



**The Box was just the right size for her
and the child.**

But what would await them when they
opened it?

THE BOX

When the Box arrived it was just the right size for her and the child. It was made out of some kind of dull black material, with a surface that gave the impression of depth, as if you could sink your fingers into it. She stared at it for a while, then decided to look inside. The vacuum seal released with a long hiss; there was a ledge for sitting on, a small light in the centre of the roof, and an air filter with a timer attached. Something chill slipped down her spine. She shut the box with a shudder and threw an old eiderdown over it.

When the child, a climate orphan from the South, had been assigned to her, she had resented it. His dull stare, his obvious sadness, all contributed to the low buzz of shame and powerlessness that she already felt; but she had surprised herself by coming to love him. Ever since her own children had gone to work on The Farms, she had convinced herself that it was best that she faced the end alone. But the child had come, and then the Box; and now she wasn't so sure.

The child was curious about the Box. Over the coming days he asked regularly to see inside it. He would take his small collection of toys in there; pretend it was a spaceship or a time machine. He asked her endless questions about it:

'How does it work?'

'I'm not quite sure. It's something to do with Quantum Mechanics.'

'What's Quantum Mechanics?'

'It's the science that studies the behaviour of all the tiny things that make the universe.'

'What tiny things?'

'Well, like photons, atoms, that kind of thing...I think.'

'Is the box made of...*fotonns* and *attoms*?'

'Everything is.'

'Even me?'

'Even you.'

The boy giggled.

And then the day came. Box day. She gathered the child's toys and opened the door. 'We need to start the filter first.' She reached inside the box and tapped 'initiate' on the touch screen then stepped back out. The boy's fingers fluttered then came down to stroke one of the dark faces of the box. 'Will it work?'

'I don't know. Nobody really knows.'

'Don't the experts know?'

She shook her head. Most of her adult life she had heard politicians and business people deride the experts; but as soon as it became obvious that it was too late to stop The Disaster, the scientists, the mechanics, the engineers, became gods. And when they said even they couldn't stop it, they were joined by the Philosophers, the experimental theorists; and from all of this *expertise*, came The Box.

She heard a ping, looked inside, and saw that the status light had gone to green.

'It's time.'

She took hold of his hand and they stepped in. She settled him on the ledge then leant forward to shut the door behind them. It closed with a hiss like a slowly released breath. Her heart thudded in her chest.

'What does it do?'

'It... ' she struggled to calm the tremor in her voice. 'It seals us off completely from the world outside; no light, no sound, nothing. And it gives us air for ten minutes.'

He held her hand a little tighter. 'And how will that work?'

'It's hard to explain. Did you ever hear about Schroedinger's Cat?'

He shook his head.

'Ok, what if a tree falls in a forest and there's no living thing around. Does it still make a sound?'

He screwed his face up tight and peered at her.

'You see, the experts thought that maybe, just maybe, if no human on earth is able to witness The Disaster, because they are in their boxes, it might not happen at all.' She knew it sounded crazy, her fraying hopes lay instead with the Many World theorists. They hypothesised that at the point at which The Disaster happened, the world may duplicate, and from the safety of their boxes, some people would find themselves in the world where the disaster hadn't happened, the unlucky ones in the world where it had.

The ping repeated and the status light moved to orange. The screen beside it read 'one minute.' Without expecting it, a sob escaped her and she brought her free hand up to her mouth.

'What's the matter?'

'I was just thinking...of my children...if they're...'

A third ping and the light changed to red. The screen now displayed the message 'exit.'

'Don't worry,' said the child, smiling up at her, 'it must be ok, coz we're still here.'

She put her arm around him. She couldn't bring herself to tell him that their reality only truly existed while the Box was still closed. She couldn't bring herself to tell him about their insurance policy; two government issue pills in her pocket, guaranteed to work in seconds and be entirely painless.

She took a deep breath and reached for the door.

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