

'The Crab'

The surface of the water rippled and danced just a few inches above him. The waves lapped gently overhead as he rocked back and forth in the delightful warm shallows. It was the first time that the Crab had ventured so close to shore. He had spent his whole life in the cold murky depths beyond the cove, but now he was drawn by the light that became ever brighter. He was middle-aged for a crab. We won't be so insensitive as to number the years, but needless to say he had taken some knocks in life. With each bump and blow his shell had grown thicker. Now it was so thick that it was as hard and as cold as a stone.

Although it seemed like nothing could hurt him, he held soft and tender parts deep inside that still felt every jolt - not that it showed from the outside of course. No one would ever guess that he felt anything at all; unless, that is, they stopped to consider why it was that his shell had grown so thick and dark in the first place.

But now the Crab was captivated by the sunlight and he thought nothing of the risks of the shallows. He just wanted more of the sun, the sun that was lighting his dreary existence, the sun that warmed his heavy armour, the sun that even seemed to filter in through his gills. It gave him the hope of a new day in the warm bay and a better way to live. Something was happening deep within his craggy shell.

"Haven't seen you in these parts before," said the Prawn.

The Crab was startled - not that it showed of course. He hadn't noticed this translucent stranger who seemed to blend in with the sandy floor. He wasn't sure that the comment needed a reply, so he pretended not

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to hear and carried on his way. The Prawn, however, seemed delighted at the opportunity to socialise.

"What brings you up from the dark depths?" he asked cheerily. The Crab felt threatened by such a direct question but he was giving nothing away:

"What's it to you?" he said gruffly. And he held his claws a bit tighter to his chest, like a careful boxer.

"It's just that you don't look quite comfortable up here in all that heavy armour."

"It's not armour and it's not heavy," snapped the Crab, lying twice. It was very heavy, uncomfortably so, and it certainly was armour. But the Crab wasn't going to let his guard down: "And I'm quite comfortable. Thank you."

"But you don't need to carry that weight around in the shallows. It's so warm here." And the Prawn flitted from side to side across the Crab's path to demonstrate the benefits of a light flexible body. The Crab swiped at the Prawn as he passed. He was irritated by his new companion, and he was a bit hurt by the comment on his weight but he wasn't going to let it show, so he decided trade insults:

"I'd rather have a presence than be swept about like a useless piece of flotsam," he retaliated.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Have I hit a nerve?" asked the Prawn directly.

"No, no," exclaimed the Crab, squirming on the inside. "You say what you want... just say it somewhere else."

"Don't be grumpy," replied the Prawn. "I am sorry. I'm sometimes too direct, I know. I was hoping that we could be friends."

At that the Crab's heart softened. It was a long, long time since anyone had offered him friendship, and he at once realised that

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friendship was something he craved. But he was careful not to appear too enthusiastic:

"Well I suppose you could hang around, as we seem to be going in the same direction."

"Oh that would be so much fun," gushed the Prawn. "You'll get used to me I'm sure. I do tend to wear my heart on my sleeve."

The Crab wasn't quite sure how to respond to gushing and he wasn't sure either as to what a sleeve was, having never had one. But he was pleased to have made a friend, although friendship didn't sit that comfortably with him. As they walked and talked together the Crab started to relax again and enjoyed the warm sunshine of the shallows.

As he studied the Prawn he noticed that it was not just the Prawn's manner that was open and transparent, his body was too! He could actually see the Prawn's heart beating through his see-through skin and some other organs, that he couldn't quite place, were doing their thing as well.

"Don't you feel a little vulnerable with all your insides on show?" asked the Crab curiously.

The Prawn was delighted that his new friend seemed to be overcoming his self-consciousness and was asking such a personal question.

"Oh no," he replied. "I find that others respond more honestly if I'm just myself. What you see is what you get with me," he beamed.

By now the Crab was feeling tired and a little odd. Everything seemed quite different here in the shallows, and all that his new friend had told him was making his head swim.

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"I think I'll stop here now," said the Crab not wanting to let on that he was feeling a bit wobbly.

"OK," said the Prawn. "maybe I'll see you later?"

"It could happen," replied the Crab as warmly as he could, still not wanting to appear too keen.

The Prawn flitted from side to side off into the distance.

The Crab sighed, breathed in the sunshine deeply, and rested. He considered the Prawn and how different they were. How he'd love to be light and soft and free ... and then it was as if the warm sun spoke to him:

"You can be."

"I can be?" he thought. "I can be."

He was now aware of why he had felt odd. There was a feeling of release from the pressure inside that he had grown used to. The sun had caused a split in the back of his shell and the casings on his big pincer claws were splitting too. Was there an inner him that could be free of his outer shell? He wriggled and pulled and bit by bit he came free from his old shell. It was hard for him to wrench away from everything that he'd been before. It was difficult and very painful. But the promise of a new freedom was tantalising. Suddenly he was out, he was free. He felt the gentle caress of the warm currents flowing over his supple skin. And the Sun beat down on his soft and tender body warming him through. It felt wonderful. It felt like nothing he'd ever felt before. He rubbed his eyes and hugged himself with his soft cuddly pincers. And for once he didn't bruise himself with his own heavy claws. They were now soft and smooth and hairless. He noticed too that they were a lovely light green colour unlike the hard black

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claws he'd left behind. He hadn't been this light since he'd been a little nipper. Excitedly he rounded to the front of his old shell. It felt like he was looking in a mirror. But now his old self had no life in it. It sat there glowering, black and horny. It looked so much like him, but it wasn't. He saw, as if through new eyes, how rough and hard and ugly he had grown to be.

"But now I'm free," he thought. "I'm light and flexible and see-through. I'm a creature of the shallows."

Then a wave rolled in. The warm water swirled and lifted. He found himself tumbling over the rippling seaweed. It felt so silky against his naked skin. It was delicious. But then the wave sucked him back against a large pebble with a smack:

"Ouch!"

His skin felt bruised and he rubbed it with his soft claw as he paddled back to his old shell.

"There are some downsides to being this free, I guess," he confided to his old shell.

"Hello Crab. Are you still here?" came a voice.

Suddenly the Crab felt very vulnerable floating there in all his nakedness.

"Hello-oo?" It was the Prawn again.

He couldn't be seen like this. Although the Prawn had been friendly before he hadn't seen him unclothed. The Crab found the prospect of being naked before another unbearable. So he quickly floundered back to his old shell and started to desperately wriggle inside again.

"Ah, there you are," said the Prawn. "Some of the guys have found a dead bird on the beach. I was just wondering if you would like to join us for dinner."

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"How kind," thought the Crab. His new softer self had really warmed to the Prawn. But how should he respond? The new lighter him wanted to gush with gratitude, but he was now hiding within his old shell and such a response didn't quite seem to fit. "I can't imagine anything nicer," he thought.

"I can't imagine anything worse," he blurted out, to his surprise. "I mean, I'd just drive all your friends away. I'm very possessive about my food you know," he explained, trying to redeem himself.

"Ur - yes, that would be a little awkward," conceded the Prawn thoughtfully.

"I'm the sort that likes to find his own food," continued the Crab regaining his composure and becoming more guarded again. "So I'd rather eat alone."

"That's a real shame." The Prawn looked genuinely disappointed. "Maybe I'll see you after dinner then."

"It could happen," said the Crab as the Prawn flitted away again.

"What am I doing?" said the Crab to himself. "I'm driving what could be my only friend away. It's like I couldn't stop myself. I said the exact things that I didn't want to say. I'm a new person, a new creature. I've just discovered a new freedom but I've slipped straight back into my old ways and into my old shell."

For the first time the Crab was faced with a real dilemma. When he'd been in his old shell he may not have liked himself, but there was no one else to be. Then when he'd found freedom he'd been overjoyed. But now he had a choice: to be the old craggy self or the new softer self. He wanted so much to be soft but, in truth, it was scary to be that

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vulnerable. It wasn't hard to be hard-shelled. It came so easily; he'd spent a life-time perfecting it.

"But then, maybe having a choice is a good thing," he thought. "Maybe I can choose who to be depending on the occasion. Yes," he said triumphantly and set off to take up his dinner invitation, whilst dragging his old shell behind him.

Before long the Crab could smell the distinctive aroma of rotting bird drifting through the water. Delicious! As he approached he wriggled into his shell again, as he wanted to be properly dressed for dinner.

"Any left for me?" called the Crab as he strode boldly through the food particles that hung in the water.

The party of feasters scattered at his surprise entrance. They knew the pecking order and so made way for the chief scavenger. Only one was left hovering in the murky water over the rotten remains.

"I'm so glad you changed your mind," said the Prawn.

"Nothing's changed except my appetite," quipped the Crab. This was about as friendly as the craggy-him got. "Make way for the hungry crab," he declared excitedly.

Now he was up close. the rotten smell was intoxicating. He hurried forward clumsily in his now ill-fitting shell, unaware that his large green bottom was hanging out of back of the old black casing. He was also having trouble controlling his pincers as the splits in their tough black skin now made them a poor fit.

"Are you feeling alright?" asked the Prawn who now noticed how awkwardly the Crab was moving.

"Nothing that a good square meal won't fix," replied the Crab as he swung a claw towards the meaty mess.

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But the claw wobbled through the water and never made it as far as the bird. Instead it swung wildly off target. There was a gasp from the nearby Prawn and when the Crab dragged the claw back to his mouth there hanging between his pincers were two prawn legs. The Crab's eyes popped out on stalks.

"What have I done?" he cried.

He quickly wriggled out of his shell and rushed to the Prawn's assistance.

"Are you alive?" he asked anxiously.

"Ooh," said the Prawn.

"I'm so sorry. It was a complete accident. I really meant no harm. Can you move?" asked the Crab very concerned.

"Who are you, kind crab?" asked the Prawn hazily.

"It's me. I'm the same crab," confessed the Crab.

"Ah yes, I recognise you from the green of your bottom," said the Prawn starting to recover. "You look quite different now though."

"No, that's what I really look like." The Crab pointed to the empty frame of his hard black shell with one soft pincer, whilst he gently cradled the Prawn with his other.

"That crab was nothing like the one I'm talking to," observed the Prawn who was surprisingly calm considering his loss. "That crab was rough and abrasive. You seem quite gentle and caring".

"They're both me," said the Crab. "I think."

He was now conscious of his nakedness again and was also feeling a bit confused as to what sort of crab, in fact, he was.

"Look, it seems to me like you've got to make a choice here," said the Prawn. "hard crab or soft crab."

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"But I was thinking that I could choose depending on how I feel," said the Crab, although it didn't sound so sensible now that he said it out loud.

"But you can't even fit in that black body," said the Prawn. "You're much too big. Your bottom hangs out."

It was true. The Crab hadn't noticed it until now, but he had grown since he'd been his new softer self. He was maybe a third bigger. It was only because his old shell was split that he had been able to get back in. As he looked at the empty shell he felt sorry for it. It had become hard and inflexible, cold and lonely, and now it had even broken and stopped working. He knew, that however tempting, there was no going back.

"I know the crab that I must be now," he said to the Prawn. "and I know what I must do. Can you move?"

"Oh yes, I feel fine already. When you've got 10 legs you don't really miss a couple," he said cheerfully, and very generously. "And besides, I won't have to wait long for them to grow back again."

"You're very kind," said the Crab tenderly. "Would you walk with me to the edge of the deep?"

So the Prawn walked beside the soft green Crab as he dragged his old body to the where warm sands shelved down into the cold deep. As they went the Crab told his friend of when he'd been just a nipper. He'd been soft then too. But he'd grown up amongst the other hard shelled creatures of the deep. Barnacles that he rubbed up the wrong way, lobsters that had twisted his arm and other crabs who'd put the pinch on him. He had learnt to toughen up, and had gradually lost all his softness until he was hard and cold like them.

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When they reached the place where the bottom falls sharply away the Crab turned to this old empty shell. He looked into its black empty eyes. It was like looking to a mirror. It looked like him. But he knew now it wasn't. Even though the Prawn was still with him he was now not embarrassed to address his old self -

"Before you go, I want to say thank you," he said, his eyes taking in every craggy feature of the shell. "Thank you for protecting me from the hard knocks in life, for taking all the bumps and bruises for me. You served me as best you could until I found the warmth of the sun. But you're no use to me now. You have gone beyond protection into restriction. You don't work any more. You're broken. Thank you, but goodbye."

And with that he threw the empty shell over the edge. It floated and tumbled down and down until they could see it no more. Because they were under the sea the Prawn couldn't tell if there was a tear in the Crab's eye, but he felt that there might be.

"My friend," said the Crab. "I wonder if there is anything left of that rotten seagull. I'm feeling hungry. How about you?"

So they walked back to the shallows together in the rippling warm sunshine. They talked about food and friends and family, and the Crab felt able to ask about the inner organs that he could see working through the Prawn's skin.

From that day on the Crab and the Prawn were best of friends. The Prawn's missing legs grew back whilst the Crab's skin stayed soft and supple.

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One thing that the Crab eventually realised was that his old shell was far from gone forever. It was as if it still had a quiet mind of its own. After sinking into deep, the tide would wash it into to the shallows and back to the Crab's side. So when things didn't go his way there was a temptation for him to creep back inside its protective cover. But the bright warm sunshine would always remind him of who he really was. He soon learned that he needed to make a trip to the edge of the deep whenever the tide came in. There he would again cast his old self away. It was always a wrench, but it felt so very good to be free. And every time he did it, he found that the old shell fitted a little less because the Crab had grown just a little bit more.