

some of that love

I've buried Elizabeth's hermit crab beneath my hammer, to show her who the Boss of this apartment is. I am the Boss. I've already shown the crab.

There was a delicious little crackle when I broke up the shell. I want to hear it again. The pieces knock like bamboo in my palm, muffled by its little body, curled up, in the middle of everything; it looks like an unfolded hand.

I'm ready for ol' Lizzy to open the door, to push the pieces of her thing across the linoleum and watch its sheeny trail and wonder what it is she just kicked. I left it there for her to push. She needs to kick the thing. I placed its body far enough from the door that she couldn't make the first step in and onto the crab all at once; I placed it where she wouldn't notice. I'd like her to shoot the thing across the floor and wonder what it is she just slid to the side. The suspense is killing me.

When I think about how I'll have to console her, when I think about the tears I'll have to brush away as I tell her, *I am the Boss here, darling*, it becomes drippingly apparent that I'll need to wash my hands. These lavishly orange, crabby creeks are still wallowing in my creases. And I wouldn't want to ruin the sweater that I bought her. She looks so fine in it. I think, *What a good purchase! What a gift! Who cares about a shell who drinks water from a sponge? She looks so fine.* It can't be disputed.

Her teacher called to tell me that I'd made such a wonderful choice of that sweater. *She is just the belle of the ball here at Winston*, she said. Teachers see children and sweaters all the time. They know what they're talking about. I'd better go wash my hands.

I've brought out the step-stool she uses at the sink, to sit on by the wall. When she opens the door, it'll make its way to hide me. *Surprise, surprise!* I'm behind the door.

After noticing the crab, after seeing how dry it is, after getting a glass of water to wet it again, I come back to the front door and do you know what?

There are feet walking around on my porch. There is a hand touching the door. There is a glass of water in my hand. I'm standing there, paralyzed.

The shutter opens wide and spits out a letter, far enough to fly atop the crab. It is a letter from my ex-wife. Addressed to the child. Oh, well. I pour a puddle over both. The envelope sags with it, but the crab finds a whole new breath of life that I'm sure I'm enjoying as much as the crab does. It absorbs all it can. The other pieces shine.

I fish out the envelope and tear it apart. There's a page of unfinished loose-leaf and I can see the word love four or five times. A light layer of pulp mops across my fingers. But who cares? It's only pulp. Maybe I'll wipe it on her face and she can feel some of that love I've read so much about.

A child falling down held the whole student body up, but no matter. Twenty minutes, I can't complain. She walked in the doorway, opened it with that shining new key. And she might not've pushed the crab aside, like I'd so fatherly planned, but what

were the odds? Twenty-five to one that she wouldn't? You can't beat odds like that. And in the end she still wept about it. It's all the same. I can't have everything my way all the time. I have to give in a little bit. Her hair is in pigtails; it's all I can do.

*This is responsibility, I say. I am the Boss.* I take a careful hand and hanky to her face, quick and subtle; the last thing I'd want is for her to stain that beautiful sweater with a leaky nose. She doesn't know what to do. She has nobody but me. I tie the hanky around her nose like a bandit, or a little girl from China.

We pick up the pieces in a blue plastic dustpan, her shivering little hands held tight in my hands, tight around the handles of the dustpan and the broom. We drop them into the garbage with a little shriek. And I take her hand again and find a rag. Her hand in my hand, we wash away the little drops it left on the ground.

She named it Albert. Or so I assume; I wasn't aware of any name before. But she's been screaming *Albert!* for a while. Let's just assume. Could Albert be a boyfriend? *No boys, I say. Oh, Albert!* she cries.

She sleeps in the cot I made up, with three comforters below her and one right above her and stuck in her arms. I'm sure it's comfy enough.

We took off the sweater, the pigtails and the frilly socks. I put on the pajamas, and forget about the sweater; let's talk about some pj's!

Albert's little clear plastic box is still clear and still plastic, but I'd scarcely call it Albert's anymore. It's mine. And Lizzy's, I'll give her some of that. I'll leave it there to remind her for a while. I think I'll put a little note inside, under the bowl where it used to live. Something like, *Who's the boss?* I'm very good at this father thing. Light-bulbs are turning on all the time.

I put a hand to her face. I give her some love, my love.

The bin is empty, save for the crab and a paper plate. But I pull it out anyways. *Let's not go overboard, I say. Enough's enough.*

But near the can outside, I simply can't help myself. The moon is full. A breeze ruffles everything and fills the bag like the lightest balloon. I reach in and take out the shell, piece by piece. I separate the pieces into two long piles, and roll my feet across them.