

# CRAB SEASON

**MELISSA  
OLIVEIRA**

I.

The season begins in May or June if you want them soft. We never did, though that is how most people seem to prefer them. For us, crab fishing was a late-summer affair: hard, blue-shelled crabs that I would dream of sometimes, so often did we talk about them.

On Friday evenings in late summer, we drove from Connecticut to Fall River. I loaded the backseat with books for the long drive. We picked up my grandparents and made a few more stops before leaving town: beer, cigarettes, enough scratch-off cards to last until Sunday night and, of course, a plastic bag bulging with raw chicken necks. These would serve as our offering to the crabs. Finally, we could leave the Fall River Flint to sweat beneath its statue of Prince

Henry the Navigator, and head south.

Within ten minutes, we passed back into that other New England: tidy gray-shingled saltbox houses, their white trim gleaming in the coastal light. On roads without lines bounded by sawgrass and sedge, the views opened up: here an inlet with white sailboats bobbing, there a dune-draped beach. We turned left when Gooseberry Point reached out straight ahead of us, with its sand trail that led to the two graffitied World War II watch towers guarding the end of the point. Finally, we arrived at Gooseberry Neck and the metal trailer my grandfather kept on a spit of sand between Buzzards Bay and a brackish tidewater marsh.

II.

In the few photos I have of my paternal grandfather, his wide, heart-shaped face is shiny and red, his black hair slicked back, neat and immovable. His dark eyes hold the expression of a naughty schoolboy who has gotten away with something. Indeed, my grandmother was fond of saying that he was the man who talked her into doing things she shouldn't do.

In these photos, I can sense something of the general mood of the moment in the faces of those who surround him. Often, he is the only person who looks as though he is having any fun. In one photo, I am a toddler and he leans over me, holding a pack of Marlboros. He has just placed a cigarette between my lips. I fumble at it with my fat hands, confusion written across my face. He laughs into the camera. My father does not. My mother, seated between them on the couch, is all thin darkness and shadowy bones: perhaps ninety pounds. Half of her face is visible above my head: her eyes are huge, dark, expansive. The flash renders her usually warm olive skin sallow. It looks as though you could

scratch it with your thumbnail and it would come off like candle wax. There are others, too. My father graduates from the Connecticut State Police Academy, and on the steps in front of the building, his smile is as staid as his father's grin is wide. In my parents' wedding photos, I notice him. His is the smile that appears hungry.

In yet another photo, my grandfather kneels beside me on beige sand. The tidewater marsh behind the trailer stretches in the background. I appear to be four or five, and I have collected an assortment of rocks and shells in a red bucket. I cannot tell now, from the photograph, what made the things I gathered that day noteworthy. I resent the distraction from my task, though: I am squinting, not smiling, and I keep my body stiff and somewhat distant. His right arm is around my shoulders, and he holds a beer in his left hand. He looks healthy, though, stout and sun-browned, but within two years of this photo he will experience the first of a series of massive strokes. Each one will leave him worse off than the last: first paralyzed on one side, then able to speak only with great

difficulty, then completely unable to walk without my grandmother's arm, a cane, a walker, at all. Eventually, he will lose both feet to gangrene. He will lose English to Portuguese, then Portuguese to rage-filled howls. He will cross over entirely into this terrifying, inexpressible rage: he will try to speak but then shake, break things, scream. He will become an angry toddler inhabiting the powerful body of a sixty-year-old welder and former middleweight boxer. Near the end, footless and incoherent, he will make his desires known by pulling himself out of his bed, dragging his disobedient body across the linoleum, and punching his convalescent home roommate. Eventually, the only nursing home that will have him is the one where my mother works, out of kindness to her and to our family.

"He always was the bad kid in the schoolyard," my father will say.

"When I was a fighter, they used to call me Joe Pawtucket," I remember my grandfather saying about his days as a middleweight boxer. "Canvas Joe, because I spent so much time on the mat." I turned away. Even then I hated the sickly sweet smell of alcohol filtered

through human skin or exhaled. It is the smell of grownups who have allowed themselves to reel out of control.

Yet in the second photo, the one taken at the trailer, his smile is not daring or reckless or mean. Behind us, the grasses that edge Gooseberry Neck are ruddy. The photo has aged in that particular way of old film that makes everything look like it is awash in autumn light, but it is also the season: he wears a red and black flannel shirt and I wear a white sweater, bell bottom jeans, red All-Stars. Everything, from the sky to the white rocks, has an amber cast. This is the palette of my earliest memories.

In my family, the dead are not left to rest quietly in their graves. They are exhumed, examined, forced to fit into molds that work for us. Relationships have been severed over this, but perfect evil and perfect goodness are too fragile. One holds these things close: any weakness in the memory of a person is taken as an indictment. My grandmother rose to sainthood almost as soon as she died. My grandfather, they say, ruined us all.



III.

By the sea, we are away from the endless reels of World War II actual film footage that played on his television and, I suspect, in his mind. For a time, we could all concentrate on other things. When there was no relief for him, there was no relief for us.

So, ankle-deep in mucky boots, we perched on upended plastic buckets in the tall grass that cut like razors. Mud sucked at our feet. We tied our lines around the chicken necks we brought, threw them in, and pinned the twine down with sharp wooden stakes. The tidal murk swallowed our lines, and when it was time we hauled them up again. The dirty Massachusetts tidewater heaved up the bright blue fruit—hissing, scurrying, living.

Even beyond drunk, my grandfather pointed out the needle-shaped aprons of the males and the bell-shaped aprons of the females. Some of these aprons burst with orange egg sponge, but even without this I learned to look for other markers. The ones with the red claws were females. He said they had painted nails, and he flung them back out across the

open water. *They need to make more for next year.* The spinning she-crabs disappeared again under the surface, trailing bubbles.

I knew too how to pick them up without getting bitten, though I wonder if I could do it now. I watched him in the kitchen, prying the aprons of the young males from their carapaces, and scooping out viscera with mechanical efficiency. They ate the garbage, the junk, the dead, the rotten things that lined the floor of Buzzards Bay. They all became red in the cooking pot. Later, seated at a table covered in newspapers, we would fall upon them. We dug out the meat with tiny picks, used nutcrackers to break the armor, and with our own soft mouths we sucked the sweet water from their claws.

IV.

Fact: You were in the 104th Division in 1945, the Timberwolves, and you traveled with a group of combat engineers. When you crossed the Rhine into Germany on canvas boats the engineers had put together, unseen enemies sent bullets splashing into the river around you.

Fact: You showed me the

photographs you took of what you found at the Nordhausen camp just after it was liberated. Liberation looked like this: grainy, vague, people's limbs and bodies stacked like denuded timber. Before you arrived, a US Air Force strike killed thousands of inmates, who the SS forced to stay inside the burning hangars. You found a dead city: thousands of corpses with a few people still living, here and there, existing among the dead. I was little when you first showed me these photos, and they seemed to me no different from the endless wartime newsreels in your apartment—the ones that made me seek out your welder's goggles and try to look through them—anything rather than sit with you in front of those ghostly images. Now, the weight of the photos falls on me: what it may have meant for you and, consequently, for us.

Fact: My father keeps these photographs in the drawer of his bedside stand, along with the Nazi mother's brooch you somehow acquired and the Purple Heart from his own war.

Fact: During much of the war, you worked as a welder in a shipyard in southeastern

Massachusetts. It was work that counted toward the war effort and exempted you from the draft, but you mocked the foreman, fired at him all of your acid wit, your sarcasm, your violence.

Fact: You were by then known for fighting, and had boxed in amateur and professional fights. You said you gave it all up because you didn't want those men, with their cauliflower ears and flat, busted noses, ruining your pretty face. Yet fighting was already by then a habit. You had been arrested for fighting but not convicted because you were friendly with the police. *That's just Joe Oliveira. Send him home to dry out.*

Fact: When the foreman at the shipyard threatened to fire you, you threw a punch that broke his nose. Later, you enlisted in the army before they could draft you.

Fact: My grandmother was pregnant with a little girl.

Fact: She was not yet your wife.

V.

My aunt holds this: that she was the unloved child of duty, the rope that tightened around your

neck. Once my grandmother died, my aunt said that my father was the favored one, the boy her father had actually wanted. He was the child of desire, she was the child of resentment.

My father tells a different story. When he was young, the family often moved throughout the northeast from town to town: Springfield, Agawam, Middletown, Fall River. They followed his father's work, leaving my grandfather's affairs in their wake. Yet the family ended up back in Fall River several times. My father was often the new kid at school, an experience which made him view a sense of place as a sacred thing for a child.

One day, when he was eleven, my father walked home from school. A group of boys followed him at a distance, a gap which began to close more quickly than was entirely comfortable. In the flash of self-preservation instinct that would serve my father much later in life as a police sergeant in Hartford, he became aware of danger. He glanced over his shoulder; the boys were bigger than he, more muscular. They taunted him. They had can openers

sharpened into makeshift shivs. My father ran.

When he arrived home, he slammed the door. He slumped in relief, sweaty, red-faced. He locked the door behind him, safe at last.

His father rose from his chair. "What are you running from?"

My father explained, "They are going to beat me. They have knives."

"No boy of mine runs away." Here, I imagine he took a drink, took a long drag on his cigarette. "You have a choice. You fight them, or you fight me."

My father weighed his options. He felt the open hand of his father once before, when he did not pay enough respect to one of his father's women. He unlocked the door and stepped outside.

We are still fighting your war, Joe Pawtucket.

## VI.

If I ever cried about the beautiful blue crabs and their destruction, I don't remember it now. Their eyestalks regarded me with such naked hatred that it was difficult to find feeling for them. Even as a child, I understood that there was no space for my

sentiment. The feeling came later, all at once, after I moved away from home, married, made myself safe in my home, surrounded myself with sensible people. I grew strong in my own sense of order and logic.

Still, nearly thirty years later, I'd know anywhere the sound of their bright blue shells scraping the insides of plastic buckets, rounding each other for a fight. Their legs, of course, could find no purchase there except on each other's backs. My grandfather warned me that they could jump out like fleas, and they would. Coming close enough to peer into the buckets was enough for me, and even that small action sent the lot of them roiling, rearing at me, claws up, quick and ready to bite.

"They'll tear each other apart for a bit of raw chicken," he said, if I ever betrayed any feeling. "They deserve what's coming for them."

And it was true that at the end of the day, when the entire catch had been cleaned and processed, the white plastic buckets would need to be rinsed of swimming paddles, legs, broken shards of carapace, shattered claw points, barbs and eyestalks.

Yet sometimes I would find

him in the trailer, bleeding freely over the galley sink littered with tiny hearts and lungs, laughing, swearing.

"He got me," he'd say, with that same red-faced grin from the photos. "That son of a bitch actually got me that time."