

The Island

by angel readman

The Island

The sea stretched in front of us. From the car I read the crossing times and checked my watch, but she didn't look at me or the sign.

'Shouldn't we stop?' I asked, 'We've missed crossing by twenty minutes. We could kill time somewhere...'

'There's nowhere,' she said.

She looked straight ahead and continued driving. The causeway seemed long, the land impossibly far, but I said nothing. The whole journey she had been quiet, determined as a woman on her way home. I looked out the passenger window at the sand, a ball that would be swept away by the tide. The sea was coming; we kept driving.

Ruth never said much about home, she never talked for the sake of. For a girl, she was good like that, without meaning to, I liked her, a lot. We said we'd find a place after the exams, go South. We talked this way, but I'm not sure if either of us meant it.

She slowed as we entered the village. What I was seeing were pretty old buildings, a church, shops, another church and a few pastel holiday lets. Lobster pots with wallflowers growing through leaned against crouched houses with tiny doors. The only person in sight was a man in a rugged sweater knocking on a door, an old man opened it a crack and looked at him stonily. We drove on before I saw if the old man let him in; later I wondered if it was his son.

People say it's a big deal, meeting the parents, but Ruth just got a letter saying her father had a stroke and her mother could use a

hand. She was going home for a bit, I could come if I wanted. 'Be warned, there's not much there', she said.

I still hadn't decided whether I wanted to go when the car pulled up. I didn't know if we'd be together for the rest of our lives, but we weren't yet ready to let each other go.

Ruth tapped on the window of the farmhouse and I heard a key in the lock. I recalled the old man peering at the younger man at his door, and thought sleepy villages where people leave their doors open must be a myth. Her mother was the sort of woman who whenever you arrived would be in the middle of something. I thought of my own mother, in trousers with matching jackets, pushing a trolley like Elizabeth Taylor, fussing over me when I came home. These two didn't embrace.

'You're looking scrawny,' her mother said.

Ruth smiled wearily.

The mother continued looking at her daughter, then turned to me.

'This him?'

'This is Brett' Ruth said.

Her mother looked at me like women turn over brisket at the butchers.

'Aren't you feeding her down there?'

'She does pretty good feeding herself.'

'Hmm. No use standing. Put the kettle on, make yourself useful, I've got your father's tea.'

She lifted a tray from the table and carried it like a boulder. The kitchen was warm, old fashioned, and could've used a scrub. Ruth filled the kettle and followed.

I trailed the way visitors do when they are unsure of their place. In the living room, her father was propped in bed, his face pale and eyes sharp as his wife spooned him soup. It was half lounge, half sick room, water on the table and a duvet on the couch.

'Hi Dad. This is my boyfriend Brett,' Ruth said, her voice artificially bright and a little loud.

'Grrmmm' her father sounded something between a grunt of dismissal and a greeting,

'His speech is effected,' her mother said, 'apparently it'll improve.'

She dipped a piece of bread in the soup and held it to his mouth, but he turned slightly and grunted with obvious irritation.

'Sorry,' she said, then turned to Ruth, 'he doesn't like it when people talk as if he's not here. He says I always do that.'

The man stared straight ahead and grunted, his hand wavering.

'I think he wants the television on' I said.

Ruth turned on the pre-historic TV and flicked through the channels till she found one that made her father stop making what sounded like an Anglo Saxon curse. He looked at me and did something like a nod.

I perched on the blanket covered couch, as Ruth's father watched *Jaws* and his wives knitting needles ticked.

'What you knitting?' I asked (it was good to show an interest.) A little question like this could turn me from a city boy into a well meaning man.

'Blanket.'

I looked at the tide of woolly cushions on the sofa.

'I started knitting when I quit smoking', she said.

'Ruth never said you smoked, when did you stop?' Suddenly I felt the presence of the cigarettes in my pocket.

'Twenty two years ago.' She looked at her husband, 'He'll be wanting his tablets.' She put the knitting down and left with her daughter.

I sat alone with Ruth's father, Peter, reminding myself he had a name I hadn't heard anybody use. Over the dialogue of the TV came a sound from him, more vigorous and louder than before. The sick

man was laughing, his mouth not quite smiling, but definite laughter, long and hard he laughed at the student and the boat on screen. I chuckled, not in on the joke.

That night Ruth and I lay in her parent's bed. I'd imagined this family on the island of churches would separate us, but it got to ten and Ruth's mother said, 'He needs rest. You can have our bed, we're not using it. No sense muckyng two sets of sheets.'

'Night' Ruth said, then, 'Night dad.'

The bedroom was sparse. The walls were white with just one picture facing us, a dark seascape and a craggy faced man on the shore. We lay like sardines, our sides touching. I waited for Ruth to speak first.

'I don't know what to say', she said, 'I came back to find my father had been replaced with an old man.'

I put my hand on her stomach, flat and cool as stone, but she didn't turn to me. She lay on her back. I closed my eyes and listened. Not a sound but her breathing in the absolute darkness. I lay for a long time as she slept, keeping my hand on her stomach so she would know I was there.

Birdsong woke me, if woke is the word, I'd lain in the dark with closed eyes. My mother accumulates expressions, when she's up before nine she says 'morning sunshine, I was up with the birds.' But here, birds are everywhere, nothing gets past them. Chirping, boasting, defiant birds, calling to let me know they were here first. Ruth slept oblivious, turned, reached across my chest, and opened her eyes, as if she had always been that way.

The kitchen was hot. Ruth's mother's face hovered over what looked like a cauldron.

'Plum and whisky' she said.

'Gourmet jam, for the shop,' Ruth explained.

Breakfast was bread, jams and tea. We ate as Ruth's mother peered into the pan like an alchemist, until she looked at the clock, and said 'Shop.'

'Ruth, I'll go, you stay with Dad. He's had breakfast, been to the toilet, just keep an eye on him. Lunchtime we'll swap, and you'll tend the shop.'

She turned off the stove and the jam gurgled goodbyes.

Ruth's father stared at a newspaper, grunting when he wanted Ruth to turn the page. I fidgeted, cramped by the room, an unlikely lad in Lilliput.

'Is it OK if I have a look round?'

'Sure, it's a nice day.'

It was drizzling outside. 'Good Luck' she said, as I left.

I walked around the island, past shops with fudge, plastic mermaids and beach-balls. The sky brooded, changed colours like a bruise. Time dragged for six weeks; everyday I'd say 'Going for a walk', and leave Ruth with her father, peeling plums or stocking shelves in the shop. The shop was small, cluttered with jars of jam, eggs, and fresh bread amongst the postcards.

'Is there anything I can do to help?' I asked.

'Take as long to explain as do it myself' said Ruth's mother.

Sometimes she gave me fruit to peel, but I could feel her eyeing the knife, inspecting each gooseberry. Usually she said things like, 'No need to trouble yourself' and I kept out the way.

It rained. Everyday, splodges, drops. I walked with squelching trainers each day for as long as I could stand. At low tide, tourists posed for photos besides churches and bought unlikely ice-creams by the beach that was more flint than sand. When the tide came in, the tourists left; whatever the time of day, vendors closed and locked their polite smiles away. The streets were comatose. I looked to sea, sat in churches beside the crypts of saints. I thought of crossing to

the mainland, finding a town or going home, but the tide forbade me. I recalled the house where my mother cleaned before the cleaner came and wondered what 'home' was anyway. Mostly, I remembered Ruth. At night we lay whispering in her parent's bed.

'Sometimes I think he'll never get better,' she said, 'I'll never leave this island.'

I knew the feeling. I didn't have answers, I'd kiss her carefully and we would be together in the bed she was probably conceived in. I tried not to think of it, but there was nothing but time and empty space. Empty and not empty- that's the thing, on the island I was a stranger, yet never completely alone. In the far North of nowhere there'd always be a man in a duffle coat not far away, mooring a boat, or beating a sheep's back with a stick.

I sat on a bench with pebbles on it, arranged neatly against the freefall of the sand. I watched a middle-aged man and woman, with a dog they barked *Cruft* to, approach. I felt my voice in my throat, ready to say 'hello', 'nice weather', anything. When they saw me the man's face stiffened. The couple stopped in their tracks while their dog did its thing. The woman muttered something the wind wouldn't let me hear, and they stormed away.

The next day, pebbles were stacked on either end of the bench. I sat in the middle as the couple with the dog passed and glared.

Later, I mentioned it to Ruth. I kept it light.

'It was like Blair Witch bench,' I laughed.

'You shouldn't have sat there', she said.

'It was their land?'

'No, beach is just beach, but the bench is theirs.'

'They bought it?'

'I have no idea' she said, slightly irritated, 'but the pebbles are comber's code.' She sighed, as if resigned to something. 'Way back,

there wasn't a lighthouse, ships would get lost. Maybe you've seen, the church beams, the cottage roofs, all came from shipwrecks.'

I had read those plaques. The island was full of signs, about tide, poisonous algae, rare flowers and hazardous rocks. I'd read every sign fifty times. I could never decide if the plaques commemorated the lost lives of sailors, or celebrated the island's resourcefulness. I imagined fishermen rubbing their hands at news of a wreck, partying on bobbing brandy barrels.

'Charming.'

'Look, life was hard. The sea took lives; we took whatever it gave back.'

I was surprised to hear the girl who was afraid of never leaving, still an islander, protecting her island. She looked at the seascape and continued.

'People salvaged, days, sometimes weeks, whole families, to make winter easier. They stacked what they couldn't carry and lay signature pebbles on top, to show what had been claimed.'

'But a bench! They weren't even sitting on it!'

'Makes no difference.'

'Finders keepers?'

'If you wanna put it that way,' she said.

We were quiet. I considered telling her I'd thought of going home, confessing I was lonely. For the first time in my life, a loneliness that had nothing to do with wanting a pint with mates. I imagined telling her I wasn't sure who I was. Instead, I said 'I'm bored.'

'Of me?'

'Of having no use', I replied.

She sounded relieved, her voice was itself.

'You could learn to knit', she laughed, and paused, 'Tom might need a hand around the farm.'

Ruth's brother wasn't much older than me, but his slow way of looking at the sky made him seem beyond his years. I walked over

early. He was driving a rusty tractor. He shut off the engine as I approached and waited with one hand above the wheel like a man with a new car. He watched in his yellow coat, the same coat as a man in a lane I saw strike a sheep with a stick.

'Afternoon', he said. It was 10am.

'Nice to meet you.' He shook my hand firmly. I put it back in my pocket suddenly aware of how clean and soft it must seem.

'Ruth says you want work?'

'That I do' I said. That I do? I'd never used such a phrase in my life.

'Plenty of it.' He started walking and I followed to a barn full of hay.

'See that?' he said. 'That there needs shifting there.' He pointed to another out-building.

'What's in that one?'

'Nothing yet.'

He grinned at the look on my face at the mountain of hay.

'Wouldn't a forklift do the trick?' I said.

'What I wanna hire one of them for? I have you,' he beamed, 'you up for it?'

'That I am' I said again.

In the cottage, Ruth turned my blistered hands over in hers. 'What you thinking?' You should've worn gloves.'

'Tomorrow' I said.

'I'll run you a bath.'

I ached everywhere. I walked round the room stretching; a picture clattered as I knocked it off the wall. The seascape lay in pieces on the floor; it looked bad. The only picture. No hiding what I'd done. Broken pieces I'd have to take downstairs. *It was an accident, they'll understand*, logic told me, but my gut didn't.

I bent stiffly; the glass hadn't cracked, but the back of the frame had come loose. Between the seascape and newspaper was tucked an old photo of a group of fishermen, with a younger man on the

end. The edge was torn. The man looked triumphant, his arm resting on rivets of some kind; the rest of the picture missing. The younger man had thick hair and features chiselled by storms, ready to laugh at something cruel - Ruth's father. There was no mistaking it, his features were slacker, the hair gone, but it was him. I reassembled the picture, and hung it back on the wall as I heard the water down the hall stop running.

'Thought you'd be out for the count' Ruth smiled.

My muscles ached but I was awake.

That night I didn't sleep as soon as my body wanted to. I stared at the picture facing me, knowing the young man her father had been was behind it. I kept thinking of his eyes looking out, at the old man who eventually slept in his bed.

The birds did not wake me. I slept until Ruth put her hand on my shoulder.

'Tom starts early' she said. I was glad to be woken, to not be seen as a city lad playing farm. I got out of bed and put on muddy trainers, a t-shirt and jeans. I helped myself to bread and stopped at a shop for gloves. The shop was a mixture of tourist tat and things like apples. A birdy woman perched behind the counter. I took an apple to the counter, a pint of milk, and a pair of rubber gloves. The birdy woman behind the counter eyed me greedily as she asked for three ninety. I looked at the RRP printed on the plastic packet of the gloves, and saw I was being overcharged. The woman did not blink. I paid, put on the gloves and returned to the hay.

The island was watching, Ruth's father too. He sat in a chair most afternoons now, shuffling to it with only an arm for support. One Sunday I noticed the upturned rug as he made this short journey. I caught him as he stumbled. He did not say thanks, but looked at my outstretched hands. I followed his gaze to my palms, now callused and scratched with hay. He nodded, and moved to his chair.

The next morning Ruth's mother was in the kitchen. The table was a jumble of cloth, as if she was in the middle of a sort. She lay a plate with eggs and sausages in front of me and pointed.

'Peter's old work boots and things. There's good gloves.'

She did not leave as usual, but perched behind her cup as I ate. When I was done, I tried her husband's clothes over my own. The boots were a little big, but passable with chunky socks. I put on a knitted jumper and a coat, and thanked her husband before I strode out to work.

On the way I stopped at the shop. I felt different, my hands in Ruth's father's pockets, not because I didn't know what to do with them, but because it was windy. My hands felt something cold, a few black flint pebbles in the pocket. Although I didn't need them, I took an apple, milk and rubber gloves to the counter. The shopkeeper was reading the paper and barely glanced up at my cap as she rang the till.

'Two eighty', she said. I handed over the money wordlessly.

There was nothing extraordinary about the day. It rained, and it didn't rain, birds came and went. I worked the day and let it work on me until I heard a slap as Tom patted my back as you would a horse before you walked away.

'You don't drink shorts do yer?,' he asked.

'Lager' I said. We had developed this way of speaking, without wasted words, neither friendly nor unfriendly till we made up our minds.

'Close enough', he laughed, 'Pub.'

The pub looked as if it had been cast out by the other buildings. Early in my island days I walked in once, hoping for a jukebox and warmth. The ceilings were low, full of things hanging from beams. Brass helmets, copper lanterns, hooks and anchors, like a museum where boats go to die one season at a time. The walls were awash with photo's of men with no sense of humour about weather, and big

fish in their hands. I could smell fish faintly as I walked in, as if seawater flowed in the men's veins.

The bar was dark. All dregs of conversation drained as I'd entered. I ordered from the surly landlord and sat by the fire, aware of the other inhabitants of the room. The tide was out. Just a few old locals staring from their corners. Men with faces like the photos, open in their suspicion. I wanted to just get out, but I gripped the glass firmly, determined to drink the longest pint of my life. The next time rain persuaded me to brave the pub, I saw firelight through the small windows, tried the door and found it firmly locked.

Tom pushed the door open with one hand.

'Usual?'

'Aye.'

The landlord was a solemn man with blubbery lips and hair combed like shredded wheat. He looked at me and turned to Tom.

'This one?'

'Same' said Tom. His voice was firm as the locals watched.

We sat at a table, not speaking. I drank the dark ale, heavy, but good.

'Cheers.'

We drank; I looked at the photos on the walls, the familiar face of Peter, Tom's father. It was the photo from behind the painting, again with the edge missing. There were several photos of the same group of men, a little older, or younger, their faces developed, more or less faded by time. On these photo's an edge was missing, always the same side of the photo, as if it had been ripped clean off.

'Evening.' A vaguely familiar man nodded at Tom, his voice tight with courtesy.

'Samuel.'

'Yer father any good?'

'Not so bad. He'll be back.'

The older man looked at me, I knew him, as a man from Peter's photo.

'Making new friends?'

'Family,' said Tom, 'Sister's man.'

Samuel put his drink on the table.

'Aye?'

Tom nodded. 'You know the old barn? He emptied it.'

'Forklift?'

Tom shook his head. The man made a sound like wind down a chimney as he exhaled through his teeth.

'That Peter's coat?' he asked.

'Aye. Gave him his boots an' all.'

He looked as impressed as man like him was about to get and extended his hand; we shook.

'Samuel, fisherman,' he said.

'Brett, barn emptier,' I replied. He laughed, a sound like a boat against rocks.

'Three pints' he called.

The pint had gone down. He leaned back in his chair. I pointed to the photo of Peter.

'You and Tom's Dad fishing?'

'Aye.'

I was hoping for something about the young man in the photo. I waited, he didn't venture more.

'Some of these photos look worn,' I said, 'Ripped.'

Tom met Samuel's eyes as he lifted his pint to his lips.

'Yep.'

Again, silence fell. I did not ask more about the photo. Just another of those things, the island was full of them, like secrets that wanted to be kept.

One night when Tom said 'pub' I suggested we bring Ruth, and his wife, Tanya.

'It's ladies night in a few weeks' he said.

'Ladies Night' at The Diving Bell wasn't Chippendales, just one night a month men brought their wives. Daytime, tourist families came and ate, but night was whole other matter. There wasn't a rule

woman that weren't allowed, more an understanding that there was a time for them.

Around that time, I noticed the stones. On the far wall of the bar was a door and a timber shelf, bare, other than a few stones. I didn't give them much thought, but later I noticed the stones were gone. It was late. The bar grew less quiet as the men's tongues became oiled by dark ale. Even Tom talked, albeit about barns. I blinked, doing my best not to seem drunk. It was then I saw a man walk purposefully towards the shelf. He took several stones from his pocket, lay them down and disappeared through the door.

I'd given up on lager. I was acquiring a taste for the heavy ale, the same way I now drank milk instead of coke. This time I drank more slowly, ale was a whole other game. Again I saw the stones on the shelf, and again, a fisherman emerged from the door, wiping his hands on his trousers before he picked them up. The shelf was bare, but later, stones were stacked on the corner again.

Now Tom glanced towards the shelf, and met the landlord's eye.

'You changing that barrel later Tom?'

A few of the men sniggered and cheered from their corners.

'Aye,' said Tom. His face looked flushed, but his tone was humourless. He did not shift.

Later, his gaze drifted towards the shelf, 'best give David a hand with that barrel' he said. The bar was crowded with last orders, but through the bodies I saw him reach into his pocket and pebbles on the shelf before he went through the groaning cellar door.

I ordered beer and waited for some time. When Tom re-appeared, he was pink-cheeked, as if fresh from a shower. He patted my back, downed his pint and I put on my coat. We walked the path from the pub silently, till we went in the separate directions of home.

'Tomorrow' he said.

'Aye.'

There was nobody around; the sky was clear. The sea shushed as Peter's boots on my feet crunched the gravel. I plunged my hands in my pockets, just stones rattling round and nothing else. My wallet was a missing weight. I pictured it, lying on the bar. I looked towards the lamp-lit house and back to the lane of the pub, and turned back.

The main lights were off, only the dwindling fire lit the bar. There, sure enough, was my wallet.

'Hello?' No answer.

I picked up my wallet and turned to leave when I noticed the shelf. In the same instant I saw the cellar door without its padlock. Without deciding to, I pushed the door gently and crept down the steps in the semi-darkness. It was damp, somewhere - a slow drip. I considered turning back, but I descended into the cellar, making out barrels and bottles, and straight ahead, a huge fish tank. The corner of the tank had a riveted metal edge, like that of the old photos, where they were torn. At the side was a wooden platform, with a grubby towel tossed across it.

I breathed out, relieved but unsure why, and felt movement, a hefty thud against the glass. I crept close to the tank with my lighter in my hand. A powerful tail, large and scaled, with a woman on the end. I stumbled to hold the flame steady and peer in at the woman behind the glass, her pale face and long hair. She looked at me, expressionlessly. Now, I saw the silver in her hair and wrinkles round her tired eyes. She curled into a corner. Her hair was tangled, algaed, the water murky. At the other side of the tank was a hairbrush, untouched, like a bad taste joke, and it was only then I thought the word 'mermaid', a word from some distant past. It belonged to a blonde with shells on her chest, Disney. There was nothing here to remind me of this, only a tired looking wrinkled woman moving anciently, sharing only the physiology of the myth. I stared at that tail, the bruise on her arm, several welts on her hips and what looked like a cigarette burn. After curbing my tongue and

minding my language on this island of the churches, I looked into the eyes of this creature and thought the word 'fucked.'

I saw the sturdy ledge by the tank and remembered men putting down stones, emerging tucking in their shirts. When I looked at the woman she seemed to curl at the edges, like an anemone poked with a stick. Yet I thought of the sea, it was a tide over me, the need to drag her out of there to the beach. I felt the jangle of the stones in my pocket as I stood on the chair and opened my arms as if she would jump into them. She did not move. If Dolphins were taught such tricks, she did not know them. I didn't know how to do this, what the tide was. Was she too heavy for me to carry alone? And if I could get her there, if the tide was high so she could leave, I could not. If the tide let me leave, I'd have to leave her behind. I stood on the platform, peering over the brink.

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