

What I Promised

When I come home, the cardboard box is there, in the center of my apartment, conspicuous, as if she was afraid I might miss it if she placed it on the kitchen counter or my desk. To be honest, I can't say I would have noticed it right away if she had put it anywhere else. It's not a large box by any means, perhaps the kind you might pack a blender in, and it is completely bare on the outside. Bare and brown and unremarkable, except for the four layers of clear duct-tape holding the top shut.

There is no doubt that she left the box here. She is prone to using too much tape to close packages. It occurred to me on more than one occasion that she wasn't as mistrusting of the United States Postal Service as she was mistrusting of the actual items she was sending. Watching her pack Christmas gifts for her friends and relatives was much like watching someone fitting a straightjacket. As best as I could figure over the years, there first were a minimum five layers of tissue paper, each wrapped completely and taped generously around whatever item was being shipped. Next came at least two layers of bubble wrap, with the size of the bubbles corresponding to the size and fragility of the object. Last came more Styrofoam popcorn than I care to remember. Basically, if the lid closed without a little extra effort on her part, there was not enough popcorn. Then lastly there was the taping of the box – an asterisk shape covering every possible angle of entry. It was as if she was constructing the last line of defense against the item inside, in case it were to somehow shed its tissue paper, pop its bubble wrap and swim upward through the Popcorn Sea. After she finished and labeled each package, she would always give one last pat on the lid, as if to say *There, try getting out now.*

The box in the center of my apartment – I can tell without even opening it – is no exception. When I pick it up there is no audible sound of shifting or even styrofoam popcorn settling inside. Shaking the box, I know, is useless, but I try anyway. I shake it back and forth and up and down in short bursts, turning it over in my hands again and again, as if any movement inside the box will prove to me that she had some imperfection, something I can use to understand. In the end, though, there is no sound. I can feel the object inside though – a dead weight right in the center of the package. It's as if she left me a box filled to the brim with the same, heavy nothing that has been hanging in this place for the past three weeks.

I do a quick inventory of the apartment for the sixth or seventh time since she left. As far as I can tell, she didn't take much with her. In fact, she'd left most of her clothes hanging in the closet. Leaving the box on the sofa, I walk into the bedroom and scan through the closet. Nothing appears to be missing from earlier this morning when I left for work. I check the bathroom next, and find her toothbrush and make-up still sitting on the sink, exactly as before, like discarded skeletal remains on a vast marble desert.

Even if she had taken some things with her (which was looking less possible by the moment), it seems rather unlikely to me that, upon realizing she had something of mine, she would have then repackaged it and come all the way back to leave it in my apartment. In the center of the floor, no less. No, whatever was in the box was something important. Something she had to be absolutely sure I would find and open.

After a few minutes of leaning against the bathroom counter and mulling all this over, I decide to make dinner first and open the box later.

You've built it up too much, I argue aloud. Relax a bit and open it later.

Opening the fridge, I decide to cook some salmon leftover from the previous night. I set some water boiling and drop a few yellow potatoes in, along with some basil growing from a pot on the window-sill – another of her projects. At first, I can sense my actions as sharp and mechanical while I try to clear my head. After a few minutes, though, the steam from the boiling water and the smell of grilled asparagus and baked salmon fills the apartment, at the same time draping a thin curtain over my anxiety. Some people bite their nails to relax, others iron all the clothes in their house, and I cook. It's strange at times when I think about how something so demanding of my attention can quite possibly be relaxing. But then, that's the point, I suppose – a welcome anxiety to cover up the unwelcome, like a foggy bathroom mirror when you don't feel you can stand the sight of yourself.

When all the food is cooked, I sit down and attempt to eat with the same fervor, trying not to break the rhythm of calm I achieved while preparing the meal. Unfortunately it only takes three bites to realize I'm not hungry and to feel the weight of the box on the sofa tugging at my mind, hanging heavily like a chandelier. I attempt two more bites of salmon before I give up completely, scraping the food into the trash and placing the dishes in the sink for later.

Standing behind the kitchen counter, I can see directly into the living room, where the box sits, silent and bare and heavy.

Taking a utility knife from the drawer, I walk back to the sofa and sit down, placing the box squarely in my lap. The asterisk on top stares up at me, like a warning. *Contents Under Pressure. *Keep Away from Small Children. *Do Not Consume. Or maybe this box is a footnote. *The end is inside.

Slowly, precisely, I slide the tip of the utility knife across the top opening, scoring the tape enough to pull it apart with my fingers. After two similar cuts to the side of the flaps, I pull back the lid completely and peer inside. There is no Styrofoam, no bubble wrap. There isn't even one layer of tissue paper. In fact, the only thing in the box at all is a medium-sized mason jar, the gold lid gleaming from the light of the table lamp. It's too small for the box, and I wonder why it didn't move or make a sound when I was shaking the package earlier. Once I finally reach in to pull the jar out, though, it all becomes clear. The jar is *heavy*. It feels even heavier than the box did when I held it in my lap moments ago.

The further I lift the jar out of the box the heavier it seems. By the time I reveal it fully, I'm using two hands and most of my strength to hold it up. Inside the glass is a dark, black, seemingly-viscous liquid, with razor-thin lines of other colors – yellow, blue, orange – swirling inside. I notice a small envelope attached to the bottom of the jar with a piece of scotch tape, and immediately set the jar on its side on the sofa in order to peel the letter off. Using the utility knife again, I slice a clean opening in the top of the envelope. Setting the knife down again, I pull out a small, lined sheet of paper from inside and instantly recognize her handwriting.

These are the things you promised to take from me – things I cannot take any further. I'm sorry for giving them to you, but you promised. You had to know I would send them someday, anyhow.

-E

I read the note twice more before giving up completely and hefting the black jar under the table lamp to study the contents further. But no matter how long I stare at the

shifting liquid, I can't seem to decode her words. I'd certainly never seen this jar before, much less promised to take it. Not to mention she'd written "things" not "thing," but there was only this single mason jar in the box.

After half an hour of mulling it over, I decide to take a break from the jar and its contents. Since leaving it unattended in the living room makes me nervous, I carry the jar with me into the bathroom, setting it on the counter as I start running warm water into the tub. A hot bath, similar to the steam rising off cooking food, has the ability to at least calm my nerves and help me think more clearly. Stripping down to nothing, I sit on the edge of the tub, watching the water slowly rise against the sides. With the tub about halfway full, I glance up at the jar one more time.

With a sudden wave of understanding, I stand up and move to the counter. Holding the glass jar with one hand, I use the other to twist the lid. It's on tighter than I expect and it takes a full minute of torque before I get the lid started. Once open, I place the lid upside down on the counter, picking up the jar carefully so as not to spill the contents. I walk back to the bathtub and, with one last look at my reflection in the ripples of the still-rising water, I tip the jar and empty the contents into the bath. There is apparently more liquid in the jar than I discerned, because the water level rises quickly to nearly overflowing. When the last drop slips out of the jar, I quickly turn the running water off. Staring into the tub, now, I can see no reflection in the substance below. The light from the ceiling seems to be absorbed into the liquid, as if the light too is trapped by the immense weight of all the things she gave to me.

I step into the tub, letting the black liquid pull me in to the knees. Standing there, I can still see the small, multi-colored lines swirling around my thighs, restless and lonely

in the blackness. In one smooth motion I lower myself in up to my neck, suddenly feeling a crushing, unrelenting weight press against my chest and arms and legs. *These are the things she told me about, I think. These are the things I promised she'd never carry alone. They are mine now. There is no one left to carry them but me.*

Taking one last breath, I finally, completely, let my head slip under, giving my entire self up to the immense and deserved weight of darkness.