

SPRING 2010 ORLANDO SUDDEN FICTION PRIZE WINNER



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"Buoys"

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I have two lobsters in my bathtub and I'm not sure I can kill them. New England will know if I don't. Henry is from Maine, which I found charming, until we moved here post-honeymoon.

I am sitting on the rim of my bathtub. It has curled, porcelain feet with flaky rust between the toes. Everything is anthropomorphized in this house- that's my first problem. My second problem is that I pet the lobsters. I roll up a sleeve and run my pinched fingers along the length of Lobster No. One's antennae. It feels sensitive and unbreakable like coiled wire. Lobster No. One knocks his crusher claw against my hand, but there's a thick, pink rubber band binding it up so I'm in no real danger. I stroke Lobster No. Two's antennae, just so they're even. Both lobsters have dark spotted backs that remind me of Dalmatian puppies. I really should not be thinking of them as puppies.

I get a six pack from the fridge.

This is my plan: I will get blind drunk and then I will kill these lobsters. I tie my hair up in a dark knob and hike my shorts so I'm ready. I open my beer on the faucet and foam geysers up. Beer froth plops in the water. Henry says his mom gave her lobsters beer before cooking them. She also bathed them in seawater so they'd have one last taste of home. I ask the lobsters, "Do you feel at home?" Of course not, some bearded yahoo caught them in a pot.

"I love you and I get my mail here, isn't that enough?" I'd asked Henry over dinner negotiations.

"Of course it's enough," he said. "But this is part of the culture here! I want us to participate in the local culture." When I say culture I'm saying let's go to the Moma. When Henry says culture he's saying cul-chah! in a wicked Maine accent.

I stare at my underwater feet. My toes are painted the color the lobsters will be once I boil them. Lobster No. One and Lobster No. Two conference at the other end of the tub. Do they suspect? They are currently bruise colored.

I'll find a way to do this, because love is boiling the lobsters your freckle-backed husband thinks will grow you instant roots. And because I want roots too, even though the soil here is black and full of salt. My parents raised me an only child in a nineteenth floor penthouse. No one grows roots nineteen stories long.

The lobsters jostle around my feet and I know I won't be able to kill them. I can live here and let it grow over me like a home but I cannot eat a lobster. I get a box of salt and shake it onto the water to make it briny like the sea. I devise a new plan to make Henry understand: I'm going to name them. I lie down on the bathmat and wait. I finish the beer and think that this is not such a bad spot.

"Leah?" Henry is home. "What are you doing down there? The bathroom smells like a bar."

"Welcome to the Lobstah Bah," I tell him.

"Are you okay?" he says. "Why are the lobsters in the tub?"

"Henry, this is Lavender and this is Leopold and they eat scurf and they have names and so we should not eat them." Still lying on the floor I gesture towards the tub with one hand. "Don't they look at home?"

I sit up and Henry and I kneel by the tub. He puts his big hand on my back.

"I'm as drunk as a lobster," I say. "Let's return Lavender and Leopold to the sea."

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That night in bed we are quiet though neither of us is sleeping. I wriggle so Henry can feel my arm against his back, but he doesn't roll over which makes my heart feel like one of those long carnival balloons let fly so it whizzes through the air.

I want to mention that I'm good at many things. To start, I'm good at writing newspaper articles, which is what I did in New York. Outside of that I'm a good cook, a fast runner, and I am excellent at loving Henry. In fact, I did such a stellar job of loving Henry that three months ago he decided to marry me, despite the fact that our two ages lumped together don't amount to half a century.

The thing is, despite my fierce balloon-heart love, Henry's worrying is putting a damper on things.

I throw off the blanket. It is too hot and I appreciate the way our blue sheets stay cool all night. I can't hear the ocean from here, but the steel bell buoys ring out a baritone song, one note for each time the waves rock them. It's a deep, echoing sound I found haunting until Henry explained the noise was meant to let ships know they're too close to shore when visibility is bad. I thought that was nice. Dong, dong, you're too close. Dong, dong, it's alright, just turn away, we're watching out. I listen and stare at Henry's back.

Henry is still but I trail my fingers between his shoulder blades that just barely protrude, like vestigial wings. I follow the vertebrae of his spine down to the small of his back where the bones disappear beneath the surface.

"Were you drawing a sailboat?" Henry asks.

I wasn't, but suddenly I wish I was.

"A sailboat would be like this," I say, and trace a boat body shaped like a lemon wedge. I add a tall mast and two triangular sails. They would be white, if they weren't invisible.

I stare a moment and then move my finger in a curved but unbroken line along his lower back.

"Those are the waves," he says, "I can feel them."

"Yes," I say, "yes, those are the waves."
