

# A BOX OF CONCEITS

A STORY BY

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## Origins

I got rid of a persistent life assurance salesman by telling him that I had a heart condition (which I haven't), and wondered if there was a product you truly couldn't resist, whatever the price.

A Box of Conceits

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## A Box of Conceits

“You get that,” she called from upstairs as the door bell rang and rang. “I’m busy. Might give you some exercise for a change.”

He threw his newspaper on the floor, groaned and cursed as he got out of his Saturday afternoon chair. He shuffled down the hall to the front door, opening it to a well-dressed stranger holding out a box.

“Good afternoon, sir,” said the Salesman with a smile. “This day, of all days, is the luckiest day of your life.”

“I’m not buying,” said the man closing the door, but a gesture and mock hurt expression from the stranger stopped him.

“But I’m not selling,” said the Salesman. “I’m giving.”

“Not here you’re not,” said the man. “We get your lot round every other week, and like I said last time, we’re not interested in messages from saviours and prophets.”

“I know,” said the Salesman with a sigh. “And there’s no salvation in my pitch, I can assure you.”

“Then what do you want?”

“A moment of your time,” said the Salesman, “for a lifetime gift, a gift of a lifetime.”

“Gift?”

“Surely,” said the Salesman. “A box, look.”

“What’s in it?” asked the man suspiciously.

“Whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want?”

## A Box of Conceits

“You name it, it’s in there.”

The man smiled. “Gotcha,” he said triumphantly. “It’s a competition, right? And all I have to do is pay to see what’s in the box. It’s a con, I’ve seen it before.”

The Salesman looked hurt again. “No con, sir, nor competition, believe me.”

“Then where’s the catch?”

“This box doesn’t have one,” said the Salesman. “Neither figuratively, nor actually. Look, a simple little box with some artful decoration around the lid. Yours. Box, contents, everything. A gift.”

“Nothing to pay?”

“Not a single penny.”

“Everything has a price,” the man mumbled.

The Salesman stayed silent.

“Whatever is in that box, I can keep it?” asked the man.

“The first one is free.”

“First what?”

“Whatever you pull out. It’s free.”

“On approval you mean?”

“No. Absolutely free.”

“So what’s in it?” asked the man again.

“Everything.”

“It’s a small box to contain everything.”

“The universe would have fitted inside that box once.”

“What? What sort of box is it?”

“A box of conceits.”

“And box of what?”

“That box contains whatever you want, and it’s all yours, all you have to do is open it. Try it.”

The man took the box carefully as the Salesman thrust it into his hands, and looked at it just as carefully. He wanted to open the box, just out of curiosity. It was a small dark wooden box, just big enough to fit in the palm of his hand. It was like a music box. It seemed too light to contain everything. The lid had a shiny brass hinge, real brass, not one of those cheap lacquered jobs that flakes a week after you get it home. The

other three edges of the lid overlapped the box slightly. The man held it to his ear and shook the box gently.

“You can’t shake it loose,” said the Salesman.

“What?”

“A dream. It’s a fact. Nobody ever shook a dream loose. It either comes true, or it stays a dream. But nobody ever shook one loose. Once a dream is dreamed, it stays dreamed.”

The man frowned. “Dreams? Is that what comes out?”

“No my friend, dreams are what goes into it.”

The man looked at the Salesman. “Come on, don’t play games, what’s really in it?”

The Salesman sighed loudly. “Open it and see.”

The man looked from the Salesman to the box and back.

“What would you most like to be?” asked the Salesman.

“What are you doing out there?” shouted the man’s wife.

The man grimaced and nodded back into the house. “The Emperor of China,” he said.

The Salesman grinned and moved the edge of his hand across his throat in mock execution. “Then be the Emperor of China,” said the Salesman.

The man chuckled and looked back into the house thoughtfully. He thought of the hundreds of courtiers and thousands of peasants he’d invite to the ritual execution of his wife, and the thousands more he’d invite to his wedding with his next wife, a beauty chosen from the pick of his harem. Just to make sure, he thought it all over again, and got the Grand Vizier, or whoever, to bring him the head to make sure it was his wife’s. It was. “You’ve got yourself a deal,” he muttered, turning back to the Salesman, but the Salesman had gone. He must have been daydreaming longer than he realised. He looked down at the box. It was open. It was empty. He shrugged. ‘Well, he said it was a gift.’

“Who was it?” shouted his wife.

“A man with a box.”

“A man with a what?”

“You heard,” he muttered.

“Did you give him anything for it? We’re not made of money, not on your income.”

“It was free.”

“Nothing’s free,” she said sarcastically.

“This was.”

“Show me,” she said. She held it, opened it, looked it over. “Not worth much anyway,” she pronounced. “If he comes back for money, give it back to him.”

He turned on the television, selected a sports channel, and sat down in his Saturday afternoon armchair.

“Turn that rubbish down,” his wife called from outside.

He turned the volume down, and went back to being the Emperor of China. And again, and again. When he got tired of being the Emperor of China, he became Genghis Khan for a few days. At the office, he and his hordes annihilated most of the finance office, and that creep in the

purchasing department. The little box of conceits was his constant companion. Every time he opened it, he became someone. By night, he’d made love to the world’s most beautiful and desirable women. By day, he’d become famous tyrants, secret tycoons, fearless outlaws. Nobody around him could survive. He’d behead, impale, hang, draw, quarter, and burn at the stake anybody who got in his way or upset him. His boss he impaled several times a week, his wife he executed in some of the most gruesome and bizarre ways ever invented.

After some time the novelty wore off, and he began to leave his little box at home, like a lucky charm whose luck had worn off. The Salesman never returned. In the years that followed, he would get his little box only if he had had a bad day. Middle age led him gently toward retirement, and he received the obligatory clock that would probably last until he died but not much longer. On the day of his retirement he took his little box to the office, and subjected everyone to the most brutal set of tortures and executions anybody had ever conceived.

## A Box of Conceits

His wife died a real death two years after he retired. Kidney failure or something. He didn't really listen to the doctor. He didn't really care. The children had grown up and become Christmas card strangers. They didn't bother him much after failing to persuade him to move into a retirement home. He retired instead to the back room and his precious television, the garden neglected, the world forgotten. As the years passed he used his little box of conceits less and less. A kindly neighbour bought his groceries, helped him sort out his household bills, called the doctor when he was poorly. For several years he lost his little box, and on finding it again was reminded of the Salesman who had never returned.

The kindly neighbour was working in her front garden when the Salesman knocked at the old man's front door.

"He's bedridden these days," she said. "Can I help?"

"I just came for a final payment on something."

"I've been helping with his bills, he didn't mention

any outstanding payments for anything."

"It was just a small thing, he's probably forgotten. They usually do. Is he receiving visitors?"

"I think you're the first in twenty years," said the neighbour. "That's how long since his wife died. Not even his children or grandchildren come here now. Nobody cares when you're old."

"I do," said the Salesman. "Young or old, I care. Can I go up and see him?"

"The door's open," said the neighbour. "He's feeble, but he has all his faculties, don't you go cheating him."

The Salesman laughed. "It's me they try to cheat. No, I'll not cheat him, it's just a small thing."

"He's in the back bedroom, it's..." said the neighbour.

"I know where it is."

"Have you been here before? You don't look old enough. He's had no visitors for twenty years."

"I've been here many times," the Salesman said quietly.

## A Box of Conceits

He walked briskly up the stairs, the treads not creaking as they should have done. He pushed open the door to the old man's bedroom.

"Hello old man, it's me, remember?"

The old man stirred and stared at the Salesman.

"Remember? How could I forget?" he croaked in his old man's voice. "You don't look any older, yet it was nearly forty years ago. But you wouldn't, not you. I know you now."

"I came for the final payment."

The old man picked up the little box of conceits from his bedside table and tried to throw it at the Salesman, but it fell uselessly on the floor.

"Take your box. You said it was free, a gift. Not a penny to pay, you said."

"Yes indeed, the box and everything in it is free. A gift. What comes out of it is not free, except the first one. The first one is always free."

"You cheated me, I didn't know."

"Nobody has cheated anybody. You know the price, we all do."

"But I didn't do anything, I didn't actually do anything. I just thought it."

"Thinking is doing. We all have the choice, old man. And we all have to pay."

"A man's soul is his own, you'll not have mine."

The old man reached out for the crucifix on his bedside table and held it up to the Salesman.

"God damn you and curse you," spat the old man with all the venom he could muster.

The Salesman took the silver crucifix from the old man's feeble grip, looked down at the little figure on it, and spoke to it.

"You see," said the Salesman, "even with their last breath they're mine."

"No," croaked the old man one last time.

"Come on old man," said the Salesman gently, "it's time to go."

The Emperor of China shuddered, fell back onto the pillow, and died.