



*one.*

IT IS A MESS, the house. Paint is peeling away in strips, the sloped roof is mottled with patches of missing shingles, weed-fingers grope blindly through the slats of the weathered deck. The detached end of an aluminum gutter dangles over the front door, bobbing gently in the late afternoon breeze. Underneath, a man sits in a rusted white patio chair, his tanned cheeks cracked in a widening smile.

“What’s he doing here?” Porter Robbins moves to his mother’s side, away from the car. He is long-boned, mop-haired, with flesh that stretches almost too tautly over his limbs, exposing the tension in his step. The taller by inches, he wears the advantage uncomfortably, stooping as though to deflect attention from himself.

His mother waves, and then raises her sunglasses for a sidelong glance at Porter. Their resemblance is plain, in the high cheekbones and the shape of their hands, each with fingers curved and nervous, seeking something to tap or twist; but her face is rounder, wide-lipped where his features begin to taper, and threads of gray show in the red-brown hair cut close against her neck.

“I suppose he wanted to surprise us.”

“Could’ve let us settle in first,” Porter says, but she is already trotting up the little staircase, her old school friend rising to greet her. Porter lingers a moment before following, thinking that she hadn’t looked surprised at all.

“Armand!” she calls. “How long have you been waiting?”

“What do I care?” The man throws an arm around her in an awkward hug. He is bearlike, evoking not an apple-cheeked cartoon but some rearing figure on display in a natural history museum, powerful and yet slightly threadbare. Thinning blond hair shades into a dusting of whiskers on his cheeks, and a navy polo

shirt, “Gold Country Construction” drawn in yellow cursive on one breast, drapes untucked over a considerable expanse of belly.

“Figured you ought to have some kind of welcome committee. Hey, kid.” The man puts out a hand as he releases Porter’s mother. Tawny hair is matted on his arms, sun-bleached, disappearing at wrists that seem delicately out of proportion to the rest of his frame. “It’s about time we got you out here.”

The rumble of the moving truck sounds from the direction of the highway. For a moment Porter tells himself that if he refuses this gesture, the truck won’t arrive, will pass the house and continue up the hill. But he takes the hand, wincing at the man’s grip as the yellow van pulls to a stop.

“Yeah, well, here we are,” he says.

Armand tosses a bunch of keys to Porter’s mother. “I put some beers in the fridge,” he says. “For later. Thought I’d give you a hand with the unpacking.”

She gives a theatrical shudder. “I don’t even want to think about that yet.”

“Place is kind of a wreck, isn’t it?” Porter says. “I thought it’d be in better shape.”

The movers lift the truck’s gate with a rattle, and his mother’s eyes flick to the street and back to him, resentful. She has hidden her own hesitation these past weeks, but not so deeply that Porter hasn’t seen it.

“When’d you get to be such an expert?” she asks.

“Just needs a little work,” Armand says confidently. “Take it from me, there’s a nice solid frame under there.”

Porter looks up. “How about a roof that’s not full of holes?”

“Drop it, OK?” his mother snaps. “You’re being a pain in the ass.”

“You ready up there?” One of the movers shouts. The other leans against the truck’s side, a cigarette dangling from his lips.

“Let’s do it,” she calls back, and only Porter sees the

caustic glance she gives him as she opens the door and steps across the threshold.

Inside are bare floors, wallpaper speckled with mildew, a dusty funk to the air that triggers a reflexive, explosive sniff. Their footsteps sound oddly muffled, as though being shut up has left the air itself lethargic and slow; but the movers' invasion, all motion and sweat and shouted instructions, stirs the space with the force of a minor whirlwind. Porter presses himself awkwardly against the wall to let boxes and furniture go past, a sofa, bookshelves, the television and mattresses. He finds each room to be vaguely familiar – the living room with its iron wood stove and French doors, the kitchen's big-windowed breakfast nook, the cool cement-walled cellar, now filled with what must be his grandparents' old furniture – but each is a surprise, too, its contours unguessable until he steps inside. They had stopped visiting even when his father was still alive, and his memories are no more than texture and mood. For a moment he tries to imagine the space feeling like home, the way their original house in San Francisco had, or the smaller apartments he and his mother had moved to later, bay-windowed living rooms and fog drifting past the telephone poles outside; but this seems a charade, like trying on a stranger's clothes.

His mother had explained her plan to move only a month ago. They had both seen it coming, she'd told him. City rent the way it is, this house standing empty, her trouble finding a job. But he hadn't seen it, not before, and not now. There had always been other options.

It is upstairs, in the smallest of the three bedrooms, that he finds what he's looking for: a wooden student's desk, real evidence that his father had once lived here too. Listening to the clattering of the movers in the next room, he pulls out its single drawer. It is nearly empty, holding only a box of rubber bands and an old aluminum compass of the kind used for measuring angles or drawing circles, tip sharp against the ball of his thumb. The top of the desk is ink-smearred and scratched, and he bends eagerly to

study the grooves, hoping to find letters, or numbers, anything that might hold some petrified meaning or lingering trace of personality; but they resist his efforts at decryption.

He straightens, annoyed at his own sudden excitement. There are no ghosts, no secret messages here, no answers left behind. The world has never been so generous as that.

The movers vanish as suddenly as they had appeared, leaving boxes stacked against the wall, furniture scattered in the middle of rooms, bits of packing material and dusty boot prints patterning the floorboards. Porter's mother opens all the windows in the house and warm air flows through, carrying with it the rich scent of sun-baked earth. Armand orders a pizza and proudly procures his six-pack from the refrigerator. Porter unpacks his things in the small bedroom, and by the time he joins them on the deck they are gossiping and relaxed.

"Some Old West-y thing, right here in town, with Farrah Fawcett, no less. Hey, kid, grab yourself a slice." Armand gestures at a seat, talking through a mouthful of crust. Porter's mother, evidently happy to relinquish the host's role, is sprawled with outstretched legs in another chair, feet bare, cuffs rolled up nearly to her knees.

Porter sits, taking a pepperoni-covered wedge from the box. "I think I found Dad's old desk upstairs. From when he was in school."

She nods. "I can't believe how much old crap is left. Have you been down in the basement?"

"Is some of that his stuff too?"

"Who knows." She doesn't like the subject. "Arm said he met a movie star in town. You've probably never heard of her."

"I took her flowers, right to her trailer," Armand picks up as though there had been no interruption. "Remember her in that Charlie's Angels getup? I practically jumped off the steps, she looked so different." He pantomimes crow's feet at the sides of his eyes, then pats his own belly. "Not that I'm one to talk."

“Everyone’s put on a few pounds,” Porter’s mother says.

“Not you. You look great.”

She colors. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

Porter sprinkles pepper flakes over the surface of his slice, and then folds it in half lengthwise for a bite. “Did she say anything to you?”

“Who?”

“That actress.”

“She thanked me. What’s she supposed to say?”

“I just thought there was going to be a story, is all.”

His mother rolls her eyes. “See? He thinks I’m ruining his life or something, bringing us up here.”

“It’s an adjustment.” Armand takes a swallow of beer, sounding skeptical. “Give it a chance, kid. You’ll like it.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.” She waves vaguely at the street. “Why don’t you go see what’s around, Porter? Let us finish catching up.”

He puts his pizza down. She is playing at being cheerful, but he sees the afternoon’s tension still caught in her wide green eyes, still frozen in her angled jaw. She wants to blame him, for spoiling a homecoming she hadn’t even wanted.

“Already trying to get rid of me?” He tries to keep his voice light.

“I don’t mean now.” She slides lower in her chair and tilts her head backward, talking to the deepening sky. “After we eat, obviously.”

“Hell, I’d offer you a beer, but you know how she is.” Armand gives him a helpless shrug. Porter stands, scraping his chair against the wooden deck.

“Yeah, you know what?” he says. “I was going to take a walk anyway.”

“Watch out for bears,” Armand calls after him. Porter’s mother laughs, a sparkling artificial sound. Porter doesn’t look back.

He heads up the little lane, away from the highway, his

stride quickening as delayed indignation pours through his limbs like oil. Lights have begun to appear in windows, some homes no more than cabins, but others sprawling immense across the hillside, looming over the road as it climbs. At the first bend, a footpath continues into the woods. He takes this, guessing it might be a shortcut to the town center they'd driven through earlier in the day. Someplace to find a burger and fries. Trees soon close around him, sparrows and smaller leaf-like birds flitting between the branches, chirping insistently against the thickening dusk.

Go see what's around. He picks up a length of wood and swings it like a bat in front of him. How dense does she think he is?

A crested-head jay, launching itself from a nearby limb, startles him into motionlessness. He looks back, his confidence in the path eroding. The houses' lights have disappeared, and the air feels denser, muted, as though the forest's weight is pressing physically in around him. It's hard to see farther than a few dozen yards between the trees. A pang of homesickness ripples through him, ridiculous when he hasn't even been gone twelve hours: Where are the city sounds, the cars and buses on Geary Avenue, the mist that chills summer nights?

But better this than turning around. A few minutes later, he sees a faint light winking behind distant tree trunks, down a fork in the path; a window, or a streetlight, surely the edge of town. He tosses the stick into the bushes, pleased at this proof of his instinct, and sets off toward it. Instead, the path spits him unexpectedly into a broad clearing, where a big building sits back dimly from the trees, squat and ugly, like a frontier fort built of aluminum siding.

He stops, whistling. Narrow, high windows are all dark, the top row reflecting the sunset's deepening glow. There could be dogs, or a guard, locals with beers and an allergy to strangers. But there's no response. Just the building, dignified and empty, even reproachful in its silence.

He picks his way through ankle-high weeds to the front,

a broad, empty gravel lot fed by a narrow dirt road that disappears into the trees. An unlit lamppost stands in the middle of the space, its fluted column unfolding into a complicated, glass-paned crown. Porter inspects the walls, looking for a sign, but can't find so much as a "No Trespassing" placard. The building's sliding front door, twice his height, is padlocked shut, and he rattles the chain, scaring a pair of pigeons from underneath the building's sloped eaves. They flap clumsily out to settle on the lamppost's top. Fat bellies, little heads. Something of the city here after all.

"Rats, is what. Flying rats," he says out loud, pointing his forefinger at them like a gun. "Pow."

One of the birds falls, hitting the ground with a thud.

Porter drops his hand. On the ground, it actually looks like a rat, fat and sleek and gray. A trick of the twilight. He looks up again. The other bird is still there, regarding him sideways with one bulging black eye. He shoves his hands in his jeans pockets and steps cautiously to the pole, keeping a few feet between him and the fallen form. There's that bird flu. Or worse, this whole place could be some toxic waste site.

Except, drawing closer, he sees it really is a rat on the ground, not a bird. A big one, too, with a long pink tail. A whisper of anxiety flutters inside his breastbone, tightening his balls as surely as cold air or frigid water. "Rat," he says again, pointing a trigger finger at the remaining pigeon.

It falls from the post too, nearly hitting him. He ducks out of the way, shaking his head to clear a sudden shuddering dizziness. Good thing he's alone. Unless...

He turns, slowly. Someone's pulling strings, watching his reactions. He scans the tree line, grimly. If he'd wanted to be the butt of jokes, he could've stayed back at the house.

"Funny one, assholes," he shouts.

His words echo from the building's side. He takes a deep breath, and then his feelings boil over, everything, the move, his powerlessness to change his mother's mind, the fight simmering between them. The idiocy of stepping into someone's stupid trap.

He bends for a rock, stands and hurls it at the thickest bush he can see.

“Fuck you,” he shouts, but the forest swallows the outburst so completely he might have said nothing at all. Stars are winking into visibility above, and he suddenly feels less comfortable about picking his way back through the woods, even if it is only a ten minute walk. A five-minute run.

A gust of wind rustles through the treetops. He steps away from the rats, breathing hard, unwilling for a superstitious moment to turn his back. A prank, is all. His heel hits a rock and he stumbles, rolling his shoulders as he catches himself, as if he had only been stretching.

“That all you got?” he demands, loudly.

No response. He turns to go, looking back only when he reaches the woods. It’s too dark to see clearly, but the rats seem to be back on their feet, nosing around the bottom of the pole. A dim bluish light has appeared, or reappeared, in the eaves of the building near where the birds had emerged. A flashlight, through a chink in the building’s wall. Extinguished when they’d seen him coming.

Porter jogs bitterly off, holding his middle finger high.