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The Black Box

HOPE NISLY

With head slightly bent, he slid stealthily onto the church bench which was in the living room of a neighbor's home. He narrowly evaded an errant shoelace, marching single file behind another boy dressed exactly like himself: white cotton shirt, suspenders, barndoor pants—the good pair that he saved for Sunday, which was exactly like his work pair minus the aroma of manure.

They sat together all in a row, little boys as quiet as proverbial church mice knowing that the slightest snicker, scratched itch, or unintended slump, would translate into hellish retribution at home. As the Amish bishop's son he had a special burden—to set an example. The other boys could not compete with his ability to sit perfectly still, but then their slip-ups were not quite so costly. So he sat and daydreamed about dashing past admiring English girls on his horse. And while he dreamed he kept his eyes open and responsive so as not to fall off the bench and to appear to be listening.

The other little boys hated him for being so good. His father, on the other hand, constantly cursed him for sneezing in church or for other infractions such as forgetting to feed the cows on time. So he listened to his father preach from the Bible, gory stories of fire and blood, severed foreskins and wars, and it all made him a little nauseated. He kept searching for incentives to remain within the confines of the simple life, but the only reason he had to stay was that it was too painful to leave.

While the woman he married wordlessly cooked his dinner precisely as he liked it and gave birth to his children year after year, he struggled to recapture the mood of his daydreams in church. In his mind, he once again pictured freedom, felt it stir his hair even while the sickening recognition settled deep into his bones that it remained in some vague and far-off place that existed only in his imagination. In those moments, his wife merged with the benches and the sermons of his youth.

So he told her they were leaving the church and her few friends, taking all seven children with them. *We will buy a car and read by fluorescent light*, he told her. *We will find other friends*. His body felt woozy and he became light-headed, embold-

ened by the power he wielded over his own little fiefdom of family and farm.

The loneliness got to him, however, and also the derision he felt from his neighbors. His domain continued to crumble. In their teen years, his sons began to curse him for beating their mother and sometimes them too. For her part, his wife continued to walk silently a few feet behind him and he sensed that what little he had gathered over the years was slipping away.

With his children grown and his farm sold out from beneath his feet, he cursed the bank and tried new ventures (peddling Blue Stuff, selling used cars, driving a garbage truck) but mostly he hated his life and each attempt to make things work. Besides, no one wanted to buy from or hire him, a dirty, old, disreputable ex-Amishman. *And whoever heard*, they murmured behind his back, *of a lazy Amishman, even if he was an ex?* He heard them; they made no attempt to be discreet.

One day late in his life, he sat tinkering in the workshop that he had built beside his house. Inside these four walls, he had located one space where he felt completely at home. In here, he was spared the observation of people averting their eyes when he passed them on Main Street. He was finishing a cedar chest he had designed for his granddaughter, the only person who liked him just because he was her grandpa.

Without forethought, he began to make another box out of wood scraps. Freed from planning and vision, he steadily created this box. It was not large, just a foot in each direction. Nothing fancy, a few hinges and a lock. It must be plain, that he knew, although he had no good reason. He picked up the closest paint can (it happened to be black) and finished it off.

It was not until he landed in jail that he really stopped to contemplate his creation. He had intended to use the box to heal himself by extending it to others, his offering of forgiveness for all they had done to him over the years. Even then, he knew they would refuse his gift so he took it away to a neighboring community. There he offered it to people who, he believed, would not reject him, to people who did not know him and who were looking for cures to one malady or another. People, in other words, more desperate than himself.

He told them to call him “doctor,” asked for their faith, for a strand of hair, a toenail perhaps, which he placed lovingly in the Black Box and prayed over it.

Now, he reasoned, the world would see his true essence, recognize his goodness, acknowledge his power to heal. And maybe they would forgive him for all those other things: for sitting too still and for not sitting still enough, for forgetting to feed the cows, for beating his wife, for being dirty and lazy, for mismanaging and losing his farm.

But they did not. Forgive him, that is. They laughed. Someone called the police. Now here he was awaiting trial. And all he had wanted was one simple thing. Why couldn't they understand that it was all a 70-year-old man needed, just like anyone else?

But they were blinded by their own goodness and he was on his way to prison.