



SAN DIEGO DECAMERON PROJECT

Life in a Box

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Greta's knees scraped against the sidewalk, her lower back in agony. She nodded at her neighbor Sam walking toward her, but stayed focused on her weeding. He called, "What the heck are you doing?"

It was noon, April of 2022, one month after the Covid-19 vaccine had changed everything. Greta wished she could join in the champagne potlucks and hug festivals, but she felt stuck in ice while everyone around her was thawing. Her life had imploded since losing her roommate Jesse.

Her street was lined with cookie-cutter tract homes from the 70s. Like Greta, many of her neighbors had lost their jobs, and dandelion bouquets billowed and thrived in the warm San Diego breeze—no money for gardeners or motivation to weed wack. Well, she'd had it. She didn't own a weed wacker but a trowel was more satisfying anyway. At least she'd found a reason to leave the house, and it was okay. Until people started talking to her.

Greta had only seen her neighbor Sam a few times in recent months, when she dashed out with the recycling bin. He always called out hello, though she could barely squint his direction and mumble before bolting back to safety inside, her heart pacing like a caged animal.

But she had her boxes, thank God. She'd get busy sorting and settle back into her skin again.

Maybe today she'd order a box of the green puffy yarn. Or the red. Or blue. No, today would be green; she'd crochet trees the next few days. Other than weeding, crochet gave her some sense of accomplishment. She alternated between caps for preemies and her own designs—things she thought Jesse would have liked. She and Jesse crocheted up a storm in the evenings.

Thing was, now Greta's house was a storm of boxes. Tomorrow. Tomorrow she'd sift through things and start letting go. How many times had she told herself that? What would it be like, she tried to imagine, without the boxes? How would it feel to invite someone over, for them to come in, free to sit on a chair clear of stacks? Sometimes she hated the boxes, her prison, her only comfort. But it felt cleaner this way, snuggled in at home, than the tangled mess of the world.

And still, at a certain point the towering weeds beckoned and mocked—something about their free-swaying wild abandon drove Greta to snort with annoyance at her window. So she ventured out. She hacked and pulled her way down the street, and

at the edge of Sam's driveway she stuffed thistly piles into her bulging sack. She couldn't ignore him standing beside her, so she said "I can't stop myself anymore."

No sprout was safe. Knuckles raw from her stranglehold on the spiky beasts, she wielded her spade, the sound of metal grating against concrete. She imagined she were a surgeon and this was life-saving work; if only Jesse had made it to the hospital in time for the surgeon to clip the aneurysm. Greta's fault—deep inside she knew it.

"So you're our neighborhood gardener now?" Sam shook his head.

If Greta looked at him she'd crack. "This helps me—what? You mind?" Sam hefted the sack and gestured for Greta's trowel, which she clutched tighter. "You're bloodied and wasting away," he said. "How many driveways have you done?" Greta's expression—ghosts in her eyes—struck an emotional echo with the darkest time in his life: Iraq.

"You don't get it," she said, "and I'm scared to tell you. I have demons." Greta surprised herself by telling him that, but Sam stood unwavering so she continued. "My kitchen is so stacked with boxes, I can't use my stove. And that's not even it. But the rest is too much; sometimes I feel like the worst person." Greta pulled the sack from Sam's hands and saw the glint of recognition in his eyes. The plastic tore and weeds spilled to the ground, countless dandelion seeds escaping into the breeze. She dropped the trowel with a sharp inhale.

Sam drew her in for a hug and said, "We've all got secrets."

Greta's whole being softened as she leaned into him; she'd been knotted up like tiny crochet stitches. "My roommate Jesse—" she said, "She died because of me. She was under so much stress with work, she couldn't sleep and she had these nauseating headaches for days." Her words flowed like a burbling spring melting icy edges, no stopping them. "I should've insisted she go to the doctor, but she was terrified because of Covid. It got worse one night so I called 911. Too late for her; she died the next day."

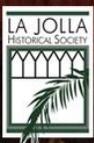
Greta stepped back from Sam and looked away. She rippled with spiraling sensations after so long without physical contact. This was messy—she didn't feel strong enough to open this box not knowing what was inside or where it would lead. She could gallop away like the feral creature in her heart told her to, but first she peeked at Sam's face.

"We have a few things in common." Sam's voice was steady and Greta saw the hint of a smile, but he sighed with a heaviness that spoke to her on another level. "Hey—there's plenty of evil in the world, and you're not it. You're just a fellow human. I'm sorry you lost Jesse."

Greta's eyes shone, her tears catching the sun. "Thanks. Guess I needed to unpack some of that." She figured he wanted to get back inside, to his own life. "I'll let you go." She turned to walk home.

"Wait," Sam said. "Just made some macaroni and cheese—come in, would be good to talk."

Greta paused, awe rising within her like fizzy champagne bubbles. "Let's make it a potluck," she said with a grin. "I make a mean dandelion salad."



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