

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

Sam Gridley  
Crabs

**W**E WERE FISHING OFF THE DOCK, me and Mom and this guy Dennis she invited for part of the week. It was muggy with sun burning our arms. Mom and I wore these big floppy hats to protect our faces and we laughed about what Grandma always says, "Ladies must be careful of their complexions."

The bay smelled kind of salty-fresh one minute and stinky the next. We smelled like sunscreen and sweat and DEET spray. I was trying not to scratch the mosquito bites that drove me bonkers. The people down there say mosquitoes are the official state bird.

We've rented a cottage on the island a couple times before, Mom and me, but never fished. It was Dennis's idea and he brought the rods. We had minnows for bait. Dennis put them on the hook for me, I could barely watch. Fish aren't intelligent like dogs or whales but getting a sharp piece of metal jammed through your guts, that must hurt.

I was first to get a bite. Dennis wrapped his arms around me to help wind the reel. I'm saying to myself, he's OK, right? this isn't creepy with him almost hugging me. He's kind of short but good-looking. Fuzzy blond hair and arm muscles that stretch his T-shirts.

"Woo-hoo!" Mom yelled as the fish came up. "Should I try to catch it in the scoop thing?" Mom's pretty useless at outdoor stuff—she does online marketing for a shoe company, what would she know about fishing?—but I think she played extra-dumb for his benefit. He works in ticket sales for the Phillies.

"Yeah, Peg, grab the landing net," said Dennis. She swiped at the wiggling fish and missed a few times before snagging it.

Dennis pulled the net over to show me. "Congratulations!" he said. "It's a flounder." The fish was flat with a big mouth and these two beady eyes squished together on the dark side. The other side was this awful pasty white. "It's too small to keep, though," he said. "We oughta throw it back. Sorry, Livvy." He reached in and grabbed the fish's ugly head with one hand and wiggled out the hook with the other. It splashed in the water and sank out of sight. I couldn't see if it swam off. Something that gruesome, I'm not sure I care if it lived.

Then nothing happened for, like, an hour except Mom also caught a fish too small to keep. The sun was beating down and the mosquitoes biting. I sprayed more DEET. The islands across the bay disappeared in soupy fog. Gulls swooped. I had this huge itchy welt on my neck and I was tired of standing and feeling all sticky. Over to our left a big white bird sat stock-still on a post which Mom guessed was an ibis and Dennis said egret. "We should get a bird book," Mom said but didn't argue with him. Waves went *plish* against the pilings and you could see the tide going out.

Then Mom's rod yanked and she was pulling something up. At first I thought it was a plastic toy but no, it was a big crab. It had latched onto the minnow and hook with one claw. While it rode high in the air it was

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nipping off little bits of the minnow with its free claw and stuffing them in its mouth. *Gross!* Mom let the creature drop on the pier and stared at it.

“Do you guys like fresh crab?” Dennis asked. “This one’s a good size.”

Mom said her only experience with crabs was when they’re made into cakes and served on a bun with tartar sauce on the side.

“Look at him,” I pointed, “he’s still trying to eat the fish!”

Dennis laughed. “He’s a greedy bastard, isn’t he? We could pick up some others to go with him, have us a crab feast tonight or tomorrow.”

Mom didn’t say no, so Dennis tossed him in the ice cooler we’d brought for the fish we weren’t catching.

A few minutes later Dennis caught a crab too. More laughs, and this one also got dumped in the cooler.

That night I forgot about the crabs when we went to dinner. I ordered baked flounder. I’d had it before but I wanted to see what it tasted like after catching one. It was good but basically, you know, fish. With lemon sauce all over, you couldn’t tell how nasty it’d looked alive.

After dinner I wanted ice cream. They have this shop on the main street with the best homemade flavors anywhere. My favorite is Marsh Mud, it’s like extra-fudge chocolate. Mom said it was too late, the lines were always horrible, we’d get ice cream another day, but actually it *wasn’t* late, just 8:30, so I argued and she got angry and I got angry back. She said this is no way for someone almost twelve years old to behave, throwing a tantrum, and I was furious she accused me like that. *Tantrum?* I don’t throw *tantrums* for fuck sake, but I do stand up for myself if I’m right. Dennis said nothing, which made me mad at him too. Maybe they both wanted to get back to the cottage to be with each other.

I heard them later. Thin walls. They were trying to be quiet but I could tell they were doing it. It’s fine with me, I know Mom’s lonely and Dennis is by far not the worst. I mean, compared to the one that left the bathroom door open when he peed, Dennis is Prince Charming.

The next day, after canoeing in the morning and beach in the afternoon, we were hot and tired, my bites had gone from itching to burning and I wasn’t hungry at all. But Dennis said it was time for our feast. “Oh?” said Mom, looking at me, “I was thinking something simple, I’m not sure we have an appetite for—”

“The way I fix crabs, you’ll be licking your lips, I promise.”

We stopped at a fish store for a dozen crabs to add to the two in our cooler. They came in a paper bag inside a plastic bag, you could see them wriggling around in the dark in there.

After we all showered and changed, Dennis searched in the cabinets and found a big pot that he filled partway with water and put on the stove to boil. “This seasoning you bought,” Mom said, “should I sprinkle it in the water now? How much?”

“No,” Dennis said, waving her off. “The Old Bay goes in later.”

He was bossy about the meal, telling her the best way to cook the corn

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on the cob and when to set out the coleslaw and beer and paper towels. I watched when the crabs went in the pot. He knew how to drop them easy so they didn't splash hot water on us.

They didn't scream. I don't know how soon they were dead, but in boiling water I guess their tiny brains explode or melt or something.

I peeked in each time he lifted the cover to shake in Old Bay. They changed color till they were bright orange. He rinsed them off fast and piled them in two big bowls. Some of their claws were broken off like they'd been struggling inside the pot.

We ate at the picnic table on the screened-in porch. Dennis put a whole crab on Mom's plate and one on mine. "Step up to the plate, ladies!" he announced. Then he instructed Mom, standing over her shoulder and reaching down to point. I wasn't going to try until I saw her do it. He had her snap off the legs and claws, pull this tab thing that opens the middle, break off the shell, but then there was this gooey greenish stuff inside that you're not supposed to eat. She had to clean it out and heap it in a bowl in the middle of the table, getting her hands all gummy.

She was gritting her teeth but she kept at it. She wiped and wiped on paper towels. Dennis showed her how to tug the meat out with her fingertips, and when she got a taste at last, she said, "Oh ... that's good, I admit. Better, in fact, than a crab cake. The Old Bay gives it a spiciness.... Livvy, you haven't started on yours. Did you watch the way we opened it?"

"I'm just having corn and coleslaw," I said.

"No, no," said Dennis, "I'll prepare it for you." He reached for my plate and in a minute he had the crab spread open with a bunch of the meat out so I could pick it up with a fork.

Mom worked through the one crab, then started a second. She even used the claw cracker and sucked to get the meat out. It was still really humid, so her face was sweating and she kept trying to push her hair back with her arm because she was smeared up to the wrists with gunk. Meanwhile Dennis was cracking and chomping and swallowing—I stopped eating to watch his jaw muscles. When he finished each crab, he scooped up the remains and tossed them in the bowl of trash. The entire porch smelled like crab guts.

I did try my crab meat with the fork. Not impressed.

All at once Mom shrieked. "Ohmigod! Ohmigod!"

She was, like, gawking at the middle of her crab. "What?" said Dennis, and he leaned over to look. "Hah!" he laughed. "Whaddaya know."

He lifted out a tiny spiky thing and held it up with his finger and thumb. "Recognize this, Peg?" he said.

"It looks like a skeleton!"

"The minnow you caught him with."

"Ewww. No-o-o-o-o-o, don't tell me that."

"Definitely a minnow," he insisted. "Definitely in the crab's stomach."

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I felt sick.

He laid it in the middle of the table between us. Mom stared at it. "Amazing," she finally said. "It's almost perfect ... all those teensy ribs.... He swallowed the whole *thing!* How did he *do* that? I didn't think his mouth was that big."

"If your appetite's strong enough...," Dennis said with a smirk.

Mom went back to picking at her plate. "Maybe I'll find a pearl now," she joked. "Or a gold coin." But she was kind of revolted, I could tell.

I asked Mom if I could have peanut butter and jelly. "I'll make it myself."

"C'mon, that's *kids'* food," Dennis teased. "I thought you were a big girl."

Isn't "big girl" what you say to a four-year-old? I wanted to kick him under the table. Mom just tilted her chin to the side with her eyes on me, like she does when she means Not Now, Livvy. Which is also what you say to a four-year-old.

Dennis pushed himself up. "Want another beer, Peg? Livvy, more coke?" We shook our heads.

When he'd gone in the house, I said, "Are you gonna keep *eating* that?"

"Well, it's not so bad. The actual taste of the flesh is ... I'd almost say ... refined." She tried to grin at me while she dragged a string of guck from her teeth. "And Dennis made such a production of cooking them for us."

I scrunched my nose. "I'm a vegetarian now," I said.

Mom snickered. "You know, honey, sometimes you have to push through the icky stuff to get what's worth having."

I watched some little puckery lines around her mouth I'd never noticed before. "No thanks," I said. "I'll pass."

When he came back to the porch chugging a second beer, Dennis laid into the crabs again. The mound of glop built up till he fetched a plastic trash bag and dumped out the bowl. Shells, green goo, bits of leg and claw all mushed together.

Yeah, I'll pass.

That night there was more noise from their bedroom, Mom groaning pretty loud, and this time it bugged me. First I worried about her, then I blocked them out with my earbuds, but I couldn't fall asleep. I was picturing the greedy crab that kept eating while he was on ice in the cooler—and kept digesting till he hit the boiling water.

In the morning Dennis left, heading back to his job. Soon as his car pulled out of the driveway, Mom sank down on the couch, flinging out her arms with a big sigh. "Just the two of us," she said. "Time to relax. God, I'm tired."

We stayed home that morning and read books. At lunchtime when we checked the refrigerator, there was a plate of leftover crabs. I made a disgusted face at her and she made one back at me.

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We had peanut butter and jelly. *Kids'* food. And that night we went for ice cream. It was the best day of our vacation.