

The Family Next Door

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For Oscar
Sorry for not writing
a book about dinosaurs

I've spent my whole life wanting you. As a toddler, I was forever toting around a plastic doll—wrapping it and feeding it and changing its diaper. As a child, my favorite pastime was making up baby names. As a teenager, I babysat every chance I could, imagining you nestled against my hip instead of the stranger's child I carried. There were times in my early twenties when wanting you felt shameful. After all, women were supposed to want careers, travel, success—we were capable of anything. Aspiring to be a mother wasn't original or brave or interesting. It certainly wasn't something to strive for.

Still, I wanted you.

So it was a shock when, years later, you announced your imminent arrival with a blinding spear of pain. There was no warm-up; no easing into it. It felt like being jackhammered, hollowed out. By the time I got to the hospital I was bearing down. The nurse rushed me straight through to delivery without even asking my name. The whole thing felt like something terrible instead of something wonderful.

ESSIE

“Fresh air!” Essie’s mother had said to her that morning. “Get that baby out in the fresh air! It will do you both the world of good!”

Now Essie stood under the dubious cover of a palm tree, while the rain slapped against the tin slide of the nearby playground. Just a few minutes ago the weather had been fine. A perfect spring day. She’d been powering along the Sandringham beach path when the sky began to darken—at the halfway point of her walk, of course, leaving her no option to turn back and bolt for home.

What was so great about fresh air anyway? Given the choice, she’d have opted for the less fresh, temperature-controlled air of the indoors any day. She wanted to be indoors now, preferably at Cuppa Cottage, drinking a cup of English Breakfast out of a

vintage teacup. Better yet, she wanted to be in bed, catching up on the billion hours of sleep she'd lost in the past eight weeks. But no. She needed *fresh air*.

Mia appeared to be deeply asleep under her rain cover (Essie doubted there was anything "fresh" about the plastic fumes she was inhaling), but the moment the pram stopped moving Essie knew Mia's eyes would spring open and the crying would start. As such, since Mia's birth, Essie had become an expert in keeping the pram moving, wheeling it rhythmically from room to room as she moved about the house, not allowing it to sit idle for more than a second or two. When Essie sat—which was rare—she could keep the darn thing moving with only three toes. According to Ben, she even rocked in her sleep.

"And when, exactly, have you seen me sleep lately?" she'd demanded, her voice wavering slightly. "No, *really*. Tell me."

Suddenly Ben had had something urgent to do in the garage.

Last week, after jostling the pram for so long Essie was sure she'd developed carpal tunnel, she pushed it down to the back of the garden and left it there. Just for a little while. It was a fine day, she reasoned, and she just needed some time to herself and perhaps a cup of tea. But she was barely back inside when her neighbor—who had a baby Mia's age who never seemed to do anything but sleep and smile—appeared at the door saying she'd heard Mia crying and was everything all right.

"Fine," Essie had said. "Everything is *fine*."

The rain continued to beat down and Essie kept the pram crunching back and forth on the damp, sandy path. The sea had deepened to a dark blue and the air was sharp and salty. On the road above, the cars swished by on the damp bitumen. Maybe she

should make a run for it—head to Cuppa Cottage and order that cup of English Breakfast? Then again, with her giant three-wheeler pram she'd almost certainly catch the eye of another pram-wheeling mother and fall into the predictable back and forth that she loathed—*boy or girl? how old? sleeping well?* Essie didn't think she could stand it. Of course, other mothers talked about how hard it all was—the sleep deprivation, the breastfeeding, the washing!—but they always did it with a cheerful laugh, an insistence that “it was all worth it.” That was the problem. Essie wasn't sure it was.

“It doesn't come right away for all mothers,” her mum had told her. “You're exhausted. Just give it time.”

Essie had given it eight weeks. And still, whenever Essie looked down at Mia's red, irritated little face, all she felt was . . . flat.

Every evening Ben rushed home from work, desperate to see Mia. If she was asleep (which was rare), he was devastated.

“Can't we wake her up?” he'd plead.

“No one wakes a sleeping baby,” she'd snap, when what she really wanted to say was: “Why would you *want* to?”

Maybe it was just the exhaustion. In an hour her mum would come over and assume pram-jostling duties and the world would make sense again. Her mum came by regularly, snatching up the baby and putting her over her shoulder, soothing her with a repetitive thump to the bottom that Essie could never seem to imitate. Her mum never seemed bothered by Mia's crying or fussiness—she held her as easily and naturally as if she was one of her own limbs. Usually she ordered Essie to go take a nap and Essie gratefully obliged. Problem was, the nap would always end,

her mum would go home and she'd have to look after her baby once more.

Essie inhaled, dragging all that *fresh air* into her lungs. She was having that feeling again. A tingling—like angry pinpricks in her abdomen and chest—that Essie had come to understand was anxiety or guilt, or perhaps some kind of cocktail of the two.

“Oh, *that*,” Ange from across the road said when Essie described it to her. “Yes. Get used to it. It’s called “motherhood.”

That had been a blow. Essie had assumed the anxiety was one of those fleeting parts of early motherhood—like engorged breasts and night sweats—that were there one moment and forgotten about the next. But apparently it was one of those *other* parts of motherhood. The parts that left you fundamentally changed.

A woman around Essie’s age was jogging toward her on the path, dressed in black lycra and hot-pink trainers. Her soaking wet hair was looped into a casual bun. Ben had been pestering Essie to start running. “A good long run always makes me feel better,” he’d said yesterday. “You should try it.” Essie would have run, if she thought it would help. She would have run to the ends of the earth. She just wasn’t sure whether she would run back.

The jogger was wet through, but she didn’t seem to mind. She had a bounce to her step that was reserved for the young and fit. The free. Essie remembered having a bounce to her step once.

Mia started stirring in the pram and Essie realized that she’d stopped jostling. The jogger bounded past, and in the time it took her to disappear from sight, Mia had moved from confused to irate. Her face contorted and her head tossed from side to side as if desperate for answers. *Who had the audacity to stop moving this*

pram? Did you not see I was having A NAP? Her face reddened and she took a breath, sucking in enough air to make sure her protest would be loud and meaningful. Essie shoved her fingers deep into her ears.

It was strange watching Mia scream and not being able to hear it. Better, really. Her eyes shut with the effort. With the rain in the background, Essie heard nothing. She felt nothing.

After a while, Essie started for home. She stopped at Cuppa Cottage and ordered her tea, extra hot, and drank it slowly in the chair by the window. She ordered another. The rain had stopped by the time she left the café. As she walked home she felt an acute sense of being out of balance—as though she'd been roller-skating or skiing and had just put on her shoes again.

Her mum was walking up her driveway when she arrived back in Pleasant Court. She stopped when she saw Essie coming and waved cheerily. "Good to see you out and about," she said, before peering at the empty space around Essie. "Where's Mia?"

Essie pulled her wet ponytail over one shoulder. A trickle of water ran down the side of her jacket.

"Essie," her mum repeated, slower now. "Where is Mia?"

Essie shrugged. "I . . . left her. At the park."

Her mum's frown froze in place. Essie got the feeling that, for the first time in weeks, her mum actually saw her. "Which park, Essie? Which park is Mia at?"

"The beach playground."

After that her mum moved quickly. In a matter of moments they were both in the car, headed toward the beach at a speed Essie thought was unnecessary. The pram was probably exactly where she'd left it! No one would be out and about after the rain;

the playground would probably be deserted and covered in puddles. Mia would be red-faced and angry. It would take hours to calm her down. Essie wished they were driving in the opposite direction.

Her mum misinterpreted her agitation and placed a calming hand on hers. "We'll find her, Essie," she said. "We *will*."

Sure enough, they did find her. Mia *was* right where Essie had left her. But she wasn't alone. A trio of mothers in puffer jackets surrounded her, the tallest woman holding Mia tightly. Mia will hate that, Essie thought. Sure enough, Mia was howling. Another mother looked on while half-heartedly entertaining toddlers nearby. They didn't seem to notice as Essie and her mum got out of the car.

"There she is," Essie's mum cried, running over to the group. "I see her. She's fine, Essie. She's perfectly safe."

"She's ours," Essie's mum shouted to the women. When she was close enough, she held her hands out for Mia, catching her breath. "Whew. Thank you so much. She's my granddaughter. My daughter accidentally left without her."

The tall woman made no move to hand Mia over. Instead she clutched her tighter, which made Mia even more hysterical. "She left the park without her *baby*?"

"Yes, well . . . she was tired and . . ."

Essie sidled up slowly.

". . . you know how your brain can be when you have a newborn!" Her mum gave a half-hearted laugh and then petered out. What else could she say? There was no explanation that would suffice and she knew it.

"I'm sorry," the woman said curtly, "but . . . how do we *know*

she's your granddaughter? We found her abandoned in a park. We can't just hand her over."

Essie sidled up slowly. She felt a scream building in her throat. She wanted all these women to go away. *She* wanted to go away. Back to a time when she was a normal, childless woman—not a crazy lady who left babies in the park.

"Her name is Mia," her mum tried again. "She's eight weeks old. Her blanket was hand-knitted by me and it has frayed on one corner. Mia has a birthmark on her right thigh—a port wine stain."

The woman exchanged a glance with her friend. "I'm sorry but I really think we should wait for the—"

"What do you want us to do?" Essie cried. "Sign an affidavit? She doesn't have any ID. Just give her to me," she said, pushing forward. "Give me my baby!"

Essie felt her mum's hand on her shoulder. "Essie—"

"Give her to me."

"Essie, you need to calm d—"

"GIVE ME MY BABY!" she screamed, and that's when the police car pulled up.