

Timothy Day

Lila and the Box

The box arrived two months after Lila's roommate Veronica moved out. It had no distinguishing features. It was brown and square and medium in size, with VERONICA written on it in small, black letters. Like all boxes, its inside would attract more interest than its outside. Lila wondered what it would be like if people were more like boxes in this way, then decided that the idea sounded like a bad commercial written by a woman who produced such sentiment with utter apathy while chewing day-old gum. Lila put the box down and called Veronica. While the phone rang, she imagined that Veronica had been sent an actual person and that this person was sitting scrunched up in the box, listening as best he or she could to the world outside. She wondered what the call would sound like. Maybe it would sound like a cartoon.

Hi, a box came for you.

Pshebebuh?

It doesn't say.

Pshebebuhbobuh?

I don't know, there isn't any name or address.

Pshebebuh... pshemumuhmamuhbuguhjubemubabobuhumobebuhum.

Okay, are you sure?

Psshbe.

Lila set the phone down and took the box cutter out of the drawer. She had only opened someone else's mail once before, 16 years ago, at the age of eight, when her father got a letter from his first wife. The contents were all very unfriendly. He had taken the letter from her and told her in a calm and patient tone that what she had done was a very serious offense and that something terrible would happen if she ever did it again. She had studied the features of his face, his narrow and protruding beak-like nose, his sterile grey eyes that never became too big or too squinched behind the thin, silver frames of his glasses, his curly hair that reached backwards as if trying to break free from his scalp. She had decided right then: the terrible thing that would happen must certainly be death.

But as Lila moved the blade along the edges of Veronica's box, no feeling of impending doom came over her. When the cutting was done, she set the blade down and looked at the newly vulnerable box resting on the counter below. She picked up the phone again.

You're definitely sure?

Yes! Jesus, Lila, it's not a big deal.

Okay.

She lifted the cardboard flaps of the box that protected whatever lay inside, ready to be seen and discovered and loved. Her eyebrows narrowed.

Veronica?

Yeah?

Nothing's in it.

What?

It's empty.

Are you sure?

Well, I mean, yeah.

That's weird.

Maybe it's a soul. Did you buy a soul on eBay?

Ha ha.

Or maybe it's from someone who really wants you to send *them* a gift, so they're trying to drop the hint by supplying the packaging for it.

That's probably it.

Probably.

Lila put the box on the couch and sat down next to it for a long and awkward moment, as if getting to know a stranger. Turning on the TV felt like giving up, admitting that there was nothing interesting happening in her life that night. Tonight the on button felt particularly cold and devastating. A cooking show appeared on the screen. The man on it was slicing carrots and preparing broccoli as if this was a very exciting activity. Lila imagined a universe in which she collapsed on her bed at night and fell asleep within seconds, completely fulfilled, thinking about what an experience it had been cooking vegetables that day. The idea was nice, but there was something missing. It reminded her of her father. She turned off the TV. In the silence of her apartment, she heard the elevator ding in the hallway outside and footsteps exit. As there were only three apartments on the floor, this could only be one of two people. It could be the old woman who always smelled like soup, or it could be the man who had just moved in and had been carrying a potted plant on both occasions that Lila had shared the elevator with him. She had looked at it the second time and said,

I like your plant.

And he had looked over and said,

It's glued to my hands.

That seems unlikely.

The man had then stretched out his arms and offered the plant to her.

Here. Try to pull it off, and see what happens.

And she had reached out and taken the plant and smiled at him. And he had said,

Wow. You're really strong.

Lila stood next to her door and wondered if it was the man getting off the elevator and if he was still carrying the plant. She thought about pretending to check her mail just to see if it was him, but she had already gotten her mail and she didn't want any interaction with the plant carrying man to take place under false pretenses. She looked at the box. Suddenly, it seemed like an unwelcome intruder, judging her for not having as simple an existence as it did. She heard the door close to the left of her apartment, meaning that it had been the old woman. Lila suspected that she was a nurse, and really it would be perfect if she was because soup would be a great thing to smell like in a place full of sick people. She probably hadn't even had to speak in her interview. Once they got a good whiff of her, they must have hired her on the spot. Lila put the TV on again and went into the kitchen and made soup without any vegetables in it. She averted her eyes from the box for the rest of the night.

Somewhere in the mish mash and cluster buster of her dreams, Lila dreamed of her father knocking on the door. He looked the same but with dirt on his face that Lila imagined must have come from climbing out of his grave. He looked at her as if this was no big deal, as if he had not just risen from the dead and come to see her for the first time in three years. And he said something like,

Did you get the package I sent?

No.

Yes you did. I see it right over there.

He pointed, and Lila followed his finger to the box on the couch, which was now looking tired and sad somehow.

That was for Veronica.

No, it was meant for you.

There was nothing in it.

There was a soul in it.

No there wasn't. I would have been able to tell.

And her father shook his head and said,

That's the thing about souls. They only attach themselves to the second person they see. An idiosyncrasy of their kind, I suppose. That's why it was addressed to Veronica.

But I already have a soul, and it's a perfectly functioning one.

I thought you must have lost it, since you never came to see me in the end. I'm not

trying to be confrontational, that's just really what I thought.

I didn't think you wanted me to. Or cared either way.

Her father brought his dirty fingers up and scratched at his eyebrows, then re-adjusted his glasses and said in a steady tone,

Since you didn't come visit me at the cemetery and ask for forgiveness, I realized you must not have received the soul. I knew that this could only mean one of two things. The first was that you didn't get the box. The second was a far more serious matter, but now we have to deal with it.

Lila shook her head wildly as everything around her started to twist and bend and wiggle.

I didn't want to do it. Veronica made me.

Her father shook his head.

He looked the same, but with dirt on his face that Lila imagined must have come from climbing out of his grave. He looked at her as if this was no big deal, as if he had not just risen from the dead and come to see her for the first time in three years.

It doesn't matter. It's done. But really, being dead isn't so bad. It gives you that same feeling of peace and contentment as, say, cooking vegetables.

Lila screamed silently as her father reached his arm out and took her by the shoulder, and the ceiling started to rain well-cooked broccoli and carrots.

When Lila woke up, she peered around her bedroom door and examined the opened box sitting on the couch. She approached it hesitantly, as if dealing with a wild animal. After peeking over the top at the empty space inside, she grabbed the box on both sides and rushed quickly to the door. The hallway was quiet and still and vaguely soup-smelling. Lila pushed the box as far away from her door as she could without it being closer to another door. After this, she went inside and took a shower, then studied her face in the mirror. She imagined what it would be like if she woke up with a different face every day. Scary but exciting. Why couldn't more things be like that? Mirrors programmed people into routine, a fresh reminder every morning. Look. See? You're the same. Your day will be the same. You're as alive as the glass you see yourself in. Lila made wild facial expressions at the mirror to prove how alive she was. She put her glasses on upside down and ran her hands like mad through her short blonde hair, leaving it in complete disarray. She spoke to the mirror telepathically. See? I can do anything I want. I'm not a part of any scheme or system that you operate on. Your glassy oppression will affect me no more. She got dressed and left the apartment, quickly resetting her glasses when the man next door got on the elevator with her. Lila was disappointed to see him without foliage.



I model mittens made for Siberian tigers.

That's boring. What do you really do?

I'm a hotel clerk.

Now I'm interested. That's the second most exciting job there is.

What's the first?

Working at a plant shop.

The day was filled with people telling Lila their names and giving her credit cards that she swiped and handed back to them like some sort of swiping and handing back machine. They would say thank you, and she would smile and tell them to have a nice stay. Initially, she had tried to make her smiles genuine, but now they felt phonier and phonier every time, as if she was slowly turning into plastic. To be a plastic person was on the very top of her list of greatest fears, above giant spiders and regular spiders and dying and finding contentment in cooked vegetables.

When Lila got home, she found Veronica in the hall waiting for her. She stood with her hands on her hips and her sunglasses lowered to the tip of her nose. She pointed to the box sitting down the hall and asked,

Is that the box?

What happened to your plant?

He looked at her uncertainly for a moment before saying,

You got it off my hands, remember? I don't have to carry it anymore.

Oh, that's right.

He smiled. Lila was happy to see that he wasn't wearing a suit. Suits made her think of businessmen, and businessmen made her think of cubicles and water coolers and discussions about the weather. Instead, he was dressed as casually as she was, though his hair was more in order.

So what do you do?

Lila hesitated, then said,

Is it okay if I make up something that's more interesting?

Sure.

Yeah.

I thought you said it was empty.

It is.

And Lila went and looked in the box and saw that she was wrong. There was a potted plant inside, the same one that the man next door had been carrying. She picked it up, then looked back at Veronica.

Sorry. My neighbor must have put it there.

Veronica looked at her skeptically, then said,

Whatever. I just came for the box, anyway.

Really? Why?

I don't know, it just feels like it's still my box, even though it's empty. Maybe I can put some shit in it or something.

Okay.

Veronica picked up the empty box and said goodbye, and Lila went into her apartment with the plant. She took a deep breath as the elevator dinged in the hall and the box made its way out of the building. For the next three minutes or so, she sat on the couch and ran her fingers over the small clay pot in her hands. The plant resting in it was small but quietly beautiful, with bright and colorful leaves hidden inside a nest of green. The doorbell rang, and Lila answered it with the plant still in hand. It was the man from next door. He smiled and said,

I like your plant.

It's glued to my hands now.

The man reached forward and grasped the pot. His fingers intertwined with hers before they stopped moving, frozen against the clay.

It's stuck to me too now.

What should we do?

I don't know.

Maybe we can find a box to put it in.

Maybe. Or maybe we don't need a box.

Maybe not.