



THE NEW WORLD

by Esther Singer Kreitman

Translated from the Yiddish by Barbara Harshaw

From the start, I didn't like lying in my mother's belly. Enough! When it got warm, I twisted around, curled up and lay still

But, five months later, when I felt alive, I was really very unhappy, fed up with the whole thing! It was especially tiresome lying in the dark all the time and I protested. But who heard me? I didn't know how to shout. One day, I wondered if perhaps that wasn't how to do it and I started looking for a way out.

I just wanted to get out.

After pondering a long time, it occurred to me that the best idea would be to start fighting with my Mama. I began throwing myself around, turning cartwheels, often jabbing her in the side; I didn't let up but it didn't do any good. I simply gave myself a bad name so that when, for instance, I'd grow tired of lying on one side and try turning over, just to make myself a little more comfortable, she'd start complaining. In short, why should I lie here cooking up something, it didn't do any good — I had to lie there the whole nine months — understand? — the whole period.

Well (not having any other choice), I consoled myself: I'll simply start later! Just as soon as they let me out into God's world, I'll know what I have to do . . . Of course, I'll be an honored guest, I have a lot of reasons to think so. First of all, because of what I often heard my Mama tell some woman who (as I later found out) was my Grandma:

Grandma comes in and smiles at Mama. She looks happy — probably because her daughter has come through it all right. She doesn't even look at me.

"Mazal tov, dear daughter!"

"Mazal tov, may we enjoy good fortune!"

Mama smiles too but not at me.

"Of course, I would have been happier if it were a boy," says Mama. Grandmother winks roguishly with a half-closed eye and consoles her:

"No problem, boys will also come"

I listen to all that and it is very sad for me to be alive. How come I was born if all the joy wasn't because of me! I'm already bored to death. Oh, how I want to go back to the other world.

All of a sudden, I feel a strange cold over my body: I am jolted out of my thoughts; I feel myself clamped in two big, plump hands, which pick me up. I shake all over. Could it be — a dreadful idea occurs to me — is she going to stuff me back in for another nine months? Brrrr! I shudder at the very thought.

But my head spins, everything is whirling before my eyes, I feel completely wet, tiny as I am! Am I in a stream? But a stream is cool, pleasant, even nice. But this doesn't interest me as much as the idea of what the two big, clumsy hands want to do with me. I am completely at their mercy.

"It does hurt a little but I almost don't feel it," Mama would say. "I'm glad! I was so scared I was barren. A trifle? It's already two years since the wedding and you don't see or hear anything . . . Minka the barren woman also said she would yet have children. And why should I be surer of it?"

“Well, praised be the one who survives. With God’s help, it will come out all right; and God forbid, with no evil eye,” Grandma would always answer.

From such conversations, I assumed I would be a welcome guest.

I knew that, here in the other world, where I lived ever since I became a soul, when an important person came, he was supposed to be greeted with great fanfare. First of all, a bright light was to be spread over the whole sky. Angels (waiting for him) were to fly around; merry, beautiful cherubs who spread such holy joy that the person only regretted he hadn’t . . . died sooner. It was quite a novelty that I, an honored, long awaited guest, expected to be born into a big, light home with open windows, where the sun would illuminate everything with a bright light . . .

Every morning, I waited for birds who were supposed to come greet me, sing me a song. And I was to be born on the first of Adar — a month of joy. “When Adar begins, people are merry.”

But right here “it” comes — the first disappointment.

Mama lay in a tiny room, an “alcove.” The bed was hung with dark draperies, which completely screened out the light. The windows were shut tight so no tiny bit of air could get in, God forbid; you shouldn’t catch cold. The birds obviously don’t like screened out light and closed windows; they looked for a better, freer place to sing. Meanwhile, no happiness appears either; because I was a girl, everybody in the house, even Mama, was disappointed.

In short, it isn’t very happy! I am barely a half hour old but, except for a slap by some woman as I came into the world, nobody looks at me. It is so dreary!

Thank God, I am soon taken out of the wet. I am brought back to the alcove, already violated, sad. I am carried around the alcove: everybody looks at me, says something. At last, I am put back to bed. Mama does put a sweet, liquid thing in my mouth: I am really hungry for what is in the world.

Mama looks at me with her nice, soft eyes, and my heart warms. A sweet fatigue puts me to sleep and I am blessed with good dreams . . .

But my happiness didn’t last long, a dreadful shout wakes me with a start. I look around. Where did it come from? It’s Mama!

People gather round.

“What happened? Where did that shout come from?”

Mama gestures, tries to point, her lips tremble, want to say something and can’t. She falls back onto the pillow, almost in a faint.

Seeing they won’t get anything out of Mama, they start looking for the reason in the closet, under the bed, in the bed.

All of a sudden, a shout is heard from the nurse, who keeps repeating in a strange voice:

“Cats, oh dear God, cats!”

The people look up, can’t understand what she’s saying. But, except for the word “cats,” they can’t get anything out of her — so upset is she.

Grandma is also very upset. But she takes heart, makes a thorough search in the bed and, laughing to hide her fear, she calls out:

“Mazel tov, the cat had kittens. A good sign!”

But apparently, this isn’t a good sign. The people are upset:

“On the same day, in the same bed as a cat?”



*"I am,
thank God,
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quite a bit."*

Hmmmm, a person and a cat are born the same way," says one brave soul.

They calm Mama. But again, nobody looks at me. Mama falls asleep. And with that, my first day comes to an end. I am, thank God, a whole day old and I have survived quite a bit.

The third day after my birth was the Sabbath. This time, a big, red Gentile woman puts me in the bath. I wasn't so scared anymore, already familiar with the way it smells.

Once again, I lie in bed with Mama. Mama looks at me more affectionately than yesterday. I open my eyes, I would like to look around a bit at the new world. I am already used to the darkness. All of a sudden — it grows even darker for me than before.

A gang of women burst into the alcove. I look at them. They're talking, gesturing, picking me up, passing me from one to another, like a precious object. They look at me, they look at Mama, they smile.

Meanwhile, Grandma comes with a tray of treats.

The women make her plead with them, pretend they don't want to try any of the cookies, whiskey, preserves, cherry brandy, berry juice or wine; but, Grandma doesn't give up, so they open their beaks, and finally consent to do her a favor.

Males also stuck their heads into the female alcove. They talked with strange grimaces, gestured, shook their beards, went into a fit of coughing.

With them, Papa succeeded, not Grandma. And I am named Sara Rivka, after some relative of his.

Now they need a wetnurse. Mama is weak, pale, with such transparent, narrow hands without sinews, she can hardly pick me up. A middle-class woman, she cannot breastfeed me. I am the opposite: a healthy, hearty gal, greedy, I restrain myself from shouting all I want is to eat.

"Not to a goyish wetnurse," says Grandma. Not for all the tea in China. And she can't find a Jewish one. The pharmacist says I should get used to formula, which is better than mother's milk. But I say I don't want to get used to it and I throw up all the time.

This is bitter! Grandma is upset. Mama even more. But Papa consoles them, saying the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He will help. And He does.

Our neighbor remembers a wetnurse named Reyzl. She has the voice of a sergeant-major and

two red eyes that scare me. She can't come to our home. She has six children of her own but there is no choice.

All the details are worked out, she is given an advance and may everything work out all right.

Reyzl picks me up out of the cradle, takes out a big, white breast, which looks like a piece of puffed up dough and gives it to me to suck, as a test. Well, what should I say? I didn't drown. Even my eyes fill with the taste of a good wetnurse.

Reyzl looks happily from one to the other:

"Well, what do you say?"

Mama and Grandma glance at each other furtively and are silent . . .

I have the good fortune to be a tenant at Reyzl's! Not that she needs another tenant 'cause she lives in a flat not much bigger than a large carton. When Reyzl brings me home, her husband comes to greet me carrying their smallest one in his arms and the other five heirs swarming around him. He seems to be pleased with my arrival.

"Well, what do you say about this, eh? Ten gulden a week, my word of honor! Along with old clothes and shoes. Along with the fact that, from now on, they'll give all the repairs only to you! You hear, Berish?"

Berish is silent. He turns around so his breadwinner won't see his joy.

"You're more of a man than me, I swear. You can earn a gulden faster . . ." he thinks to himself. But right away he becomes serious. "Where will we put the cradle?" They ponder a long time.

But Reyzl's husband who is an artist at arranging things in his tiny flat, smacks his low, wrinkled forehead with his hard hand and calls out joyously:

"Reyzl, I've got it! Under the table!"

So in a tiny cradle, I am shoved under the table.

With open, astonished eyes, I look at the filthy wood of the table, covered with a host of spiderwebs, and think sadly:

"This is the new world I have come into? And this is its heaven?"

And I weep bitter tears.

— translated from the Yiddish by Barbara Harshav

Barbara Harshav's recent translations, with Benjamin Harshav, include: Yehuda Amichai's Even a Fist Was Once an Open Palm With Fingers (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), and A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991).