

The Box-maker's Wife

The box-maker is skilled, and he is quiet. The only sounds coming from his workroom are the buzz of his saw and the soft scraping of sandpaper as he cuts and carves, smooths and polishes. He takes a rough board torn from the heart of a mesquite tree and dissects its symmetry into six planes—each flat surface pulls out a part of the tree's grain, the pattern of cell upon cell, the dark stripes of growth laid against the pale pulp becoming a gyre, a parabola which fades and diminishes like a wave rising and breaking, frozen, in the wood. He does not speak as he works. The sawdust born of the wood's pain flies and then settles on his bare hands and arms, along his shoulder; it coats his face, but he does not brush it away.

He builds boxes of rosewood and maple, of pine, and ebony. In Brazil, in Mexico and Japan the trees succumb to the saw, and the damp, gleaming leaves of the jungle enter his workroom with the cries of the mackaw and the monkey. The desert sun blazes under the saw and lizards and serpents crawl from the wood, leaving their marks pressed deep in the pith. The wood is passive under his hands as he forms it. It takes geometrical shapes, the corners and edges defy space, define space, outline space, contain it.

I have entered his world, and I observe him. I watch for the difference, waiting to see what it is that makes him create space, shapes, and designs in four dimensions. My materials he does not know, or notice—they are the bits and pieces of people's lives, the date, minute, and place of their birth. With a thin gold pencil I draw a chart of stars, for the stars are the symbols in my language, the zodiac my tool. But the real material is the people themselves. I see their tears, I hear their anguished words, I fill my nostrils with their breath. For a fee I define the boundaries of their fears against the awful void of the air.

There are two signs on the door—the letters are burnt into the wood. One says: "Hand-crafted Woodwork—Custom Designs." The other: "Natal Astrology Charts—Inquire Within." So simple and neat, to call it that, "Woodwork," or "Astrology," when the people coming to the door desire so much more as they stand, looking at the signs and counting the letters seared there. I watch them from a hidden window while they are unaware, and I study their faces, their postures, their costumes. I imagine the dimensions of the thoughts behind their eyes. Some move nervously, as if they would see through the carved wooden door, and destroy it to dis-

cover its secret. Some look about, observing the dusty street with its Spanish adobe and red tile houses, as if waiting for a surprise.

Some want a box to hold their jewels, some want a place to store love-letters, to hide drugs, from which to pass out perfumed cigarettes. At recitals of specifications, the box-maker's eyes narrow, his hands reaching blindly for a piece of wood, stroking it, imagining a new box. He shapes their desires, and although they are sometimes surprised they are never disappointed. Each part of them has been given and taken; each part must be identified, classified, labeled, and put in a box. But there is no box which can contain the whole living world, unless it is the mind itself—and the mind dies. The blood vessels dry, the cranium bones crumble and crack—the secret treasure will escape. A careless word can open it, a touch of the hand, a singing melody, a look. They must have boxes to contain each part. Big boxes, tiny boxes, carved boxes, boxes inlaid with silver, plain, polished boxes.

The box-maker works into the night. In the darkness, when the street is deserted and the dust has settled, I follow the house's walls, running my hands over the painted flowers on the rough adobe until my fingers bleed. I must learn the shape of this house, this enclosure for my isolation. Touching, I am learning the reasons for the boxes, and the meaning of my own symbols. What the difference is between me and the box-maker, I do not yet know—the difference between wood and words, and the shapes of things. The house is a long rectangle, its short end facing the street, the longer walls on either side. Within the walls are the smaller quadrangles of rooms, closets, doors which fit together in puzzle pieces.

The back of the house is a large, square room where clients sometimes stay. There are few of the buyers and sellers who stay long; most are passing through, waiting until their work or their orders are completed, then leaving. I have divided the rented room with printed curtains hanging from the long wooden rafters, and when, in the afternoon, the southern sun floods the room and sets the air ablaze, I open the doors and let the breeze blowing in through the orange trees outside stir the curtains. The curtains sway and make changing shadows on the floor. Sometimes I rearrange the curtains, dividing the room in different ways, but it is always the same plain box-shape.

At night the room settles and opens like a night-bloom. As I pass the door I listen for footsteps, sleeping sighs, pens scratching hidden words, muffled sobs, and I absorb something imprecise which the box-shaped room has passed through its walls to me. I take on the pitch of someone's voice, the slur or glitter of another's words, the rhythm of a walk, and the clients who sleep there see themselves in me when they wake from their

dreams. In this way they are surprised when I look at the golden-figured charts and tell them what, all along, they had suspected was true.

There is a blond young man with a V-shaped body streamlined for swimming: an athlete's body which is somehow slight-looking in spite of the power which must be there. Wide shoulders, thick biceps, golden-skinned, taper to a tiny waist and small, tight buttocks. His fingers are slender and he drums them constantly. His box is a guitar—a box for music.

The box-maker strokes the instrument and studies its shape, tenderly. He lifts it and presses his head against its curves as if he would listen for a heartbeat. The wood's sound sings to him, and he hears it, molding it in his imagination. He touches the strings with the tips of his fingers as he removes them, one by one. Then he strips the front and scrapes off the old finish, relentlessly, for the paint and lacquer of old associations must be destroyed before a new identity may emerge. He carves tiny designs in the fragile wood from paper patterns which he draws and cuts. Like hieroglyphics, they seem to leave a scrolled message in a forgotten language—only the box-maker may have known it once. The golden-skinned young man goes in to see his guitar in pieces, and he worries, restless, pacing through the rooms of the house.

Idle, I sit in my parlor with my red- and gold-bound books of spells and incantations. I can hear them talking in the front workroom—the box-maker's light voice comes alive at this client's presence. I hear him tease, softly, sardonically lilting, and then they both laugh. I sit frozen, straining involuntarily for bits of information of them both, for even the box-maker I have not yet known long enough—his voice, the shape of his squared face with its firm, wide-nostriled nose, and the motivations of his hands slowly reveal themselves to me like the secret unfolding from a Chinese puzzle-box. The blond man shifts from one foot to another as he watches the work. He takes the back room and the angles of his nervous body settle into its corners.

The box-maker cuts matching pieces of pearl for his design. Around the dark O of the soundhole a chain of gleaming inlay snakes, piece by curved piece. The edges must be sanded and polished until each seam disappears. Then layers of paste wax are smeared over the shine, rubbed off, buffed, and applied again. Outside, the summer sun rises, turning baked adobe and pounded dirt roads golden, but the box-maker works under fluorescent light, and the curtains are drawn to keep out the dust—nothing must settle on the tacky finish drying.

“What can you tell me about myself?” the young man finally asks, and I open the book to Taurus and begin reading from memory—“You love beauty, you love money, the flesh draws you—” He scratches the cleft in

his square chin that has covered with golden, prickly down after several days. I begin to notice such things—the cleft in his chin, the down—he leaves his shirt open and I can see it in a deep V down the flowing breast muscles.

What do they say about me?

I put the book down.

Let me tell you what *I* know about you.

Outside the sky is deepening and a few silver stars appear where darkness flows towards the west in ragged welts. There are many different boxes in various stages of assembly, for many different clients. I remember each customer in the movement of my hands, the strange inflections in my speech, the way I've come to sit and hold my mouth. The boxes sit about the house, in corners, on windowsills, on the tops of tables, as they grow and watch the world age. Some are round, with curved little legs to hold them up. Some are wide and deep, and one is as big as your thumbnail. I go from one box to another, trying to learn the stories of each one, but before I can come to the end of these epics, more boxes are being created, with more stories to tell. Each part of me has been given and taken, there is no box which can hold me.

Sketches of birds and serpents cover the box-maker's table. He tries bridges of many types of wood. He becomes absorbed; his eyes turn inward and focus only on the music-box. (Once I watched and gave suggestions—they irritated him. So now I leave him alone, and if I do speak, he does not look up.) Finally he carves the shape of an eagle's head. At night he hangs the guitar to dry in our bedroom where no pearl has been ground, no lacquers sifted into the air. When his hands move over me they are weightless, grazing only the fine hairs which stand up from my skin at first. Through the house blows a vibration of strings, and the presence of tones and half-tones created for music, themselves nonmathematical, non-knowing. We turn in our sleep in musical rhythms and wait for the next client to come.

I pass the days in my parlor, watching the tissue pages of my books blowing open. I study the words of magical charms and hexes gilded there. As the boxes grow and multiply around me in the house I gather candles according to the spells, and I set them in brass cups. (Candles cannot burn in boxes—they would set the wood on fire.) There is a color for each spell: tall purple candles for the spirit world, yellow for love, green for fortune, and a red candle in the shape of a flower for desire.

It is when the candles have all burnt down that a woman comes to the door to ask for a box which will hold the rings she no longer wears, but carries in her hand—her wedding band, and two other old, silver rings. They represent the past to her. The box must be simple but elegant, a fine

wood with a straight grain, a soft finish. The lock must be small, and there must be little hardware. The box-maker listens and his hands reach for pieces of wood on his work table, his eyes narrow and do not see her milk-white skin, and the golden hair which frames her face. The woman takes the back room briefly; it is ill-fitted to her—she is all curves and pearls in its angles.

“What can you tell me of the future?” she asks me.

“I must know your birthday first,” I reply.

She hesitates. “November?”

“And the day, the year—”

“Must you know the year?” Her voice is light, and musical, but it begins to grate at my questions.

“I should know everything—down to the exact minute.” She remains silent. Her gaze has dropped and she turns her rings nervously in her hand. “Perhaps there is some reason you would rather not say.”

She looks up. “It is the fourteenth, November fourteenth.”

“I can, if you wish, tell something about your Scorpio personality—”

She waves her hand impatiently at my speech. “I know all that about secrecy, and passion, and topazes, and magenta.” She makes dramatic gestures with her hands, and tosses her head in an effort to hide her fear.

The box-maker carves letters in the top of her box, and fills each hollowed groove with silver and pearl. (The saw on the brittle mother-of-pearl fills the room with a sharp, smouldering odor.) This box will belong to the person whose name is engraved and inlaid forever in the wood. Only destruction of the box itself, the cracking of the planes, the ripping apart of the grain, could tear apart the spell of those carved letters, letters which somehow represent the whole complicated mass of a human being. He lines the box with black velvet, to cushion unused jewels. The light of the old diamonds will be contained and intensified against the soft black walls. He carves the lid to match exactly the dimensions of the protective walls, and he fits golden hinges, oiled and polished, which will lift and close, silently. The rings will be hidden away in the darkness.

I can see the pattern of a woman's life in the movement of expression across her face, in the path of her hair as it travels in a soft curve along her brow, her cheek. I can see the dark rings of growth around her eyes, shadows barely perceptible under the makeup she so carefully applies to her face. There are dark rings left from the transition between love and hate, between joy and pain. “I would like to be in love again,” she says, “although my last marriage was a failure.” In every new man's face she is looking again for the flashing light of jewels. I cannot give her that. I cannot show her the chart I have drawn up, one of loneliness, and destruction.

Instead, I let loose my mind along the dark lines of shadows on her skin

—where will she go, what will she do when she leaves? The stars are behind me. I see her in a gilded bedroom, everything white and gold, with accents of black—all very tasteful and carefully arranged, like the conservative, elegant clothes she wears. I see her meticulously applying the makeup just a little too thick—she surveys her work anxiously in a scrolled, gilded mirror, patting the pinkish cream over wrinkles she imagines around her eyes.

What do I see myself doing? I am talking to her.

“I see you parting your hair all over, before the gilded mirror, searching for grey hairs, searching for traces of the dark roots.”

I can never say to her, “These astrological charts actually mean nothing.” She would look at me in astonishment—she has accepted as reasons the configurations of planets, the tropisms of stars. So the stars travel, so the shadows across her face. But the charts are only a means of leading her along the path which is already there. I lead her part of the way, and by the time I stop, I am the anguished one. Her shadow passes on to me. Before she leaves she pays me well and promises to return.

The box-maker’s workroom is crowded, the work scattered and disassembled, in many different stages of completion. Some boxes have two sides and a bottom glued together, there are pieces of beautiful pearl and abalone carved—before they are finished, another order, another idea arrives. Scraps of silver and precious stone lie on the table, carvings of a delicate piece of inlay, left over, and destined for the trashcan, but beautiful still. Drills and files, evidence of construction and destruction, clutter the room. The smells of oils and lacquers, glue, alcohol, and polish burn in the air. I would like to open the windows and throw everything into the night, where it would lie in the moonlight and fuse—one thing, even if made from many scraps.

Precious diamond drills have been lost, designs on scraps of paper lost; they cannot be duplicated. For a moment, my candle illuminates the confusion, casting a small yellow circle, one golden core of light on the disarray, and in the quiet of night while the box-maker sleeps I watch it throw hovering, changing shadows on the boxes. Small boxes, big boxes, carved boxes, plain, polished boxes.

The candle’s flame mesmerizes me. It rises, and grows, one thing, burning, creating, and destroying at the same moment. It seems to speak to me, saying, “See—I make light. See what is here—” I see the shapes in the workroom alter and adjust themselves slightly until they are what I imagine them to be. The curved latch of the window becomes a snake’s head arched and poised. The windows are faces and my hands held up to the light play melodies on keys of air. The veins on my hands are vibrating strings running up through my arms, and the scream that I hear as everything catches

fire and dances before my eyes is the screech of a mad conductor, transfixed for a moment in awareness of each instrument, playing one thing.

The box-maker pushes me away to search in the rubble of his work—there is a fine lump of turquoise there, somewhere, hiding, like a tiny thought burning bright at the tip of his finger, to complete his design. He sifts through the ashes of shells and bone—he screams as his hand finds the fire and closes on it, and the flaming wood swirls away from the sound of his pain.

Night falls now on a thin, airy silence. The workroom is deserted—the box-maker lies idle on the sofa in my parlor, his arm thrown over his eyes, his hands hidden, his head turned to the wall. No sound disturbs the air, no buzz or screech of torn wood. The house is so calm that it seems the only movements are the soft falling of dust molecules, one upon another.

An electric light still illumines the shambled workroom—everything stands as it was left, each drill and hammer where it dropped, the pieces of wood left in half-constructed fragments laid on the table, as if ready to assemble themselves, the shards of abalone shell lying in a bowl where they relinquished their special colors to a soaking of water. Dust collects on the table, and the water evaporates in the bowls, disappearing into the air.

The blond woman comes to the door, and steps into the mute workroom, a helpless smile slowly forming on her face to hide her confusion as she crosses the room. When she reaches the threshold she stops as if against a barrier. She pauses and listens for the familiar abrasive sounds, she cocks her head, waiting. Like all clients, she can only bargain with creativity, not with pity. Unaccustomed to transactions which do not involve the taking of art, she can only stare at her future lying torn in the box-maker's bandaged hands.

In the aggregate stillness the setting sun leaves deep orange scars across the sky. Stars appear as the wind rises; the trees outside make their noises and the grass lies back tight against the earth, as if an invisible hand smoothed it.

The ashes of the house's walls crumble even at the breath of my passing as I leave the house to the carpenters, leave the box-maker sitting contemplating his hands as the skin heals, compelling strange new sensations. Under the swollen burns which ooze and crack, the sinews and the bones will remain the same. I am carrying the last box. It was there, in the rubble, a plain unfinished wooden box which fits in my hand—it had been there all along. How old it might be; it is ageless.

As I walk away from the house, I do not measure the hours. It is many miles to the forest—it may take me twenty days, or twenty minutes, or twen-

ty years to reach the dark fir trees in the cool distance. On the road, I pass the rowed boxes of houses, and the fields of boxes buried underground, and overhead the aerial boxes on telephone poles, with their buzzing wires. I soon leave them all behind, and as the sun rises I enter the fog surrounding and whitening sweet-smelling, coned trees.

In the damp clearing there are no more box-shapes but the one I hold, only tall trees which gaze over my shoulder on the floor of wet, piled needles where I put down the box. There are the wraith-shapes of the fog as it disappears. The small wooden box opens and grins at me as only a box can grin, its hinged mouth clacking, its sharp, bare corners pointed out and the world showing through. The box moves its top and bottom together and speaks.

You carried me here, it says.

We are alone now. A pause.

You are the one who made me—

No, but one like me. I smile at it now. We grin together like conspirators. The box tells me things I thought I had forgotten, and shows the way to treasures I had buried long ago along forest paths. There is a poem written on an envelope fallen in a rain puddle. The rainbow colors in the pool made by the ink as it rises to the surface. There are flowers pressed between the pages of heavy books, still fresh and scented, and there is the picture of a rose cut from a greeting card and buried in the snow. A cross made of sticks lashed together, peeled and whittled down with a child's patience to the blond, bare pulp is found underneath a marked tree.

Then with the black juice of the berries which lie on the bushes surrounding the clearing like drops of blood, I draw my mark on the box, one long curved stroke and two short straight ones. The box is pleased. I carry it proudly, its corners resting comfortably in the crook of my arm, back home, and as I approach the house, the same box-shape filled out by new, raw beams, I hear the sound of music.

In the house the box-maker sits with his clients. His hands rest on his knees; the new skin is whole, shiny, and naked looking. It has none of the sandings, stains, and furrows of old. Around him are the boxes: big boxes, small boxes, carved and polished boxes, plain boxes. The blond young man looks up in surprise at me from his guitar with its pearl hole gleaming, and the blond woman looks at me in confusion, but the music doesn't stop. My eyes meet the box-maker's eyes: they are round, with little curled tails that turn up at the ends as he smiles.