



Meaghan Mulholland

## PURPOSE COVE



"Cockles," Marnie told them. "Razorback. Scallop. Cat's paw. Coffee bean." Her grandchildren stood at attention as she held up each pale, salt-smoothed shape for them to study. Waves broke against the seawall and hissed back across the sand.

The children watched as she paused to peer into a shallow tide pool. Marnie was different from the groups of elderly shell-seekers who wandered the small stretch of beach at Porpoise Cove with plastic bags and buckets, scouring for washed-up treasure—she searched alone, her style meticulous and her eye ferocious. She walked fast and carried only a child's fishing net, more of a talisman than a tool. At sixty-one, she could still crouch on the slipperiest rocks, gripping green seaweed with her toes, agile enough to snatch up a promising find just before the surf came crashing over it.

The regulars on the beach recognized Marnie and addressed her shyly, usually to ask her opinion on some unusual object they'd discovered. After twenty-five years there, she was unofficially acknowledged as the shell expert of Hutchinson Island. She could spot a perfect white lady-slipper from ten feet. She could walk past a gleaming section of King conch that jutted out of the sand, knowing without needing a closer look that it was fragmented, worm-eaten, and not worth taking.

Addie and James were amazed at the scope of her knowledge. From the moment they arrived, pale and tired from a gray Boston winter, with their entire worldly belongings stuffed into two beaten-up suitcases, she began to teach them. Not the usual subjects one would expect children to be taught—though Marnie wasn't stupid; she had a shrewd mind for business, and kept strict finances. Instead, she taught them about the sky and the water, the right way to tie a lure on a fly pole, the types of creatures that lived nearby in the brackish Indian River. She taught them the cycle of the tides, the names of different birds that flocked along the jetty wall—the ones that ran across the sand, and the ones that dove beneath the waves. She wanted Addie and James to know Hutchinson Island, the world that was to become theirs, as well as she did—each rocky inlet, each moss-strung tree, the way the breezes sounded through the palms at different times of day.

On their first evening together, she took them walking along the beach at sunset. Addie was twelve, quiet and serious with dark, mournful eyes. James was only eight, still young enough to forget, in moments of temporary amusement, that his mother had died. He scurried across the

sand and his shadow followed, curling into itself when he paused to study the scattered ground.

"They're everywhere!" he shouted back to Marnie and Addie, who walked along the water's edge without speaking. Their shoes crunched over rows of pebbles and shell-pieces that stretched the length of the beach. Iridescent, pastel and bone-white shapes scattered in random piles, aglow in the pale evening light; smooth brown moon-snails and fishbone fragments rolling over each other in the retreating foam.

That was the first lesson Marnie taught them. Addie often thought of it in later years, during the loneliness of her adolescence, with the gradual dull acceptance that her life was now in Florida, in Hutchinson. Never again would she live in their old apartment in Boston, or hear her mother's slow, deep laughter, or eat take-out Thai food with her while they watched TV movies on rainy days. The knowledge was so sharp and real that for a while it seemed to choke her. She swallowed hard and it dissolved in her throat, finally, leaving a sour taste that never went away completely.

Hutchinson was a strange adjustment for her. It had a marina lined with sailboats and a Tiki restaurant looking out over the pier, but the sleepy streets, with their trinket-shops and old-lady boutiques, were mostly deserted. Few children lived on the island. Addie was overcome sometimes with longing for their old place on Commonwealth, its great long windows that looked over the intersection and the train tracks, the convenience store and the baseball field; she could stare out of them at any moment and see people moving in every direction.

She missed taking the T home on summer evenings and walking to their apartment, the gasoline-cigarettes-Chinese-kitchen smell of their neighborhood; she missed smiling hello to the homeless man outside 7-11 who insisted that Jesus loved her even when she had no money to give him. Now she and James drove an hour each morning on a bus down a flat, palm-lined highway to the Okeechobee School, and the few friends they made lived too far away to see very often.

They had moved into Marnie's apartment, above the Driftwood Oceanfront Motel's main office. A tiny, two-story stucco building wedged between the new rows of high-rise condominiums that lined the cove, the Driftwood appeared from a distance to be just that: a piece of something bigger, a remnant from the past that had washed up onshore. Marnie was not an unhappy woman, but years of working and living alone had made her hard. She considered herself an unsuccessful mother the first time around, and though she regarded Addie and James with maternal duty, she had to frequently remind herself that they were completely dependent on her. The one value she was determined to instill in her grandchildren was level-headedness, as their mother, Lola, had been a reckless and passionate woman; heedless of Marnie's disapproval, she had left Hutchinson and followed an

Australian surfer to the Northeast. Shortly after James was born, he went back to his native country and left his children and young wife scraping by in a small South-End-of-Boston apartment. Marnie often wondered, during the years' estrangement, what had become of the daughter she had raised. It wasn't until Lola's accident, though, that she was confronted with the reality of her remaining family, forced to be a part of it again.

They became a family, then—Marnie and Addie and James—in some sense of the word, though each member of their trinity functioned primarily as a solitary, independent being. Addie had her schoolwork, her sketchbooks filled with dark pictures. James had the ocean, and by the time he was twelve he grew his hair long and rode a skateboard to beaches where older boys taught him to surf. Marnie worked, as always, at the Driftwood, renovating the nine rooms every few years, giving the patrons information about the quickest way to get on A1A, and which was the fanciest restaurant on the beach. So time passed, and the tides washed over them, and they settled into their positions on the island, embedded there like clams buried in sand.

Marnie went walking everyday at low tide to search for shells, examining each with the same strict criteria: no wormholes, full noses, no discoloration. She filled her pockets with drills and snails. The morning that she met Dylan Maloney, she was bending to examine a pink-tinged cockle.

"Find anything good?"

Marnie straightened up and met eyes the color of cove water. A stocky, sun burnt man stood squinting at her.

"Not particularly," she replied, wiping her hands on her pant-legs. "Waiting for the full moon next week. Usually get the best assortment then."

The man looked impressed. "Is that right?" Marnie noted the tone of his voice, trying to place his accent. She waited for him to say something else, and after the silence and his smiling grew awkward, she blurted, "How about you? Anything good?"

"Eh," he shrugged. "Nothing much worth keeping. Just liked this one."

He stepped closer to her and held out his upturned palm, which cupped two still-connected halves of a dull, sun-bleached clam. Marnie studied it carefully.

"Not the most unusual," the man added. "I just liked it."

Marnie had similar conversations with local beachgoers and tourists more times than she could count, but they all seemed to have been practice for this one.

"It's a good find, actually," she informed him, suddenly self-conscious of the harshness of her voice, the tone of impatience behind it.

"Yeah?" he asked. "Think so?"

"Yes," she answered, too quickly. "It's complete, no chipping or discoloration, no wormholes. It's a nice shell."

He squinted at her again, and then laughed, though it sounded more like a cough. "Well, you seem to know what you're talking about, don't you? Let me ask you something else, if I may." Marnie nodded. "I was just standing here, wondering... Could a shell wash up here from some other shore, from all the way across the sea?"

Out on the jetty the morning fisherman were setting up rods and buckets, spacing themselves down the length of the rocky outcropping. Pelicans hung suspended over the surface of the water, their massive wings outstretched.

"From where, exactly?" Marnie asked.

"Why, Ireland." He sounded surprised, as though she should have known.

"I suppose," she replied. "I don't see why not..."

The man smiled at her again. "Well, I have, anyway—so it's surely possible!" He punctuated this with another high laugh. "Name's Dylan Maloney." He extended his hand. The lilt in his voice made everything he said sound plaintive, hesitant.

"Marnie. Marnie Lofting," she told him. Dylan explained that he was visiting Florida on holiday, staying with his brother and American sister-in-law in the nearby Sand Dollar Retirement Village Condominiums.

"Nice enough," he offered. "Very quiet."

Marnie told him that she lived in Hutchinson, had for her whole life, and that she owned the Driftwood Oceanfront Motel. After a few moments they had run the course of small talk, but neither made a motion to leave their positions in the sand. Marnie glanced at Dylan's face as he gazed out over the glassy cove, and felt an unsettling in her stomach, the stirrings of something long dormant. She reached up to tighten the loose bun she had pulled her hair into, quickly ran her hand down the front of her blouse, making sure each button was fastened.

"Well, there's one!" Dylan pointed toward the water, and Marnie glimpsed a dark, smooth shape disappearing back under the waves.

"Yes, they've arrived."

The porpoises came every spring. She often saw their sleek gray backs arching out of the water when she hung sheets on the clothesline. They usually stayed out by the boats, but occasionally a few would surface in the cloudy green water of the cove, leaping and chattering at captivated beachgoers who watched from the sand. Marnie advertised on the front of the Driftwood with a sign in black lettering that read "On Porpoise Cove," and for a while it had seemed that business was improving. When James first arrived he had pronounced it, "Purpose Cove," a name Marnie found ironic. It seemed that everyone lived

there for the opposite reason, for a lack of meaning anywhere else.

"You've got a beautiful place here, Marnie," Dylan told her, "and I'm glad to have met you." His voice, though warm, had a tone of finality that filled her with a bizarre fear.

"Would you like to see it?" she blurted. "The Driftwood? Have some coffee?" Almost before the words had spilled out, she closed her mouth, shocked at her own stupidity. Asking a stranger on the beach to follow her home.

Before she could apologize for asking, he grinned. "Thank you kindly for the invitation. I'd like that, I surely would."

— — — — —

"You better set traps." Andrew spoke with a mouth full of vanilla. "And stop leaving food out."

"We don't leave food out." Addie was annoyed. She took a final bite of her ice cream cone and tossed the dripping remains to a pelican that sat watching them from the edge of the pier. The bird started and half-lifted its folded wings, ready to spread and flap away over the water. Then it tilted its head and studied the offering with pale eyes.

"Sure, Addison." Andrew had a way of saying her name that didn't make her despise it so much. His voice was quiet, and it steadied her. Though he annoyed her on purpose, she could never bring herself to get angry with him, the way she did at James or Marnie. Andrew was Addie's one real friend in Hutchinson, and they had been in the same class for the past six years. He lived with his mother in an apartment across the street from the Driftwood.

"Anyway, it's just one stupid mouse in the wall. It's not like we're infested. We don't live like pigs." Although she knew he hadn't meant to offend, Addie pretended to be hurt by Andrew's comments. She wanted to see him panic, to reassure her of his devotion.

"I know, I know," he answered. "Sorry. I didn't mean..." She stood at the end of the pier and stared out to the horizon, knowing that he was worriedly watching her expression. It was Tuesday afternoon and they had skipped class to hang out at the Dockside Arcade.

She turned to face him, noticing as she did that Andrew had grown even taller—her head only came up to his chest now. His face was spotted with tan freckles and his dark hair hung down on his forehead, almost to his eyes.

"You need a haircut." Addie squinted at him.

Andrew smirked, relieved that she was no longer angry. "You need a face-lift. That's what I'll get you for your birthday." She punched his arm, and he reached up to grab her wrists, pinning them behind her back.

"What are you going to do now, huh?" he taunted as she laughed, struggling to free herself. "Not so tough now, are you?" Addie writhed in his

grip and felt the sweat of his chest, the wiry length of his body pressed against her. Their grunts and shuffling noises seemed to echo over the still harbor.

"Okay, cut it out." She went rigid, and after a few seconds Andrew released her. He was breathing heavily, and without looking she could sense that he was staring at her. Lately he had been acting weird, not his usual self. There was a tone behind his teasing that hadn't been there before. When he joked and grabbed her, his grip was a bit too firm; he held her a few seconds too long. It made Addie uneasy; she didn't want to think of any boys that way, let alone Andrew. On the rare occasions when a guy at school looked at her, it was usually to call her "Moonbeam," to make fun of her pale scrawny self. She sat in the front of the school bus and listened to music in her headphones for the duration of the ride to and from Okeechobee. When Andrew rode the bus he would sit beside her, poke her arm, and make funny faces so she'd smile. She couldn't bear thinking he could become like *them*, like other boys who talked about "banging," who spit tobacco juice and wrote dirty words on their desks. So she told herself she was imagining things; he was the same lanky playmate who had taught her to do a cannonball in the motel pool.

"Come on," she said when she had caught her breath. She started back the way they had come, scuffing her feet against the bleached wood of the boardwalk. "I'm tired."

— — — — —

On Sunday morning James entered his sister's room without knocking. Addie was lying in bed, dreaming of Boston. In the dream she was running up the hill, past the 7-11 and the train tracks, and her brother was calling behind her, calling her to wait. She wouldn't turn back, wouldn't even look over her shoulder. The apartment was in sight, a lit window ahead of her. Then James grabbed her shoulder, shook it, and she awoke.

"Marnie's friend is staying," he said, when she opened her eyes.

Addie sat up in her blankets. James was scowling, braced in her doorway with his hands in his pockets. He nodded toward the living room. Dylan was snoring on the couch, as he had been doing every night for the past week.

"Dylan?" she asked, still half-suspended in the dream.

"No," James answered sarcastically, "Her *other* friend. He might as well move in."

"How long is he staying?" Addie whispered. "Is he staying *here*?"

James shrugged. "He says he has two months left."

Dylan's intended three-week vacation to America had already been stretched into a month-and-a-half. Since meeting Marnie, he had begun to spend more and more time at the Driftwood, less and less at his brother's condominium. Within the last couple of weeks he had taken to sleeping on the foldout couch in their living room, and had stored two shirts, a pair of

jeans, and a bathing suit in a bathroom drawer. Marnie made pancakes or omelets for breakfast every morning when Dylan stayed, and the children sat, polite and bewildered, around the small kitchen table, listening to his elaborate, exaggerated stories. He sometimes taught them Irish songs about Molly Malone and Whiskey in the Jar-o, and Marnie would laugh out loud—a shrill, surprising sound. Dylan fixed the leaking toilet and set mousetraps around the apartment, and Marnie told him more than once, within earshot of the children, that it was so good to have a man around the house.

"I like Dylan," Addie said carefully. "I think he's nice."

"He's nice enough, but he doesn't live here," James answered, loud enough to be heard from where Dylan was lying on the couch. Addie shushed him, but he continued. "What's he trying to do? He's got to go back sooner or later. This place isn't big enough."

James stood in her doorway and his hair hung down over his face. A square of sunlight fell through her window onto him and Addie was struck by how much he looked like their father, sometimes—or at least a hazy, sun-glinted memory of him.

"Don't be rude, James," she whispered. "He's not staying forever. Let Marnie be happy." At this her brother replied simply, "Whatever," shook his head, and retreated from the doorway. She heard the creak of the screen door shutting, then his footsteps jogging away across the porch.

Immediately after her mother died, Addie had found comfort in the simplest things, in sitting on a hard plastic chair in the airport cafeteria, chewing on a stale bagel. She stared ahead into space and felt no need to look occupied in front of the people who passed and turned to stare at her. She chewed slowly and swallowed small pieces at a time, feeling them fill the space inside of her. When she finished, she brushed the crumbs from the tabletop and threw her napkin into a trashcan. She walked down the bright tiled hallways with James gripping her hand, past other departure gates, red electronic signs reading Albuquerque, Chicago, Houston, and there was comfort in the existence of distant places, of other people's destinations. She placed her feet before each other, left, then right, then left, on the hard solid ground, and was happy for the existence of real things, of the stable objects and walls and ceilings that surrounded her.

Her mother's death had made Addie aware of the simplicity of life. She couldn't, even if she wanted to, let it concern her. James was different—emotional, sensitive, weighted by existence. He was affected by what people said and how they treated him, wary of change, of anything that disrupted his established routine. Addie couldn't make him understand what she did: that Dylan was temporary, nothing more than a passing wind that had blown in off the water and would float away soon enough on its own.

"Do you miss winter?" Dylan asked Marnie one morning. He held his coffee cup with both hands, close to his lips, and stood on the deck

looking out over the Cove. She folded guest towels on the bench beside him, sorting them into piles of small, medium, and large.

"I hardly remember winter," she answered, without looking at him. "Least, not the way you think of it. Winter, to me, is having to wear a jacket sometimes."

Dylan shook his head. "I tell you what, Marnie, I could get used to this. I really could."

She sat with a bleach-white washcloth in her fingers and paused to gauge the significance of his words. He continued to stare out over the rim of his cup as though he were measuring his surroundings with some surveyor's tool. The sky was blank, pale blue, cloudless, and the already hot morning sun beat onto their heads. Dylan stared out over the water as intently as if he was trying to see across to the other side of the world.

"It is pleasant here," Marnie replied dumbly, and resumed her folding. She would let him enjoy his vacation, she reminded herself; that was all. She had heard it before, the lamenting tourists who hated returning to their cold December lives. They fantasized about quitting their jobs, selling their houses, remaining in tropical island bliss forever. After a while, though, they grew idle, then restless; the constant warmth became a drowsy haze. Nobody really wanted to stay in Porpoise Cove longer than a few weeks, and Dylan was no different than the rest, Marnie told herself—a visitor. He was enchanted with the illusion of summer, the false impression of youth. She knew that when the time came he would leave, too.

"It's pleasant here with you," he said. She continued to fold, intently, squinting into the blinding whiteness of the towels. His shadow fell over her but she refused to meet his gaze—the blue eyes that always looked, even when he was smiling, like they were filled with tears.

He reached for her. She let him pull her up from her seat and into his chest, but still would not look at him, staring instead over his shoulder at the green water, at a solitary boy who stood on the high-tide patch of sand, skipping stones. For an instant, a porpoise slid into view, then disappeared again beneath the surface of the water.

"What did I do to find you?" Dylan's voice was low, earnest, in her ear. Despite her determination, Marnie felt herself melting like a cold stick of butter in the sun, softening in his grasp, dissolving into warm golden trails against his skin. His lips touched hers and she closed her eyes. She wanted to push, to fight him, but he held her, and the island beneath their feet bobbed and rocked on the waves, yielding, ready to float away into uncharted waters, to drift into the distant sea. She stood embracing him, and white towels fluttered around them like doves.

SO ——— OR

Addie had long ago stopped bothering to add any shells to Marnie's

