

A Bird in the Box

For the first eight years of my life, I was confined to a wooden cargo box enclosed with a rusty brass lock. During my imprisonment, we grew to know each other quite well. The scent of rust-crust mold and wood decay remains dormant inside my nose. I mastered the lock's shape, smell, and sound. The strong clasp popping from connecting both ends was final, like prison bars slamming in-on inmates and the last nail that's drilled into a deadman's coffin. They are all impressions of something terminal, a descendant into a dark abyss of the unknown and a grieving deprivation of no return to any sense of normality.

There is safety in confinement. Prisons isolate people, but they also secure a body. What an odd contradiction. In a typical scenario, people assume freedom is outside. This is not true. A baby bird cannot leave the nest because it has not yet learned how to fly. The bird is bound to the inside. The nest protects the bird from outside predators. In my case, the outside was much more petrifying. The box's interior provided me safety but, I was not safe from outside predators.

The cargo box was my only home from infancy to eight years old. It was my haven, my friend, my victim mate, and a parental figure, too, I suppose. I ate, used the restroom, and even played with my first toy while inside the box. It was a small, yellow rubber ball with sparkly zig-zag patterns designed around its surface. Whenever the ball of rubber bounced about the four walls of the box, I giggled. I threw it off of my forehead, and it hit me back in the face. I put it in my mouth and gnawed on the stars like pieces of candy and at night held my sparkled friend close to my heart. It was a happy time. I did not know pain yet. But, the joy from my toy did not last very long. The innocence of a happy child turned cold one day when my father unlatched my box. His eyes turned to fire with envy, and his lips quenched tight with rage when he saw me playing with the ball. Smiling as wide as my cheeks allowed, showing innocent pink gums with baby teeth, my arms reached out to him with love. I thought that these gestures could turn his

black eyes back to white and reverse his stern lips into a smile. My attempt failed as he extended his sizable hairy arm down towards me and pried the ball from my hands. My heart severed. The day he took away my pretty yellow ball was also the first time I was aware of pain. I was about two or three years old, but I understood the feeling of loss. A pierced ache in the pit of my stomach with the likeliness of a woman giving birth is the only way to describe the pain. My breath labored the same as a woman does between each contraction that hits her. These new pains caused me to pant heavily every few minutes. Raw internal guts souring, flipping, and cramping. My organs went haywire inside my body and out again and then repeated this motion. The relationship between the lock and the aches would become familiar.

There's hardly any distinction between night and day for a baby when a fetus is in the womb; it does what it wants despite the time of day. A newborn infant doesn't know the concept of time. A child's mother has to teach her child the difference between night and day. These were things that I had to figure out on my own. A baby nurses from the mother's breast. I, surrounded by four walls of darkness for eight years, did not have such an option. I managed to save a nipple from one of the bottles I had as an infant. I wound into a knot on the corner of my blanket. The blanket nursed me like a mother, although no milk came from it. I imagined so. It's amazing what one can do when desperation arises.

My father would open up the box to feed and change my diaper daily. The streaks of light that pried through the cracks of the box at sunrise taught me morning time. Complete darkness taught me nighttime. He did not visit me during these times. The box was the closest thing I had to a mother regulating my days from the night. Confinement told me when to awake and sleep and alarmed me when danger was approaching.

At four years old, I fell ill. I knew my age because my father let me eat a chocolate cupcake and told me the day was special and that I was four. It was the first time that I'd ever eaten anything sweet. I didn't care for the taste much. He fed me and then locked the lid back shut. My body was clammy, cold, sweaty, and I couldn't stop shivering and vomiting the next day. The thin blanket underneath me was soiled and wreaked with feces and urine. I pulled my legs to my chest. I felt comfort in the bowl of warmth that was created.

Hallucinations accompanied the fever that day. I thought my box was open, and my mother smiled down at me from the opening. Her skin was a perfect shade of tan. She had gold wings that spread out like a bald eagle's. Her long shiny brown hair fell down to her waist, and she wore an exquisite sequin garment. She was playing the harp. The music gave me peace amid chaos. Those visions resembled reality, but I was far from such a delight.

I cried for days in this condition, yet my father never opened my box to check on me. The scent of urine was typical and made me feel secure when I'd urinate in my diaper, and the warmth of the liquid comforted me too. The moans of a sick child that only Angels could hear were ignored by my caregiver.

I became more aware of everything, especially when my father finally unlatched the lock. The sound, louder than usual, was sterner than the others. When he opened my home, this time, the entire box shook. I was afraid and didn't know if my father hated the lock or me? The sound of the sharp click of metal sent chills through my body. The ritual occurred every time he opened and closed me back inside. I was now aware that I was growing up in some kind of incomprehensible captivity.

No two sounds were ever the same. One sound that made my ears burn was the sound of my father laughing and talking with guests. I never knew what they were saying, but everyone

always sounded cheerful. The clicking of glasses hitting together and forks hitting their plates. They laughed, and some even sang songs at times. Footsteps of careless children running about the floor above my head pleased me. Their giggles and swift footsteps were pleasant, and I imagined that I was running along with them in a pink dress and new Mary Janes'. My heartbeat was a loud noise. Sometimes I would dance to its tune by tapping my finger against the sides of the box to its rhythm. BEAT, BEAT, BEAT, BEAT. The heartbeat dancing was a fun escape, but it also frightened me. But then again, strange things were normal.

There were pleasant aromas. Savory scents were my favorite. None of the intrusive smells or sounds could outscore the sound of my father unlatching that lock. While most of the noises were sometimes inaudible, the clasp of my lock was always the most dominant tune. It was a clear, consistent sound, security alarm, and a willing accomplice with my father to trap me inside. The lock unclasping and then back together again was like no other. The intrusive tune was a glorious pang to my ears, a nightmare, and my faithful lullaby in darkness. An eery jolting melody inducing sweat beads along my tiny forehead and suffocating knots to my stomach. I never knew what was going to happen next. I was the lock's captive, and it was my savior. We were allies and advisory. The sound of the final never disappointed me and never betrayed me either.

Things started to change as I grew older. I had less legroom to move about in the box. My hair became untamed, and my limbs got so weak that I could not bend them at all. This crippled my legs, confining them to one sitting position even when I didn't want to sit that way anymore. My legs did what they wanted to do. The fetal position that once gave me comfort was now my torment. This added a new element to opening up my box to feed me, read bedtime stories on occasion, and change my diapers. These kind gestures were brief and minimal.

On my 6th birthday, my father unlocked my box.

"Happy birthday princes. You are six today."

He lifted my crippled limbs from the box and removed my soiled diaper to rape me for the first time. My legs were like a dangling pretzel as he dragged me from confinement. My vision was blurred and dim. He laid me down next to my box. I knew we hadn't traveled far from my dwelling because I could smell the mildew of wood, and we did not go to another area. At this point, I could no longer feel my legs, nor did I dictate what they could do. My father stuck a sharp object into my arm. I hollered, and my body was limp in an instant. I could not feel a thing, but I saw my mother playing her harp again. This time she sang to me.

"Hush, little baby don't say a word Papa's gonna buy you a mocking bird And if that mocking bird don't sing Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring."

As the song echoed through my ears, the sandman stole my eyes away.

I slept for what seemed hours and awakened to him removing my diaper with the stench of his hot breath suffocating my face provoking me to cough. He choked me to silence my reactions, but I was not planning to scream to his surprise. I couldn't utter a word if I wanted to. It was the oddest sensation. My mind was fully awake while my body was lying cold and frozen and detached from control. My body shifted around in different directions. The encounters were weird, and it always hurt afterward. I always hurt. In the end, my father cleaned me up and replaced my diaper. I was always happy to have a clean diaper and felt guilty for expressing an ounce of happiness. He placed me back in the box, and the lock clicked back together again. I was safe inside.

When I turned eight years old, I thought I'd finally died. I was angry and confused, banged on the box walls, and screamed. My long unkept nails scratched the walls until they bled and sores

arose. It must've been a pitiful sight when I screamed as loud as my lungs would allow. Saliva escaped my mouth without my permission. The aching pains returned again. This made my father furious, which caused him to starve me.

After what seemed like a few days, the lock popped again, but this time it was peculiar. It was a new song. A melody combined with terror and grace like the harp my mother played in my dreams. There were so many intrusions competing at once. It was overwhelming.

"Get down on the ground! Put your hands up this is the police!"

"Go around to the back and make sure it's covered."

"Release your weapon! Hands up, son of a bitch!"

Some squeaks hurt my ears. Whaling alarms and hard footsteps rumbled over my head like clouds ready to erupt with thunder. Gunshots blasted off, capping bullets through the walls with unforgivable force. BOOM! My ears rang. BOOM! BOOM! They rang again. The mumbles of deep voices screaming police protocols echoed throughout my dwelling. My body would not contain its shivers, forcing the box and the lock to vigorously jiggle. The heartbeat song came back again but with more bass this time, and I tapped my fingers to its beat on the ceiling of the box BOP, BOP. A clear view of my lock was through a tiny crack in the box. I kept my eyes fixated on, and it gazed back at me as I continued to tap to the beat of my heartbeat. We were all each other had in the midst of an apocalyptic storm. There was drilling and more thumps until I heard a loud pop! I closed my eyes so tight that my stomach felt the doom. I hoped that I would disappear or that I'd at least be dead upon arrival with my soul entering into an afterlife. I'd already lived in an unfamiliar hell, so heaven could be the only best option by default.

And then there was light. Everything around was so piercing, burning my eyes lids to tears. I could not open them, nor did I want to. I just wanted to be back inside, but I was outside, and

predators were all around me. There were so many things that I could no longer control inside of my box after the only four walls that I'd ever known abandoned me. I wanted my father. I needed my mother. I wanted to die. I needed to live.

"Officers you've got to see this! There something moving around in the box."

"Holy shit, position your weapons!" They all screamed out.

I let out a loud squeal followed by a deathly moan and a dry gulp of regret and gratitude.

"What the hell?" One of the officers asked.

"It's a person." Replied the other.

"Is it a boy or a girl?" An officer yelled from afar.

"I don't know sir. Their legs are stuck in place and they have long hair, my God this kid is skin and bones." the officer uttered.

"Get a medic in here!" The officer screamed.

They all gasped at the sight of me.

"Where's the blood coming from? Are you hurting? Can you hear me? Can you talk?"

All I saw were lips moving and panicked faces. I didn't understand a word they were saying. When I opened one of my eyes, the police cut the boxwood. The noise was so loud that I was surprised that I did not pass out. I was a spectator to my own rescue and possible demise. Each side of the box crashed to the floor as though a tiger was gnawing at my clothes. I was naked. My frail body was a centerpiece for all to see. A live spectacle. I felt like a monkey in a cage at the zoo.

I pivoted my head to the right of the box ruins and saw the lock gazing back at me. It was lying down on the floor all alone. We were both bruised and broken. I stretched out my

weakened arm and grabbed it, clinching onto it with the grip of death, securing it into the palm of my gutty hand.

"What's the kid doing?" The officer asked.

"It's holding something. The kid doesn't talk and has been making strange noises," said the medic.

A woman with a strong odor picked me up. My legs were still dangling like a soft pretzel and wrapped me in a warm blanket. The blanket felt comforting, the same as what I imagined in my mother's arms. These were senses of the outside. They whisked me onto a long bed with wheels and placed a blindfold over my eyes. I was relieved. The darkness was more vivid than the light.

"Her eyes are swollen. Put some drops in them and then cover them back. I don't think she's used to the light." said one of the medics.

They gave me oxygen at the hospital and placed me into an induced coma.

I stayed in a coma for 6 months until I decided to wake up one day. My pretzel legs were amputated, and the remnants were wrapped in surgical bandages. They managed to save my upper limbs, enabling me to write my story although my left arm is deformed.

It's been twenty years since my rescue, and people wonder why I kept the lock from the box? They say that it's not good to hold onto things that remind us of the past horrors of our lives. Those things should be forgotten. But friends make pacts. I made a pact with that lock, and I cannot quickly dispose of a friend. The lock is a part of me the same as a limb is valuable to the human body. I no longer have my limbs, and the lock has lost its clasp. It was my savior in the sense that it was the only thing that was ever consistent in my life and protected my body from my outside predator. It never allowed me freedom but never abandoned me either. And although

I had not yet learned to walk, just as a baby bird cannot fly at birth. I was kept safe and secured inside my box, my bird's nest. There is hope and sanctity in these kinds of intersections.

The police killed my father during my rescue. He never paid the price for what he did to me. I suppose this could make me angry, but I am not because now my father is neither inside nor outside. He is neither free nor in captivity, and I am okay with the uncertainty of his fate. He died a drifter of two fateful possibilities arriving at none of them taking away eight years of my life, but unlike his legacy, I now have a choice because freedom comes in all shapes and sizes. It spreads far beyond the outside world.

Life is too open and expansive. There are no locks in the free world that keep one away from harm's way. Some people are bound, although they are visibly free. I suppose the burden of freedom relies on the captive and the capturer. I am a living witness of this testament.

I am 28 years old and bound to my wheelchair. I live in a house that overlooks a beautiful lake surrounded by tall green willows. Birds are singing happy tunes and flying westerly across the endless blue sky. We are both free. I am a woman who never learned to walk, but I have traveled the entire world. I never received a formal education but learned how to talk, read and write. I am now a survivor who lives life on the inside and outside. It is a beautiful day. The wind blows the melody of whimsical chimes that swing on the front porch. I hear new sounds now and smell the aroma of possibilities.

Sometimes birds don't always make it out of the nest. Baby birds either die from starvation or are killed by outside predators. The mother also kills or abandons them if they have abnormal mutations. In this scenario, they are left to fend for themselves. Some birds cannot fully spread their wings, and I have reconciled with this notion. Not all birds inherit the sky either, but that

doesn't mean they are incapable. I am alone in this world, but I'm not lonely because a rusty lock will always protect me. Is it so wrong not to abandon old friends?