

BOX

Her phone pops. The post "Foot Day," a picture of her feet after a pedicure— tissue stuffed between her toes— continues to get "likes," up to forty-three last time I checked. The phone doesn't know she's gone. It is alive and well, the tentacles of social media clinging to her corpse, every "like" and comment, ripples blurring the line between life and death.

I keep her phone charged. If it dies, she will die again. Her gallery is the hippocampus of her phone, storing 368 images, a file cabinet cataloging the last year of our lives. They are filtered, altered to low-fi or sierra, a distorted version of reality that has become reality.

After months of searching, reading reviews, and endless comparisons, she finally clicked and purchased a refrigerator. Over a hundred sites in her search history, numerous threads, and text messages confirming her order and delivery- she was a tenacious Internet-shopper.

Free delivery, installation, and haul away. The refrigerator is huge, a 29.7 cubic feet, stainless steel, French Door refrigerator. I take pictures of it with her phone, use filters to make it look green, upload them with the caption- New fridge!

-The delivery guys were great. This refrigerator is beautiful and functional but it's a little loud! There's a lot of storage space and the freezer capacity is amazing. Love the stainless steel. Four stars.

Eight people find my review helpful. My (Her) fridge pic immediately picks up thirteen likes and two comments from friends.

- Congrats on the new fridge!

- We're looking to buy a new fridge. Tell us how it goes!

The refrigerator box rests on its side like a fallen giant. I help it up, opened side on the bottom, flaps turned out like clown shoes.

Every inch of the house reminds me of her as if she was masked, armed with spray paint, marking open spaces like a diligent Blek le Rat. The desert sets up camp inside my home. The silence hovers above a blanket that struggles to hold in her restless spirit that struggles to break free into the silence. Visual images morph into a layer of sound that plays over her voice echoing throughout the house. The walls feel like her skin. Her aroma rests inside soap bubbles floating in the air.

I lift the box and climb inside. I must get inside. There is no choice. The air is drastically different inside the box. Formaldehyde oozes from every surface. She is in a box. I am in a box. We are connected in our coordinates, the demarcation between life and death, a thin cardboard box, a thin wall of mahogany and walnut.

Before they closed the casket, I slid my phone under her shoulder. After her grave was filled, the soil compacted and returned, I placed my head on the ground, the blades of grass tickling my earlobe, and I called her. It sounded like I was at the bottom of a pool listening to my ringtone playing on a small transistor radio next to a lifeguard tanning on a high chair.

I was the only one at her funeral. I made arrangements with Desert Mortuary and Cemetery for a quick burial. Body to casket. Casket to cemetery plot. No services. No words. No questions.

Her phone continues to ring, messages flow in from family and friends. I answer the text messages.

-Why aren't you picking up??

-In the middle of something. Will get back to you.

Her family hated me. Her friends loathed me. We escaped to Las Vegas to get away from them. Her father was from Korea. He followed the mold of many highly-educated Korean immigrants who came to America during the 70's and 80's. They worked hard, got their degrees, landed great jobs, and lived in the best suburbs of America. He was an affluent anesthesiologist, conservative and racist in the way some Koreans could be. Living in America and an elite American education did not strip him of his xenophobic traits- they reinforced them.

When a Korean girl married a black man at his church, he masterfully created an environment that made it impossible for them to become a part of the congregation. He methodically campaigned, talking about morals and good sense. He knew other Korean parents felt the same way but were afraid to say anything. So he created a narrative that accomplished their goal, making it a safety issue, a bad-example issue.

-Do you want your kids marrying a black guy?

-He might be a good guy. But one black guy shows up. Then two. Soon it's gonna be like Harlem in here.

He did not respect the black doctors working at his hospital, said they had cheated through affirmative action. His favorite dinner time conversation was telling how each race differed when going under anesthesia, explaining in detail how certain races were mentally weaker and prone to panic. He hated Chinese people, said they never showered. He crinkled his nose when talking about a Chinese colleague. He called children with mixed parents, particularly kids with Korean mothers and black fathers "mutts." He hated Japs, Spics, and Jews. He even made a distinction between people from different regions in Korea, saying people from Jeollado were backstabbers and fickle or people with AB blood type were smart but conniving. He made blanket statements for every category of people, and it made him feel like he understood the world.

He made his money before the politically correct, social media era. He argued his views were grounded in science, that just like apples smelled like apples and that plums fell from plum trees, not cherry trees, people were a certain way genetically. Blood type influenced personality. Uncontrollable things determined the way a person was.

I was born with a cleft lip and palate, which in Korea, at the time, meant you were a monster or ghost, born into the world to punish parents for their sins. My cleft palate was left untreated, and I was dropped off at the steps of a church. A nice elderly, white couple in Chicago adopted me.

I went from O'Hare International directly to Rush University Medical Center. I had surgeries throughout the years. Many people with cleft palate have scars that are barely noticeable, but my scar looked like a worm crawled out of my nostril and got squashed.

I am missing a chunk of my upper lip where the scar hits my mouth. They ran out of skin when sewing my lip together. It looks like they buttoned the top buttons of an extremely small coat and left the bottom open because the coat could not wrap all the way around.

I went to good schools, but I was teased. I was the perfect combination- nonthreatening Asian with a defect. So it was usually chingy-chong-chop-suey- harelip chink. Somebody created a comic strip called the "Adventures of Harelip Bruce Lee," which was posted, printed, and spread around school. "HBL" detailed the trials and tribulations of Bruce Lee in an alternate world. In one episode, Harelip Bruce seeks revenge against an opposing gang for beating up his weak and timid brother. He stands in front of their dojo in that yellow tracksuit. He calls them out, but because of his harelip and bad pronunciation, the wrong people keep coming out until Bruce cracks a chopstick with his signature scowl and jams it between his lips to stop his quivering harelip.

The school conducted an internal investigation, but they told me to "embrace it," gave me the "turn your weakness into a strength" pep talk. And the comic strips were well-done, witty, and professional, and that was commendable, they said.

Life would have been easier if I had the personality to overcome this glitch in nature, but I was aloof and unapproachable. I was headed nowhere, and my high school teachers did not see potential being squashed. I wasn't an oyster they needed to protect and nurture. There were no pearls in my future.

I wore a black Fishbone shirt, jeans, and Converse every day in high school. I didn't comb my hair or shower. And for the last six months of high school, I wore a flu mask with a big "X" that covered my mouth. I did not speak at school, and when I did, I was shocked at the sound of my voice.

Other Korean kids in my class avoided me. They headed to Ivy League schools, did missionary work, celebrated their Korean roots, and formed study groups that spent Friday nights at Barnes and Nobles. They weren't mean to me. They avoided me. I wasn't someone who was worried about the SATs or finding that

extracurricular activity that would set me apart from the thousands of overachieving Asian applicants.

I barely made it to Depaul University. I survived a quarter. My father died during high school, and my mother died as I started college. People who lose their parents early often regret that their parents missed out on their successes. I was grateful my parents died before seeing me fail in life. For their charitable act, the least I could have done was try.

My parents left me some money. When that money ran dry, I ended up working at a restaurant in Hyde Park where I met my wife, who was an MBA student at the University of Chicago. The owners did not want me out front. I cleared tables, washed dishes, and mopped the floors.

She came once a week or once every two weeks. She liked the deep dish, artichoke hearts and fresh garlic pizza with wheat crust. She started talking to me on a dare. Her friends put her up to it, and she never backed down from a challenge. She had a strong sense of justice. She wanted to prove to others and herself that she did not judge people by their appearances. And I was different from anybody in her universe. All her friends were successful, competitive, and dogmatic. She had never met someone who was the antithesis of every idea and value she held to be unequivocal truths.

When she approached me, I did not say a word. I glanced at her sideways and continued to clear tables. Exasperated, she followed me from table to table.

-Excuse me. Excuse me. Umm. Hello?

She was persistent. I grabbed a used napkin and scribbled on it.

-Say you talked to me. You win the bet. Congrats.

I threw the napkin at her and pushed the cart of dirty dishes to the back of the restaurant. That was the end, I thought. When I finished washing dishes and came out an hour later, she was waiting for me. Her friends were gone.

-Before you blow me off again, I just want to apologize.

I got off work, and she walked me home. She talked the whole time about herself. She was not equipped to deal with awkward silence. If I did not talk, she talked. We followed this pattern for several weeks. She talked so much, I never felt the pressure to say anything. It was comforting. Occasionally (very rarely), she would ask me questions, and if I did not respond, she would answer the question, as if I had posed it to her.

-What do you think about living in Hyde Park?

-

-I love it here. I just wish spring was longer, you know. I love going to the Point and laying out on the rocks.

She knew I had a thick wall, that I was a tall mountain, but she was determined to climb Everest.

When I told her I was adopted, that my biological parents had thrown me away, she cried. When I told her

that I suffered from both a cleft lip and palate, that I had lost some hearing, she cried. When I told her I tried to kill myself in high school, she cried. When I told her the only people in the world that loved me, my adoptive parents, had died within the span of eighteen months, she cried.

We did not talk about the news, movies, or gossip. We talked about pain, and I had a lot of it. At first, in her attempts to empathize, to align herself to my pain by sharing her pain, she told me about the time she wore a Christmas sweater to school and the kids laughed, or the time the other Korean girls called her a banana for being yellow on the outside and white on the inside. She got better with the pain formula, and being the great student she was, she mastered it. When we talked, we drowned ourselves in pain, swam through it with zest.

This hurt.

This wounded me.

This almost killed me.

It was a perfect system. We categorized and analyzed the pain, made it something tangible, and she was the magic formula. I inputted the variables, my pain- she acknowledged, processed, and assuaged it. In the beginning, we needed pain for the relationship to work. When we exhausted all our past pain and heartbreak, we needed fresh wounds, and many were ready to inflict them.

I brought out the worse in her father. Every time we met, it gave him Vietnam flashbacks, although he had never been to Nam.

-You know that picture of the naked girl running in the Vietnam War after she all burned. You look like her. Just like her! Running all gimpy.

He was referring to the picture taken by Nick Ut, and it made him chuckle. He was saying I was Kim Phuc, and I had been hit by a napalm bomb.

-You wearing clothes but you always seem naked. Naked little girl running through the jungle. You know, all scared and helpless.

Her father made it his mission in life to destroy me, using money, guilt, and threats. He called me *jjebo*, a derogatory Korean word for people with cleft lips. God made a mistake, and he wasn't about to let his daughter be a part of imperfection. He faked a heart attack, got several of his doctor-friends to stage the bedside meeting where he pleaded with her to leave me. He paid three men to threaten me- three short Korean guys fresh off the boat who had a hard time speaking English. They had memorized a speech but ended up telling me to eat a cow or something.

She took a job in Las Vegas, mainly to escape from her family. It was a high-paying job working for an entertainment company. I didn't work. My job was making her happy. I drove her to and from work, cooked, and cleaned. There was a well of goodness and emotions buried inside of me. She tapped into it, and it felt good to be circulatory, to be flowing river instead of a rotting cesspool.

We developed our cultural life, our taste in music around shows playing in Vegas. I bought tickets to see Olivia Newton-John, and for a month, we listened to her music, saw her movies, and marveled at how we had missed Grease and Xanadu. We memorized and sang the duet "Suddenly." She was Olivia, and I was

"Cleft" Richard. Donny and Marie, Wayne Newton, and Celine Dione- it started as a joke, but then we'd laugh about how our tastes resembled an elderly couple from the Midwest.

She played jokes. We went to coffee shops around town. "Oh my god! You sold us scolding hot coffee! Look what it did to my husband's lip!" I would cover my mouth, act like the coffee burned me, and lower my hand in a dramatic ta-da moment. My cleft palate was no longer a source of pain. It made us laugh. I thought of what my high school teachers said about turning a weakness into a strength. I drew the line when she started using a close-up of my cleft lip as her profile pic.

We lived in a chic condo on Las Vegas Boulevard. I understood why words like "amazing," "great," or "fantastic" existed in our lexicon. Before meeting her, I never used those words. She turned me into a man of words. With over a million English words, she made me feel at least 800,000.

The walls of the box grow thicker. I update her status with a question.

- What's it like to live in a box?

It is a funny and quirky question, the best kind for social media. Within three hours, twenty-six comments, numerous conversation threads, and various memes with cute kittens and puppies. The box is metaphysical, the trappings of civilization, your mundane job, your family. Get in the box. Get out of the box. Wear a box on your head. Someone shares the link to No Doubt's "Trapped in a Box."

To keep her phone alive, I punch a little hole in the side of the box, line it up with an outlet, and plug in her

phone. I send messages to my phone, which sits in her grave. There is that brief second I forget she is where she is and anticipate a reply. I will never leave this box. There is nothing outside of this box.

As we started our second year in Vegas, she began to get tired. She started to swell in her ankles and feet. It was to the point she could no longer fit into her normal shoes. She would come home, go straight to bed, and wake up in the middle of the night complaining about extreme leg and back pain. She found spots of blood in her urine. The doctors told us she was suffering from a kidney condition that causes urine to flow back into the kidney and poison blood.

In the span of six months, she lost her job, went on dialysis treatment, and became a weaker, timid version of herself. We were running out of money. I worked as a parking attendant at night, flipped burgers at In-and-Out during the day. I moved my schedule around her treatment, rushed home to take care of her.

She was put on the kidney transplant list. I called her father, told her of the situation. I begged him and family members to get tested for a possible match. I made plans to fly back. I was ready to do anything, but he only wanted one thing.

- That lip was no accident. You cursed and now you cursed my little girl. Leave her! I'm a doctor. I'll give her the best care.

She was against it. She hated that I even made the call. And when she heard her father put a condition on his help, she was livid.

-It's just you and me. Me and you. Got it?

I never brought it up again.

The doctors told me there was a fifty million to one chance for a tissue match between two unrelated people. I did the blood type, crossmatch, and HLA testing. Our tissue types were close enough to make a transplant possible.

I gave her my kidney. I would've given her any organ. When she woke up from the surgery, the first thing she said was, "Am I going to grow a harelip now?" Maybe there was something to what her father said about people being born a certain way.

Fifty million to one chance she would fall in love with a harelip like me.

Fifty million to one chance I'd have the right tissue to give her my kidney.

I create an event in her calendar and on her Facebook page. I call it "The Harelip is Gone!" I invite her friends, send a heartfelt email to her father and family in her words. She tells them she misses them. She wants to celebrate finally leaving me. The last line of the email reads:

-I will never see him again. We are separated forever. Please come to Vegas and celebrate!

I immediately search for event planners and through Yelp and Thumbtack, I find a planner, Yvonne, with 82

positive reviews. She immediately friends her (me), sends a message about scheduling a face-to-face to discuss possible themes, venues, and budget. I ask her if it will be possible to do most of the planning through messaging because I am traveling. To verify her identity, I send Yvonne a picture of my wife's license, links to her Facebook and Twitter account.

She has been on Facebook since 2006. Almost ten years of her life documented by photos, posts, and likes. Undoubtedly, Yvonne has combed through her Facebook page, looked at her graduation pictures, the generic drunk party pictures, our wedding photos, and the countless pictures of food plates. It was probably her music interests, liking James Taylor and Jack Johnson types that put her at ease, because someone who listens to James Taylor will never screw you over. And the event has just the right amount of vindictiveness and humor to make it worth her while.

-I usually don't start working with a client until meeting in person but will make an exception in this case. Been in bad relationships too. This is something to celebrate!

-Thnx. BTW Can we get Olivia Newton-John to sing?

-She's in Vegas. Can look into it.

We continue to exchange messages and email. Yvonne is a single mother living in Riverside, California, but she spends half her time in Vegas setting up events and parties. She likes taking pictures of sunsets, fancy meals, and her daughter doing ballet. She posts about black injustice, leans left, and is a proud graduate of Arizona State. Occasionally, she uses the Sun Devils logo as her profile pic.

-Can I run by some ideas? Hotel on the Strip. We can get rooms for guests. You mentioned ONJ. I think I can get her. How about a Grease theme?

-Xanadu. No Grease.

-LOL. The Grease theme is a little played out. Should I move forward? ONJ could be pricey.

-Money is not an issue.

I don't eat or drink. With every passing hour in this box, the darkness seeps inside of me. I am more than sixty percent water, and by the time of the party, I will be less than forty percent water. Sitting with my legs bent and knees pressed against my chest, I am coiled, twisted like my dirty lip. Darkness upon darkness coats the interior space of this box. I know every pocket of air, tap the wall every so often with my finger to hear a sound.

Zero percent chance I will meet another woman like her in this world. Zero percent chance I will ever be happy again. Zero percent chance I will make it out of this box alive. Absolutes devour probability, chance, and uncertainty leaving nothing but despair. She will never be here again. I choose to become a part of the darkness because of the slim chance she might be there, that we might meet again.

After the transplant surgery, I continued to flip burgers and park cars. She felt healthy enough to work at home as a freelance consultant. We saved up enough money to buy a small home in Henderson, Nevada. Our two-bedroom house was in Green Valley, gravel yard mottled with cacti and succulent plants. After the fridge, we were going to buy a flat screen TV and a karaoke machine.

They said the kidney could last a good twenty years. I found her collapsed on the kitchen floor. Sitting in the ambulance with her, I held her hand. She mumbled under her oxygen mask about a Thanksgiving dinner we had several years back. I had crossed my leg in front of her father while chatting in the living room. While carving the turkey, her father sliced off its leg and screamed, "I'll cut that leg off!" She was waving her hand

around imitating her father who waved that turkey leg like a mad man. She laughed which made me think she was going to be fine.

My mouth is dry and sticky. My upper lip is rolled up exposing my teeth. In the darkness, I can't tell if my eyes are open or closed. The brightness of her phone screen pierces my eyes like a thousand pins. It takes time to focus. The arrangements have been made.

-MGM Grand.

-Xanadu.

-Olivia Newton-John.

One arrangement is left. Before I run out of energy or lose consciousness, I must figure out a way to ready this box for delivery. How can I tape it and get it ready for delivery with me inside? I gather the Styrofoam blocks and bubble wrap. I am dizzy. The freshness of the air stings my nose and eyes. I grab several blankets and pillows. I lay the box on its side. I push the Styrofoam base to the bottom of the closed-end of the box. Mustering all the strength I have, I cut a hole large enough for me to squeeze through near the open end of the box.

I throw in blankets, pillows, bubble wrap, masking tape, and the piece I cut out. I crawl in backward. I find the hole, slip through it, and stand. I look like a captain sticking his head out of the bridge of a submarine. I bend over, close the flaps, and seal them with the masking tape. Out of breath. Back and forth, I seal the open end.

I slide down the box. Lie down with the hole directly above me. I tape the cutout piece from inside. I've done

enough to break a sweat. No sign of water anywhere. My eyelids stick to my eyeballs when they blink. No spit in my mouth. No urine. I'm running dry.

-will have a special present delivered to the party.

-What's inside?

-Surprise for guests. they'll love it. trust me.

The traditional delivery places will not open my door. They refuse to pick up unattended packages. I find a shady courier service in North Las Vegas. I give them special instructions. I tell them the key is under the second cactus tree and to deliver the box to the MGM Grand for a special party.

The box will be placed in the middle of the stage. Olivia Newton-John will kick off the event by singing "Magic." The lyrics will play on a large screen showing a photo of her tombstone.

Through every turn I'll be near you

I'll come anytime you call

I'll catch you when you fall

I'll be guiding you

You have to believe we are magic

Nothin' can stand in our way

Party-goers might be befuddled by the picture. But considering our past humor chord, which has played dark and inappropriately ironic and morose, they won't be surprised. They will guess the tombstone symbolizes the death of our marriage. When the song ends, people will applaud, wait for the punchline.

Yvonne will introduce herself, and then open the box to reveal my pale, grisly face.

I'm no longer hungry or thirsty. That stage has passed. Every tissue is being drained. The space inside the box expands into intangible elements. There is nothing real. Everything unfolds inside my eyelids. It is a Wednesday afternoon. She comes home from work early. She wears a blue suit. Flips off her heels. Hugs me. The smell of perfume behind her ears. Come sit on the couch. Tell me about your day.

My blood turns to sludge. Portraits of me as a child, as a teenage boy, and as an adult cover a murky wall. All the lips are split open. They haven't been sewn together yet. The lips flap like the wings of the bar-tailed godwit that flies like crazy for 7,000 miles without stopping. They talk to me simultaneously without pause.

-You can't eat French Toast with blueberry jam.

-Paint the board with your favorite slogan.

-Aborted babies live in boxes.

-Come boy, jump! Jump!

-Hate that speck of blood on your foot.

Mouths keep moving, I lift my arms and reach for my mothers. They forgive me. My mother in Chicago, not my Korean mother, drops me off on the steps of a small church in the country. I'm wrapped in a pink blanket. She's wearing that blue dress she wore on Sundays. It's a windy night. Old Korean men play *Janggi* on a bench. Street cats approach the baby stealthily across the ground with their bellies low and tails tucked down. They nibble on me. Take a part of my nose and mouth. I try to lift my arms to shoo away the cats. They gather around and rip the pink blanket off, the high-pitched trill of cats fighting. Under a sterile moonlight,

the cats rip the baby apart. I wave my arms in vain.

Shaking wakes me. Siren roars. Silence under the oxygen mask. Ambulance rocks side to side. Box set upright. Pushed into a hand truck and tied. -Stay with me. Eyes flutter. Hair falls to side of gurney, hanging like black icicles in winter. Gravity pushes head into chest. Chest into thighs. Cold steel boxes slice through night. Smear jelly on cold paddles. One on me. One on her.

In the emergency room, she leaves me. There's no coming back. Box rattles. Placed on a hand truck and moving again. I hunched over her body, ran my hands through her hair. I whispered but she did not whisper back. The hotel air seeps through. It is cold. I cut off some of her hair. Taped it to my wrist like a watch to keep time. Voices pierce the box which has lost its filter. Soon the hole will be removed. I will be set free forever.