

This was written as an entry to Cast Iron Theatre's "Dukeanory: The Box":

"Dare you open THE BOX?"

"Join the macabre storytellers of Cast Iron Theatre as they lift the lid of this sinister collection of stories to celebrate Halloween. In the (dis)honourable tradition of old Amicus and Hammer horror movies, all the terrifying tales have one thing in common: a box that must never be opened..."

"We're looking for your stories! Cast Iron Theatre will present an evening of spooky short stories as part of the BRIGHTON HORRORFEST in October!"

"Loosely inspired by the portmanteau Amicus stories of the seventies, CAST IRON THEATRE will present an evening of six spooky stories, all with one theme."

"The stories will be read by CAST IRON actors in a Jackanory style, and will have a linking theme – THE BOX."

"Please submit your horror / spooky story of around 1,500 words, and allow the title to strongly influence your narrative. Bear in mind that your story should probably be first person narrative (although the events don't have to have happened directly to the person telling the story), and that the Amicus films we're taking inspiration from were a) largely made in the 70s and b) often influenced by folklore dating between 1870s and 1930s."

Extra information – you can put anything into the Box and take anything out, but can't destroy it – as 5 others also use the same box."

The Box

By Susanne Crosby

Sila used to be happy. He had a beautiful wife Margot and a daughter Veena who was growing into a beautiful woman; he had a great carpentry skill, he had his own shop where he sold his carved ornaments, furniture and creations, and they all lived in the rooms upstairs. The house was warm, the Town was happy. The Mayor of the Town had his own particular style and sometimes he was too fond of his gold, but what town didn't have that?

Until last Spring. Margot became ill. It started with her just looking a bit grey, and gradually they noticed that she was in pain. She tried denying it, she had always been strong and never sick. She protested about calling the doctor, but the doctor turned a different shade of grey after he examined her. He talked to Sila quietly in the hallway, Veena strained to hear. Sila stroked his greying whiskers on his rugged face, and she was distracted by that until she saw the panic in his eyes. Yet her father still smiled when he saw Veena, wide eyed and scared. But he didn't smile with his eyes.

Then everything started turning grey. The house was less warm. Sila would spend hours with Margot, reading to her, talking with her, while Veena served in the shop; and then Veena would take over. First as a companion to her mother Margot, then as days and months passed, as a nurse. Slowly the things in the shop started gathering dust, slowly things that were bought were not replaced with new things for sale. I had not seen them for Sunday service for some time when I

called in the shop and found Veena trying to hide her tear streaked face from me and smile as if I were just another customer. It was then she broke down and told me everything. As I listened, I heard between the lines: that most of their money was going on doctors and medicine, that Sila had not made any more of his wonderful carved wooden creations because he had spent so much time with his wife.

She went upstairs to fetch him when I asked her, and looked around the shop. It had lost its sparkle, its brightness: little wonder nobody was buying much anymore, it seemed as if sadness and desperation were oozing out of the brickwork, the shelves, the pores of the shop. I heard his heavy footfalls on the stairs and when he came in, I hardly recognised the man. This man whom I had seen every Sunday since I came to this Town, who prayed with fervour as if he was being heard, as if he truly believed, not like many of the others who just prayed because they thought they should.

I left there that afternoon, in the Summer sunshine, feeling chilled to the bone at how things were for them. I was determined to do something to help, so I went to the Mayor, to ask if there was a commission or something he could give to Sila, something with money, so that at least that wouldn't be a worry. At first he refused. Then he suddenly lit up, as if he had a light on him, but the look on his face wasn't light: it was dark, it was strange. He suddenly became animated. He muttered some things, more to himself than to me. My prayers have been answered he said. I remember that.

Three weeks later I found Veena outside my door, asking me to come administer to her mother and father. I was so shocked when I saw Margot that I was shaking. She was so incredibly thin and unrecognisable from the bright woman I knew. I had no idea that she was so very ill, gravely ill. I was hoping Veena and Sila wouldn't notice my reaction but they seemed to be just looking at their beloved Margot. I prayed and prayed: asking God to give them strength, to give me strength, to give them the light and the love that they needed.

Sila seemed a little brighter downstairs. He told me he'd had an urgent commission from the Mayor, to carve a box, but that the wood for it had to be taken from Gilda wood. I was shocked, I had heard strange things about Gilda wood, but I said nothing. The Mayor had given him a deadline for the box, he wanted it very quickly. But Sila he had spent time with his wife instead, and was late in delivering; the Mayor at first had understood but after days and days passed had told Sila unless he delivered by this evening, he wouldn't pay. I understood without asking that Sila was now seriously in debt with doctors' fees and medical bills, and that he had to deliver. I stayed with him for a while. At first it was just moaning from the room above that I could hear. The cries became louder and louder. Total anguish and pain was coming ringing through that house as if the house itself was crying. In the end I'm ashamed to say I couldn't take anymore and said I had to leave on God's business. I beg forgiveness for that. I encouraged him to keep on praying.

I walked up the cobbled street and felt the round stones under my feet, and a fine rain in my face. I gradually became aware of a voice calling me: Pastor, Pastor... Veena was there in front of me, her face tear streaked, shaking with sobs, her beautiful hair was lank and full of rain and sticking to her face. The town clock clanged seven loudly, disturbing the suspended moment. I looked at her face and I knew, and she led me back to the house. Sila was still praying, seemingly more with fervour, the box in his hands, tears landing on the box and soaking into the wood.

When I saw Margot I could not believe her face: once so beautiful, had stayed in the shape of a terror filled scream. I had seen dead before, but never like this. I covered her with a sheet. I heard the door of the shop downstairs and went down: a messenger from the Mayor was there, taking the delivery. Sila was almost attached to the box, I had to gently ask him to let it go. The evening disappeared slowly, like drizzling mist, in all the things that have to happen.

A few days later, before the funeral, Sila came to me and asked me to come to the shop. The box, that special box that he was making, was there, on the shelf... I pointed to it, not understanding why it was back in the shop. He nodded, and said that the Mayor himself had brought it back but Sila wouldn't say more about it, but he was strange and on edge. I wondered what on earth was going on, but Sila told me to wait. It was early evening. I waited. And waited. And then the box moved. It was so gradual it was like watching the hands of the Town clock, but then sped up, and then sounds came from it: cries, I had heard them before, deep pain filled anguish, as the box contorted and moved into a face holding a scream: a face I had seen before, upstairs in this very house. I knelt and clasped my hands together in prayer, almost a reflex action. Then I heard the town clock strike seven. I looked up from my praying hands at the box, now as it was before. Sila was looking at me, with the strangest look I've ever seen. Pleading, imploring, aghast, terrified: he was silently asking for help: begging for help.

I went back the next night after at first I refused to believe, even though deep down I knew, and it happened all over again, just before seven. The wood, moving slowly, then faster and faster and contorting into a dead scream. Sila's eyes were red rimmed, he was shaking; he was desperate.

So now I have the box. I am on my way to seek help, to the Pastor in the next Town, he is older and hopefully wiser, I hope he has answers. I keep the box very safe; but every night, just before seven, I try and keep as far away from it as possible: the screams, the cries, terrify me right to my soul.

Is it her tortured spirit trapped in the box? Why? Is she alone in there or is she held captive? What can be done to help her?

But another thought haunts me.

What did the Mayor want the box made for..?