

The Abandoned Mother

The waitresses at the Dockside Restaurant are not twins but they are identical. Their braided hair, their sunburned kid-cheeks, their thin arms, even their bellies, distended over narrow hips, as though their tank tops are stretched over two perfect globes. Kelly's due date is closer, but Mariah's stomach is just as big, and they talk about the same birthday for the babies, they talk about rubber nipples, they talk about mothering together. They snap barrettes into each other's hair. The tourists, only in Maine for a week at the longest, love them, or are frightened of them. They stick forks into their platters of plastic-red lobster, give the girls big tips, and can't decide whether to look at them or away from them, to the harbor. Salt hits everyone's face when a breeze ruffles in. Boy or girl? The old women ask, and the girls answer, it's a surprise. Their aprons hang low, their pockets filled with small bills.

When I referred to Kelly as Mariah's sister, they laughed and cooed. "We're sisters *now*," Mariah said, as if to correct me. I was taking my break down by the tugboats, eating oily fries that an unhappy child sent back, watching the mates scour the main deck. I had been working as the fry cook for over a month, and still I knew nothing about them that I couldn't see. The rumor was that one of the mates was the father of Kelly's child, maybe even her on-again off-again boyfriend, maybe even the father of Mariah's too. The rumor was that they ran away from home together. The rumor was the immaculate conception. Kelly had watched one man loop a long, wet rope into a pile, and when he saw her, he nodded. I had finished my fries and gone back to the kitchen. But since then, I've seen Kelly go down there every day to talk to him.

They need a ride home from work. Kelly's car, which had seemed like their collective property, is busted. We all smell like fried fish. My feet hurt, but theirs' must hurt more. Mariah sits in the front and directs me away from the coast, Kelly sits in the back, singing under her

breath and counting her money. Turn left at the fork, now go straight, she says. The windows are down. As the air darkens and cools, I smell the ocean fade and woods fill the air. We don't drive long at all, but the world around us changes quickly. We begin to pass through a kind of ramshackle forest, trailers sprouting up like a colony of white mushrooms.

They tell me to stop in front of one with a dirty sign, If You Lived Here, You'd be Home By Now. It looks like something a realtor would put up. I can't imagine anyone driving through here if they weren't going home to one of the trailers, can't imagine a realtor walking through the mud here, so I imagine they put it up themselves. A tree leans over their trailer, and a plastic bag snagged in its branches holds the shape of a swan.

You want to come in? Kelly asks me. I know this is a formality, they feel like they owe me for the ride. I hesitate, but I follow them through the screen door. Sorry, I say, as it bangs behind me, but they don't notice. Its more obvious than ever in the space they share alone that they move in tandem. They sling their aprons over chairs, they turn lights on, they kick shoes off, they pull glasses from the dishrack and fill them with water. The whole time, their bellies seem to lead them, charting little courses as if they're swimming through water. The air is thick, smells sweet. They murmur to each other, and when I can't catch it, I don't feel left out, rather, that I am just a foreigner who doesn't speak the language.

There are several small rooms. They have a pink couch, a plastic-topped table, the walls are colorless and close in around us. There is a saccharine grime in, on, a part of everything. There are cardboard boxes filled with used baby clothes, bottles, cartoon-patterned blankets in the corner.

So, Tim, What do you think of Manny? Kelly asks. Manny is the Dockside manager. I tell her I think he's an asshole, and they laugh.

Yeah, but he's good to us. He gives us whatever hours we need, Mariah says, and then looks down at her buzzing phone. She walks into what looks like a bedroom, but the door swings shut behind her before I can see anymore.

I think of shiny-headed Manny, who yells at the girls like he does at all his employees. I always wondered why they smiled in response. They never seemed worked up. From deep in the steaming kitchen, I had watched them eye each other, piling platters of shrimp up their forearms, as Manny screamed over their shoulders about courtesy to customers. I always want to punch him.

He gave us his son's old onesies, too, Kelly says.

My eyes cut to the boxes on the floor. I can't imagine Manny, always so mad and sweaty, folding the worn, pale squares of fabric into a box.

I should go, I say. I am suddenly too submerged, I feel like an intruder.

Wait, are you on the schedule tomorrow? Kelly asks. I am.

Could you pick us up? She asks. I can.

Mariah walks back in the room. Her face is blank. That was my old neighbor, she says to Kelly. My, uh... apparently my mom died last week, she says.

Kelly looks up at her. I can't see what passes between them.

Sorry, Mariah says when she sees that I'm still there.

Outside, the air has darkened and dampened, and lives with wood sounds. The slam of the car door and the rev of the engine are so loud they echo in my head. The radio comes through static every turn of the knob. My high beams puddle in the thick air, and I have to sit up and forward to see where I'm going. In the newly fallen night, without the girls in the car, I'm uneasy. I reach for things I know are in the console just to make sure they're there: a lighter, a tin

of altoids, receipts. I wonder, then, if I thought somewhere buried deep, that they would steal from me. I don't have anything they would want. And the thought upsets me: I don't believe they would do anything wrong. Unless they had to, I think. I don't know what saga I'm entertaining about their characters, and I didn't realize that some part of me didn't trust them. I think of the hardness of Mariah's jawline, her serious, wide-set eyes.

I always feel like I'm staring at her, and know that I shouldn't, until her eyes sweep across the distance and settle on me and I look away, as though she's the one who'd been staring at me all along. It makes face tingle. Looking at short stretch of wet road lit before me, I realize that I wouldn't know if I took a wrong turn.

Rollie's is the only bar in town, and the only people awake, who don't have to get on their fishing boats in a few hours, are inside. A few gristled bikers drift outside. The Dockside sits next to the bar, black windowed now. And beyond them, the boats, like pale, flat nosed animals, rest on the night water. I pull into a spot behind the bar. I realize I've been listening to static the whole way. When I turn the car off, the silence is thin and circles around me as though I'm the drain.

I take the back staircase up to my room on the third floor of the building. The moon, rising, angles through my window. Even looking out from inside, the night sky is cornerless. I fall asleep with the noise from Rollie's like a television turned down very low.

They're sitting outside the trailer when I pick them up for work, as though they're waiting for a school bus. I think to ask how old they are, but I don't want to seem judgmental. I want to absorb the peace they seem to feel when it's just them, don't want to open my mouth to remind them that I'm there. I search for signs on Mariah of the news she uttered last night. She

looks the same as ever, a beatific calm on her face. I don't know if I should ask about what I heard, or if I should help them maintain their sphere of secrecy.

Mariah picks up her phone, her voice dry against the silence. Yeah, she says. I'll try to get there this afternoon.

When she hangs up, Kelly, who seems to know what was said in the space before and after Mariah's words, asks her, you want me to see if Louis can take us?

Louis, I assume, is Kelly's man on the tugboat. In Kelly's offering of him, Mariah suddenly seems very alone to me.

You need a ride somewhere? I ask her.

Mariah thanks me several times. I owe you, Tim, she says. I don't know how to tell her that she doesn't, how much I wanted to drive her. It's a half an hour to the ferry, and then an hour on the water to North Rock Island, where she grew up. I don't know what it is, but some seam in me begins to rip when I look at her.

This is no big deal, she also keeps saying.

I know, I say back each time. She twists the radio knob, and it lands on static. I am sorry, though, I say.

Don't be, she says. I keep trying to look at her face but she stares straight ahead, her hands resting on her belly. She gives good directions, though there are few to give. We drive straight north along the coast, the horizon invisible in the fog, the sea and the far sky and the air around us are all the same soft, wet pewter.

So, you need to figure out your mom's property situation? I fumble through my question. She closes her eyes and smiles.

I guess so, she says.

Everything she knows that I don't is a secret. She's in a loose black dress, and I wonder if she's mourning, despite her insistence that she's not.

When we pull into the harbor where the ferry waits, she tells me I can leave her here. I park and turn the car off.

I'll get Louis to pick me up tonight, she says. Thanks for the ride.

Let me come with you, I can help, I say. I don't know if I'm being generous or crossing a boundary. You might need to carry stuff, I say, I can help with that, or...

I realize I don't know what else I'd help with, but I don't want to leave her. She is surprised, and laughs quietly, and I know she's laughing at me. Your shift is about to start, she says, I won't be back til tonight.

But she doesn't say no. The ferry is a fishing boat filled with empty lobster crates, named Laura B. A grandmother with a sleeping little girl and a thin black cat are the only others on the boat. We stand at the bow, the fog soaking our faces and our clothing.

When did you move away from the island? I ask her.

It's been a long time, she says definitively. The way she quells inquiries into her life impresses me. And she doesn't ask anything about me, I notice, after a while. She comments on the cat, sitting on the lobster crate, cleaning its paws of salt. I wonder, with some self-satisfaction, if maybe she isn't interesting, just a sad life sealed within privacy. I feel awful, instantly; I find myself wishing I knew all that Kelly knew.

The ferry heaves itself along the dock and the sun pries itself through the fog. There is a general store, but beyond that, only houses and pines. They look like flotsam, barnacled, gnarled

and whitewashed by the ocean. Mariah keeps her head down, and begins walking up the path towards the woods.

It's not far, she tells me. I have no idea what this means.

We move slowly, blinking in the light newly bright, breathing the air cold off the water. Mariah holds her belly with one hand, makes deliberate steps. I keep having reflexes to hold her arm to balance her as we walk over gullies and knots of root in the path. I try not to look at her, not to make her uncomfortable, but when I do, I see she's grimacing, as if in pain.

You okay? I ask. She screws her face into a smile, assures me she's fine. There are starfish and strands of bubbled seaweed on the path, as though the tide has come this far, but the house up the road in front of us looks dry as bone.

Mariah! The name, yelled, almost echoes. Mariah stops and shields her eyes from the sun, looking for the voice. A very old man is walking towards us. The door of the house bangs shut behind him.

Hey! Mariah yells back.

Wasn't sure you'd come! He is loud, friendly. His words are faintly shaped by the accent of the area, his voice rusty. He limps, but heaves quickly towards us. He's wearing the white heavy canvas of painter's clothes, dirtied all over. Up close, I can see beneath his windblown and thinned hair, the layers of weathered, wrinkled skin, one of his eyes is crossed, as if rolled to the bottom of its socket.

His focus darts to Mariah's belly, then to her face, then back at her belly. I can see the thoughts pass behind his other eye as he decides what to say.

Who's your friend? He turns to me.

Oh, this is Tim, Mariah says, as if remembering my presence. Tim, this was my neighbor, Mr. Boardman.

Bill, he says, and claps my outstretched hand. I understand that he thinks I am the reason for the bulge beneath Mariah's dress. She doesn't seem to care.

Listen, Bill says, quieting. I'm sorry about your ma. I know it's been awhile for you two, but a mom's a mom, and that's that, he says.

Thanks, Mariah says. She accepts his comfort. Bill leads us to the house he emerged from. I walk a few steps behind, but hear pieces of what he tells Mariah, about how she went peacefully, cremation, a service if she wants, all the boxes. I listen closely, though I wish I could try not to.

Now I would bet the last time I saw you, you were only seventeen or so, he says.

Mariah confirms this.

And Kelly? he says.

She's good. She's gonna have a baby too, Mariah says.

Huh, isn't that something, Bill says. I remember when

Bill pulls open the heavy door, warped so it hardly fits the doorframe. I follow them through it. Despite the sun, there is no light inside, all the windows shuttered and thickly curtained. The floors and walls are dark and mostly bare, a few spindly chairs sit around a table, a hard-looking olive loveseat faces a tiny, old television. The air smells ancient. Cardboard boxes that look mostly empty, their flaps hanging inward, sit on the floor. Mariah sits down on one of the chairs, blows air out of her cheeks. On the table is a silver urn.

She was a good woman, Bill says. Might not always seem that way, but she was, he says.

Thanks, Bill, Mariah says, as if to dismiss him.



You call me, okay? He says. Then he looks at me. You take care of her, he says.

No, he's not... Mariah says, as if to say I'm not the father, but she stops there. Bill smiles and his brown teeth shine.

I will, I say. I can't tell which eye to focus on.

What's the plan? I ask Mariah, when he's out the door.

I don't have one, she says, her voice sounds damp and sad.

No, I don't mean... I say, feeling like I've hurt her feelings. Can I help you pack things up? I ask.

I don't think I want any of this, she says. *Ah*, she cries suddenly. She bends over her stomach, pushes out another breath.

You okay? I ask. I know I keep asking her this.

Baby's kicking a lot today, she says.

She stands slowly and walks out of the room, holding onto the chairs, the table, for balance. I don't follow her, thinking it would make her uncomfortable. There is a portrait hanging on the wall, of a woman with light ringlets piled on top of her head, her lips caked in brown lipstick. Or maybe its not brown, maybe the photo is slightly discolored. There is another picture of a baby and I wonder if its Mariah, because this is her mother's house, and because the child looks so solemn. I can't tell if it looks like her, have never been able to see anyone in a baby's face. Minutes pass so quietly I can hear the dry tick of the clock. I sit and I stand, waiting for her to come back, to give me a reason to be here. I am in a dead stranger's house.

Hey Tim, Mariah calls me. I jolt, and admonish myself for being so jumpy.

The bedroom is just as dim. She sits on the white bedsheets, making a crater in the mattress. There, on the table beside the bed is another framed picture, of the woman with brown lipstick and the same baby, this time in her lap.

I think my water just broke, Mariah says.

Oh god, I say. Oh god, what do we do? I ask her, and I can see the fear in her face, and wish I wasn't so afraid.

I need you to call Kelly, she says.

Kelly, I say. Kelly. I can do that, I say.

Tell her I'm on the island and it's happening and I need her, she says.

I dial Kelly's number.

Call the ambulance! Kelly screams through the phone when I tell her. Get her off the island!

I can hear the restaurant din in the background. I'm sorry, I say, she said she needed you.

Get her to the hospital to get that baby out and I'll meet you there, Kelly says, still yelling.

I hang up and call the emergency line. When I get off with them, I look over at Mariah on the big white bed and see that she is crying. Silently, and not many tears, but she is crying. I can't stop myself and I put my arms around her.

They're coming, I say.

I owe you, she says to me, and then yells in pain. I help her stand, so we can walk to the harbor where the police boat will take her inland to the hospital. I don't know what I'm thinking when I grab her mother's ashes on the way out the door.

I don't want this, Mariah says through a clenched jaw, when the coast guard boat appears in view. It docks, but its lights keep flashing, bright in the daylight. An EMT jumps off the boat. Mariah stops walking, but doesn't loosen her grip around me.

You're gonna be okay, I say.

I don't care if its early. I don't want to do it anytime. I changed my mind, she says.

She groans and leans forward. I hold her, not wanting to let her fall, or go.

The EMT stops short before us, breathing heavily. He reaches to take her arms. Come with me, ma'am, we have to get you off this island, he says. I like the professionalism to his urgency. He has an immature, pink face.

She stares at the ocean. The EMT looks at me, bewildered. I realize, for the second time today, that he thinks I'm the father of the child trying to make its way outside of her.

Mariah, I say. Mariah, are you ready to get off this island? Something behind her eyes solidifies.

You probably want to know how this baby even got here, she says.

Kelly's waiting for you at the hospital, I tell her.

Everyone wants to know, she says.

Ma'am, please, the EMT says, desperate now.

It's Louis, she says to me. No one knows. Not even him, she says.

My thoughts slow. This was the preferred rumor, because it was the most outlandish. Thick-armed Louis, who would tie his canvas jumpsuit around his waist when the sun was hot and high, who Kelly offered favors from as though he belonged to her.

I won't tell anyone, I promise her.

Mariah groans again. Of her own accord, she stands and walks to the dock, where the water taxi's emergency lights yell silently, furiously red against the midday.

They strap Mariah to a stretcher and lift her shirt over her belly. The skin there is mottled and shiny, purple blood laced just beneath the surface, all around her navel. Stretchmarks trace their way up over the arc of her belly, from under her waistline. She reaches for my hand as the EMT presses a stethoscope to her stomach.

Just when I know I should look away, she looks me dead in the eye and she starts to laugh.

What? I say, retracing the moments between us. What's funny? I'm alarmed. The boat takes off over the waters, hitting crests of choppy surf.

She keeps laughing until she screams in pain. When the pain stops, she looks at me.

Would you believe anything about me? She asks. I'm aware that my thoughts are piling on top of each other, sticking to one another. If open my mouth too fast I'll stammer.

Louis isn't the father, I say, testing it out. You were kidding? I half ask. She laughs again, then forces a breath through her mouth. The EMT tells her that she's lucky, if we had waited any longer, we wouldn't make it to the hospital, she would have had to have delivered the baby on the island.

At the hospital, Kelly seamlessly replaces me by Mariah's side. Thanks Tim, she says, and grabs the sides of Mariah's stretcher, leaning down over her belly to say something to her, to kiss her cheek. Mariah screams, but I can see the intense, white relief on her face that Kelly is there. The EMTs with the stretcher and Kelly at their side rush through a set of double doors, and their images quickly retreat from the other side of plastic portholes.

Hey, man, thank god you were there, says someone beside me. I turn, and see Louis, with a streak of grease on his face, still in his florescent orange boat gear.

Yeah, I guess, I say. But I think she would have been fine. If she asks where... I can't seem to decide how to finish my thought. I set the urn down beside him and walk out, into the brightened and calm summer day.