

**The Redwood Writers**  
**“I Made A Terrible Mistake” Contest 2021**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner**

**“Into the Box”**  
**By Jean Wong**

Samuel squinted as darkness fell, his eyes smarting in the dusty, warm air of his workshop. He needed to quit, but he was caught by the rhythm of his arm and the sound of the sand paper. The movement and the familiar swish of the wood submitting to the hot roughness was soothing, hypnotic.

Samuel stopped and ran his fingers on the reddish-brown mahogany. The setting sun’s faint rays lay on the surface of the small exquisite table. Knowing the work would be done by tomorrow, he felt a familiar gloom darken his spirits. Completed work only signaled the futility of achievement. For weeks after he would lie around listless until he was seized by another idea—perhaps a shelf, chair, cabinet, or stool—all pieces he had made hundreds of times, but each rare and unique.

Samuel pushed away from the table. And was his talent acknowledged? Did people admire his work for its simplicity, proportions, imagination, restraint, elegance? Idiots. Some

"Into the Box"  
By Jean Wong

fool had started a rumor that his pieces possessed a magical dimension. They said books placed on his shelves ended up automatically arranged in categories—fiction, poetry, biography, history sorted themselves in their proper place. Folks swore that a table made by Samuel was spill proof. Dishware, glasses, and flatware never slipped from his dining tables. And then there was this nonsense about the boxes.

An amateur magician had asked Samuel to make a box that he could rig up so he could disappear and reappear in it. Then the trickster claimed he never had to fake it, and that anything he put in it automatically disappeared. Now everyone wanted one. Damn if he was going to spend the rest of his life making boxes no matter how much money...

The door opened. It was *her*. Didn't she know how to knock? Samuel fumbled to light a candle as she stood there, tall and imperious. And so full of herself. The way she thought she was Queen of the town. Mariabella. What kind of name was that? What was wrong with just Maria or Bella—typical of her to make people struggle just to say her name.

He stared at her. Nothing special to look at but those slim legs—nature's design. No sculpted table leg could compete with her trim ankles, the way the flesh rose up to a magnificent curve. His eye traveled up to her smooth white hands. A gold bracelet with a circlet of charms hung from her wrist. He spotted the wide smile of a clown's face, then a tiny monkey, his hands covering his eyes. Women were always wearing silly, cheap bangles.

"Oh, sorry, am I disturbing you?" he heard her voice as if from under water.

"No, no," he muttered. Adjusting his glasses, he stepped forward so abruptly he almost kicked the table. *Damn*. Something about her soft fragility always made him clumsy. His bulky, muscular body—the strength he usually took pride in—felt heavy and stout.

"Into the Box"  
By Jean Wong

"I was just passing by and wondered how the music stand was going," she said. Her head tilted in a regal stance. She waited, silent and commanding.

Music stand ready! Did she think he was a speed demon? She had put in her order a few weeks ago, maybe a month, certainly no longer. And yet he had not even cut the wood. In fact, he'd forced himself to put it out of his mind. He couldn't seem to come up with an idea. He had wanted to make something different. Something so special that it would forever have her looking at him in recognition and awe.

"No, no," he said. "Not ready, nothing is ready. I am busy. Very busy!" Was he actually shouting? At the same time, he imagined her sitting at his nearly finished table, her delicate fingers curled around a tea cup handle.

Mariabella backed up, as her hands fluttered in a placating gesture, "Of course, I am so sorry to trouble you. I will leave you to your work. Excuse me."

She made a quick turn and walked out, gently closing the door behind her.

He almost called, "Wait, don't go!" But instead, a black rage flooded his brain. There she was—doing it again—flitting in and out, never standing in one place so he could...could what? Talk to her, touch her, hold her, possess her?

His gaze landed on one of the boxes he had just finished. It was slightly larger than most of the boxes people wanted. This one had been ordered by a professional magician from out of town. The man said he was also an animal trainer and wanted to make tigers disappear. Ridiculous. Still. It certainly had plenty of room to fit Mariabella. Let her look in disdain when she found herself in a box disappearing. Disappearing to where? Who knew? That was the beauty of the plan. It would be an adventure. She would be totally dependent on him. Her haughtiness would turn to alarm, fear, and then...gratitude, when and if, she was released. But

"Into the Box"  
By Jean Wong

her freedom would be conditional on him. His will. His supreme will. Of course, he wouldn't touch her. He wasn't some pervert.

Samuel brushed at the air as if a fly had been buzzing around his head. What was he thinking! Was he mad? But his eyes kept settling on the box. He had just finished painting it—gold with a black border and a few exotic symbols. It sat there massive with a potent presence. Did it really have magic powers? He'd always dismissed this rumor about the fantastic properties of his work, but now a brutal urgency surged through him. How long was it since he'd had a woman? He couldn't remember. He didn't even like them. In fact, he hated them. He never thought he would have anything to do with a woman...since...Samuel shrugged, dismissing a distant pang.

He lifted the top and swung himself into the box. The lid softly settled shut immersing Samuel in darkness. He sat; his arms wrapped around his knees. He felt a chill. He could still smell the dizzying effects of the paint. It almost made him sleepy. Did that mean he was beginning to disappear? And if he did, how was he supposed to get back? He pushed away his apprehension. If he had the power to vanish, of course he could return.

Samuel felt a strange pulse of energy course down his arms and legs. He felt lighter, almost suspended. A transformation was indeed taking place. Each cell in his body glowed bright and warm. His heart slowed to a steady beat. The crown of his head tingled with an alive, vibrant sensation. More time passed. His legs felt a little numb. He looked down. Was he still there? He couldn't see anything but he could feel his heavy work shoes. Had an hour gone by, maybe two? There was a cramp in his calf.

He forced his mind to relax and summoned his powers of concentration. Vanishing had to take time. He blocked himself from thinking of Mariabella...the way she wore skirts that were

"Into the Box"  
By Jean Wong

a little too short. She had a curious way of looking at him with a sideways glance—maybe she was nearsighted. Or was it a look of dismissal? He felt an itch on the inside of his thigh. There was a kink in his neck.

Nothing was happening. He waited a little longer, but after what seemed like another hour, he began to feel like a fool.

He positioned himself into a crouch. A muscle spasm ran down his back. He pushed on the lid. It felt locked in place. He pushed again a little harder. No movement. He slammed his hand upward. There was no give whatsoever. He lay on his back and gave a violent kick. Nothing budged. The lid felt more like metal than wood. Damn. He never used screws...everything was fine joinery work. He hadn't even put a latch on the lid. He heaved his shoulder against one of the sides, kicking out with his feet on the other. His face was sticky with sweat. The air was warm and dense. He could hardly breathe. He tried to hold back the panic, but his heart was pounding.

"Help, help," he screamed. "Get me out of here. I'm trapped." He yelled, struggled, banged, kicked and cursed. There was no answer. The cold night lay still and silent like a judge.

His back was killing him. Was this really it? Was he going to die like a condemned man? How could this happen to him? He who never bothered anyone—who only wanted to get on with his work and make the finest furniture for...for what? For Mariabella? He'd wanted to kidnap her for Christ's sakes. For the town? He hated the people. He hated everything. Yes, he was pissed off—pissed off at everyone, himself included. How did it happen? Why did everyone make him so angry? His dad was always angry. His mom was always sick...and critical...and crazy. A flood of emotions churned through his psyche—flashbacks rose in a furious swirl.

"Into the Box"  
By Jean Wong

Scenes lashed out at him— the hugs his mom smothered him with after she'd screamed at him, her foul breath, the cuff of his dad's fist on the side of his head, his own wild temper.

Surrounded by four walls, the space was thick with a torment of images he couldn't shove away. Memory struck him with a bewildering force, yet at the same time each jolt was familiar, intimate. He'd forgotten how close to the surface the unbearable was lodged. A muffled sob came deep within him followed by a paroxysm of tears. His whole body shook with misery and grief.

Time merged with sorrow and loss as Samuel sat in the box. The hours stretched out, unforgiving, forcing him to surrender to a past of overwhelming pain. His body felt wrung out, beaten down, exhausted. He lay on the floor of the box curled like an animal. The rage subsided as he stopped struggling. His breathing was low and even. Samuel felt sad yet strangely calm as he surveyed the life he'd squandered. *I've been a jerk. All that wasted time. No way to make it up. It's too late. I've blown all my chances. I've made a terrible mistake.*

A blaze of light fell from above. He peered through the glare and saw the blurred outline of a figure opening the lid up high. He focused on the face of Mariabella, her eyes anxious with concern, "Are you okay?"

Her arm stretched towards him. He reached for her hand, the gold bracelet dangling from her wrist shining like a lifeline. She pulled him up.

"Why did you...come...back," he whispered. The words were barely audible. He was stunned to be out of the box. How did she manage to open it?

"I don't know," she said. Her eyes darkened in confusion. "I didn't mean to bother you again. I'm sorry. Something...drew me back."

"Into the Box"  
By Jean Wong

He wondered why he'd ever thought she was haughty...or stuck up...or anything...but...  
nice.

"No," he said, "please." He wanted to tell her about the magic. But he stopped. He didn't  
know anything about enchantment. Magic was a mystery.

He stood there. He was free. The room seemed large and spacious—the windows  
touched by tendrils of ivy and the world beyond. The air was fresh. Light shimmered in the cool  
dawn. And she was right here beside him. He gazed at the wonder of it all.

# # #