

# Creels To Catch Crabs

It was his job to check the creels for crabs, or better. Rowing out to where they were, places marked in the water by orange cork floats – that was what he had to do. Each day his boat traced the slow arc of the bay connecting the loose ends to complete a full circle. Less than an hour if the water was still. Less than an hour to empty the creels, bait them with torn fish, and set them again. Then he rowed back to shore, pulled the boat into shallow water and tied it fast. That was Drew's job, and what was caught he carried in an old basket to the hotel and exchanged for small silver.

Only that day Drew had cut his hand, gutting fish with a sharp blade, and his palm was slashed and blood slow-filling the upturned cup, spilling through his fingers till she noticed, and swore and called him clumsy.

His older sister, Bessie, blamed herself. She cursed after that she had not kept more of an eye on him, had not seen this coming and held up her own hand to say stop. Then Bessie had to do what Drew could not. He hadn't thought of that. She took the bobbing-boat, tug tugging at the oars, rattling them in the rowlocks, cross she was, and she dragged a jagged line through the water, the tear she made on the surface was edged like scrap-lace. And before she left, 'Sing to me,' she told him.

Drew stood on the shore watching her, and singing, a pulse marking time in his hand where wrapped strip-linen pressed, and stitches like the broke legs of spiders were laid across the cut. His boy-song carried out across the water, so she could hear. He knew it might bring the curious seals, to see what a song might be, and the seals always breaking the creels when they came and stealing what was caught. But he sang anyway.

Drew watched Bessie stroking the sea, pulling pulling, and he could see where the furthest marker lay and he pointed it out to her and told her all that she must do. He sang a little louder then as she shrank from him, and maybe she still heard. And with the fingers of his good hand he counted the stops, and the raised creels, and strained to see if crab or lobster was in them. Then he talked her through the baiting and the lowering of the reset creel to the sea floor again, all the words in his head.

It was on the fifth when Bessie lifted the oars clear and leaned close to the water, looking down, down into what Drew did not know, though he had done the same before, looked into the sea. Maybe the creel-line was caught, he thought, snagged on rocks, might be. Bessie stood in the boat, stepped easy out of her skirt and pulled her sweater over her head. Drew followed the dance, did not look away. Then she dived, not falling, into the boat-chopped sea. Drew saw in his head the water pulled through her hands, and her feet kicking it behind her, and the black rocks in the cold dark of deep water. He'd been there, following wet rope looped round a jagged black tooth or tangled with strings of weed, his breath in his full cheeks and almost bursting.

Drew counted the seconds, his song cut into numbers, and the pulse in the clutch of his torn hand quickening so that he thought he was counting his own beating blood and counting too fast.

The sea was still, looked as still as ever sea can be. The air too, like a held breath, like a hesitation, the calm before storm, only the sky hung clear and no quick or grey clouds gathering.

Drew counted, slower. He tried to, not sure how long was long, counted and wished and hoped and prayed. Somewhere in him something grew wings, in the centre of him, and rose up, shapeless, whipping the air, and then screaming in his ears.

How long before he should move? He called her name but knew she would not hear, her ears full of water. He called again, and her name became a plea, and her name caught in his throat. He stepped into the water, up to his knees, and called yet again, her called-name skipping like a flat stone thrown across the surface, and six or seven leaps before it span to a stop and sank well short of his aim, sank into nothing to lie somewhere at the bottom where sand and rock is.

Still he waited, long past knowing, but hoping still, not daring to give up, and the boat twisted in the water, drifting from where she was, till he did not know quite where that might be. Could be either side of the boat. He tried to remember. Was it the fifth or the fourth marker where she stopped the oars and took to the water. And he thought then maybe she did fall, though he also recalled her removing her skirt and her sweater, and wasn't sure any more, his thoughts shifting like water.

He watched the boat drift closer to the shore, edging nearer and nearer, carried on the turned tide. And Bessie could be drifting too, he thought. Closer to home. So he waited. Up to his knees in water, and he waited.

Later – much later – the sea flickered with lights and the yellow-lit faces of men looking down, like Bessie did, into darker and darker places. The seals came then, the shadows of seals with their eyes like moons, and they could not know, could only guess why men called to each other across the black water, the sounds they made broken into pieces when they reached Drew standing with his mother on the lantern-shore.

But it was not till the next day that she was found, Bessie on another beach at the far curve of the island, and they went to see, to be certain. People from all over the island were there, some of the women crying into the arms of other women, and everyone waiting for the mother and the father of Bessie MacNeil.

Drew was not sure, at first, that the almost naked mermaid asleep on the sand was the sister he had once. Her hair was like rope when it is unpicked, and matted with shells and sand. Her skin was like wax or marble, silver-sheened and smooth, an invitation to touching. And Drew did, touched her, with the fingers of his good hand, the tips just, touched her salted-cheek, and she was cold and he should not have been surprised, but he was. ‘Those are pearls that were his eyes’; it is a line he remembered, from something in the school. Now it was true of her eyes, milky white like small moons, and Drew wanted to know what she saw, what it was that had pulled her from the boat into this. So he asked her, there on the sand, on his knees, but no one heard for his words had shape and no sound. He leaned in close and whispered again, into her ears, nibbled by fish, like the pitted surface of shells. And he wondered if he pressed his ear close to hers would the sound of the sea be in them, the rising and falling pulse of the sea.

‘Come away, boy,’ said his mother.

Drew stood back and let his father lift Bessie limp in his arms and carry her up the beach and onto the back of a waiting cart, the wood and the wheels painted black and the horse glossy dark as cut-peat and its feet stamping impatience into the ground. Then there was the long walk back to Hobart’s the joiner and his measured wood and a box soon to lay Bessie in when the women had dressed her again.

After, days laid on top of days, and weeks laid there too, and the world turned somehow when it should have stopped, and time passed from this time to the next. Now Drew sits out on the water sometimes, out by the fifth marker, leaning over the side of the boat and staring into where she dived. In his head there is a song and his own voice singing, but words do not fit in his mouth any more, won't ever fit again. The fingers of one hand play over the scar in the palm of the other, just the tips, finding the new skin smooth and shiny like a smear of pearl.

He remembers, cannot forget, that this was his job, not hers. And he remembers, too, that once he caught her bathing, the tin bath hauled in front of the fire. He did not know, should have been out on the water checking the creels. Only that day he had not gone, the first that he didn't. That time the sea was rough and tossing, and he'd returned to the cottage instead, walked in on her. He remembers her hair sleek-wet like the skin of seals and her breasts bared and pink from the hot water. Bessie did not shout or try to hide, but said quietly that he should look away in case mother came in. And the guilt of that time feels light, for the guilt of another time weighs heavier. In his memory he thinks he touches her skin, and it is smooth, like wax or marble, and a cold surprise, and she does not flinch, and shells are in her mermaid-hair, and sand. And he holds a knife to his hand and cuts no fish and his blood spills through his fingers and Bessie takes the blame, and she thinks she should have stopped him, only he knows she never could, for the knife had not slipped.

In all his dreams, sweet then and bitter now, he walks in on her again, her skin always pink and her breasts always bare. He did not know that day she would have to do his job, had thought his cut hand excuse enough to keep him off the water, that's all, and

time, that time, would maybe bring another fireside bath and something like a surprise when he saw her again.

A brother should not have such thoughts about a sister. Drew knows that now. A brother should cut such thoughts from him, with a sharp knife, sharp enough to gut fish, and then torn into pieces to bait creels. Out in the boat Drew parts the water with his scarred hand, the cold a pain he tries to hold onto like before, and somewhere maybe he sees her swimming down into the dark and thinks of following her there to lie where she lay. Only his mother's singing holds him back, comes to him from the shore where she waits, as he waited once.