



M in a Box

A J Zelada

M

IN A BOX

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*Images
within are photo fictions
of Marilyn Henley Owings & her life.
She was born November 16, 1926 & died August 27, 1957.*

The M in a Box images were made from 1997-99.

M
IN A BOX



Wedding, 1922



1938 Road



Long Road



West Virginia Road

Tricycle (facing page)









Drugstore (above)

Sliding Down (facing page)



Beside Myself



Sepulchre

Tree of Life (following spread)







College



Dejeuner



Little Sympathies

Dark Eyes (facing page)



The moment an emotion artifact is transformed into a photograph
it is no longer a fact but an opinion.

We all dip into the wells of personal sadness.

We go there for refuge from newer tragedies.

We go there to refresh some honor in bond and flow of genes from one dead to another live. We go there to experience some rich feeling of emotion that might not accompany our daily physiological habits of breakfast or supper. We touch the connecting bases of who was and who we are carrying forward underneath our skin or in our unawareness. Marilyn my mother is here in all her faces of reflections and sadness. I have inherited her facial tension. My face can make many faces.

I laugh, am a teaser, am sarcastic, am smart, am self deprecating in intellect and humor, can frown, can growl, can squint with disgust, can be relaxed when seeing harmony, can envelope another with a loving smile.

Yet there is always some cool blue egg tempera layer of emotional sadness just beneath my facial muscles, no matter how varied a human I may be. I have carried around these photographs ever since I cleared out the house of my grandfather upon his death, almost 20 years ago. His remaining daughter, my Aunt Louise, did not want them. My sister did not want them and left the house cleaning as my uncle had alienated my sister by accusing my sister's husband of stealing items from the house.

I took all the photographs into my possession, which rather felt like I was stealing all this history that I never knew. That was 1979.

I kept them in boxes until 1997. If I sat and stared at them in the evenings surely people would feel I am morose. Even with this series of prints my wife thinks it is morbid pursuit. Yet I knew that opening one box and sifting would take me somewhere. The sifting asked something of me. It made me use my photographic senses. It demanded I awake and project. It is more than just looking into a casket to say good-bye to the mother.

It was a chance to get to know her in what she presented or what was captured from her dispositioned face. I have gone through several decades to become a person who only trusts what I see. In all relationships, words fall short of the believability compared to what I sense through viscera, sight, smell, touch, and taste. I could not go through the images only once, like the funeral line of last respects. I needed to inspect the blurs, to identify the clumped grains of silvered faces, to see the blank spaces of frame, to see the figures within the frames. I wanted to see how she organized her images and was organized by others.

There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate.

None of them is truth. - *Richard Avedon*

I wanted to know the angles. I wanted to know the moment and imagine the moments pre and post the shutter's decision. I know photography well. It is something so second nature to me, I surprise myself that I can still make images with grace. I have an island in my head that has no culture from El Salvador, my birthplace, and that contains no mores from the American soil of my grown self. That island is just the thing I see in front of me. There must be some cultural context for my vision but that zone has fewer cultural intrusions of words and expectations.

So I heard a small number of stories about Marilyn, my mother. The grandparents (her parents) whom raised me did not want to talk about her. It was too much for them. I wanted stories; I wanted affection. I wanted a mother. But early in response to my questions about my mother my sister stood by the blooming Illinois forsythia bushes and said don't ask about our mother. She said it in English. I knew both English and Spanish. And I had just been at the grandparents' house a little bit. It confused me not to state my needs. It started the distrust of words by people and drove me inwards to be cautious and to only believe what I see.

Words do communicate, yet the behavior is a real proof and like Avedon says even behavior photographed becomes a perception through a filter. These photographs are all from real times and places. And yet these photos are clearly my internal island's reality.

Marilyn in the photographs is young and old as one can be before death at her age of twenty-four. She died when I was two years old. These photographs move through her time and space much like my own recalls of emotions and compressions expecting a mother's presence. I am not sure when she was the mother to me. I am only sure she came before me. She looks at herself and others in many of the photos, not as some judgmental soothsayer, but much as that silent voice that talks to us when we are actually filling in the words and validating the expected voice. Maybe there are moments of clear insight when she tells us to accept what we will become. Maybe there are sadnesses on her part of having left America and gone to El Salvador only to succumb to food poisoning and feel her children recede in darkness. I see my own historical frame of reference which limits me. I feel that these photographs have forced me to acknowledge Avedon and his belief that once the emotion occurs and is recorded it is indeed no longer a fact but an emotional part of my history.

AJZ (written in 1999)

Cast of Characters

Wedding 1922 Pg 6

Priest from Marilyn's funeral,
best man, Clyde Norvell Owings,
Mary Henley Owings, Virginia ?, Marilyn

1938 Road Pg 7

Clyde, Marilyn,
Marilyn's funeral procession

Long Road Pg 8

Marilyn

West Virginia Road Pg 10

Romeo Norvell Owings (father of Clyde N. Owings),
Marilyn, funeral procession of Marilyn's

Tricycle Pg 10-11

Marilyn, age 7?, Marilyn's funeral
procession, Mary Henley Owings, age 20s?

Slide Down Pg 12

Marilyn, age 6 ?, Marilyn, age 20,
Priest from Marilyn's funeral

Drugstore Pg 13

Marilyn in doorway, Priest and two from Marilyn's burial site,
Romeo Owings, Clyde Norvell Owings.

Beside Myself Pg 14

Marilyn, age 8 ?, Marilyn, age 2

Sepulchre Pg

Mary & Clyde on wedding day, June 16, 1922 &
headstones across from Marilyn's Resting place in San Salvador, El
Salvador Central Cemetery

Tree of Life Pg 16-17

Clyde, Jen Owings (aunt of Clyde), Marilyn, Priest from
Marilyn's funeral, kid? Marilyn at wheel, Marilyn in tree top, Marilyn on
swing, Marilyn's funeral procession, Clyde's ghost, Louise from
late teens (sister of Marilyn), Louise (child)

College Pg 18

Soldier and lover, Marilyn age 19?,
Marilyn whispering after Judy's birth in 1947

Dejeuner Pg 19

Judy, age 4?, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5: Unknowns,
Armando Zelada, Armando Jerry Zelada, age 2?,
coat sleeve of Marilyn. Unknown symmetric person
& Marilyn near tree.

Funeral Pg 20

Upper left: Clyde and Mary Owings, Marilyn hidden
in the headstones, Marilyn in the box; priest in religious dress, Armando
turning away at casket, Little Sympathies showing concern for the
passing of Marilyn on below left.

Dark Eyes Pg 21

Marilyn, age 8?



Louise, M, toys

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