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∞ The Box ∞

The man placed the last item in the box and sealed it, along with his own fate. It was done. Anxiously he checked the window, fearful that someone might have followed him. He had precious little time and still needed to decide on an address. The question plagued him: where to send it. There was no family left but was there a friend, a neighbor who could be trusted? It all needed to be done so delicately but he had too little time. It was strange, after all the weeks spent in meticulous planning, to be rushed at the last moment.

The man sighed.

The house will be empty of course but could it be addressed here even so? Sending it to the jail itself certainly wasn't an option. He looked at his watch—nearly half past five. There was no more time. It wasn't ideal but it would have to suffice. If Walt at the post office received an undeliverable package, perhaps he'd feel obligated to track down someone who'd know what

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to do with it—especially once he recognized the recipient's name.

Subconsciously the man began calculating the chances that the box would be sent as instructed, found and opened. Forty percent—maybe a little less. Factor in the chances of someone actually understanding what was in the box—that was a different story. *But what is there to do about that now?*

The address was written in his small leather notebook but he didn't need to check. He had it memorized. He'd known it before everything happened and afterward, everyone knew it. It had become *The House*. People in town, even as far away as Portland and Boston, had been talking about it. Murder. You never forget an address like that. He couldn't if he tried.

Quickly he scrawled it on the outside of the box. The boy would bring it to the post office and then it'd be their problem. He set the box on the counter. It weighed so little—barely a kilogram and yet it held a man's freedom inside. *How much should a man's freedom weigh?* he wondered. Even he couldn't begin to gauge that and immediately chastised himself for being so sentimental as to even think of such a thing anyway.

The man used his arm to sweep away the debris from the kitchen counter. He set the box in the middle—exactly where he told the boy it would be. He took a quarter out of his pocket and set it next to the box. He left no note. *Notes cause trouble and I've got enough of that as it is.* Besides, he wouldn't need one. The boy knew the instructions. Come to the house at six, side entrance. The kitchen door will be left open. Take the box on the counter and deliver it to the post office. The other half of the payment is next to it.

How much simpler could it be?

He grabbed his coat and his own small bag. He didn't need much. Everything he'd ever need, ever want, would be waiting for him once he got to New York City. The money was there—or at least his half. But it was

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more than enough. He'd already booked a room at the *Ritz-Carlton*—their best suite. Of course he couldn't use his real name anymore and that was a shame. All those years spent establishing a reputation for himself, earning the recognition, the glory and now it was gone. Still, you can't have it all. And a name, an identity, are small prices to pay for a lifetime of luxury.

Now there were only a few things separating him from that new life: a plane, two taxis and this box. As agreed, he left the door slightly ajar. He twisted the lock so all the boy would have to do is shut the door on his way out.

The man left The House.

And although the man had spent much time at The House there are just some things one doesn't know about a place unless one actually *lives* there. For example, he wouldn't necessarily know that the upstairs bathroom faucet would drip if the nozzle wasn't left a tad askew. Or that the third stair above the landing squeaked and should be avoided if you didn't want to wake the baby. And since he had never resided in The House, he did not know about the subtle slant in the kitchen floor—practically imperceptible. He did not know the way the window at the end of the hall would swell in warmer weather just enough so it could never quite close, leaving a tiny gap for air to get through. He certainly wouldn't know the way these two separate factors fit together so perfectly, lined up just so, that the cross breeze coming up from the ocean would draw air in such flawless alignment that the kitchen door could never stay open.

This didn't happen all at once. It was probably ten minutes after the man had left. Ten minutes of the door shifting slightly, to and fro, before—*slam*—it was closed. Locked.

This is how the boy found it twenty minutes later.

“What's wrong, Billy?” his friend asked, shifting a fishing pole to the other hand.

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“The guy said the kitchen door would be open.” The boy jiggled the handle but the door wouldn’t budge.

“You think he was just joshin’ you?”

“Nah, he was serious. Kinda’ creepy too. But it’s a quarter and that means a new fishing pole.” Billy put his open palms on either side of his head to shield the sun. He pressed his face against the window.

“See anything?”

“I think I see the box. Boy, it’s a mess in there.” He turned to his friend. “Think we should break the window?”

“Are you mad? Crazy-lady Pang lives right next door. She’d be over here in a heartbeat.”

“I suppose so.” Billy hesitated, reluctant to give up the other half of his payment.

“Look, you still have the first quarter he gave you. I’ll give you my old pole—it’s not half bad, you know. You can save the money for something else.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Miss Pang would be over here in a stitch. She could hear an ant swallow.”

“Attaboy. Now c’mon. This place is really giving me the willies. Say, check out those plants, huh?”

Billy looked to where his friend was pointing. It was odd. The owner of The House had planted flowers willy-nilly around the yard.

“Yeah, pretty strange.”

“I’ll say.”

The boys set out for the stream, their minds filled with images of catching fish and maybe even camping out if their mothers would let them. And as time passed, they forgot about The House and the box and the strange man and the locked door. And eventually, even the quarter.



As anyone who has ever tended plants will tell you, a summer garden will take over if you don’t keep an eye on

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it. And since there was no one to keep an eye on it—not even Miss Fanny Pang, who was so disgusted with it she closed her kitchen shade to banish it from sight—that is exactly what happened to this garden. The wisteria, which had been planted so liberally the summer before because his daughter had liked the smell of it, crept upward, ensnaring the gutters and chimney. The rhododendrons, with their brash bouquets, seemed to double in size as June turned to July and July to August. And so on with the clematis, the lavender and the hydrangeas. Even the comically-planted flowers on the large unkempt lawn—looking like some 50-foot-tall housewife had dropped a bag of groceries and scattered the contents higgledy-piggledy across the parking lot of the local Shop ‘n’ Save—grew and spread and grew and spread.

By late October all of the flowers and deciduous greenery were gone, replaced with the shocking reds and oranges of autumn in New England. Then winter, when everything looked dead but wasn’t in the least. So that by the time spring came and the first crocuses poked their heads through the disarrayed mayhem, the vegetation had expanded to such a degree that even the one who planted it would not have recognized it. The infusion of sunlight and warmth and water brought life back to the garden, which had now become an entity in and of itself—a wild animal with no one brave enough to tame it.

And so it went on like this. Miss Fanny Pang muttering oaths under her breath as she gradually drew every north-facing shade in her house, in an annual attempt to cast out the eyesore. Every year she’d complain to the town selectman but he’d say there was nothing he could do. After all, it was *The House*.

Finally enough years passed for the small house to be fully consumed by the garden. At this point, Miss Fanny Pang convinced herself it was no longer her neighbor’s outrageous landscaping but the forest itself

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that abutted her property. One by one, she re-opened the shades, which allowed her to enjoy her forest view along with the view of the ocean and her lawn and the seldom-traveled Old Mill Road leading into town.

Within Miss Fanny Pang's forest—which is how others had come to think of it as well—The House was alive with activity. Boards were rotting through. Pipes, which had frozen in winter from lack of use, had burst and water flooded the entire downstairs. Wallpaper—periwinkle to match the wisteria—peeled away. Snow on the roof, left unshoveled, accumulated throughout the winter, gradually weighing down so heavily that it collapsed into the attic—letting in more water and more wisteria. Dust collected on the dishes—two cups, two bowls and two spoons—which had been left to dry on a red and white checkered towel next to the sink.

In fact, the box itself, which sat unmoved on the counter, was probably the only thing in that house or in the surrounding environs, which was never altered in any way. So year after year after year, until an entire decade had passed, it rested, undelivered and hidden from the world

