

Scott Sandler

The Lobster House

You are on your third beer and are searching for Orion's belt or the Big Dipper and you momentarily forget about your daughter who lies in a bunk bed on the bottom deck, beneath the floorboards. Her feelings are hurt, her nose is stuffed up with snot and she has been crying. You say we'll talk about this in the morning and you mean it at the time, but now that you are on your third beer, wrapped up in a shawl, the ocean, and the stars, you forget what it was even about, little things, and you have no intention of carrying this into the morning.

This wonderful woman, Melanie, the one from the Lobster House, hands you your fourth beer and puts her head on your chest. She sings you a song that she learned in the first grade. You remember the first line only: "Oh, I was born, one night, one morn, when the whistles went BOOM, BOOM." You notice how her cheeks puff out like a walrus' on the boom, boom part and laugh out loud, saying you will have to teach that to your daughter. She says, "It's a nonsense song," and takes the bottle from you with her big hands and you remember that this was the first thing you noticed about her, were those hands, back when you and your daughter first started coming to the Lobster House. They were as big as frisbees, you thought, and watched as she stuck them into the lobster tank, and how the tank itself seemed to light up when she did this. She had snatched one lobster up and held it away from her face like smelly diapers. "Here you go," she said, lobster juice dripping from

her big, frisbee hands. Button on her apron said — ASK ME ABOUT OUR PEACH PIE. You remember what you did that night, how you locked your door and imagined what it would be like to rub lobster juice all over her body, and that moment comes back to you now that you are on your fourth beer and she is in your lap, and you reach under her skirt and say, “I want to get you off.”

Your daughter leans her elbows on the railing, looking out at the water, the wind blows her hair back. You put your hands on her shoulder and she won't even look at you. What was it you promised her? That it would be just the two of you? That you would get her one of those neat wristwatches — the kind where you can tell how fast you're running and play Asteroids at the same time? You try to remember exactly when it was that she stopped talking to you, but you are not thinking hard enough, or you figure she has just blown this whole thing out of proportion, and you sing her that song of Melanie's, thinking that she will enjoy that boom, boom part, but no such luck.

You feel as though you've hit a wall, where neither of you can go any further, so you figure well, maybe Melanie can connect, maybe she, being a female and a mother of two of her own, will be able to break through somehow. So, she gives it a shot. She says, “O.k., I've got something to show you,” and balances five stacks of nickels on her elbow, lets her arm fall and catches them without effort. Your daughter thrusts out her hand and Melanie drops the coins in her palm. Your daughter looks Melanie square in the eye and says, “O.k., I've got something to show you,” and pulls some extra coins out of her own pocket, and one-ups her with six. Melanie says, “O.k., I've got something to show you,” and seven stacks of nickels fly throughout the boat, ricocheting off the railing, splashing off into the water. Melanie is on her hands and knees picking up the coins, and your daughter, believe it or not, is smiling.

You and your daughter have been to the Lobster House so many times that when she pulls her homework out at the dinner table it doesn't bother you. She says I have to get it done by tomorrow. You watch as Melanie turns late customers away, saying, sorry we're closed. She puts chairs upside down, on top of tables. Your

daughter, meanwhile closes her books, kicks off her shoes, leans against the wall, and strikes up a conversation with this ugly, blue swordfish mounted above the cash register. She says, "You think you've got problems?" She says, "What's it like to be shellacked?"

You sit out on the deck, wrap your shawl around her shoulders and kiss her. You say, "A pretty face is like a Melanie." You say "A pretty face is like a melon. A mellow knee. Chief Mellow Knee." You say, "A pretty face," and put your hand on her breast and smile. You say, "Hey kemo-sabe."

The three of you drink blackberry wine in the back of the Lobster House out of jumbo dixie cups ("No way," Melanie says that she's going to do anymore dishes) and you bring up the idea of taking this cruise. You have the pamphlet you picked up from the travel agent folded in your pocket. You are so drunk, you don't remember what the pamphlet looks like; you only remember the color blue. Melanie says that she was on a boat once. A whole bunch of her friends took her whale watching. She brought her two children, the twins, along and they both get sea-sick because they have identical tummies. She made them both close their eyes and imagine that they belonged to this ocean; they were the dolphins, the trout, the hump-backed whales, they were the ocean. She learned all about meditation from her first husband, their father, and she tells you about how she rubbed their tummies, focused all her positive energy in their tummies, and only one of them threw up. Maybe it is the wine or maybe it is the way she draws circles in the air with her big frisbee hands, but whatever it is, you can't take your eyes off her. She says it was a big waste of time anyway, because there were no whales that day, even though her friends, who didn't like the idea of wasting their money, insisted there were.

Your daughter has never been on a boat before, but is quick to remind you what happened to Gilligan and his friends. She recreates the storm that occurs at the beginning of each show by shielding her eyes and yelling, "Sploosh." She says that her favorite one is where the castaways stumble upon a chest full of costumes and movie equipment and go hog-wild. She says that if you all go, she wants one of those white hats like Gilligan's got.

You are the first one to wake up in the morning and you lean

against the railing, watching the sun just hit the ocean and turn it into tinfoil. You see quick, darting flashes in the water, and wonder if those are fish or not. Your daughter walks right up to your side and you wish that she'd put her arm around you or tell you that the water looks beautiful or cold or something, but she's standing next to you, you can see her freckled face, the tiny puffs of her breath, you can hear her blow her nose, and you have to be satisfied with that. You almost wish she'd hand you her kleenex as a reminder of this moment. Your daughter bounces up and down in her barefeet and her LA Rams pajamas and you tell her that she better change before she catches cold. As your daughter leaves, Melanie comes out, and they both laugh and give each other little pats on the butt, as if they were barroom buddies, and you wonder if this has something to do with last night when you were stone drunk, and Melanie decided to teach your daughter that "boom, boom," song. You couldn't hear them, you could just see their puffed out walrus cheeks. You could see the stacks of nickels fly into the ocean like it was one humongous wishing well. Melanie leans against the railing now, and you watch as the wind rolls the hem of her cotton skirt around her legs like seaweed. You say, "good morning, sleepy-head."

You are all playing Twister. Your daughter is the designated spinner. "Right foot blue," she says and you slide your leg in between Melanie's, making her look all out of proportion, the three-legged woman. Melanie's really out of it, laughing at everything you say, laughing every time your daughter shouts out a command — "Right hand yellow," she says and Melanie snorts out : "NO WAY," but does it anyway. You are feeling young tonight and spread this joy around by letting your daughter finish off your beer, without saying anything. She starts on another bottle and now your daughter is not even waiting for you to complete your moves anymore. She's just whacking at that metal spinner and shouting out commands: "right foot red, right hand blue, left hand yellow, left foot red." She looks up and Melanie's leg is lifted so high, she can see her underwear. You are holding her waist, trying to keep her steady. Together you look like the letter Q, but you can't hold it too long and soon you topple over. You look up from this

polka-dotted mat, and your daughter is smiling, the incriminating spinner in her hand. Melanie holds her stomach and says, "I don't think Twister on a boat is such a smart idea." Then she throws up.

Your daughter watches Melanie as she prepares the food. She is amazed that there are so many ways to serve fish: sauteed in butter and garlic, raw, broiled, skewered. Sometimes it comes whole: head, tail, and all. But you can always take off the head or tail if you want. You can leave in the eyes, or if you so desire, cut them out. Melanie does all of this so casually, that she almost seems cold-hearted. Your daughter asks her why she can't just leave in the eyes, and Melanie says to her, "Honey, a lot of people get spooked real easily. They don't want their dinner staring them back," and then Melanie goes straight to deboning her salmon, slices it open and pulls out pieces as easily as one pulls out coins from their pockets. It is too hot in this kitchen for your daughter, so she heads off to the front room, to where the cash register and the shellacked swordfish are. She focuses all her energy into that swordfish, like Melanie had taught her to do. "Pick out one object in the room and become that object." And it is working: her back takes on the curve of the swordfish, her eyes become black marble, there is a gloss on her forehead. It is here, beneath this shellacked swordfish, that she comes to realize something, something that she will not be able to express to you until she is already a Junior in college and you are both stone drunk on beer and blackberry wine: "There are two kinds of people in this world," she says, "one who is constantly worried about making mistakes: about exposing the film in his camera, about overcooking the fish, about losing money through a hole in his pocket, about getting holes in his pocket, and there are the ones who are perfectly willing to make mistakes, and you know what I'm talking about, taking everything so casually that soon everything weighs the same and nothing is very important, and it's like that fish, shellacked, smoothed over so much, that you almost forget it's there."