

Lost Crab Blues

You're waiting for a feeling. A gentle tug. A pull on the finger, where the line is wrapped, like an infant's testing grip. That's when you'll know you've got one.

The clear but unoppressive early autumn sun glares on the water—a blinding display muted into a pensive flicker behind my sunglasses. Wading in lukewarm water, the sea slops into me at waist level, hiding and revealing my belly button with a soft slap. Peekaboo!

Maintaining the tension on the line in my left hand, I reach for the IPA I set on the jetty beside me not more than 10 seconds ago. The cool can sweats and shimmers in the sun. The sharp, bitter beer goes wonderfully with the brine on the rim, the lingering sunscreen I'd sprayed earlier on my face. It cushions my mind and body, which has already started to disappear from me—my toes sunk and melded painlessly with the muddy seafloor, my legs warbling with and becoming the rocking current.

“How long does it normally take?” Callie calls over to Luke, who's busy finagling his surf fishing rod into its white plastic stand on the beach.

“What?”

“To catch one.”

“Just wait and see,” Molly laughs, answering for her boyfriend while carefully navigating the slippery, barnacle-encrusted rocks on the jetty, returning from the cooler with a fresh chicken neck.

Callie has been begging for us to go crabbing with them for a couple of weeks now. She cited her nostalgia for her family's Lowcountry boil and her desire to get out of the house and do something for once—neither of which I could argue with.

A year ago, I was sure that she was having an affair with Luke, when we were living apart and doing the whole long-distance thing. But I couldn't prove anything.

Anyway, we're living together now, and things have been going well. And Luke has been hooking up with Molly. And since I've been here, we've only ever hung out in groups of four or groups of three. It must have been during one of those nights at a bar without me that the notion of a fishing day was hyped into reality.

So, here we are.

At the end of my line, there's a raw chicken neck, tied tight to prevent theft. Not too far up the line from that, there's a small metal fishing weight to keep the line and the bait from floating to the surface. All the way up the line from there, there's me.

To the crabs below (if there are really any there at all), it might look like the chicken neck is the active angler, luring something utterly giant in from above, using me as bait. And whether it has that intention or not, it's succeeded—landing one hell of a catch. Callie wades over to me for a quick hug with her free arm—soft, warm, tanned, glistening, and gradually becoming sunburnt.

Turns out my body hasn't disappeared below the waist after all.

She looks great in her bikini, and I can tell she's happy to be out here, trying something new. I'm glad to be here with her, too. I grab her waist, pull her closer. A brightly lit, dark fog swells in my mind, feeling her tautly soft, slightly damp flesh beneath my fingertips. I pull her closer still, giddy with her presence and the buzz from the IPA.

Forgetting the line in my left hand, still tied around my finger, I make a claw and start a pinching dance.

“What are you doing?”

“It's a crab mating ritual. They use their claws to woo the ladies. Crustacean jazz hands. So sexy. Is it working?”

I read up on blue crabs and how to catch them before we came, so I'd seem like I knew what I was doing.

"If I were a crab, I'd already be pregnant." She kisses my shoulder.

"Did you know that when they mate, the girl molts her shell? Otherwise, her body will be too hard for them to make it happen—like chastity armor. They'll do it when she's softened herself for him. Afterwards, they'll cuddle. The guy will latch on to her to protect her with his body until she's grown her shell back. He'll stay with her like that for a few days, without even eating."

"Then he's off to get a pack of smokes, leaving her alone with the babies? Typical."

"Two million of them. But only a few will survive."

Out of nowhere, a cloud passes over the sun. Her smile fades.

I should have known better than to say something like that.

Joking about crab sex wasn't the problem, nor was the idea of pregnancy. But the whittling down of millions of lives worth of potential to nearly nothing, that's the topic I should have avoided.

But still, what's that saying—*Just one life can make a difference?*

Perhaps, for instance, just one of those baby crabs would be needed to grow into an adult large enough to satiate the cravings of a redfish who in turn would offer itself to a hardened shark who would dutifully careen itself into the propeller of a violent dictator's megayacht, stranding him at sea long enough to devour only two of his crewmen before having an epiphany regarding his wrongdoings, after a serendipitous gull shit directly into his slack-jawed mouth, making him realize that the flesh of man on his tongue just moments prior was actually sweet, and thus resolving to cast himself overboard, where perhaps hundreds of blue crabs would gather to feed and fornicate and fight for the right to feed or fornicate or die trying, spawning in the process perhaps billions of eggs, which in turn may only produce a handful of adult crabs when all is said and done. But that's still better than just one, right—especially if

only one surviving crab can lead to all of that? It's important to always look at the big picture.

That's the circle of life, baby, and it sure is vast.

But, of course, I know it's not the idea of millions of lives dwindled down but only one single life, or pseudo-life, that's on her mind. Even without having been outright said, the asymptotic approach of millions of crabs to a hypothetical zero likely implies the eradication of any last lingerer into oblivion, even if never truly achieved, a shadow show hinting at the existence or potential existence of a *One* until either the light gone full or the dark, spiriting away in either case the hinted at figure of that *One*, leaving behind only the sense of a no-longer-there or never-existedness, if there's a difference, an active and/or passive, pervasive and/or all-devouring *Zero*, which in turn, perhaps more horrifyingly, could be seen to be a kind of *One-in-Toto*, as distinct from a *One* which rises from and stands in stark contrast against a *Zero* or a *One-in-Toto* or a *Death* or a *Void* or whatever is in fashion to call that great blank these days—the not-quite-death anyway of a not-yet-life.

Before things can get too externally dour or internally labyrinthine, I lie: “Hey, I think I've got one! Want to help me pull it in?”

I offer Callie my finger, where my line is wrapped. She smiles and resurfaces to the present moment, ready to act. Her careful grip around my finger and deft control of the line dipping into the water stirs something in my heart. The cloud dissipates and the sun feels wonderfully hot. A warm wind teases the hair on my chest. I place my hand on the small of her back below the water to encourage her—“Get ‘m!”—and to balance myself while clinging to the other end of the line with my toes, just above the fishing weight, offering her some resistance, you know, for sport.

“He sure is strong, huh?” I laugh. “But don't pull too hard, or you might shake him loose.”

“I got one too, I think!” Molly shouts.

Luke cries out from the shore, “Whoooooeeee! Y’all keep this rate up, and we gon’ eat good tonight, for sure!”

I look back at him, excited by the shout, even knowing that our crab haul is only half as full as he assumed, following his gaze to watch two bethonged women saunter along toward the boardwalk leaving the beach. He catches me staring and offers me a chummy wink.

“You need another beer, bro?”

Before I have a chance to answer, I’m grossed out by the feeling of raw chicken between my toes, which Callie has pulled closer to the surface, determined to win her catch. She pulls us both toward her a little more—me and the chicken neck—and my ruse is revealed.

“Hey! That’s not a crab, that’s your foot!”

“Why not both? Everything’s everything else, right?”

“Huh?”

“If you caught my foot, then you’ve caught a crab too, and everything else in this world—and the whole universe! My foot is only the emergence of all phenomena, including but not limited to those thousands and thousands of crabs down in that deep, deep blue!”

“If that’s true, then you won’t mind me boiling them toes up with the rest of the crabs we catch, huh?”

“You can boil me up any day, honey,” I try to say suavely but likely fail due to an unintentional grimace and a distracted gaze. Unable to bear the slimy feeling between my toes any longer, I release the bait. I watch the two bikinied girls disappear into the short trees along the boardwalk and can sense in my periphery, I think, Callie’s disappointment with losing her nonexistent crab.

“Anyway, hey—at least I caught a nice piece of chicken!” She throws the chicken neck at me, which bounces off my chest and falls back into the water, where it sinks and gets smaller and darker, but only visually you know, until out of sight.

Meanwhile, Molly, it seems, has approached the two of us in the water. Her bright smile beams behind ten spidery, wriggling legs, which are bluer than the gray-green ocean behind, pulsing out ceaselessly from the void beyond the horizon, which must be only miles and miles away from us. Unsure of who to attack, it’s blue-but-red-tipped and certainly meaty claws challenge each of us slowly in turn, pausing in midair—*en garde!*—and warding off additional assailants invisible to the three of us as well.

“Think it’s big enough?” she asks the two of us quietly, then shouts to Luke, “Hey, babe, how big do they have to be again?”

Before he can answer, I cut in: “Five inches or bigger. Same as in Tinder bios, right?”

She smirks, and the crab’s white belly rocks. I look into its alien, rodlike eyes—cold and emotionless and intimidating not because they’re cold and emotionless but because I can sense that it can see through me, all the way down to my core, which remains yet hidden to me.

Molly slaps my arm.

“Five big ‘ol inches!”, Luke echoes from the shore.

“Hm, how big do you think this one is?” Molly asks me, then teases, “You’re pretty familiar with what five inches looks like right?”

“Hell yeah, I am! You know why?”

Callie gives me a warning look.

“Because crab hands, that’s why! Go on, Callie, show her.”

Callie gives in and reveals her hands, showing us her waterlogged palms with a subtle spark of pride.

“They’re exactly five inches from her wrist to the tip of her middle finger. We measured them before we came, after seeing that rule about which ones to keep online. Five inches exactly, I swear it. She has the perfect hands for crabbing. You can just call her Ol’ Callie Crab Hands!”

Molly grins and holds the crab up to Callie.

“Well go on girl, do your thing!”

Bashfully at first, then with the full-on aura of an aspiring faith healer, Callie extends her right hand toward the crab and turns it sideways to measure it. It’s hidden behind her hand, clearly too small, blocked completely from view. Even so, I can still feel its cold stare, penetrating through her flesh and mine. It’s watching me. And how many others of its friends down there, countless black rod-pupils fixated on me—perhaps obliterating me or maybe the inverse, like Schrodinger’s party trick, bringing me into form as a result of their observational static?

Yeesh.

I twitch and shiver and sweep the bank of the surf below me with my foot for good measure. Nothing there but mud and a few seashells.

Phew.

I have a sudden craving anyway for more beer.

“I guess this one’s too small. We should throw it back.” Molly suggests.

“Throw?! Can I do it?” I ask.

“No, don’t throw it!” Callie scolds.

“Oh, don’t worry. I just want to hold it for a sec. Then I’ll *toss* it. *Gently*. I promise.”

“Treat her nicely, and I’ll let you hold her, okay?”

“Oh, you’ll let me hold her, will ya? If I treat her nicely?”

Come on, man. Don’t flirt with Molly with Callie right there. And is that really flirting anyway? What kind of line is that?

I rub Callie’s shoulder with my fishing-lined hand to reassure her (likely wiggling the chicken neck below in the process)—and just in case, I pull a complete reversal of conversational direction: “You know, that one’s actually a dude. See it’s flappy thing on its belly there? That’s the shape of a male’s.” But that’s not true. The dudes have all blue claws, unlike this red-tipped manicured lady, and their aprons are more, well, the dudes’ aprons I mean, they’re more dick-like.

“Sure, I’ll let you hold him,” she says, looking me dead in the eye—testing me?—“if you think you can handle all four of his inches. I’ll catch a bigger one soon anyway!” She smiles, measuring my reaction to what she’s about to do before looking away from me to call up to the beach, “Hey Luukkke!” while passing the crab to me.

My fingers graze Molly’s hand as I accept her, the crab, trying to be careful, honing my attention on her little body. Her shelled belly is bright white in the sun, with some mottled brown staining here and there—a sign of aging, of the world imprinting itself on her, of her relatively porous body absorbing the world but not providing similar passage out, holding some of it there permanently within her, and accumulating more and more over time. Her apron is tucked up under her—blue-brown with hints of red, round, and just a small pointed nub at the top. That nub points like an arrow upward at her face, where one of her rodlike eyes collapses in on itself, retracts, wary of my grasp, then protrudes again halfway, the other still at full mast, again coldly staring, cockeyed as she is. What was it that I read? They can see well even close to a mile down below the surface, where the sun just barely reaches?

The strength in her pointed touch—in all five of her legs that grasp at me—surprises me, gives me the shivers. I nearly drop her. She waves her claws about to catch herself, and I can't blame her when she does, in catching me: a sharp pain that makes me cry out—the palm-flesh beneath my thumb pinched tightly enough in her grip to draw blood, redder still than the claw upon which it seeps.

Uh-oh. I know where this is going. I can feel it happening already.

She's opened a gateway within me, from which The *Void* will bleed and devour—or no, it doesn't feed but only takes. It takes away, away.

I'm going to pass out.

I know, because this isn't the first time. And though it doesn't happen every time, it does happen sometimes—when I see blood. When I see blood enough where it shouldn't be, coming out of someone else or me.

And knowing, I look to Callie knowingly. But I know that she doesn't know. And I know that she doesn't know, because she's laughing at me, at the crab dangling from me.

But she's disappearing too, doesn't she know that? She's disappearing too!

The *Void* spreads within me, staticky and cold, so cold, pulling inward the world from within, so that a darkness opens in the center, such that it pours in from the edges, all of it, filling, displacing me, like a sinkhole collapsing in a flood. Cold water rushing in. Cold, cold, cold.

Fuck. The water! Hopefully they'll realize what's happening and catch me (or pull me back to the surface) before I drown—one last coherent thought before thought and image and the image of thought collapses into angst, pain, fear, larger and more profound than the pinch at my palm, the world's pain, all on me all at once, crushing me out completely, at least for me:

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