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# GOLEM CRAFTERS

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**LQ**

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*Golemcrafters* by Emi Watanabe Cohen

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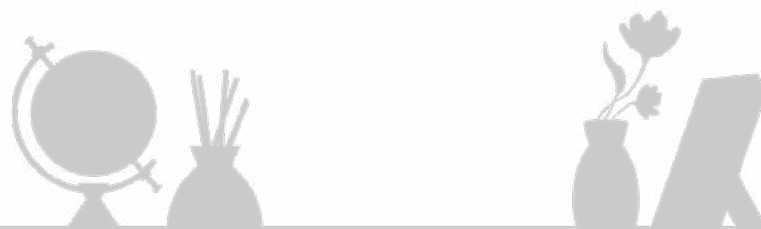
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To the grandfather I met the year I turned thirteen  
and the grandmother I visited in secret.  
And to Drs. Marion and Stan Cohen,  
who have been here all along.





## The Unexpected Cardboard Box

I drop my overstuffed backpack on the floor by the door, set aside the heavy box I'd found waiting in the mailroom, and flop onto the couch so heavily the back of my head hits the frame beneath the cushions. It has been a long, *long* few months. But it's over now, and maybe by the time we return to school in a week and a half my classmates will have settled down. My older brother, Shiloh, isn't home yet—he's probably out doing eighth-grader stuff with his eighth-grader friends. Mom's at work, Dad's at work. Our apartment is nice and quiet, and the fridge is full of snacks.

All in all, I'm ready for a calm, *solitary* start to my sixth-grade spring break.

But then Shiloh storms through the front door. One look at his scuffed-up face and all my thoughts fly straight out the window. "What happened to you?" I exclaim, sitting up.

“Nothing.” Shiloh gives me a warning look, dropping his bag next to mine and prodding self-consciously at the big bruise forming on his jaw. “Just got into an accident, that’s all.”

“You got a bloody nose.” I drag myself to my feet and hurry to his side, peering at his face. He has dried blood on his upper lip, smudged like he’d tried to hide it. “What happened? Who did this?” I have a feeling I know *exactly* who did it, but there’s a part of me that still hopes I’m wrong.

“I’m fine,” Shiloh says. “Seriously, can we just drop it?”

My emotions are roiling, sloshing messily between anger and grief, but Shiloh doesn’t want to talk, and I know from experience that I can’t force him to. So I take a deep breath and shove all the feelings down. “You need an ice pack,” I say, heading for the kitchen.

“No, I don’t—”

“Yeah, you really do.” I halt to level a glare at him. “Bruises look worse when they swell up, and the swelling happens because of blood leaking from damaged capillaries—”

“Faye,” Shiloh interrupts. “Summarize.”

“Ice will make it harder for Mom and Dad to see,” I say.

“Oh, cool,” Shiloh says. “*Literally.*” He does finger guns at me, and I know he’s trying to get me to lighten up a little,

but it doesn’t work. His face falls, and he heads into the kitchen to find an ice pack.

My skin is covered in pins and needles. I ball my hands into fists to keep them from shaking. I feel silly—Shiloh’s the one who got beat up, not me, and *he’s* making awful puns—but I can’t help it.

Shiloh emerges from the kitchen with a bag of frozen peas and a forced smile for my benefit. “So, my last day of school sucked,” he says. “But how was yours? Did the chorus line give you any trouble?”

I sigh, and we head back to the couch. Shiloh calls the girls in my grade “the chorus line” because they repeat everything their leader says. I’ve considered explaining to him that chorus lines are actually lines of synchronized *dancers*, not singers, but if there’s one thing the chorus line has taught me, it’s that nobody wants to be lectured, even if it’s the truth.

“Any fun homework?” Shiloh coaxes me.

“No,” I say. Teachers aren’t allowed to give homework over holidays until high school. That doesn’t stop them from trying, but they’re not allowed to enforce it. “But Mom set next Monday as a deadline for me to find an extracurricular.”

“Oh,” Shiloh says. “I’m sorry, Faye. That sucks.”

It doesn't suck as much as getting hit in the jaw by a kid twice your size, though. I force a smile. "I'll figure something out," I say. "There's gotta be at least *one* club out there who'll have me."

"You could join—" Shiloh begins.

"Nope," I say.

"Robotics Club?"

I shake my head, glaring at him.

"Ah, well. Worth a shot." Shiloh sighs, slouching down further against the couch cushions. "I still have some left-over bar mitzvah stuff to finish up. Two more thank-you notes and I'm all done."

"Oh! About that." Somehow, I'd forgotten. I motion toward the box I left near the door. "Add one more to your list."

Shiloh frowns, sitting up. "Who's it from?"

"Judah Meisel, according to the return label."

"Who?"

I shrug. I have a few theories—estranged uncle, half brother from another dimension. But I only say the obvious thing aloud. "Must be a relative of Dad's," I say. "A New York Meisel."

"Maybe it's a half brother from another dimension," Shiloh says.

"That's what I thought!"

"Well." Shiloh winces, touching his nose and setting aside the melting bag of peas. "I'm going to go wash my face. Wanna open the box for me?"

"We should open it together," I say. "I'll wait for you."

Shiloh shrugs and saunters away. I can see better than anyone that he's trying to hide a limp.

## The Obvious Lie

**M**y brother can always tell when I'm lying, which is unfortunate since he's the only person I ever try to lie to. Maybe it's my tone of voice that tips him off this time, or maybe I do that shifty-eyed thing that robbers do in old cartoons. Either way, Shiloh knows. "You think it's creepy," he says.

"Nooooo," I say.

Definitely shifty eyes that time.

Look, you gotta admit, it's weird that our estranged grandfather sent Shiloh a box of uncured clay as a bar mitzvah present. Most of our other relatives gave him books—we now have no fewer than *five* copies of the Old Testament from Mom's well-intentioned yet confused Japanese Catholic relatives. And then our one living Jewish grandparent sends him *clay*?

"Hey, he also sent me eighteen dollars," Shiloh says defensively. He holds up the envelope it came in and an unbranded greeting card with a happy golden retriever on the front. "That was probably a lot when he was a kid!"

"But what's with the clay?" I ask. "Does he want you to make something with it?"

"How should *I* know?!"

This wouldn't be an issue at all, except handwritten thank-you notes are more important for a bar mitzvah than receiving gifts. It's a tradition! Five hours into our spring break and Shiloh still hasn't figured out how to write *Thank you for the lump of clay, Grandpa* without sounding sarcastic. I suggested he add *I'm not being sarcastic* at the end, but then *that* sounded sarcastic.

"Ask Dad for help," I say for the fifty-millionth time.

"You know what he'll say!"

What Dad will say is *grumble-grumble-grumble*. He's never liked his father, and whatever this clay business is hasn't helped much. Usually when he gets home from work, he spends a few minutes catching up with Shiloh and me; today, he took one look at the box of clay on Shiloh's desk and stalked off to barricade himself in Mom's home office. "Well . . ." I say.

"I'm going to try writing it in Hebrew," Shiloh says. He triple-clicks his clicky pen and sits down at his desk with a determined air. The window to our shared bedroom is propped open to let in the brisk evening breeze, so he has to hold his paper down with his elbow or else it'll get blown away. "He'll be so impressed with my studiousness, it won't even occur to him to be offended by—" He hesitates. "What's the Hebrew word for *clay*?"

"Um," I say.

"Come to think of it, what's the Hebrew word for *thank you*?"

"My Hebrew school teacher says 'Sheket be'vakashah' every two seconds," I offer, thinking of poor Morah Ayelet and her existential exhaustion. I grab my own desk chair and drag it over so I can sit next to Shiloh. "That means 'Quiet please,' right? Pick one. You've got a fifty-fifty chance of being *close enough*."

"Ugh." Shiloh drops his pen and rubs his eyes with his hands. "That's it. I'm hopeless. I'm the worst Jew!"

"You are not the worst Jew," I say.

"I can't even send a polite thank-you note!"

"Our grandfather can't send a polite bar mitzvah gift," I point out. "I think that makes *him* the worst Jew."

"This would be so much easier if we knew what the clay *meant*," Shiloh says. He glares at the box, which has been sitting morosely on the corner of his desk since we opened it earlier. "Is it a metaphor for life? Does it symbolize fate?"

"I think it might be clay," I say. I get on my tiptoes to peer over the cardboard flaps. "Have you tried sculpting anything yet?"

Shiloh gets all shifty eyed. "No . . ." he says.

I give him my best Mom Look.

"Okay, okay, I did!" Shiloh exclaims. "I took a little chunk, but . . . it was weird."

"Weird how?" I ask.

Shiloh shakes his head. "You wouldn't understand," he says.

"Try me," I say.

But Shiloh refuses to try me because he's Shiloh Meisel, the Responsible Big Brother who takes care of his poor, clueless baby sister, even though she was *taller than him* until two months ago when he hit his growth spurt.

I scoff, pushing past him to touch the clay and see for myself.

"Wait, wait!" Shiloh exclaims. He grabs my wrist. "It . . . made me *see* things."

I stare at him. “What things?”

“It was . . .” Shiloh makes a face like he’s trying to remember. “A guy with a beard. A *Gandalf* beard.”

“You saw a wizard?” I say.

“No? Maybe. He was younger than most wizards in books. And he was standing in this grassy field . . .” Shiloh shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“Huh,” I say.

A long moment passes.

“Was it drugs?” I ask.

Shiloh lets go of my wrist, scandalized. “I don’t do drugs!” he says.

“Yeah, I know, but if this clay is making you hallucinate—”

“It wasn’t a hallucination,” Shiloh insists. “I don’t know how to describe it . . .”

“I wanna try!” I say. I make a grab for the clay again, but Shiloh pushes me forcefully back. “No,” he says.

“But—”

“You’re too young!” Shiloh says.

“I am *not*—”

“Our grandpa sent this clay to me.” Shiloh points at himself for effect. “Me. So it’s my responsibility to figure out

what it is.” He looks back at the clay. “And write a thank-you note for it.”

I stick my tongue out at the back of his head and drag my chair back to my own desk. I shoot a furtive glance at Shiloh before opening up my school-issued laptop.

See, the golden-retriever card may have been unbranded, but it wasn’t unsigned. *Mazal tov*, our grandfather wrote on the inside. *My E-Mail address is judahmeis@mail if you have questions. Love, Zeyde.* And boy oh boy, do I have questions.

Shiloh thinks digital thank-you notes aren’t as meaningful as paper ones, and if he were being less annoying today, I would agree with him. But he won’t ask for anyone’s help, and I’m a problem solver.

*Dear Estranged Relative,*

*Hello! My name is Faye. I’m Shiloh’s little sister. He’s trying to write a thank-you note for you right now, but he can’t figure out what to say because he’s not sure what the clay is for. He’s worried about offending you. So if you don’t get a note in the mail in a timely manner, please know that it’s*