

Box Arrest

By: EL_Refresho

Mr. Virgil's toy store was Nanette's last hope. She didn't have a car, couldn't return home, couldn't trust the cops, and she couldn't think of another place to hide. Pushing open the shop's beaten glass door triggered long dormant memories of a childhood wonderland. She knew every dinged shelf and chipped tile in the store, having caused some herself in this enchanted second home.

Then, she saw Mr. Virgil and those memories turned to guilt, but not over anything she had done.

As always, he tinkered with a toy while sitting at his counter. Today, he worked on a red metal robot, and muttered to himself while unscrewing bits so he could bring the broken toy to life again. Mr. Virgil had a leathery face and bushy eyebrows, but the kindest blue eyes Nanette had ever known.

When he looked up, those eyes nearly turned Nanette around. Involving Mr. Virgil in her problems was selfish and dangerous. But his calm voice stopped her from leaving.

"Nan? What are you doing here?"

"Mr. Virgil, I'm in some trouble," she almost choked up just saying that, and hung her head so that her blonde hair covered her face.

The old toy maker was by her side before another moment passed, taking Nanette's hands in his weathered ones. "What do you need, kid?"

Nanette gulped as she looked up. "Can you hide me?"

Nanette told him what she could while they got ready. She was going to be a star witness in Big Tommy Scargetti's trial, and the only one who could link him to the scene of the crime. His goons took a swipe at her earlier today, and she'd been running ever since. "After I testify, I'm going into Witness Protection," she finished.

"So, I won't see you again?" Mr. Virgil asked, pausing to look at her. She sat in a chair, away from the windows, while he sat on his knees at an orange and green box.

"Sorry, Mr. Virgil, but that's the way it is. I won't even be Nanette after tomorrow," she sighed.

"Well, who will you be?"

She laughed. "They haven't told me yet."

The toy maker grumbled, his way of cursing in front of kids and adults who grew up in his store.

Nanette patted his shoulder, "Everything's gonna work out. You'll see, Mr. Virgil."

"You just make sure Big Tommy gets what he deserves," he said as he finished his work. He lifted a mannequin out of the colorful chest, so he could get it out of the strange costume it wore.

Nanette stared at the now vacant box and rubbed her hands. *It's not going to be so bad*, she thought. While she had known Mr. Virgil was willing to hide her, Nanette never considered he didn't have the space to hide her. Toys crowded his shelves and the too-small backroom, at times making it hard to walk down the aisles. But Mr. Virgil's store sold a revolving door of one-of-a-kind oddities, such as a human sized Jill-in-the-Box. Nanette chose to think her idea was genius, rather than insane.

"You sure he'll look in the box?" Mr. Virgil asked.

“If he opens that box and sees just normal me, I’m dead. Putting me in that costume gives me a chance. Besides, do you have a better idea? You don’t have many hidey holes.”

Nanette didn’t wait for his reply, instead stepping inside the box, happy to find Mr. Virgil padded every surface, and her feet sank into black foam. Down to just a tank top and shorts, she stood ready for Mr. Virgil to turn her into a toy.

“Well?” She asked.

Mr. Virgil sighed and draped the costume over Nanette. The suit consisted of a loose skirt that pooled at the floor and an accordion-like top made from seven stacked rings wrapped in blue and violet fabric. Since half the fun of a Jill-in-the-Box was the springy way it moved, Mr. Virgil had sewn plush arms, including hands, onto the body. These would flop at the smallest movement and drum on the sides of the suit.

After the body came an extra large clown collar and a blue cap with a dancing bell. The suit covered most of her body, and a layer of caked on makeup she had already applied covered the rest. The addition of vinyl eyebrows, arched to create the appearance of perpetual shock, and a red clown nose, further made her a toy.

Mr. Virgil took a step back to admire his newest creation, and Nanette smiled proudly. In a way, she was one of his dolls. While she couldn’t use her real hands, she shrugged and made her doll arms pop. The satisfying dun-dun-dun sound reverbed through the suit.

“How do I look, Mr. Virgil?”

“Like one of my toys,” he said with a sigh.

“Just don’t get any funny ideas, all right? I gotta be at court tomorrow. Toys don’t go to court.”

Mr. Virgil laughed and knelt at the edge of her box. Getting her into costume was only the first part. To complete the illusion, he also had to secure Nanette to the box. The toymaker locked a dozen clips sewn into the skirt to fasteners buried in the foam. Then, he went around the back and hooked strings from the accordion torso to the top of the box. A spring pull taught as Mr. Virgil hooked it into her back, and while she wasn’t sure

how it worked, Nanette knew the way it lifted her onto her toes. Almost floating, even light pushes could set her swinging like a pendulum. But while someone outside the box could move her with ease, the suit and spring held Nanette firm so that she couldn't do more than wiggle her red ball nose.

Nanette watched him work, curious as she always was when he made toys, and came to understand what Mr. Virgil meant when he said that getting her out of the box would be a two person job. It seemed to her it was a one person job, just that the one person couldn't be her. But, Nanette had insisted they do everything to perfect the disguise, and Mr. Virgil obliged.

"Just so you know, the lid has a lock on it, and springs, so when it pops..." Mr. Virgil warned again.

"Yeah, yeah, it's gonna haul me out. When it's closed, I can't come out. I'm the one in here. I get it."

The toy maker grumbled again, and Nanette smiled.

"Thank you, for everything, Mr. Virgil. Now, put me in my box."

It was a good thing Nanette wasn't scared of the dark and tight spaces, or she would be in a nightmare right now. But the nightmare was still on his way. Instead, she took comfort in the foam interior, the way her toy suit hugged her, and the way her box limited her universe. Mr. Virgil muttered nearby and clanged his tools against a metal toy, working as if he had forgotten all about her. He existed in a different dimension from Nanette. He lived in the world; she lived in a box.

The front door swung open, heralded by street noise blasting into the store. Then, leisurely footsteps scraped along the tile floor, walking to Nanette, walking by her, and then walking away from her. They traveled all the way to the front counter.

“How ya doin’ today, Mr. Virgil?” Vinnie asked. Even in a box, that voice sent shivers through Nanette. She had to remind herself to trust Mr. Virgil, and trust the disguise. Still, her heart picked up its rhythm like someone cranked a music box at double speed.

“Doing fine, and I believe I’m paid up through the month, Mr. Capasetto.”

“Oh, I ain’t here about payments, Mr. Virgil. I’m here because a certain someone was seen coming into this store, and I’d very much like to talk to that certain someone.”

Nanette tilted her head to hear their conversation better, but the bell on her hat chimed, as bells on hats are made to do, and she froze again.

“Can you be more specific?” Mr. Virgil replied, “I’ve had several customers today.”

“Yeah, this one you know. Ms. Nanette Wilkins. Yeah-high, blonde hair.”

“I haven’t seen her in a few months.”

Nanette realized that she wasn’t even breathing as she listened. Hiding had never been a strong suit. Running, she could do. But running hadn’t gotten her far enough away.

“See, that’s funny,” Vinnie said, “because I got a couple of witnesses says she did come in here. You gonna tell me they’re liars?”

“No, I don’t know what they saw, I just know I haven’t seen her.”

Vinnie paced and Nanette’s eyes followed his footsteps back and forth. “Ya mind if I take a look around?”

Scraaaape. Step. Scraaaape. Step. Footfalls walked to the box, as they were always destined to do.

“Of course.”

“You think a person could fit in here, Mr. Virgil?” Vinnie kicked the box, and a thud reverberated into Nanette’s world, making her squelch a yelp.

“It’s a human sized toy, so yes. Let me--”

“Don’t bother.”

The latch clicked, the lid jumped, and Nanette popped.

She went from lifeless and in the dark to alive and in the light. The toy store became a whirl of kaleidoscopic motion and color and color and motion, wholly amazing the toy’s senses. Her spring kept Nanette bouncing, her strings kept her standing. Combined, they kept her dancing and making her head as light as a balloon.

A toy on a far shelf entranced Nanette. He was a little orange version of herself, much less detailed, but just as surprised by the world as she was. He taught her how Jacks were supposed to look, with big eyes, arched brows, and a round, slightly opened mouth. She mimicked its wonderment, all while basking in her body’s sway.

In that moment, Nanette understood something about toys that no human ever had before: things happened to toys, and they never made things happen. Click, open, pop, bounce, sway; all because Vinny Capasetto set her in motion. Nanette kept staring at her little brother toy, learning all she could from it, and waiting for the next thing to happen to her.

Vinny obliged, pushing on her chest to restart her pendulum motion, causing her to swoon once again. She held onto that surprised look, as if Mr. Virgil had carved it into her himself.

Let this be a ride, Nanette thought. It would be the perfect ride, powerful enough to captivate, but gentle enough that she needn’t scream. A dreamy middle ground where she became lost in toyness.

Beside her, Vinny scratched his head and stared at the toy. “Damn. I really thought she was in there.”

The mafioso didn't leave, refusing to believe that Nanette was somewhere else. Or, maybe, that he just didn't have any other leads. Whatever the case, he wandered the store for a woman he had already found and gave no further care to the Jill-in-the-Box, which had proven itself a toy.

She maintained that state, even while she couldn't see him. This ruse could all be over with one wayward glance or one head twitch, so Nanette focused on a spot on the far wall and froze in perfect stillness. Mr. Virgil, meanwhile, fidgeted at his counter, from where he could maintain a better view of the mobster that prowled his store.

Nanette did wonder if Vinny guessed the truth. But that didn't feel right. He could just stuff her back inside her box and cart her away if he even suspected, and he had no reason to waste his time searching any further. Mr. Virgil, for all his virtues, couldn't stop the man from the mafia.

While Nanette kept still, her arm moved. Her left arm, the one made of cardboard and plush, drummed against her accordion side. Bun-bun-bun, the sound echoed through her suit. Nanette nearly lost her character out of shock, but managed to keep her face forward.

A man, his voice surprisingly close, whispered next to her. "This is excellent craftsmanship," he said. It took Nanette a moment to realize he meant her.

Then, her jester cap jangled with enough force that Nanette swayed in her helpless, toyish way. Wanting desperately to at least see who was turning her into a makeshift musical instrument, Nanette risked a glance at Mr. Virgil, who just noticed what was happening.

"Excuse me, sir, can I help you?"

"Are all the toys on the floor for sale?" The customer asked. That made a pit form in her stomach as her mouth went dry. But while Nanette understood the implication of the question, it went right on by Mr. Virgil.

"Well, yes, all my toys are for sale," he said, looking confused.

"So, how much for this Jack-in-the-box?"

Mr. Virgil's eyes went as wide as Nanette's. "Oh, uh, I didn't mean you meant her. She's not a finished product yet."

If she knew where Vinny was, maybe Nanette could make something happen. She could talk and get the customer to understand she was not for sale. But if she surprised or scared him, it could alert Vinny.

Just trust in Mr. Virgil, she thought.

The customer left Nanette's side to stand next to the shopkeeper. And from her toy suit and toy box, Nanette listened to a man argue that he could buy her.

"So why is that toy on the floor?" The customer asked, a huff in his voice.

"It's not the doll, it's the box. It still needs some extra touches of paint, you see."

The man turned to Nanette, and he saw what she knew to be true: the paint and craftsmanship on her box was perfect. Mr. Virgil and he never put anything on the floor if it wasn't just right.

"It looks finished to me, and I don't mind paying full price for it as-is."

C'mon, Mr. Virgil, put your foot down and get rid of this doofus. Tell him...tell him I'm a display model!

But Nanette didn't have telepathy, so her thoughts stayed stuck beneath her jester's cap. Toys couldn't make things happen.

"Sir, I have a reputation to consider, and..."

"I don't understand; it's just a child's plaything; my daughter will love it."

Which was a backhanded compliment if Nanette had ever heard one. She fidgeted in her toy suit out of nervousness, and frustrated herself by how little she could move.

"And if the toy breaks, you'll come back blaming me. I'd rather not sell a--"

Vinny Capasetto scrape-stepped his way back into the scene, a phone to his ear: "OK, honey. Daddy will see you soon." Vinny's voice stopped Mr. Virgil mid-sentence. The tall, lean mobster leaned on the counter, easy

as he liked. He put his phone away and looked between Mr. Virgil and the customer, curiosity in his eyes. “There a problem?”

“Well, yes,” the customer said, “I’m trying to buy that toy,” he pointed to Nanette, “which is in perfect condition, and he’s telling me that it has a defect.”

“Not a defect, just she isn’t finished yet.” Mr. Virgil said, “as I already explained.”

“She?” the mafioso asked, turning to Nanette. The toy stiffened under his gaze like a block of wood.

“It,” the shopkeeper corrected.

Oh, come on, Mr. Virgil, Nanette thought, while Vinnie’s curiosity started turning into ideas. The longer he was here, the more chances he would have to figure it out. And with this man here insisting on making a scene, Nanette had no idea how Mr. Virgil could get her out of this. But he had to, because he was her only hope.

After another second, Vinny shrugged, “You know, my Annie would love a doll that size. And this man is right, it’s in perfect condition. I’ll buy it.”

Nanette’s heart stopped. *Mr. Virgil, I am not for sale,* she thought, terrified of the mere idea of going home as Vinny’s toy.

“Now, hang on,” the customer said, wheeling on the mafioso. “I was here first,” he said with a tone that no one ever used on one of Big Tommy’s best hitters. Clearly he wasn’t from around here.

But the mafioso took it in stride, and everyone, Nanette included, looked toward the old shopkeeper to settle the issue.

“If you give me a day, I’ll work to complete the paint, and give you ten percent off for your trouble,” Mr. Virgil offered the customer.

Bless you, Mr. Virgil. She could still get out of this. Not that it wouldn’t be discovered that Nanette wasn’t the same as the mannequin, but that was tomorrow’s problem. Tomorrow after she was long gone.

The customer thought about it. “Ten percent off how much?”

“Umm.” The shopkeeper glanced at Vinny, did a calculation, and said, “ninety, after the discount.”

The customer shook his head. “I’ll take it full price today, thank you very much. Your store is a hassle for me to get to.”

No! Nannete screamed in her mind. She wanted to gasp, to shout, to jump out of her box. Even if those things were physically possible, Vinny’s presence made them impossible.

“Then, that will be one hundred.” Mr. Virgil couldn’t look Nanette’s way, looking at his counter.

Just as toys couldn’t make things happen, they couldn’t stop things from happening. Once Mr. Virgil said he would sell her, Nanette couldn’t disagree. She couldn’t stop the customer from pulling five green bills out of his wallet. She couldn’t stop Mr. Virgil from accepting them with an open palm and sorrowful gaze. She couldn’t stop the shopkeeper from saying, “Pleasure doing business with you. Enjoy your new toy.”

That was all it took for Nanette to be bought.

Nanette recoiled the millimeter she could move, her jaw falling open. The world spun like she had just popped out of her box, all the while staring at the man that agreed to sell her. She acutely felt the way her real arms pressed at her sides, the way her feet grazed on the foam, the way her springs held her upright and trapped. They were feelings she would have to get used to, at least for a while longer. It took all her willpower to remake her passive Jack face before someone noticed her, portraying a docility she didn’t feel.

Nanette still had hope, though, since she was only refusing to speak while Vinny stalked her. Once she had space from him, she could get to work on convincing the customer--she refused to think of him as owner--to get her out. Which would definitely be the most interesting conversation in her life. In the meantime, she had to accept the fact of her toy nature, taking comfort in knowing she would leave the box--eventually.

I am not owned. I am not property. I will get out of this box.

While Nanette made those thoughts a mantra, the gathering at the counter broke up. “Mr. Virgil,” Vinnie said distantly, “that box looks heavy. Why don’t you get a dolly and help this man with his merchandise.”

“Oh, I’d appreciate that. I’ll go pull up the car.” The customer said, getting out his keys. Mr. Virgil started to speak, but a harsh look from Vinny changed the toy maker’s mind.

“I’ll go get the handcart,” he said. And within ten seconds, Vinny Capasetto was the only one in the room with Nanette. He maintained his leisurely, heel scraping step to come over to her. The hitter took a moment to look at Nanette, then pushed on her clown nose to set the toy rocking. Her face remained so still that when this was over she would have to work to express some other emotion other than silent surprise. What else was she to do? Move in front of the man who wanted to kill her?

“You are...a very well made toy,” he said while watching Nanette sway.

Just leave already, she thought. The customer had left the store, and there might be a vanishingly small opportunity to get her swapped with the original mannequin. Mr. Virgil could still save her. If Vinny went away.

“You’re so well made that you’re gonna stay like this. Just like this. In your little box, in your silly costume, makin’ *people* happy. ‘Cause that’s what *toys* do. And that’s all you are, right?”

A chill ran along Nanette’s spine, a twisting knot in her stomach, as she realized. He knew. And he wasn’t going to let the Jill out of her box.

Vinnie slapped the toy’s shoulder while she rocked, so that she spun like a top in her box, enough that it knocked Nanette’s thoughts out of her. She swooned in the rushing air and spinning world like a kid on a merry go round. It would have been delightful, but for the person who made her spin.

“And just to make sure you stay right where you’re supposed to be, I’m gonna follow your Owner home, and keep an eye on you. Maybe I’ll set up a little camera nearby, or maybe I’ll drop in from time to time to

say hello. If it turns out that you're gone, or that you're not as good a toy as I think you are, then the next conversation we have ain't gonna be so nice. I'll even talk with Mr. Virgil, seein' as he made you. We can't have a toymaker who makes misbehavin' toys, can we?"

The mafioso couldn't see her gulp since she was moving so fast, her stomach alternatively rising and dropping with simple joy and terrible humiliation. Before now, everything, even being bought, was part of a game, dangerous as it was. Vinny just made that game her life.

She was human, she had a family, friends, complicated thoughts, a degree, but none of it mattered to Vinny. With just a hand, he stopped Nanette from spinning. While she stopped spinning, the world did not, and would not for a long time. Vinny put his hand on her head and pushed her down, compacting her inch by inch, forcing her down until she became a plaything and nothing else. The box lid clacked shut and a sharp, final click that sealed Nanette in toyness.

Nanette glanced around the small world she made for herself. Springs commanded her even in here, keeping her pushed against the box top. Her mouth was dry, her heart trying to burst out of her chest. This is where she would stay and what she would be until someone let her out.

Vinny kneeled by the box, his voice a final parting shot that echoed in her mind. It would echo when she was given the name Nanny Jinglebells, when she saw her first owner, and when she was placed in a child's bedroom. It would echo whenever she popped out of her box, whenever she made people shriek, and then made them laugh. It would echo whenever she was made to spin, and most of all, whenever she was pushed back into her box. It would echo in her mind for years to come.

"Congratulations, Nanette, this is your life now. You're a toy."