

SHELLFISH

By Patrick Tobin
Short Fiction

Normally I pull up in front of the school like all the other parents, but someone vandalized my delivery truck last night and painted a dick on the mermaid. I'm not talking a small one either. I bought a can of spray paint at Pep Boys this morning—Krylon's *Celery*, I thought it would match Ariel's tail—but I only made the situation worse. Why didn't the asshole paint a cock on the deep sea diver? At least it could've looked like part of his air hose.

Okay, good, my son Zach sees the truck, but now he's confused because I'm parked all the way up here. Oh Jeez, he's worried. He sprints to the truck, his shoulders up by his ears like they're pinned there.

He opens the door and he's gasping. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Everything's great."

"They charge mom twenty five dollars when you're late."

"I'm not late. I was here."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you about it when you're older."

He touches the 90-day pin I got at my lunch hour AA meeting. "What's this?"

"An award."

“For what?”

“For keeping a bet,” I say. “For ninety days.”

“What kind of bet?”

“Not eating pizza.”

My sponsor says I should tell Zach I quit drinking—he says Zach already knows I’m an alcoholic—but I guess I don’t want him to worry more than he already does. The kid’s really sensitive to suffering. One time I had ants in my bathroom. I was about to take care of them with bug spray when Zach stopped me.

“Please don’t kill them,” he said. I swear to God, he looked just like that son of bitch Saint Francis.

His exact sentence: “Why can’t we convince them to relocate?”

So I let him put out chocolate sprinkles that went from the bathroom all the way through the open sliding glass door, out to a rose bush where Zach thought they’d like a new home. He stayed up past his bedtime helping stragglers find their way.

“What are we going to do about him?” my ex-wife asked me a couple months ago. “Cause in case you hadn’t noticed, our kid isn’t wired for the way life really is.”

“So what if he’s sensitive?” I said.

Clarissa didn’t say anything.

“You think he’s gonna be gay, don’t you?” I said.

Clarissa remained silent.

“He’s only eight, for Christ’s sake,” I said.

“And you’re a drunk,” she said.

“I’m a month dry.”

“You don’t say?” she said, in that smug way that reminds me every fucking time why we split up.

Zach starts to put my pin on his jacket. “It’s pretty.”

I take it from him. “The thing is, Zachy, it’s not for kids.” That’s all I need. Him showing

up at Clarissa's with an AA pin. "It's just for grownups."

I put the pin on my shirt pocket. Even while I'm doing it, I can't remember why I didn't put it on earlier.

"That's okay," he says without a fuss. Like he's used to disappointment.

"Here's the deal," I say. "I have one more delivery and then we can go home."

For some reason Zach puts his hands together, like he's about to pray.

"What are you doing?" I say. "Asking God for protection?"

He giggles. "I was making two airplanes with my hands."

"I'll tell you what, you can have a Coke while I'm loading the tank. How about that?"

"Mom doesn't let me drink Coke."

"Do you want a Coke?"

He gives me a crooked little smile, like he's half expecting a punch line that'll pull the rug out from under him.

"Then have a Coke," I say. "Live a little."

A car full of teenage boys pulls up next to me and the driver starts honking. I expect them to tell me I'm getting a flat tire or something.

"Hey Tranny Truck!" the kid with the cigarette yells, and the rest of the bozos in the car crack up.

"Fuck off!" I yell.

"What did he mean?" Zach says after I roll up my window. "Train truck?"

"I'll tell you when you're older."

"You owe a quarter," he says.

"For what?"

"For saying the F word."

"Did I say the F word?"

"To that guy. The one who called you the train—"

I pull some coins out of my pocket. "Okay, okay. You got me."

I toss a quarter to Zach. He flinches like I'm throwing a hardball at him—the quarter bounces off his chest and falls to the floor. He struggles to find it.

“Here,” I say. I hand another quarter to him. “Do you know how much I love you?”

Zach lifts his head, his hair messed up like he's got a bad Mohawk.

“Sometimes I love you so much it makes my heart hurt.”

“Can I get a parrot,” he says.

“Nice try.”

I deliver seafood. Usually I'm done with all my stops before I pick up Zach, but I went to the AA meeting at noon and that threw my whole schedule off. Ninety days sobriety, it's a big deal. I didn't want to miss it, but I also didn't want Zach waiting at home alone while I went to the five o'clock group.

We pull up to Davy's Locker. It was built in the early sixties, when every restaurant in LA was trying to look like a ride at Disneyland. The outside of Davy's is a ship—a galleon I think they call it—except they stopped doing repairs about two decades ago, so now you're not sure if it's a ship or just a crappy building falling apart.

I pull out the plastic container with live crabs.

“Wow!” Zach says.

“Pretty cool, huh?” I'm proud that at least one aspect of my job impresses the kid. “They came all the way from Washington. Where Grandma Jenny lives.”

Zach sticks right by my side while I carry the box. “Hi!” he keeps saying to the crabs, waving at them. “Hi!”

“Hey buddy, open the door,” I say.

“Hi,” he says to the crabs one last time before we enter the nearly pitch black restaurant.

It takes my eyes a long time to adjust. “Anybody here?”

Laura walks out from the kitchen and turns on a light. The last time I saw her was six months ago, right before she went to Guatemala with her boyfriend. The day I delivered clams

and we fucked in the locker.

Jesus H Christ, she looks great.

Zach runs up to the livestock aquarium, with its two lobsters. Laura doesn't even notice my kid, she's been staring at me the whole time.

"When did you get back?" I say.

"Yesterday," she says.

"I thought you were gone for a year. Saving the world."

"Saving the world's kind of boring," she says.

"Your boyfriend agree with you?"

"Nah. He likes the jungle and the bugs." She licks her lips. "That's where I left him, by the way. With the bugs."

I wonder if she can tell I'm starting to get a hard on.

"Zach, I want you to meet my friend Laura," I say. He doesn't move from the tank—he's talking to the lobsters.

"Zach!"

He walks over with a shy face. "Hello."

"Nice to meet you," Laura says. I can tell right away she's not good with kids.

"Can I get him a Coke?" I say. "I'll pay."

"Sure. But your money's no good here."

She walks over to the bar and I swear she's wiggling her ass on purpose. "Can I get daddy his usual," she says over her shoulder. "What was it, rum and something gross, like Dr. Pepper?"

"Just Dr. Pepper these days."

"Aw. For good?"

"I hope so. I'm taking it one day at a time."

"How long?"

"Ninety days. As of today, matter of fact."

“Wow, you sound all group huggy now. I hardly recognize you.”

I take the crabs over to the tank. “Ten, right?”

“Gordy must have ordered them,” she says. “Who’s he kidding? We’re gonna have ten people eat crab this week? In this dump?”

Zach looks up at me, his eyes full of horror. My heart sinks.

Laura comes over with two highball glasses.

“Nobody orders them and they just die,” she says. “And then we have to throw them out and they stink up the dumpster like some kind of shit you never smelled before.”

She’s relishing the gruesomeness. I’d hate her if her tits weren’t so perfect.

I put the crabs in the tank and they fall to the bottom like sky divers without parachutes. Zach ignores Laura when she hands him his Coke. Tears are coming down his face, but he’s not making a sound.

“Hey Buddy, it’s okay,” I whisper.

Laura frowns. “Was it something I said?”

“He really likes animals, that’s all.”

“Oh honey,” Laura says in a fake sympathetic voice. “We don’t hurt them. Not on purpose.”

I motion for her to stop talking.

“They don’t feel a thing,” she says, ignoring me. “Mr. Crab hits the boiling water and he’s gone before he even knows what hit him.”

Zach puts his hand up to the tank and uses his other arm to wipe his nose. I hand him a paper napkin from one of the tables.

I get down close to him and help him blow his nose. “Zachy?”

Laura takes my clipboard and signs the invoice. I can tell she’s getting bored.

Zach points at one of the crabs. “He wants to go home.”

I can barely hear him, he’s talking so softly. “Really?”

“He wants to go home.”

Suddenly Laura's at my side sipping a Corona. I can smell the alcohol when she exhales—it makes me want to grab her and French kiss the booze right out of her.

"Maybe his mommy and daddy are in the tank with him," she says.

"No," Zach says. "You're just saying that."

Laura finishes her beer in one long gulp. "I need to powder my nose," she says before giving me a wink.

Laura walks toward the back of the restaurant, wiggling that ass like a red flag.

"You need to use the bathroom?" I say to Zach.

"No," he says.

"Maybe I should go before we hit the road." I hand him another Kleenex even though he's stopped crying. "You okay by yourself for a few minutes?"

He doesn't look away from the crabs. He nods.

"It'll be okay, Zachy."

He nods again, but I can tell he's only doing it for me.

I knew she'd be waiting in the cold locker, where we fucked the last time. She's sitting on top of a crate, naked, holding another beer. *This* would be a great ad for Corona.

"Miss me?" I say.

"Not one little bit," she says.

I close the door behind me and I'm already half way out of my uniform. We kiss and I use my tongue to lick whatever Corona is left in her mouth. She pulls away from me.

"Whoa, slow down," she says.

"We don't have time to slow down."

She puts her beer on a box of onions. I do her from behind. While I'm fucking her the only thing I can concentrate on is the bottle. I can tell it's ice cold by the way the neck is all frosted—just the way I used to love my beer. I squeeze her tits, but all of a sudden my right hand is on the bottle. I grab it and finish it off in one long gulp, like I'm dying of thirst in the middle

of Death Valley. Laura smiles and I can't tell if she's smiling because she got me to drink or if she's enjoying my dick. I don't feel anything from the beer or the sex, and this makes me want to smash the bottle over my head.

I remember Zach waiting for me and I start to lose my hard on. I have to think of my ex-wife to come. When I'm done, Laura reaches for her empty bottle.

"You're a very bad boy," she says.

"You think I could buy one of the crabs?" I say as I'm pulling up my underwear.

"Without getting Gordy involved?"

"Only if you give me a ride home," she says.

"Now? What about Gordy?"

"Fuck Gordy. I've got jet lag."

I zip up my pants. "You're a very bad girl," I say.

"I know," she says without smiling.

We're back in the truck: me, Laura in the middle, and Zach riding shotgun. To be honest, I wasn't thrilled when she said she'd come to the beach with us, because I didn't ask her to come. Zach doesn't seem to care, he's happy holding the bucket we borrowed from the restaurant.

"So who painted the package on the mermaid?" Laura says with a smirk.

"Her name's Ariel," Zach says.

"Some a-hole," I say.

"I take it you're the one who spray painted over it?" she says.

"Yeah."

"Nice job. You hardly notice it all," she says, again with the smirk, and talk about déjà vu: for a second it's just like I'm talking to my ex-wife.

"How's he doing?" I ask Zach.

"He's a little nervous, but he's happy," Zach says.

Laura lights up a cigarette without asking if it's okay. I hate the way she just assumes she

can do whatever she wants. More than that, I hate that I'm now feeling buzzed from the beer.

"What's the crab's name?" she asks Zach.

"Lenny."

She coughs and smoke goes everywhere. "What kind of name is Lenny?"

"I like Lenny," I say.

"That's his name. I asked him," Zach says.

"Lenny's the name of a crack dealer," Laura says. "Or a stalker. Or the bald guy at the DMV with the fucking combover."

"Hey," I say.

"She's owes a quarter," Zach says.

"What?" Laura says.

I explain the swearing jar we have at home.

She puts her hand on my leg. "I'll give you more than a quarter."

"Be careful," I say to Zach, cause he's putting his hand in the bucket with the crab. "You don't want Lenny to pinch you."

"Yeah," Laura says. "Lenny could cut your finger off in one snap. And it wouldn't bother him one bit, trust me."

"He won't hurt me," Zach says. "But I'll be careful."

"You know where you have to be careful?" Laura says. "In the jungle. In the rivers."

"Hmm," I say.

"Cause there's this parasite that's gets in your junk and burrows in with these little hooks. And it's really bad if you're a guy, cause they can't get it out without cutting off your—"

She acts like she suddenly remembers Zach is with us.

"—pee pee," she says.

Zach isn't buying it. "But how does it get through your swimsuit?"

"These people can't afford food," Laura says. "You think they can afford fucking swimsuits?"

“Quarter,” Zach says.

“You remind me of someone I dated one time,” Laura says to Zach. “And that’s not exactly a good—”

But she doesn’t get to finish her sentence. A red Buick makes a sudden left turn into me and I don’t have enough time to stop. There’s a horrible crunch of metal, and water splashes everywhere. I look over and somehow Zach has managed to hold onto the bucket, but Laura wasn’t so lucky with her cigarette—it ended up in my lap.

“Shit!” I say, throwing it out the window.

“Asshole!” Laura yells at the driver of the car that just hit us.

“Are you okay Zachy?” I say.

“We’re...okay,” he says bravely.

I get out and see that the left side of my fender is bent into the wheel. I’ll have to call a tow. I walk over to the driver who hit us, an old woman who looks confused. I’m relieved to see she’s wearing a seatbelt.

“Are you okay?” I say to her.

“What happened?” she says, her voice unsteady.

“You must not have seen me,” I say. I point to my truck, and that’s when I notice Laura has flagged down some guy in a Camero.

Good, I think, she’s getting help, except she’s talking to the guy like they know each other. She laughs and points to me, shaking her head. All of a sudden she runs around to the passenger side and gets in. She shrugs at me when they drive by, like she’s pretending she’s sorry for leaving. She mouths *I’ll Call You*.

Fuck off, I mouth back.

Quarter, she mouths back.

I survey the damage again. We’ll both need a tow, God damn it. I help the old woman to a covered bus stop so she can sit in the shade.

When I check on Zach, I find him stroking the top of the crab.

“I told you to keep your fingers out of the bucket!”

“He’s scared,” Zach says.

“Why can’t you just talk to him?”

“Are you going to call mom?” he says, and I can tell that he wants me to say yes.

“Of course I am.”

I hand him a dollar. “I think I owe you at least this much. For Laura too.”

“Was that her friend who picked her up?” he says.

“I suppose.”

“Why didn’t he take us?”

“There wasn’t much room in his car,” I say.

Zach leans his face into the bucket and says something, but I can’t make out what it is.

When he lifts his head he looks calmer. “I’m glad she left,” he says.

“Me too,” I say, and I’m surprised that I’m not angry anymore. Just relieved. Still buzzing, but relieved.

I try not to glance at Clarissa while she’s driving us to the beach—she’s had this look of disapproval from the minute she picked us up at the auto shop.

“Whose hair-brained idea was the crab?” she finally says. “Not that I’m complaining. It’s not like I had anything else to do today.”

“It was my idea, okay?” I say. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“You made it my business.”

“This was my thing. With Zach.”

“You are supposed to be toughening him up,” she whispers. “How does this fit in with our plan?”

“What plan?” I whisper back. “He’s a sensitive kid, that’s not a bad thing.”

“Your dad let you have a Coke, didn’t he?” she says to Zach.

“Yes,” Zach says, staring into the bucket.

“Great.” She gives me a smug smile and then looks in the rear view mirror at Zach.

“What did your dad have to drink?”

Zach continues to stare into the bucket. “A soda.”

“Huh,” Clarissa says. To me: “It’s a good thing the cops didn’t show up at the accident.”

“Why’s that?” I say.

“You tell me.”

I shrug. *Whatever*, I try to convey, but the only thing I end up conveying is how pathetic I am.

“I—” My mouth goes dry.

“What?” Clarissa says.

“Nothing,” I say.

“That’s right,” she says.

I can feel we’re getting closer to the beach—the air is cooler and cleaner. I put my hand out the window and pretend it’s a plane. I can see Zach in the side mirror, watching me with a grin. I whistle and make my hand act like it’s plummeting toward the ground.

Zach giggles. I giggle. Clarissa sighs.

“My two eight year olds,” she says.

“Lighten up, okay?” I say. “Look, there’s a spot, we don’t have to pay for parking.”

“I’ll wait in the car,” she says. “Make it quick. I have to do laundry tonight.”

“I’ll take us to dinner,” I say. “My treat.”

Clarissa doesn’t answer. She’s pulling out a pack of cigarettes and looking for her lighter. I hold the bucket and help Zach out of the backseat. While we’re walking to the shore, I notice the crab isn’t moving.

“I think Lenny likes it here,” I say to Zach.

He puts his finger to his lips, like he’s weighing a whole bunch of options. “I suppose.”

“Let’s take off our shoes so they don’t get wet,” I say.

I hand him the bucket and he gently tips it over into a retreating wave. Lenny lands on his back, but he doesn't try to right himself. I turn him over.

"He just needed a little help," I say.

I take off my pin and place it on the crab's shell.

"There," I say. "That's more like it."

"Yes," Zach whispers.

A big wave comes crashing up and Lenny and the pin disappear in the sandy water. I look down at Zach. He's waving like a little beauty queen, with the widest smile I've seen in a long time. I look behind me and see Clarissa sitting on the hood of her car, smoking, watching us. From this distance I can't tell if she's still pissed or not. I wave my hand the way Zach's waving, twisting my wrist back and forth, but not like I'm making fun of him—I just want him to know it's okay to wave that way. Clarissa isn't responding, or maybe she is and I can't see it.

I look back at the water. For a moment I think I can see limp, white claws twisting in the surf. Like maybe Lenny's still got some fight in him, but then he's gone for good.