

# The Box

Gregory G. Allen

It was 5:30 am in Iraq which meant she was just getting ready to go to bed in Texas. He held the ringing phone in his hand.

Finally she answered. "I was waiting for you to call."

He loved hearing her voice. He had a few photos of her, but having never seen her in person, he wondered what her lips must look like as she formed her words. Did her forehead wrinkle as she frowned? Would her eyes smile when she said his name?

"My morning is just beginning. I wanted to get you before you went to sleep," he said.

"I like hearing your voice before I go to sleep," she responding, always knowing what to say.

"So...what do you think of my family?" I asked.

"They are very nice," she said. "I can't believe I met them before I get to meet you."

He couldn't believe it either. Nor could he believe she had gone half way across the country to a place she had never been, people she had never met. What a strong woman she must be. The hard life she already had by twenty-five years old had only made her more courageous with the ability to try anything. How he couldn't wait to see her face to face. There was but a relationship of letters, email and the internet. He had never thought he would find the love of his life five states away while he was serving his country, but it had happened while he wasn't even expecting it. Few moments stolen when he could actually go online to chat with her were worth a lifetime to him.

She went on to tell him about the differences she had experienced in his home state, which was different from hers in the northern mountains. The heat, the price of gas, southern food she has been eating with his family.

"Don't remind me about the food I'm missing," he teased with her.

She laughed and said "Just know I may be bigger than the pictures you've seen of me if I keep eating this way."

"I love how you described the drive from the mountains to the plains of Texas," he told her.

"Writing is a secret passion," she said in a voice that sounded sultry when saying the word *secret*.

"Do you think you'll be happy there?" He asked, hoping he knew the answer.

"I will be, once you get back here," she said.

That was the right answer.

"I have something for you in the attic of my mother's house," he said.

He knew she was wondering how in the world he could have something for her there. He had left Texas long before he had met her online.

"What is it?" she asked very inquisitively.

"There is a box up there that belonged to my grandmother before she died."

He thought back to when he was a young boy standing at the stove next to his grandmother as she would cook: pots of homemade soup, fried okra, biscuits from the oven...she had ways of creating love in that kitchen. When she passed, he had told his mother he wanted the small box that sat next to her bed. It was a box that she had since she was a girl herself. Nothing fancy, but it reminded him of her.

"There is something for you inside that box," he said.

What could it be? This all seemed strange to her now. Yet it was also very intriguing. She had grown to care for him more and more and though people found it odd, she knew she had fallen in love with him. She had not laid eyes on him other than in photos, but she still knew this was the man she wanted to be with.

She had the advantage of having his family near her now which meant she could learn more about him through them. He had to learn everything from letters, emails and phone calls. But once this war was over, once he was home, they could finally be together.

"I'll go to your mother's house and ask her for it," she said.

"I'm sure she'll be surprised too," he said to her. "But she'll know where it is."

They said their goodbyes as she tried to go off to sleep and he headed out to start his PT. After that, he would go to the hospital where he was able to offer a glimmer of bureaucratic hope to the people in that country, caring for wounded American soldiers as well as Iraqi citizens. The worst for him was seeing small children brought in who were caught in the middle of a suicide bombing. Would this country ever be able to get over all that had happened during this war? His wasn't to question. His was to carry out the orders of his commander and chief. And while he was a world apart from the woman he loved, moments as he had just shared shortened the

distance between them and grounded him to something real back in the states.

She drove out to the house in the country to talk to his mother the very next day. She had already grown very close to her in such a short time. The woman treated her like a daughter, helping her to get settled in town and assisted her in finding a job. She went in and started the visit as any other. Finally, the conversation led to the box.

“He said it’s in the attic and he has something in it for me,” she said.

His mother looked perplexed. “I have no idea what it could be. He hasn’t sent anything to me for you.”

“I thought the same thing. How could there be something there for me?” she asked.

“Well, we’re not learning anything by sitting here,” the mother said. “Let’s head up to the attic.”

They walked up the staircase and were met by years of dust and memories: an old trumpet from his high school band, boxes full of photos, and other items from the past strewn around the attic.

“I always plan to come up here and clean up,” the mother said. “Maybe when he gets back from Iraq he can help me.”

She knew the woman missed her son. He was her only child and having him so far away from home, defending his country and not knowing what he was going through must be hard for her to take each day. She opened a box that held his high school year books, a graduation cap and a slew of star wars figurines.

“He would probably hate you seeing all of this,” his mother said as she moved what looked to be a child’s first stuffed animal that was tightly wrapped in plastic.

Then she pulled out the box.

It was a hand-made box made of cedar. You could smell it linger in the air.

“My father gave this to my mother when he met her,” the mother said. “They were teenagers at the time. He made this box for her and told her it was to hold memories of him when he was not with her. I guess he didn’t think she would have many or he would have made it larger.”

The two laughed as she took the box in her hands. Both women were very curious to know what he had placed in this box. She opened it. There inside was a folded up letter. She pulled out the letter and read it aloud.

“October 1998. To My Soul Mate,” she read.

“That was written ten years ago,” his mother said with anticipation in her voice.

“So it seems.”

She continued reading.

“I write this letter today to the woman who is out there that will complete me one day. I know you are there, waiting for me as I wait for you. I know ours will be a life like no other: completing each other’s sentences, as we share the same goals. Clinging to one another through bad times that will lead us to the good. Sharing our deepest thoughts and feelings as only a husband and wife can do. I look forward to the day when I can stand at the front of a church and see you walking towards me. Knowing we will walk out together, arm and arm, towards a lifetime full of love, hope and dreams. As I write this letter, I can already feel you there. It may take awhile to find you, but I will. And when I do, I will never let you go.”

Both women’s eyes filled with tears. His mother figured these were the words of a scorned teenager who was not going to give up on love. The young woman believed these were the words of a man who she knew she could be comfortable with as passionate as he was in his writing. Both women were in awe that it was the man who was serving his country in Iraq and neither knew he had these kinds of feelings bottled up inside of him. They took the box back downstairs, hugged each other goodbye and she got in her car to head to her apartment. She couldn’t wait for the next time she would hear from him.

The phone rang late at night while she was sitting in bed waiting, the box resting beside her.

“Did you get it?” said the voice a million miles away on the other end.

“Yes I did...and I *am* waiting...and will continue to wait until you can come home to me,” she said. “I’ll be the one walking down the aisle in the white dress.”

Both of them set in silence for a moment as words did not need to be spoken. Even over a phone line, this proposal was as real as if they were side by side. The two remained in silence and spoke only with their hearts.