

the woman in a box

The woman kneels inside her box, invisible from either direction, on the hot sunny street. Her head doesn't reach the height of the carton. The floor of the box is brown cardboard. On it the woman bends to her embroidery within the square world she has created. Perhaps the dull well-handled threads make the warp of her life. Dust colors her hair, her clothes are dirtier than cleaning rags. Sometimes she sets a soiled cloth on her hair to shield her from the sun. The woman is not young. The dirt disguises creases in her skin as neatly as expensive creams.

The fourth side of the box is missing, as is the roof. When a person passes, abruptly the woman in her open home is revealed tending her embroidery, like a view glimpsed from a bus passing unfamiliar country.

Her box interrupts the flow of pedestrian traffic along the sidewalk between banks and shops. Shoppers may pause to observe what caused their detour. Perhaps a startled foreigner turns and snickers. The woman does not lift her head. She doesn't put aside her embroidery meditation nor recognize another presence. The stranger examines the web of dirty hair below his eyes, below the level of the box's shielding sides. The stranger feels embarrassed. He feels like a peeping tom. He pretends unconcern, he almost smiles an offhand smile, continues, stepping around the box with the care necessary to avoid damaging somebody's home.

Her mother died last year. Her mother lived with the woman in

the three-sided box on the sidewalk, blocking access to the telephone company office. Somebody suggested, or forced the two women, mother and daughter, to move their box further down the sidewalk. Or maybe the sun's heat prompted them to a spot protected by overhanging stone and granite angels of Mexico.

The mother in companionable silence also embroidered, the two dust-dulled heads bent over their tasks. Each held her embroidery hoop and pulled threads through intimate designs. The box size obliged them to fold their legs. The mother's knees hurt. They leaned into one another in weariness, until the mother straightened herself and resumed embroidering. The daughter waited for her mother to lift her slight leaning weight. The daughter never spoke. The mother never spoke. The daughter perhaps considered that the mother's weight, so brief and silent, was the stroke of a passing cat.

Then the mother died. At least I guess she died, because the woman adorned her box interior with candles and flowers arranged like an altar, with candle flame that caused my heart to leap for the carton and the dusty hair and rags. And yet I was happy. Because it wasn't a cat, it was her mother who passed; an altar suggests a mother, not a cat. A recognition, although with it, loss.

After the mother's death the woman in the box remained alone. The embroidery in her hands stayed constant; perhaps like Penelope she undid her work each night to have a chore unfinished during interminable days of delaying suitors.

I'm just inventing that. How would I know what the woman in the box was thinking? How would I know which police or officials arrived to suggest her elopement to a more convenient location? Yet somehow I'm certain of the mother. The mother who accepted her daughter's complications and lived with them, with her, in companionship that never fed nor washed. The mother sat in her daughter's chosen box on the sidewalk, and while the daughter pushed threads of preoccupation through old cloth, her mother did the same.

A good mother, to accept the honorable cardboard convent in which her daughter dwelled, engaged in her secret life. The

daughter's altar— before she built it, I only saw her hands free dust from her hair, or thrust her embroidery needle. I never saw her move her lips. I never saw her mother speak.

Perhaps with threaded needles they signaled all the speech required. Then the mother's needle stopped. How did the woman sitting before her altar in the box comprehend the new requirement? That her natural mother understood, but Mary beside her in heaven needs everything explained, twice, three times, daily and forever?

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