

## *Lobster Claws*

by

Jennifer Handford

Charlotte Collins sits cross-legged on a mat in a meditation room at Santosa Springs, a wellness retreat tucked in the misty Berkshire Mountains. Kel the guru is cute—Charlotte's age, thirty, give or take—the type of guy Charlotte would have loved in her twenties, an enlightened, touchy-feely feminist in the body of a mountain biker, but those guys wanted to *know* her, wanted to look into her eyes and understand how she was feeling. Charlotte had no interest in swimming in the deep end of that pool.

"There's a difference between chest and belly breathing," Kel says. His biceps wink from his fitted hemp T-shirt.

Charlotte raises her hand, feeling her ponytail dance on her shoulders. "Breathing doesn't usually work for me. I've tried, but it makes me more stressed."

Charlotte's inability to breathe is why her boss, Diana, VP of Commodities at JP Morgan, called her into her office. "Have you seen that PSA? Khakis and golf shirt type of guy, but then he starts fentanyl, and his face turns ashen and his skin becomes thin as cellophane."

"Am I the fentanyl guy?" Charlotte asks. She reaches for her face, noting the tender skin on her cheeks that used to be plump like dim sum buns.

"You're a little worn down," Diana said. "I'm sending you for some forced fun."

\*\*\*

"Keep an open mind." Kel explains that breath work can take you to the same places as psychedelics, and if done properly, one's consciousness can be altered.

Charlotte wants to be transported to her happy place, an inflatable blue raft adrift her childhood swimming pool, the sun on her face, the terrifying thrill of Tony sluicing beneath her, the menacing *Jaws*' anthem—duh duh, trilling in her ears.

"You may even talk with a deceased loved one," Kel says.

Tony's biting the gold medal hanging around his neck. He's pointing at Charlotte, as if to say, "This one's for you, Sis." Charlotte squeezes her eyes until the vision of her brother pixilates to dust. Although Santosa Springs is alcohol-free, Charlotte has packed a bottle of Tito's for tonight. She'll settle into her room with a vodka tonic, Chex Mix, and Red Vines she smuggled in, study the markets, and respond to client emails.

"The quickest way to get there," Kel says. "Is to do two major inhales through the mouth, and then one long exhale. He exaggerates the breathing, and the class mimics him.

Charlotte can think of an easier way to get there: the bottle of vodka in her room.

"Now let's lie on our mats," Kel says. "Use the bolster under your knees. One big inhale. Another inhale. A giant exhale."

Kel covers Charlotte with two blankets, and when he kneels and places a folded towel over her eyes, he presses ever so lightly, and she feels his breath on her face. Wintergreen. "Inhale. Inhale. Exhale." Charlotte wells from his gentle touch like an abused shelter animal.

The music begins. Drums. Primal howling. Water whooshing. "Match your breath to the music," Kel suggests.

The chanting continues, the monkeys hoot, the wind whistles. Charlotte imagines a jungle like the one in *Apocalypse Now*, a movie her dad made her and Tony watch when they were little kids. Scared them to death. It's not lost on Charlotte that money is the only idol she worships these days. Charlotte hears herself exhaling audibly, with guttural moans; her breath has taken on a rhythm of its own, like the natives beating drums as the water buffalo is killed.

*This isn't so bad*, Charlotte thinks. At minimum, she's in for an hour-long lap, like the nights she treats herself to an Ambien and a heavy pour of wine. The blankets on her body are comforting, and Kel has burned a sage smudge stick, and Charlotte seeks it like catching a whiff of coconut suntan lotion.

The heat and vibrations begin in her thighs. Energy moves. When she runs, she often gets a runner's high. This must be something like that. The tingling ramps up until she's in a calcified state, as though Prometheus has fashioned her out of clay, and she is drying in the sun. Charlotte is prostrate with legs that no longer work, with arms and hands that have contorted into lobster claws.

*Take a deep breath and hold it. Starfish your arms and legs.* Tony buoys her with one hand on her back as he teaches her to float. *Pretend you're frozen.*

Charlotte cannot move.

She is paralyzed.

She accepts her crustacean body and stares into the darkness of her shut eyes, seeing the turquoise pool water lap against the Spanish tiles, smelling the chlorine, feeling Tony's smile as he lets go. *You're floating.*

She's ten years old, maybe the last time she was happy, before her father moved out (fire bombing their family like napalm in *Apocalypse Now*), before Charlotte and Tony learned the magic of Dad's abandoned liquor cabinet—Let's try the Johnny Walker, before high school and boys grinding into her and then ignoring her the next day, and before Tony on the diving board—the booze, the accident, the wheelchair.

Ten was the best.

She's ten, and they're in the backyard swimming pool. Tony swans from the diving board, and Charlotte sails on a blue raft. "Race you," Tony says, pushing off the wall and swimming the length of the pool underwater, gracefully, his lithe body like a dolphin, while Charlotte strokes and slaps the water like a seal attacked by a polar bear. Before Tony reaches the wall, he feigns drowning, as if a sea monster is pulling him to the trenches, flailing until his little sister taps the edge first. "You win," he cheers.

Dad is at the grill, flipping burgers. Mom is fussing over the side dishes of potato salad and watermelon triangles. The sky is embarrassingly blue. Laughter rings.

Charlotte thinks of her New York apartment building and the rooftop swimming pool. In five years of living there, she hasn't once been there.

\*\*\*\*\*

Jennifer Handford is a former high-school literature and composition teacher and currently an MFA student in creative writing at George Mason University.