

Ghost Fishing

by Ethan Palm

Jon keeps reviewing Alan's reminders as he maneuvers his car through the twisting roads up the hill. Water the plants. Go canoeing, crabbing. Take care of yourself. Call if you want. Their conversations leading up to Alan's departure for the summer all took a similar tenor.

"I want you to feel ownership of the space. You're not just house sitting," Alan had said. "Take care of yourself, too. It's been years since I saw you, wish we'd have some overlap. Tell your folks 'hello' for me."

Jon needs a change of scenery. Alan is abroad for the summer. It makes perfect sense to have Jon house sit. A quiet spot on the bay might be just what's needed to get Jon out of his head for a bit.

A rolling and divot pocked lawn stretches out from the house. Brown and gold splotches of grass are a heat map of where the sprinklers need to be replaced. Furry wood timbers frame the yellow house giving it a pineapple appearance. It's a Craftsman. At least Jon thinks it's a Craftsman or heard someone call it that. He's not really sure what a Craftsman is, but it looks like a craftsman could live here. Crafting the fibrous, kiwi skin timbers into a house, then looking at it with hands on hips and the barest smile of satisfaction.

The house exhales as Jon opens the door. The scent of dust and grandmas. Echoes of memories reduced to smells. Jon inhales the memories. The house is packed with the kind of stuff that could go to the dump or to a second-hand store, but maybe we'll use it one day. Dust motes glint in the air.

Photographs of Alan's lineage are scattered about the house. There is no obvious order to the photos, and generations mingle with one another. Jon remembers a past visit when the house bustled with activity. He recognizes aunts and cousins of Alan frozen in happy poses on the walls. A photo of Alan and Jon's dad in their thirties is included among the snapshots of blood relatives.

An eat-in kitchen dominates the ground floor. Light fills the space from a large bay window that look out onto the water. The kitchen's brightness lures Jon forward like a beacon.

Alan left a collage of notes taped to the refrigerator. They curl out from beneath magnets, threatening to leap.

Jon,

Make yourself at home. What's mine is yours. Please remember to water the plants.

If you ever need to talk, give me a call.

Todd and Lana are next door. They want you to introduce yourself.

You have to take the canoe out and catch some crabs. Yellow cookbook by the stove has a recipe.

The page is marked, but it's simple. You can boil them in the shell.

If you need anything, I'm here for you.

Cheers,

Alan

A list of plants in the house and watering instructions is scribbled beneath the note. Caring for the plants was Alan's only requirement for Jon to occupy the house for the summer.

Marianne kept air plants suspended in intricate geometric shapes in the apartment she and Jon shared. Jon would buy her a new one from a knick-knack store downtown any time he couldn't think of a more thoughtful birthday/anniversary/holiday gift. He never had to do much for the plants.

Jon wishes for an old cat or even a fish tank to pad the number of things under his watch requiring sustenance.

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Sunlight cracks beneath the curtains before Jon finally manages to fall asleep the first night. The house is alive and it is nocturnal. The frame sighs and creaks as it settles. The wind is a good friend coming to visit and strikes up a chatter of rattling windows.

In the morning, Jon waters the plants before frying himself an egg. He stands in the kitchen, soaking in the early sunlight, watching his egg congeal from see-through to plasticky white. He wishes he could photosynthesize like his plant wards. He sprinkles salt and pepper like dashes of fertilizer.

He stares toward the ocean as he eats. The back-lawn slopes down, flanked by tall trees on either side. A runway to the bay. Water laps at the shore in a calm, inviting way. Farther out, foam and spray coat the top of the ocean like frosting. Constantly melting and reforming, sculpted back to shape by the waves. Jon leaves the dishes in the sink and goes to dress himself.

He used to wear graphic t-shirts to work to look like the other young members of the engineering team. Then he discovered that he was more comfortable in a button-down shirt tucked into his jeans. Inserting each button through its hole wasn't strapping himself into a corporate straight jacket, but rather a suit of armor for his confidence. Now it doesn't matter

what he wears. No one to see him. He's still drawn to a button-down, a flannel that he wears open over a t-shirt.

His phone buzzes with the arrival of an email from an old professional acquaintance. *Congratulations on the acquisition! Ran into M at a meetup—so sad, sorry! Let's meet up sometime. We're hiring a new senior engineer. You would be a great fit! The product is going to be huge. We're about to hit our second round of funding. Different beer on tap every week and*

He stops reading as the message devolves into ravings about the catered lunches.

Jon exits the house and tosses two crab pots into the canoe perched on the back deck. He drags the canoe from the porch and across the grass to the start of the sandy beach. The scraping sound makes him pause to look for new scratches, but the deep green composite wears a road map of scars from previous outings. Jon's contributions are invisible among the well-earned pocks, crannies, and fissures already sustained.

The last time Jon canoed was almost a decade ago with some friends during a college break. Memories of navigating through the slough and arguing whether the long-legged birds were herons or cranes come back to him as he shoves the canoe into the water. Bright memories of cold beers back at their campsite and the special deliciousness of cheap hotdogs cooked outside.

When the canoe transitions from grinding along the shore to floating on the water, Jon hops in. He propels the vessel farther out on with inelegant shoves of the paddle against the sand.

He dips the paddle into the water and levers it back. Ripples erupt and the canoe lurches forward and to the right. He crosses the paddle over the canoe, dripping salt water across his lap, and sends the canoe to the left. He continues with this zig zag stroke until he is several hundred

yards from the shore. Jon brings the paddle into the canoe and allows the boat to drift. The water is a gray green that the canoe almost mimics. Jon breathes in and feels the boat rock as his lungs fill. Alan's house peeks out from the trees behind him. A pleasant yellow spark in the otherwise green and gray of the bay.

He grasps for the crab pots near his feet. Two rings and some weighted nylon rope are all that's needed to capture crabs. A Chinese finger trap of death. Jon tosses a pot over the side of the canoe and watches it drift down until it's swallowed in the murk.

Momentum carries the end of the cord into the water with a blip. It is swallowed beneath the surface and lost to Jon. He notices two orange floats in the canoe. One tied to the remaining crab pot with a mélange of haphazard knots. The other float, conspicuously naked of knots, is attached to nothing.

He gives the knotted float a tug and throws the contraption into the water before paddling back to shore. Jon drags the canoe up to the porch and sits down. He can just barely spy the orange float bobbing gently.

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A knock on the door calls Jon downstairs as he's washing up from the canoe venture. On the other side of the door stands an older couple looking like catalog models from an outdoor clothing company shooting a Pacific Northwest spread.

"You must be Jon," the man says, extending a hand. Jon shakes it and wishes his own hands felt as thick and strong as this stranger's. "Todd."

"And I'm Lana," the woman says.

“Jon. Nice to meet you. Alan mentioned you two.”

“Uh oh,” laughs Todd. “Just the good stuff, I hope.”

Jon elegantly navigates neighborly small talk and drops the essential information. Worked in software. Currently figuring out his next move. Just looking to have a relaxing summer, you know? Enjoy life for a bit.

“What do you do outside of work?” Lana asks.

“That’s what I’m figuring out,” Jon says. He smiles hoping for humor, but Lana gives him a look that makes him wish he’d lied.

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Dragging the canoe to the water is easier this time. As he paddles back to the bobbing float of the crab pot, muscles that Jon is typically unaware of in his shoulders and back cry out for attention. He can’t remember if he even likes crab.

At the float, he dips a hand into the cold water. The canoe rocks on its axis sending Jon’s stomach into a flip. He wraps a fist around the crab pot’s line and yanks it toward the surface. It dances and coils as the trap rises. Water cascades into the canoe as Jon pulls the crab pot into the boat, pooling in the bottom and creating temporary continents of water logged fabric on his jeans.

A lone crab is tangled in the trap. Jon expected that his prey would scuttle about, but the crab only opens and closes its pincers.

With every stroke back to shore, Jon worries that the crab will spring free and frantically attack with slicing strikes. Or that it is secretly harboring a venomous proboscis—until now undiscovered in Dungeness crabs. Just waiting to lethally sink into Jon’s thigh.

He delicately carries the trap with his index and ring fingers hooked on the wire frame and sets it in the kitchen sink. He fills the basin with cool water before fetching the cookbook Alan recommended.

The recipe says to boil water with enough salt that it tastes briny, then drop the crab head first into the pot.

Be aware that the crab does not grab onto the rim of the pot.

He removes the crab pot from the sink and places it on the floor, tangling the crab in the nylon ropes and splashing water about the kitchen. Jon brings the largest pot to the sink and fills it with water. He transfers it to the stove and pours salt into the water. He sets the stove to high and turns toward the ensnared crab.

The crab doesn’t move, save for one rear leg scratching against the tile floor. Clacking like the rap of fingernails on a table. Jon frees the crab’s legs and it snaps a pincer toward him. He retreats and grabs a pair of tongs from a drawer. Jon tweezes the crab out of the trap and chuckles remembering playing “Operation” as a kid and how high the stakes felt back then. The sound of his laugh is startling.

“I haven’t spoken all day,” he says aloud either to himself or the crab, he’s not sure.

Jon raises the tongs to eye level and regards the crab. Beady eyes top marbled purple and white stalks. The bottom of its carapace is covered in jagged spikes. The crab flails, trying to

swim through the air. Its claws click open and shut. Its eyestalks pivot. The water in the pot is roiling now. Jon transfers the crab to his hand and suspends it above the water. His thumb on the apron and fingers pressing on top of the shell.

The crab looks dumb. Jon once read that a crab's brain is only the size of a pencil point. It probably can't even feel pain. Steam from the boiling water curls the hair on the back of his hand.

Jon moves the crab to a cutting board and forces it down with one hand. He selects the largest chef's knife from the magnetic rack above the stove and aligns the knife point between the crab's eyes. He pokes forward and the knife tip deflects off the crab's face. Pressing down harder on the crab elicits an eggshell crunch as the crustacean's legs scuttle with ferocity against the cutting board, gashing the wood. Another shove of the knife bounces off the crab. His third jab punctures the shell. The eye stalks are mirrored on the knife blade, temporarily giving the creature four eyes. After the initial resistance, the knife dives through the crab and bites into the delicate webbing between Jon's thumb and forefinger.

Oh fuck, Jon thinks.

His blood spills over the crab, mixing with salt water, viscera, and the filth that pools out from the butchered crab.

"Fuck!"

The impaled crab and knife clatter to the floor. Jon mashes a kitchen towel against his hand. The white linen greedily soaks up his blood and takes on a deep maroon stain. Curses fly from Jon's mouth and he doubles over, cradling his hand into his belly. He knows he must look

at the wound to assess if he needs stitches. But maybe he'll settle for ignorance and bleeding out on the kitchen floor. The palm of his hand is slick with crab guts and his own blood.

The thought of dying alone bounces around his mind. Just Jon and the crab. He laughs and chokes on sobs until tears squeeze from his eyes and spittle bubbles around his mouth.

You can't even see me, can you?

The crab's innards drip down from the counter to the floor and pool near Jon on the floor.

A deep breath steels his nerves enough to unbuckle the towel. Amid the sticky mess of blood, the meat beneath his thumb gapes open like a bass mouth. Instead of gasping for air, it just hangs open slowly regurgitating blood.

Jon turns off the stove. Leaving the butchered crab and all its filth in place, he ties the towel back around his hand and searches on his phone for the nearest Urgent Care. A forty-eight-minute drive. He slams the door on his way out. The windows rattle and the door bounces back open. Jon shuts the door gingerly this time and goes to his car.

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His hand throbs while he drives back from Urgent Care. The nurse admonished him for driving himself. Apparently in his shocked state, he was a threat to other motor vehicle operators and even to his own safety.

Jon steadies the car by wresting the bandaged hand on the wheel and gripping with his uninjured one. His headlights light up trees and sparkle off reflective speed bumps.

Jon's cheeks flush as he repeatedly replays in his head how he told the nurse that he cut himself cooking.

"Try to be careful next time. Drive home safely. Slowly."

A car driving the other way floods him with light. He glares at his bandage, a testament to incompetence.

When he pulls up to Alan's house, he storms inside avoiding the kitchen and immediately flopping into bed.

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Jon dreams of the beach. The tide comes in as an inky stain brushing against a whale laying on the sand. Unsure if it is a carcass sighing out mortal gasses or a raggedly breathing animal clinging to life, Jon approaches the whale.

A twist of teal plastic rope trails from the whale's mouth like macabre floss. The whale has dug a plot for itself while attempting to rock back into the water. Water drains into the pits the tide ebbs in, but never enough to resurrect the whale's buoyancy.

The whale regards him with huge eyes so dark that Jon expects to see stars in their night sky murkiness. He shudders and blurts, "I'm sorry."

The whale doesn't respond.

Jon touches the rope and a sigh leaks from the whale. He gives it a tug and is met with resistance. He yanks harder, his injured hand burning and threatening to split open. Gripping the rope with both hands, he pulls and digs his heels into the wet sand. His muscles strain until the

resistance suddenly uncorks. A crab pot knotted to the end of the line that he freed from the whale plops into the sand.

The whale wheezes. Jon tastes the smell before his nostrils register it. The whale deflates. Organs, bile, ocean water, and blackness spilled out. Thousands of crabs pour from the ocean to feast on the carcass. Their scuttling movements bring the whale to life. The crabs—shifting sequins in the moonlight—pick the whale to bones.

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His hand bleeds through the bandage and Jon awakes in a sweaty, bloody bed. Last night's carnage awaits him in the kitchen. Crab guts and his blood stain the counter and floor where they coalesced into pools of salt, grime, and filth.

Jon scrubs and scours, but a brown stain is painted into the floor. He spends the day napping, reading, eating, and cursing.

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His mornings adopt a pattern. Start coffee maker. Consider the need for food while dragging the canoe to the shore and pushing it into the water until it's at the point where the sand barely clings to it. Hop in, shove off, paddle out, and gaze down. His ripple-distorted reflection staring back up.

Some days, the water is clear enough to see down to the abandoned crab pot. It sits there tamely, tauntingly. Crabs scuttle in and out of the trap, baiting the trap for larger prey with the presence of their bodies. Jon imagines diving down for the trap to preemptively rescue whatever

sea creature will try to eat the bounty of contained crabs. But the thought of diving over the canoe's gunwale and sending it drifting keeps him moored to the vessel.

He experiments with a long stick, a broom, a cane he finds in the guest room, but nothing reaches to the crab pot's drifting line. His morning ritual is completed by paddling a sloppy circle around the trap, looking for another point of attack, and returning empty-handed to coffee in the kitchen.

The plants wither as the days go by.

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On the Fourth of July, Lana knocks on the door and insists Jon comes to the barbecue party she's hosting. He drifts about wearing a nice shirt.

Jon gets better at repeating the same conversation. He's not *from* Seattle, but yeah, he'd been living there. He and Alan go way back, yeah Alan is a great guy. Work?

"I'm actually on a bit of a break now. The last place I worked got acquired, but didn't keep me on. So, the summer is mine. It's nice to be away, but not feel like I'm in the middle of nowhere, you know?" Jon says.

The multiple audiences for this spiel nod politely and murmur agreements.

Todd and a small group of men who make Jon feel like a child discuss fishing between gulps of beer. Jon nods along to their words before inserting himself into the conversation. Yeah, they love to go crabbing. Don't usually catch much in the bay, but it's nice when they do.

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When the first of the house plants' leaves turn brittle enough to fall from the pull of gravity, Jon breaks his morning canoe routine and goes for a walk. He's become too familiar with the easy slope of backyard to the bay and the gray green water behind the house. He knows the view looking back at the house from the water as well. Tree-heavy and dense. He's driven to town, but never walked anywhere nearby.

After a half mile of steep roads, he exits the woodsy area and is surrounded by the gentle roll of small hills. Static waves covered in yellowed grasses spread out in every direction. The sun feels hotter here. He knows his neck is burning and sweat makes his limbs itch.

A car rolls past and the driver stares at him quizzically. He trudges on alone until a pickup stops beside him. The driver calls out to him.

"Hey, you're that young man staying at Alan's place, aren't you?" The driver is a kind, creased lady with steel hair cut short in a way that said she could load her own groceries, thank you very much and don't you call me ma'am. Her eyes crinkled with thick cut crow's feet and Jon remembers seeing her walking along the beach with her dogs during his canoe trips.

"I am, yeah. My name is Jon." He is self-conscious of the uhs that punctuate his words.

"I'm Margie. Your car break down? Let me give you a ride back to the house."

"Oh no, that's okay," Jon says. "I'm just taking a walk."

"Out in this heat? It's no trouble, my house is right up from Alan's," Margie says. "We're a community out here."

Jon doesn't protest and crosses to the passenger side of Margie's pickup. An old Ford Ranger that Jon could see in a Steinbeck novel. He pulls himself into the truck and when he clicks his seatbelt, notices that Margie is driving with hers unbuckled.

Jon's feet rest on a pile of crushed Diet Coke cans. Margie wears a red flannel with the sleeves cut off, her forearms more muscular than Jon's.

"Alan's a great guy. Used to get spider plant clippings from him."

"He's very generous." Jon clears his throat. "He and my dad have known each other forever."

Margie grunts an acknowledgement. She asks if Jon is from the city and he nods.

"Yeah sort of. Been in Seattle for a while now. Just needed a break."

Margie agrees that everyone should get out of the city and breathe once in a while. Especially with this beautiful bay so close.

"Do you fish much?" Jon asks.

"Oh sure. You'd have to wrestle me to keep me off the water," Margie says.

Jon knows he would lose that fight.

"Do you know what to do if a crab pot sinks? I'm worried I lost one of Alan's."

"Oh, honey, you're not the first to have one drift off. Don't worry about one trap."

Margie's chuckle makes Jon blush, but he feels a tightness in his chest start to unwind.

"I'll bring you another trap and it'll be our little secret. Alan won't miss it," Margie says.

"That's too kind," Jon says.

They stop at Margie's place on the way. Jon notes that from her home, which is the color of the surrounding trees, Margie has a perfect view of his splashing trips out in the canoe. Her dogs bark while Jon waits in the truck for Margie to return with a crab pot. At Alan's home, she declines Jon's offer of a beer.

"Used to love the Silver Bullet, but I'm off alcohol except for kom-booo-chuh now."

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The next morning, Jon doesn't start the coffee pot. He heads immediately for the canoe and cuts a line through the water and finds the sunken trap.

Jon stows the paddle, rips off his shirt, and dives into the water. He never opened his eyes in the ocean as a boy, but he forces them open now. His shoulder blades contract as he strokes downward. The morning sunlight doesn't penetrate as deep as he'd expected. His lungs hold less air than he thought they would. He sees the trap, but he cannot find the cord in the dark water. He lashes out with a frantic grasp, but the line that he stares at every morning evades him. He feels a primal tingle of vulnerability in the small of his back. A phantom great white, crocodile, ichthyosaur, or any other number of monsters lurk in his mind, just waiting to close in on him.

The crab pot is feet away. Jon kicks and grabs at the water, but he can't fight his body's physical instinct to return to the surface. Bubbles float from his mouth and his lungs beg to be refilled. He kicks and grabs to propel upward. When his head breaks the surface, he immediately gasps swallowing salty water with his first breath of air.

The canoe is drifting away. His sloppy freestyle stroke takes him to the canoe. He grabs it midship and kicks back to shore.

The quiet scrape of the canoe against sand is a whisper of safety. Jon crawls from the water on hands and knees. His stabbed hand is bare, the bandage somewhere in the bay. All of Jon's muscles ache. He tugs the canoe just out of the water and trudges on toward the house. He sheds his pants on the porch and takes a hot shower. When he steps out, he can't see himself for the fog on the mirror.

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After he waters the plants, Jon sits on the beach watching the waves. His clothes feel heavy and soft as they absorb moisture from the salty air. He gently moves his uninjured hand across the sand, feeling the textures of the granules—the rocks mixed with the fine particles. A prick from a sharp stone sends a sympathetic jolt of pain into his bandaged hand. He folds his hands into his lap and leans forward.

Todd and Lana stroll on the beach. Smiles break on their faces when they see Jon and he lifts a hand to acknowledge them.

The tide is coming in, the surf creeping closer with every wave that breaks. The cresting of the waves captures Jon's gaze. Light blue peaks coming in from the green water. At every wave's crescendo, there is a moment when the peak becomes translucent. A momentary portal through the opacity. Jon looks through as many of these quick windows as he can before the water comes in to touch his feet.