds before she puts them back. She turns to me.

"Is there anything here you want?"

I think of Naji's lips, chapped because he picks at them when he is thinking. "No."

She is surveying a row of jars of baby food now. Creamed bananas, creamed peaches, peas and carrots, something akin to applesauce. She turns to me and says, "I need a pregnancy test."

She does not notice that I stand still instead of following her as she turns and ambles down the aisle, letting her fingers hover over tubes and bottles on the shelves until she picks a test and holds it to her chest.

I hold it in my lap in the car on the way to her place. I let the plastic bag shed itself from the box the slightest bit, just so I can see the smiling brunette with the swollen baby bump printed on it. There is something missing from this picture. I look out of the window to avoid speaking to Lama. My fingers tighten and whiten around the small thing in my lap.

We are soon in her fifth-floor apartment. I stand in the middle of her living room as she pees. There are curtains at her windows instead of blinds. The wooden arms of her couches are buffed, probably with plenty of wax-based furniture polish. There are too many things here: embroidered runners, bowls of white paraffin roses, apples, pinecones. All etched beautifully. My apartment—the one I share with Naji—has none of these things. On a Sunday morning, when the light is strongest through the East-facing living-room windows, I carry a pair of shears and clip the threads that have come undone from my furniture's worn upholstery. To Naji, this is acceptable. "Don't you understand," he says, "that extravagance is a sin?"

I turn when I hear her come in. Her face—when I look at it—is luminous. She forms fists and pushes them into her cheeks so that her lips part, sweet and pink. "I'm having a baby."

I stare at her.

"I'm having a baby, Leila."

I turn away a little, but I look back, wanting to see the glow fade, to see a miniscule vortex of hurt in her eyes. But there is nothing but coolness, and the glow stays.

I decide not to tell her that after this news, I spend ten minutes at home angled delicately over the toilet bowl. It all comes up—the fruit juice I spent half the morning sipping from tiny blue and yellow straws so that half-finished cartons don't go to waste, the small packages of organic crackers I had in lieu of breakfast because they are Naji's favorite brand. I vomit silently. I do not know why I stifle my own gags. Naji is at work and there is no one to hear me.

#

In the months that follow, I try to reason with Lama. It is too difficult, too expensive, too suicidal to be a single mother in this country. I tell her that her baby will have no citizenship, no country. I do not tell her that what bothers me the most is that she is unwed. I have a sickness in my gut when I think of this. Instead, I tell her that schools will not enroll him (or her, she butts in) without proof of citizenship.

"I'll homeschool her," she says.

"How will she go to college?"

"Are we really thinking about that now?"

I still have not told Naji. Naji likes Lama and is willing to put up with her idiosyncrasies most of the time, but this will be too much for his orthodox upbringing to bear.

"Let's call Lama," he says sometimes. He says this when we sit together on a Friday night with chamomile tea. We have chocolate-covered almonds and dried apricots scattered between our knees. Some fall between the couch cushions and neither of us care; that is work for the morning. It is winter, and my feet are pushed up against his legs. He patiently pulls a blanket—furry, and yellow and black as a bee—over my painted nails. I add sage to the tea to make it sharp and fresh. This makes him talk less. Sometimes our silences last too long and grow a little awkward, and this is why he says, "Let's call Lama."

I make excuses, knowing that Lama's bubbly enthusiasm, much more exaggerated these days, will give her away even if she says nothing. This makes Naji happy; apparently I would rather be alone with him.

Lama soon comes up with a solution. She plans her maternity leave. When her due date nears, she will fly to visit an aunt in Brooklyn. Auntie Maha is not her real aunt, but her mother's childhood friend who flew to Columbia for graduate school and never returned to Beirut. She lives on a diet of honey, tapioca, and cottage cheese, and takes her yoga as seriously as other people take their marriages. "She goes on retreats on the weekends," Lama tells me. "While she's in Nirvana I'll have her place to myself."

I imagine Lama carrying the swell of her belly around a New York flat, a luxurious space with 30-dollar face masks, fluffy-foamed baths, and lemon meringue pie. "The best thing about it," Lama says, "is that she is liberal. She'll buy the baby silk footie pajamas and bibs too pretty to spit on. She'll even give the baby her own last name."

I want to consult Nana, so I drag Lama with me. Nana ushers us in and spreads her coffee-table with sweet tea and butter cookies on chipped china plates, each layer separated with a sheet of wax paper. We sit each of us on one side of her, so that Nana has to turn her head right and left when we talk.

"I don't even know what she is going to tell her dad," I say.

"He'll be upset for a while, and then he'll come around. I'm all he has in this world."

I think of her father, cooking his own food, cleaning his own apartment, coming home to nothing but mosquitoes on the walls. I imagine him scrubbing his marble countertops. There is always somebody else to wash his cars. I decide to change the subject.

"She won't even tell me who the father is," I say.

"There is no father. There is a sperm-donor. He doesn't even know this baby exists. I will probably never see him again as long as I live."

I scratch impatiently at the couch's striped fabric. My fingers, anxious, object to Lama's terminology when referring to the man she slept with and discarded. I make my hands clasp each other, remain still in my lap. "Wow, so he couldn't even see it coming?"

"It has nothing to do with him."

"You can at least talk to him. Maybe he wants to be involved."

"I don't want him to be involved."

"Maybe he'd be willing to marry you for form's sake, so the kid can at least have legal papers."

"I don't want to marry him, or anybody else."

My toes curl slightly in my shoes. "Well, what will you do when your child starts asking for her father?"

"I'll tell her that he died hunting sparrows."

Nana places her soft leathery hands on our knees. "Maybe," she says slowly, "this is not the most standard way of doing it. But," She turns to look at Lama, "motherhood is a gift. If you want it this much..." When she shrugs her shoulders, it is a gesture so elegant and gentle that her lacy butter cookies settle comfortably in my stomach.

#

I watch Lama's belly and her obsession with probiotics grow. Almost daily, I lock up the nursery and drive to the bank to see her on her lunch break, constantly checking the rearview mirror. I am paranoid that Naji has sent someone to follow me.

"We have to think about our own reputations," he had said when she began to show. "When we have children, we want good people to know them." In my mind, I secretly agreed. But my priorities were friendship first, discomfort and uneasiness last. So I said nothing. I knew that arguing with him would mean spending the night passing a two-liter bottle of cranberry juice back and forth across the kitchen table, bleary-eyed yet not wanting to go to bed together.

As I drive I eat a cinnamon roll, or a falafel sandwich, or a cup of fava-beans-with-cumin that I stop on the corniche to buy. I don't want to partake in Lama's lunch. Watching her eat makes me feel slightly nauseated. She has taken to stocking up on all of the Lebanese yogurt-types: laban, labneh, shankleesh. She drives to far-away European delicatessens to buy sauerkraut, which she keeps in a place of honor in the center shelf of her fridge. Her breath constantly smells of sour cabbage. "I need to boost my immune system," she says when I complain. "We should embrace God's friendly creations. Bacteria are no exception."

She eats other things, of course. I sit by her desk and watch her clear space for her feast. I watch her sink her teeth into rosemary chicken, or spear grilled zucchini and broccoli with a plastic fork, or lift quivering spoonfuls of blancmange. Her bites are tiny and voracious. She rests one hand on the curve of her abdomen, content, as she eats.

Today, when I take my seat across from her, the worry lines on her forehead are unnatural, like ridges rising out of a plain. "What is it?"

She is twisting a handkerchief in her hand, so soft it sinks and folds, embroidered in pastels. It is the kind of handkerchief I would never buy or use. I think of how Naji separates tissue layers from each other and uses them one at a time. These are discount brands I buy in bulk.

"I don't think," she says, "that in your heart you are really supportive of what I'm doing. So I think it's better if we don't see each other anymore."

When I look at her, now, I see that the intense focus that defined the rounds of her face—her chin and cheeks, her eyes—is gone. There is something else, now, that I don't know how to characterize.

I don't want to think about it just now, or try to understand why she thinks or how she knows that I have had misgivings. I feel like ripping the handkerchief from her fingers, and wiping it across her mouth before I shove it into my pocket, leave the bank, drive to the corniche, and throw it over the rails. I want to watch it sink, small and soft and pastel, into the salty swells of the sea.

But I do not do this. Instead I nod, too proud to object. My nod is as stiff as her bow on that morning I helped her move.

#

When I get home, I rummage in the back of my closet and pull out the gift box I have been preparing for Lama's baby.

I lay the tiny outfits out on my bed, limbs splayed so that they look like warm yellow, beige, and red stars. They have tiny ribbons and fuzzy feet. I don't know what to do with them now. Spread out on my blanket like this, they look empty.

As sudden as Lama's cold-shouldering is, I am not too surprised. I think of our college days, when she would string along a row of soft-stubbed, unsuspecting boys, and discard them as soon as their attention began to lapse. I was always a shadow behind her left shoulder, an afterthought of her tall frame, watching each of her worshippers stumble away, snubbed. I used to sometimes wish that one would stumble in my direction.

"Why do you do that?" I had asked her once, over carrot cake in the oldest café in Hamra.

"I'm the kind of person who deals in absolutes." I watched her slowly stir cream into her coffee, only stopping when the coffee absorbed it all and its color mellowed. "If you don't love me with every molecule of your being, then away, away with you."

Now, sitting on the edge of my double bed, with a soft flannel baby garment nuzzling my fingers, I wonder whether Lama is not a poor judge of character. She should not be blind to my commitment, even if I have been somewhat hesitant because of Naji and, I admit, my own misgivings. I know this, so how do I explain her sudden cold-shouldering?

I think of her alone in the evenings, curled up, cat-like, in her chair as she browses the internet for jarred baby food with probiotics. I imagine her, as she clicks her mouse and skims through maternity pages, deciding to cut me off on a whim. She does not need my support. She does not need the clothes I have carefully tracked down and collected for her baby. She does not need the effort I spent shopping through long afternoons for high-quality baby-wear at reasonable prices. This is her last step towards absolute independence.

Or something else. I cannot think of a more ready explanation.

I fold the clothes up carefully and lay them in their box. Then I call her father.

"Is Lama okay?" I ask him.

"Is she okay? I wouldn't know. She doesn't call me, or speak to me. My heart is with my daughter, but my daughter's heart is cold."

When Naji comes home, I am so preoccupied that I burn the soup.

#

It is a couple of weeks later when Lama stands at my door looking most unlike herself. Her hands fold over her belly protectively, and she is elegant in black slacks, a beautifully-cut red blouse, and silver filigree earrings. But her face is haggard.

She sits in my living room with her head in her hands. She looks mismatched against my threadbare furniture. I wait for her to speak.

"Is this like, what? Divine, fucking, retribution?" Her hand, as she places it on her knee, is taut as the curve of her belly. She looks up at me. The delicate silver of her earrings tremble.

"It's a boy," she says.

I wait.

"There's something wrong with his heart. A congenital defect, inoperable."

"Oh, Lama." I understand, now, why she was so cold, why she has kept away. Realizing this, I feel dirty and slightly unwell, a feeling like a mold slowly consuming the moisture in my skin, leaving it desiccated.

My blinds are pulled up. Lama sits where the light does not fall on her. I watch the particles of dust settle in the shafts of light that filter through my windows. They twinkle and disappear around Lama's shadowy frame.

"I didn't want anybody to know. But then I couldn't be alone anymore."

"I understand."

She leans forward slightly, until her thighs lift from the couch cushion, and places her hands beneath them. She sits on her hands, and rocks a little, rocks a little, crooning to her child.

#

I leave Naji at home to fend for himself while I sit with Lama in the hospital. Naji and I have one violent argument over this, but he gives in. He is sympathetic of babies dying.

Lama sits beside her tiny son in the postnatal ward. I watch her through the glass. She looks like a wilted petunia; the moist freshness of her skin has evaporated. Once in a while she puts her head on her knees and lets her arms drop beside her so that her fingers scrape the polished hospital floors. She looks graceful even like this.

She has named him Samer. He sometimes wakes, and looks up at his broken mother. I see the flailing of his transparent limbs as if in slow-motion. A bubble of moisture breaks at his lips under the oxygen mask. He does not have the energy even to cry.

Lama's father walks up and down the waiting room, or stands at my side watching her watch Samer. She does not speak to him. When she does look in our direction, her eyes are focused on some hard-to-reach spot in the wastelands beyond us.

Sometimes, when Samer sleeps, Lama walks out of the ward and straight to the coffee machine. I make sure she has a constant supply of coins in her pockets. I have filled a canvas bag with hand sanitizer, biscuits, chocolate bars, and packets of nuts. I sling it over her shoulder, but most of the time she doesn't notice it's there. I rip open wrappers and coax bits of chocolate into her mouth. She stands in the middle of the waiting room and chews, loose-jawed, mechanically. She will not swallow more than a few mouthfuls before she turns back to the postnatal ward, back to stand outside the glass, mindful not to bring her coffee inside. What would I do if I were in her place? Thank God she can stand here and watch her son die. Thank God she can hold her cup of coffee so tight that the heat sears her skin through the plastic.

#

I take trips from the hospital to Lama's apartment in the few hours that her exhausted mind lets her sleep. She has begged the doctors to let her stay with Samer instead of taking him home to die. She does not want to be alone when his stunted heart sputters and stops. It is safer in the hospital, even if the lights are harsher.

I search through her closets and drawers, and pack away all the clothes and the toys. Every bit of fine stitching and hand-embroidered love is relegated to the dark crampedness of cardboard boxes. I dismantle the hand-carved wooden crib standing under Lama's bedroom window and pack it up. I bring new boxes with me; Lama has thrown the originals away.

Naji's sympathy allows him to help me pack everything into the car. We drive them to our small apartment until we decide what to do with them. I go back to the hospital, praying that Lama has not woken and failed to find me there.

I put off taking the box in my closet out for a few days. I know it will only hurt Lama if she finds out about it. I ponder selling the outfits to a second-hand retail shop, even though the tags are still attached. I have not thought to keep the receipts. But I decide to do something else. On a quiet afternoon, I sit at my kitchen table with a pair of sewing scissors, and cut out shapes I have marked using

cookie cutters. Bursting stars with many arms flung out, clouds, hearts, and crescent moons that have tips that almost meet. They are soft and fuzzy-edged. I will take them to the nursery with me so my toddlers can use them for crafts.

The phone rings. It is Lama's father, and he tells me that Samer is gone. He has never seen Lama sit so still and cold. The feeling of uncleanness comes back, the mold eating at my skin. The mold creeps closer as I realize that I am glad I wasn't there. I pack the little cloth shapes into a zipper bag.

#

In the days that follow Samer's quiet burial, Lama hibernates with her curtains drawn. I hate to leave her alone in the mornings when her father is at work and I have to take care of my children. I lock the nursery up at noon and drive impatiently. I run up the steps and curse at the slowness of keys until I am standing at her bedroom door. She is lying like I left her, curled with her feet tucked behind her, unaware of anything but the enveloping screen of pain.

One afternoon, I hear sounds from inside as I shut her front door behind me.

She is sitting on her kitchen floor in shorts and a t-shirt. She is wearing tennis shoes without socks and has jars of baby food open in a row at her knees. I watch her dip her fingers, the golden arcs of her thumbs, into the jars, and smear the mush over her mouth and her cheeks.

Creamed bananas, creamed peaches. Peas and carrots. Something akin to applesauce.

She opens her mouth and mews. Her gums are pink, and her teeth are white all through. I put my arms around her and help her into the shower.

Walking to the pharmacy and buying the jars is the first sign of life that Lama shows. In the months that follow, we—Naji, Lama's father, and I—convince her to move back home. It will be good for her to have someone to watch her, to take care of her. Her father's bones will ache a little less if she is sleeping in the next room. His walls won't be echo-bouncers, and Lama will not be so alone.

She leaves her furniture sitting regally on her marble floors. She leaves her silverware and her pots and her pans in their drawers and cupboards. She leaves her lovingly-chosen hand-towels hanging on their racks. I am with her when she walks into her father's house and sets her suitcase inside her childhood room. She shrugs my hand from her arm and slowly walks into the kitchen.

In this room, with the yellow tiles and the green-painted cupboards, Lama stands. She quietly surveys the gentle sweep of the counters, the rust flecks on the water taps. I watch her take the thick blue eye from its hanging place over the sink. She drops it into the trash can and turns her back.

When I go home in the evening, Naji is already in his pajamas, reading in our bed. I pull my shoes off and kick them near the door. I climb in beside him, pulling the covers over his chest and tucking them around both of our bodies. He looks at me, and sets his book down. We touch, fingers-to-palm, hand-to-face, gentle. I want this—to make a baby—and the warm up-and-down of his chest as he breathes.

