

## *In Rincon*

by

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Rincon was the end of the line. A simple fact of geography: you headed out Rincon Boulevard until it dead-ended into Main Street, and then you either turned left toward Pete and Alicia's house or right toward Zak's and the Ridge. You couldn't keep going forward, or you'd drive into the bay. Chris Patrick had swum in the bay enough as a boy to know that if he *did* keep driving—the pickup sailing over the rocks, the cab hood slicing neat into the water, the bubbles as she sank—he'd see nothing through the windshield, even if the headlights stayed on: no fish, no mud, no barnacled pilings. He liked to imagine he'd see Julia, her long hair swirling like sea grass.

Parked here at the edge of the bay where the road ended, he could turn his back on the bicycle path paved over the old train tracks and the condos built

around a fake lagoon where he and Pete had ridden dirt bikes through sourgrass and miner's lettuce every February. He could turn his back on twenty years of development and face what had never changed: the view, the bay.

He and Julia used to pull chairs up to the kitchen window and play *Star Trek*, as if all those lights were stars they were approaching at warp speed. And then their mother would walk in and remind them not to wipe their fingers through the foggy circles their breath made. In the first few years after Julia died, Chris and his mother often talked about the past – the stray cat Julia had befriended on a trip to Tahoe, or the colored snowflakes she cut from construction paper every Christmas to tape in the windows. They'd corroborate each other's tales, verifying facts and dates, recalling a scrap of dialogue the other had forgotten, comforting and being comforted: two mourners, paying homage at the same shrine. They stuck to a well-worn path, circling around and around but never touching down on what exactly happened that night in 1978.

But lately, Roberta Patrick had begun to change the subject. *Oh, enough about all that*, she'd say, and get up to measure out the coffee for the morning. Or *What's past is past. Let it go*. Dread and isolation swamped Chris then, a strangled petulance. All these years living in Rincon with his mother, they'd played together the song of loss. Two instruments, but the same melody. Shared grief brought solace – to both of them, Chris had always believed. But lately his mother seemed impatient and restless with their longstanding repertory, as though she wanted to go solo. He would leave the house then, drive to Zak's and, when Zak's closed, to the side of the road. There, even the bridge seemed friendly and benign, the red lights atop the towers blinking reliably. The white sparkle of the city, the inky bay spoke to him in murmurs. *We'll always be here*.

*This is as far as you ever need to go.* He felt reassured as he listened, slumped in the front seat, warm night air stirring the fuggy cloud of dope smoke, and looked out at the dark water that never changed.

They drove all night, stopping once for gas and so Eileen could cut her hair. She chopped it short, shorter than it had been since third grade when she'd wanted a wedge and Viv had insisted she could do as good a job as any salon on her own daughter's hair, and the boys had called her Dorothy Camel. She dyed it too, rinsing the maroon splotches from Randy's sink just before they left. She didn't need a disguise but wanted to make change visible in every way.

Miles pulled the tires like the belt of a treadmill. North, over the Grapevine and down into the valley and past faraway towns scattered flat like lighted dice come to rest at the edge of flat dark fields. The car shook over 75 so she kept it at 70, big rigs bearing down from behind and passing in a swoosh and a blast of horn at the sight of a woman alone in the front seat. Dawn broke just outside of Patterson, and she cut west on a small highway to prolong the drive. Once the sun came up, the spell would be broken, but in the dark everything was still possible.

*Anytime*, Gary had written on his Christmas card. *Anytime you need a change of pace, come visit. Love to have you.* As a kid, she'd looked up to Gary, her older cousin by only a year but always more popular, more cool, and she took pride in the fact that they'd kept each other's secrets, playing doctor behind closed doors, and as teenagers, getting stoned in her aunt's back yard. They'd pooled their resources once to score a lid, and gathered a big group of mutual friends for a Heart concert at the Hollywood Bowl. She'd been fifteen that night, the first time she'd touched an erect naked penis – Gary's friend's, she didn't even remember his name, just that when the others had returned to the car where they'd been making out he'd whispered to her that she could just blow him in the back seat and no one would have to know. After two years at community college, Gary had (in the words of Eileen's mother, Viv, the sister of Gary's mom) upped and transferred to Berkeley.

Eileen had phoned Gary just two days earlier, after Randy had asked what she was doing. Randy was only a roommate, a guy she'd met at the lab where they both worked, and when he asked her just like that why her own kid didn't live with her and why she wasn't doing anything to change the situation, it gave her an idea. Sudden, rash, appealing. She needed to do something, and she knew she had to leave Sepulveda to do it. She reached Gary on the third ring – just going out for a ride, he'd said, by which Gary meant mountain biking in the hills while Eileen thought of cruising Sepulveda as a teenager. "Well, great," he'd said, clearing his throat, after she said she was moving to Rincon. Would he give her a hand? "Mi casa es su casa, Leenie."

Jeremy stirred in the back seat. Her son. She started – it was so easy to forget he was there. The sun made a red ball in the rear-view mirror. Up ahead,

a boarded-up store with a parking lot; she could turn around, be back in Sepulveda by one or two. Randy didn't keep track of her comings and goings, and anyway, he didn't get home until three. She could make up some story about Jeremy having a fever, needing the car to take him to the doctor. Viv would never need to know.

Not even eight o'clock and already the air felt still and hot. She yanked the rear-view mirror to avoid the glare – the sun now more white than red – and dabbed paper towels on her neck. The color and texture of paper bags, they stuck to her skin in pieces. She kept driving past the parking lot, turned north toward the coast.

By the time they reached the bridge, heat haze clung to the distant hills and hovered a sickly brown over the ocean horizon. Jeremy sat up, fluttered his eyes, made a sound.

"It's okay," she said. "It's all been a bad dream."

When Jeremy had been young, he'd clung to her ankles every time she left him at Viv's. He'd clung, and cried, and it had felt good: someone caring enough about her to make such a fuss. She found she liked the drama of dropping by unannounced, Jeremy's shriek of pleasure as he dropped his toy and ran to her, Viv standing back with her arms crossed, looking sour. Her own mother's disapproval: nothing new there, but it stung less when placed next to Jeremy's clinging need.

"The Golden Gate Bridge," she said as she watched him in the rear-view mirror, his head turned to follow the swooping cable. "It's taking us to a place where everything will be better. We're leaving everything behind. I promise."

Had he even heard? What was he looking for, back there? She had a lot of work to do, to get to the place where she could feel she had the right to ask him questions.

She drove another ten minutes to the Rincon exit and followed the boulevard into town, pulled into a bank parking lot, backing the car against a wall. She didn't have to hide the plate – Randy would never call the cops, she knew too much about his cash transactions with a pharmacist from Walgreen's – but she felt safer not broadcasting the car's outsider status, its back bumper of Cal Tech parking permits. Jeremy had fallen asleep again. She felt a rush of tenderness.

Across the street, the bay sparkled so bright it hurt her eyes. Along a path bordered with flowers, a bench faced out over the view. She could get out of the car and sit there. Not yet. Not like the three women who strode past wearing tasteful sweats and carrying arm weights. They clearly belonged.

*Get J in school*

*Find place to live*

She wrote the list on a receipt she found in the glove compartment. Ink leaked onto her fingers. Already the dress she'd pulled from her closet, the dress that had looked pretty and maternal back in Sepulveda at midnight, felt cheap and outdated.

The women had disappeared behind a parked Mercedes, and Eileen rolled down the window, letting in the still, warm air. The bay lapped at a wide swath of baby-shit-colored mud mounded smooth by the tide. On a half-submerged log, five pelicans sat in a row, and then lifted and flew, one after the other, their beaks sagging with dead fish.

She tore off a clean scrap of paper. *STAY HERE, I'll be right back*, she wrote, and placed it where he'd see it. She added *Mom*.

She found Varney's easily enough, at the end of a row of low-slung professional offices. She lingered in front of a Realtors' window as though considering the listings. Every price had seven figures, except for a 2-BR condo for \$699,000. She'd known Gary had done well – the whole family knew as much, the way he sent \$100 bills at Christmas time – but this kind of money scared her. She had a thousand dollars, including the three hundred in cash she'd taken from under the couch cushion. She'd pay Randy back, soon as she could.

*Ditch the car.*

*Get a job.*

*Get real.*

Eileen had never hidden empties in her underwear drawer or partied in front of her kid. Sometimes she wished she had. Then she'd have a particular clear-cut wrong for which to atone, a specific pattern of action she could point to and say she'd fucked up. Instead, she had only an accumulation of vague intentions never borne out. She couldn't even say that she'd made bad decisions. The few times she went with Randy to an AA meeting – “c'mon,” he told her, “it'll help, I promise” – she envied people their dramatic stories of totalled cars, broken limbs, burned houses. “I left my son at my mother's for ten years” was true, but she didn't even had a good reason why. It was hardly the stuff to bring on snuffles of solidarity, nods and whispered *Amens*, or the tearful hugs and thumbs-up others received over bad coffee while she slunk out to wait for Randy in the parking lot.

Metal scraped against pavement, and she turned her head to see a man arranging patio furniture. She straightened her dress and approached. He didn't look up but bent to adjust a chair leg, then stood with a hand pressed to the small of his back. In bicycling shorts and a bicycling shirt with *Varney's* written across the chest, he looked too small and human for all she had riding on him.

"Hi."

He didn't look up. "We open in five minutes."

"It's me."

He sighed as though she were another demanding customer and glanced at her through hipster titanium-framed glasses. His frown smoothed into an uncertain smile. "Why, Leenie, you weren't kidding." He clasped her against his shoulder in a sideways hug. "What do you know. Well, uh, welcome. Welcome to Rincon." He spread his arms in an expansive gesture. Gary always got himself noticed, the first in the family to go to a four-year college, the first to move away, the first to own his own business. Every Christmas, in addition to sending \$100, he phoned right as the ham was being carved.

"Come on in. Let me show you around." He held the door for her to follow him into *Varney's*, a large barnlike space separated by long, tall-shelved aisles. Overhead lighting buzzed and flickered on. "You changed your hair."

Her hand flew to her neck, to the strangeness of bare skin there. Without a second mirror, she'd had to guess at a straight line.

"Gary! It's been like, how long? I've worn it this way for years. It needs a trim."

“Yeah?” He touched his fist to her arm, and she made herself smile.

“Good to see you. God. Everything OK ... you know?”

She nodded, held his gaze.

“The boy still living with Viv?”

She looked at him evenly. “No.”

“How old is he now?”

“Ten.”

“Huh. Ten. Time flies.” He cleared his throat. “So how long you in town for? Wish you’d given me a heads-up, our sofabed’s out being reupholstered. Dog took a while to get housebroken. “

“Don’t worry. I’m not here to freeload. I’m going to find a place. But I do have a favor to ask. You have something around here I can do anything, you know, until I line up a regular job? I managed a lab at Cal Tech.”

He nodded, his head like a bobble doll’s on a spring. “Right.” He looked around, as if willing a customer to materialize and save him from her desperation. She felt it lifting off her like the stink of cigarettes. She needed a shower.

“Let me see, Leenie. Let me see what I can do. Come back in an hour.”

“OK,” she said. “I have to take care of some business.” Emphasizing the last word.

On the way back to Jeremy – she’d been gone what, ten, fifteen minutes? He’d been left alone longer than that in worse areas – she avoided every crack in the sidewalk, like a kid unwilling to tempt fate. *Take computer classes. Take J siteseeing.* Viv would show up at the bus stop at three and Jeremy wouldn’t be

there. Eileen had another six or seven hours to plan. And if Gary didn't have a job for her, she could find something else. She had to.

She turned toward a row of shops, their doors opened and held in place by baskets of hydrangeas, terra-cotta pots of geraniums, a topiary rabbit with a ribbon around its neck. A card shop. A café. A florist. A car passed whooshingly down the shaded street. She must have turned down another street. Had she passed all this earlier? A bird flew from one tree to another and hid itself in thick green leaves. A tabby snoozed in a patch of sunlight. In a gift shop window, beneath a wooden sign saying *The Birdcage*, items beckoned with the promise of Rincon – tapestry pillows, porcelain bowls, hammered brass and pewter picture frames. Everything the town had to offer – its quiet, its privilege, its order – seemed available. The top half of the store's Dutch door had been left open, and on its surface fluttered a sheet of celadon green paper with scalloped edges, on which was calligraphed in gold ink: *Sale. Reductions up to 40 percent.* No exclamation points, no huge red block letters, no huge banners slung from the tops of giant stores along wide, treeless boulevards – all that she'd left behind. She turned the knob and, releasing a tinkle of small bells, walked in.

She chose a pair of ceramic candlesticks no more than an inch high but a gorgeous gold-flecked blue. She looked at folded mohair blankets and lamps shaded in glass beads, silk table runners and tasseled silk cushions, but the candlesticks were the first item she saw that wouldn't upstage her. It was more good luck, she decided, to buy an omen for her and Jeremy's new life together. She shouldn't be spending forty dollars, not without a job and a kitchen full of groceries, but doing so suddenly felt imperative. An investment of sorts. A vote of confidence.

“A gift?” A pretty gray-haired woman with agate earrings smiled at Eileen from behind the counter.

“Yes. For me.”

The skin around the woman’s eyes crinkled. “How nice.”

The woman’s harmless comment felt like a rebuff. She had no idea what the purchase meant – and yet, her smile seemed kind. Eileen’s stomach rumbled, and she recalled that she hadn’t eaten since half a burrito the night before. She’d gone without food longer than that, many times. An omen counted for more than a full stomach. And the woman had already pulled from a drawer two sheets of crisp tissue, one lilac and the other that same celadon green as the sign on the door. Eileen couldn’t stop her now, could only watch as the woman peeled the price tag from the bottom of one of the candlesticks and placed them in the center of the tissue, then pulled and folded and smoothed the tissue so the finished thing looked like a peony in full bloom. She tied a gold ribbon around it and tucked it into a small brown bag, tugging at the tissue so the lilac and green peeked out from beyond ordinary brown paper handles. The woman hadn’t looked up once, and the whole time Eileen had let her hand rest against a shelf beneath the counter, a shelf just level with Eileen’s hip, a shelf on which small bean bag cushions displayed earrings and rings and brooches. It would have been so easy to take one, to slide it into her purse. Her fingers climbed a silky cushion and worked the filigree of an earring as though caressing a prayer bead.

“Do you need candles?”

Eileen’s hand jerked away, as though from electric shock.

“We have some lovely hand-dipped beeswax – just there, behind you on the table.”

The woman’s face held no accusation or even curiosity. *I’m nobody to her. Just another customer.* Joy thrilled her, and she shook her head, took her brown bag by the handles, and left the store. A few more paces, around a bend, and the rusty car screamed *You Don’t Belong*. The sidewalk ended, as did the shade.

The tide had moved in, covering the log and most of the mud. Jeremy stood on a rock. He’d gotten out of the car without her. Irritation climbed in her. Unchecked, it could flare like flame. Then, like a slap: He hadn’t eaten in hours either. She flushed with shame, swallowed her shout to him to get back in the car. He hadn’t seen her but stood, looking out toward the bridge, his hand in his pocket. As if she needed a reminder. She hadn’t meant for him to get hurt. She’d left a cigarette burning in an ashtray. It wasn’t her fault that he picked it up and she didn’t stop him in time. It was an accident, she’d told him, over and over, as he’d nodded through his tears, even as she thought of all the pain she’d tolerated and of how he could stand some too.

He saw her then, jumped down from the rock and ran across the street, first looking both ways. That felt an affront too, because Eileen hadn’t been the one to teach him to do so. The toes of his sneakers – sneakers she hadn’t bought – were dark with wet. For a second, she forgot about the bag she carried, it was so light.

She reached out to touch his hair, but he kept moving toward the car. So she pointed. “That’s the bridge we crossed earlier. The Golden Gate Bridge. Pretty nice, huh?”

But he'd already climbed back among the Hefty bags in the back seat. It was the two of them now, and not just for the rest of the day. "Let's go find some breakfast and get you in school."

Of course he knew it was the bridge they'd crossed. He'd been awake the whole time since, although he'd pretended to fall back asleep. A bad dream, she'd said – but no dream had ever lasted as long as his entire life. And after a bad dream, he always looked for the white slit of light under the door from the lamp Grandma left on, and found it. Until now.

“We’re leaving, come on, get up. We’re leaving.” That’s all she’d said, jostling him awake on the couch where he’d fallen asleep as Randy watched the Sharks. Except for a sickly green glow from one of the grocery-store security lights across the street, the room with the gold carpet had been completely dark.

“Come on.” She whispered, a sound he wasn’t used to from her.

*Nothing’s wrong, she’s taking me to Grandma’s, that’s all,* stumbling to his feet. Eileen didn’t say otherwise – didn’t say anything – but pulled the sleeping bag into her arms while steering him out the front door. The back seat of Randy’s car had been stuffed full of Hefty bags, lumpy with clothing, and he fell back to sleep on their soft mass.

That's where he woke, sunlight streaming through the car window and his face sticky and hot from resting so long against Hefty bags. Outside, cars moving fast both ways and nothing surrounded the road but air. He sat up and saw railings and water, watched a red cable swoop up so far that he pressed his face to the window to follow it to the top of a tower. They drove beneath, and he turned to watch the cable swoop down again, and then the car moved onto solid earth, the bridge behind them. That's why he'd faked falling back to sleep and gotten out of the car and crossed the street for a closer look. The bridge, all he knew and wanted on the other side. His grandma, waking him in his own bed. And then Eileen came back and he thought that she was taking him across the bridge, home to Sepulveda. But instead she took him to a diner for breakfast and told him to order whatever he wanted. He wasn't hungry. She told the waitress to bring him waffles, which tasted like wet cotton balls. He thought of Grandma's French toast, and couldn't swallow. In the restroom, the forced-air dryer didn't work, so he dried himself with paper towels that fell apart when they got wet. He wiped his hands on his jeans instead, brand-new jeans Eileen had given him from a plastic bag, the tag still attached and the denim stiff. "New life, new jeans," she said, and he hadn't wanted to put them on.

As long as Jeremy could remember, he'd called her Eileen. Not to her face but to himself, inside. Eileen was her name; it was what Grandma and Randy called her. One day, a long time ago, she'd shown up at day care – the pumpkin place, he still thought of it, because the back yard had a big inflated pumpkin, big enough to play in – and the pumpkin-place lady had said, "Your mommy, Jeremy, your mommy is here," and he thought "Who?" while all the kids stopped what they were doing to stare.

The way the kids in the Rincon classroom did when he walked in with the teacher. In the school parking lot, after the waffles he couldn't eat, Eileen had popped open the car trunk and smiled as though it was Christmas morning and here was his surprise and he was supposed to like it: the bicycle he'd already had for four years, its seat raised as high as Randy could get it to go, its front tire yanked back so the thing looked broken. And then she'd said good-bye and she'd see him at six, remember? He remembered. In front of Varneys, she'd told him, pointing it out as they drove to breakfast.

The teacher wore dangly earrings and had a long braid and gave off a minty smell. She asked Jeremy to stay inside during recess, because she wanted him to meet Alister. A mouse, a white mouse, an albino, she said. In Jeremy's hand, the mouse was all heartbeat, the way Jeremy woke sometimes before he remembered to look for the white slit of light.

"Hold him gently now, so he doesn't feel trapped. You're a lot bigger than he is."

Jeremy had never held anything so small and so alive. He'd never been this close to a teacher. Her name was Ms Bliel. The cries of the other kids carried in from the playground through transom windows open so wide they lay flat.

The mouse picked his way along Jeremy's sleeve, small feet catching in the weave of the fabric, whiskers flicking, all the way to the boy's neck. Jeremy hunched his shoulders and laughed, a sharply truncated laugh as though he realized midway through that he wasn't supposed to.

"You sure you don't want to take off that windbreaker?" the teacher asked again. "You've had it on all day. We can hang it up where it'll be safe until you leave."

Jeremy shook his head.

The bell rang. Kids jostled into the classroom. Jeremy put Alister back in his cage, latching the lid the way Ms Bliel had shown him, and as he turned around, a boy in a 49ers T-shirt pressed a meaty arm against the counter and, when Jeremy stepped away, shoved him with the heel of his hand. "You breathe mouse shit, you die."

"Who'd be dumb enough to do that?"

"Russell. Jeremy. In your seats." Ms Bliel stood at the front of the room, chalk in hand. "Now."

"Cleaning the cage, that's how." Russell jerked his chin toward Alister, whose small pink feet clung to the side of the cage. "My mother's a doctor and she says pregnant women can die from cat litter. And rodents are worse. Rodents are vermin."

"Russell! You heard me. Outside! Three minutes. Jeremy, take your seat."

The children sat as Ms Bliel divided them into teams – Jeremy got paired with a girl who sucked the ends of her hair so her pony tails tapered like paint brushes – and explained how to measure leaf litter and collect specimens, then they followed her out of the building and across the playground and onto a path through eucalyptus trees to the creek. "You won't see anything now," she told them, "but back in the classroom we'll use the microscope and you'll be amazed by what lives in a drop."

"What's your dad do?" Kevin, dark-haired and slight, asked Jeremy from the other side of a partly submerged branch, as the teams crouched to fill test tubes with water.

"He's in L.A."

"What's he *do*," clarified Russell from the creek bank where he lifted rocks. The air by the water was cool, even though the creek barely trickled. "Just wait," Ms Bliel said, "in February, it'll overflow the banks."

February. It was October now. Jeremy's palm started to itch.

"Cal Tech." That's where Randy worked. Randy was as close as Jeremy had to a dad, considering he stayed over with Eileen at Randy's house and watched Sharks games with him. Randy had taken him fishing once. Eileen worked at Cal Tech, too, or she did. Now she was going to work at Varney's, she said.

"What's Cal Tech?"

"Russell, please remember to put that rock down exactly where you found it. Some creature calls it home." Ms Bliel poke at the base of a tree with a stick.

"Children! Come see! Wild mushrooms! Don't touch."

"They sent the Pathfinder to Mars," Jeremy said as he capped the vial full of creek water.

"Cool," Kevin said.

Russell shot Kevin a glare. "My mom operates on people with cancer. She saves their lives." He picked up a rock. "Check this out." He chucked the rock behind him and dug around in the moist indented earth, pulled up a salamander.

Back in the classroom, as the children lined up to peer through the microscope at tiny swimming things, Russell hissed in Jeremy's ear, "Vermin should die." Just like the salamander that Russell, on the way back from the creek, had left on a bench where, by lunch, it had dried out in the sun. No longer

slimy and shiny, what remained looked as dark and brittle as a scrap of old tire rubber, about as long as his pinky finger. Jeremy had heard Miguel's uncle yelling at his dogs, mean yells and loud crashing noises and the high pitched whines and yelps of the dogs. Jeremy had seen butterflies and moths crushed, ant hills blown up with cigarette lighters. But the dead salamander went beyond mere meanness, and into the confusion and unfairness of all that had happened in the past twelve hours. He knew what he had to do.

So at the end of the school day, as the other children poured, shrieking and pushing, out of the classroom, Jeremy lingered by Alister's cage.

"Everything all right over there?" Ms Bliel sat at her desk, arranging papers.

Jeremy didn't turn around, but kept his fists at his side like stunted tree branches. Chalk dust swirled in the mid-afternoon sunlight.

"You might give him some fresh water," Ms Bliel called out. "But no more food. Don't be misled by an empty dish. He hoards. Then put him back. It's time to close up."

Jeremy hadn't picked up the mouse, but now he did, holding its warm rounded trembling in one hand and, with the other, mounding the shavings and sunflower seed husks to look like a burrow. He latched the lid. The teacher had her back to him, gathering her bookbag and pocketing the packet of Merits she kept hidden in a drawer. "All set then?"

But Jeremy was already out the door, dashing across the playground, the mouse in his pocket, ticking like a watch.