SHORT STORY

Crab Fishing

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"symmetry in chaos" by Sofiya Levina

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If a crab grabs the mussel within two minutes, then she'll tell.

If they ignore it, then she'll never bring it up again.

Anne rolls the closed shell between her hands and picks at the beard where it covers the blue. The wind coming in over the water chases goose bumps up her legs, but skjærgården shelters the cove from the worst of the weather. The cove mirrors the dying sky; the water is like glossy ink, its black only broken by the last sunlight reflecting on the crests of lazy waves. There are glowing eyes in the white house on the other side of the crescent.

Anne was trying to climb up on the kitchen counter to reach the thick, won't-break-if-you-bite-at-it glass, and it was harder than she thought it would be after three beers and a mystery drink.

'Careful,' a girl laughed behind her and stabilised her with a hand at her back.

'Thanks,' she muttered and put the glass down next to her knees before crawling down. The hand disappeared. The girl took a step back and watched her as she leaned against the kitchen cupboard. Anne's hands gripped the edge of the counter behind her.

'Hi. I'm Sara.'

A stubborn piece of byssus comes off between her fingers. Anne holds the shell up to her face. All smooth and clean and gleaming. She jams her nail into the crack, trying to pry the shell apart by force, but she knows it won't open that way. They never do. She gets up and walks across the narrow dock to the small boulders they've been using for this purpose for as long as she can remember. She places the mussel on the wide flat rock and picks up the smaller, sharper one. Perhaps if the mussel had a voice it would be screaming for help, she thinks right before she slams the rock down on the shell. Mucky liquid squirts out from between the stones. She drops the rock into the heather and bends down to grab the shell.

The light blue inside is smooth and satisfying to the touch, even as it cradles the orange chunk of slime. It looks almost like a heart. She pokes it with her little finger. A small, malformed, discoloured heart with bits of muck and pebbles grown into it.

Anne steps closer to the edge again and eyes a patch of sea bottom that's visible between the swaying seaweed; holds the butchered mussel over the water — and drops it.

It hits the surface with a plop and sinks down slowly, before finally landing on the corner of the patch she aimed at. She sits down with her legs hanging over the edge and slides her hands over the grey wood. Her fingers trace the discolouration from tide and wind, from the spilt beer and sloppy pickling.

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A *Poirot* rerun leaks out from an open window in the living room of their summer house. Luckily, the decline down from the lawn is so steep that the swimming dock can't be seen from the house. It's the only place on the property where she knows for certain that she can hide and not get accused of committing the cardinal sin of being in a bad mood. She checks the watch on her wrist. Forty-three. She rests her head on her shoulder. A one-clawed crab peaks out of the big hole at the base of the dock.

'Come on,' she whispers. 'You can do it.'

Forty-seven. He's moving closer, circling the exposed orange lump and the open spot, but still hiding in the seaweed.

Fifty-two. Another crab steps out from the seaweed. She gets a glimpse of the light-green belly. He has both claws and all legs intact. Yet he walks at a distance from the one-clawed crab like he's afraid that the other has fighting experience.

Her ponytail is yanked back. Her neck locks right as her head is pulled backwards. Something throbs on the side of her neck and sends a short-lived white fire up into her brain.

'Are you planning to sleep out here?'

Anne slaps Josefine's arm away. She laughs and sits down. Her long legs come pressing down across Anne's lap. Anne flinches when her heel knocks against the inside of her right knee.

'No.' Anne shoves her sister's legs away and pulls her knees up against her chest.

Josefine moves closer anyway. Their sides are pressed up against each other. There is a weight in the bottom of her lungs. Shivers ripple through her chest with every deep outward breath. Anne goes tense again but forces herself to focus on the softness of Josefine and the smell of her shampoo.

She closes her eyes and leans her head against Josefine's shoulder. The joint presses into her temple, so she shifts closer, finding a more comfortable angle to rest her chin and jaw on the ledge of Josefine's shoulder.

There was a knock on the door, and Josefine asked 'who the fuck was in there,' and 'this room is fucking private' in a voice twisted by Fanta Exotic, crisps, beer, acid and sobs. She couldn't even croak out the words that it was her. Sara grinned at her at first. Anne shook her head and watched it turn into a frown and then into a frustrated understanding. She looked down at the toilet water rather than meet Sara's eyes, but held her wrist in a vice until she heard the door to Josefine's room slam shut again.

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Anne squeezes her eyes shut and tries to just breathe through her mouth. Josefine angles her head down so that it rests on top of hers. Anne's trapped in the musky cologne imprinted in the wool, her face pressed against fabric that's expensive and well-worn. It smells like strong shoulders and a good haircut. It brings back a boyish laughter, the good kind, but it does nothing, nothing, not a thing compared to even the thought of that hand on her back as it made sure she didn't topple backwards and break her skull. It smells good, but it's like the cologne is being poured right down her throat and a hand is closed around her nose and mouth to force it down. She looks down her nose to the patch of open sand and tries to see the mussel and the circling crabs. Anne scoots away so there's a person's width between them.

'What are you doing here?'

'Talking to you is better than losing at cards.'

'Thanks.'

'And I'm leaving soon.'

Anne glances at Josefine. She wants to say that she should keep the jumper if she breaks up with him. 'Still a whole week left.'

'You trying to get rid of me? Aren't you going to miss me?'

Anne wraps her arms around her knees and rests her lips against her skin. 'I'll live.'

'Traitor.' There's no bite to the word. Anne rolls her eyes theatrically in return. 'Anyway, it will be nice to have some time with Ben — I mean, we won't be alone, but I haven't seen him since he left after the party and then we were both pretty hungover, so I don't feel like it counts, you know?'

Anne looks back into the water.

The shell is gone. She rushes to push her sleeve back. Two minutes and thirty-six seconds. Josefine shivers and tucks her hands inside her sleeves.

'Let's go inside, I'm freezing.'

Anne watches her sister's back as she makes her way back towards the house but hesitates on the stone steps up to the lawn. She looks back down on the spot where the mussel and the blue shards had been.

They won't understand. That's what she repeats to herself as the house grows larger and the sound of the TV veers into the stiff announcement of the NRK presenter.

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She slips in through the patio. Sand from the green carpet sticks to the bottom of her feet. She gets a glimpse of Pappa through the window. He's leaning against the kitchen bench and drying a plate. Anne stops in the doorway. She turns her head from side to side to watch them. Mamma is passing through the living room, stacking books and throwing miscellaneous stuff into the bowl on the small table. Anne can see herself in the mirror above the table, but Mamma hasn't noticed her yet. She turns her head to the right, where Josefine lies stretched out on the corner sofa with her feet resting against the coffee table.

'Should we share a bottle?'

In the kitchen, Pappa looks over his shoulder and asks Mamma to repeat what she said. He goes back to the dishes without having understood a word.

'Pappa,' Josefine calls, twice as loud. 'Wine?'

There's the sound of the fridge door opening and then of glass thudding against hard plastic. Josefine points the remote at the old TV like she's threatening it and moves through the hundred blank channels before she gets to the four that actually have service out in the skerries. Anne crosses the room and grabs her phone from the mantel over the empty fireplace. She forces her lips into a thin line when she spots the message and shoves her phone into her pocket as if they're going to drag it out of her hands and survey all her conversations.

'Hei, vennen,' Mamma pushes Josefine's feet off the table and curls up next to her. 'There's a Bond movie on NRK3 tonight.'

'I'm pretty tired, I think I'm just going to bed,' Anne mutters. Her head still buzzes with the *did you talk to them yet*? It has probably been scorched into the screen in her back pocket.

'Alright. Natta da, vennen.'

'Natta. Natta, Pappa.'

'Good night,' he says as he comes into the living room with the wine bottle in one hand and three glasses in the other.

Their voices are muffled once she has closed the door to the hallway behind her, but she knows the image of Mamma's hand combing through Josefine's hair. She texts Sara back *no, not yet* and watches the bubble pop up green on her screen before adding *sorry, I'm hopeless.*

She climbs the stairs to the attic. The first room, on the left side at the top of the stairs, is Josefine's, her door permanently not quite closed. Not that it would make much of a difference if it were, the walls are too thin to keep any secrets anyway. Josefine's door is even less sturdy — a mere breath can push it all the way open. At least Anne's room can be

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locked from the inside. The latch on her door moans. Every year it gets a little tougher to close, and now she leaves it without pushing the metal bar all the way down. She opens the window; the red, white and blue pennant is swaying around the top of the flagpole. She scrolls back up and reads the old text underneath a photo of them in Sara's garden: *You don't have to come out, you know. Not everyone does.*

She knows that. She *knows*.

And yet her leg is shaking for wanting to run downstairs and steal a half-thawed shrimp to try the crab fishing experiment again. She drops her phone onto the bed, it bounces on the bedspread, and she rubs her hands over her face.

The rope smacks against the flagpole, creating an uneven rhythm of hollow clanging. The bed groans when she sits down. Pappa and Josefine are laughing through the floorboards. The clanging is like a metronome ticking inside her head… over and over and over and over, dictating the chorus of *tell them tell Josefine tell them tell Mamma tell Pappa tell them tell anyone*.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow she'll tell. She'll start with Josefine. She'll get it.

Well, she thinks. She won't *get* it.

Faen heller, she'll just tell her as soon as she sees her. She starts counting the clangs outside, one-two-three-four, one-two-pause-four, one-pause-three, and closes her eyes. Her phone buzzes on top of the duvet. She sighs and jolts up into sitting and reaches for it. *Good luck anyway! I'm rooting for you, snuppa,* followed by a winking emoji. And then a storm of gifs with people waving rainbow flags. Anne chews on the knuckle of her thumb and laughs despite herself. She sniffles. Who lets crabs make decisions for them anyway?

Tomorrow. Tomorrow she'll tell.

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