

The Box

By Dede Sanchez

It was on his table now.

After being ripped from sleep by the sound of the doorbell, he had found it on the porch, and without second thought had carried it inside. He was having second thoughts now. It was a box, cubed and made of cardboard. There was nothing special about it. It had no writing, no return address, no postage. What could it be? There was no note, no one had called to tell him they were dropping anything off, he'd checked. Not a single missed call, text message or email. Just the doorbell, just the box.

He rubbed his alcohol sweat soaked forehead and tried to think. Last night had been a blur, he could've talked to any number of people, drunk as he was. But the last call on his phone was a call he'd made to his wife. She had been gone for quite some time now. He hadn't heard from her since the day he'd come home to a lone note attached to the fridge that read, *"I'm leaving you."* He'd begged to her voicemail for her to return, maybe this time she would.

The box, silent, menacing, and without context. Was it something he'd ordered in a drunken stupor. *"No, because,"* he reminded himself, *"there is no postage or writing on it."* Perhaps it was something more sinister, a severed head like that Brad Pitt movie. Perhaps it was parts of his wife. Maybe she hadn't left him at all, maybe she'd been kidnapped, and they were sending her back to him piece by piece. But there had never been a ransom note or a call demanding anything. If anything, it was a maniac playing a sick game with him, but that was unlikely.

He should just open the box and end his misery, he was probably worked up over nothing. But what if it was Anthrax. Yeah! That had happened before, right? In the mail, Anthrax. Or maybe he was the first of a group of people being sent some new disease via hand delivered packages, his diseased corpse plastered on the news for all to gape at in horror. A pawn to induce fear and panic to the masses or deliver some sort of sinister message.

Or maybe it was a bomb, he wasn't an action star with people out to get him, but it was possible, right? Had that not been happening recently in the news, random people sent a bomb in a package. He should call the police. But what if it wasn't anything and he ended up on the news for that reason looking foolish? A joke for all to laugh at and mock.

He walked over to his fridge and pulled out a beer, the box taking a toll on him mentally. It was just a damned box, why was he getting so worked up over a box. It was probably nothing. A gift from a relative or a friend trying to help. They knew he'd never accept a gift because of his pride so they'd snuck it to him anonymously. He knew that ever since his wife had left him his friends and family worried about his well-being and wanted to help. Pride, he was told constantly, was his biggest problem. He hated hand outs and anyone who knew him, knew that.

Or perhaps he had a secret admirer or worse, a stalker. The box containing a gift that was both unwarranted and creepy. This thought was the most unlikely of all, as he was a slob of a man. His wife had always done his laundry and cooked him proper meals, but now she was gone. He didn't know how to do laundry and he didn't care to try. He hadn't been to the gym since she'd left, and his eating habits had taken a nose dive. The excessive grease of take out and his nonstop alcohol consumption had made his skin greasy and swollen. He'd put on quite a few pounds. He let himself go, no one would want him.

Or maybe it was a prank, maybe some kids had decided that he'd be the perfect target for one of their practical jokes. "*Let's get back at the drunken idiot down the street for yelling at us all the time.*" Perhaps they had put something in the box that would jump out and scare the crap out of him. Maybe there was something gross in there like dog poop or a dead animal. He knew that the latter was dark, but it was not at all impossible. Kids were messed up.

He looked sidelong at the box, his mind reeling. Resigned, he gulped down the remainder of the beer feeling the fizz burn down the back of his throat. He grabbed another beer and a peanut butter covered steak knife from his dish filled sink and moved cautiously towards the box. He stopped and shook his head. "It's just a box, you're being ridiculous," He said to himself

He placed the now half empty beer bottle down on the table and pulled the box closer. He gulped nervously as he ran the dirty knife along the tape covered seam. His heart pounded; he didn't know what to expect. He put the knife down and pulled apart the folds. He jumped back and waited for a few seconds to see if anything happened. Nothing happened.

What could it possibly be?

Inside scattered about there were photographs. Photographs of him. Photographs of him and different women. Photographs of how he had been before his wife had left and he had thought himself an untouchable Adonis. Proof of his every indiscretion. Pieces of his past fell into place then. The note, her absence. She *had* left him after all.

At the bottom of the box beneath the photographs, tied with string to a stack of white papers was a wedding ring he recognized. He'd bought it for his wife 7 years ago. The top page of the papers read, in big bold letters, "Divorce Agreement". Her signature delicately scrawled along the consent line. Idiot proof arrow tabs boasting "sign here," marked where his boorish signature should go, a vacant line awaiting his consent.