



## HERMIE

by Nathaniel Rich

Vermin, heights, thunderstorms, airplanes, wide-open spaces, commitment—they don't get to me, not at all, but public speaking is another thing altogether. The Introduction to Marine Biology lecture I give to my freshmen every year is enough to rattle me, so you can imagine how I felt in the moments before my speech at the Eighteenth International Conference of Limnology and Oceanology in Salzburg this year. Fortunately I have developed a practice that has served me well in these moments. Fifteen minutes before I have to go on, I make a trip to the restroom, where I wash my hands and recite several passages from the paper I'm to deliver. Then I close my eyes and repeat to myself, like a mantra, three words: Calm Blue Ocean. Calm Blue Ocean. Calm Blue Ocean. When I open my eyes—well, I may still have the flutters but I'm as ready as I'm ever going to be.

So as Arnie Lundtfelt was coming to the end of his discussion of organochlorine contamination of the Bering Sea's Steller

sea lion pup population, I quietly exited the conference room and made my way to the head. I've always found the restrooms at Sheraton Hotels to be consistently clean, well-attended, and capacious; I have observed this to be true in Lyon, San Diego, Toronto, and even Hanoi, at the Third Annual Polychaete Conference, a few years back. The Salzburg bathroom was no exception: the mirror was unsmudged, there were no puddles around the urinals, and the bank of three sinks was a pure white porcelain. I say this only to emphasize how quickly, and with what a sense of shock, I noticed, perched next to the rim of the middle sink, a giant *Coenobita clypeatus*. That is to say, a hermit crab.

I didn't recognize him at first. Perhaps it was because he had changed his shell. Gone was the *buyscon spiratum* I remembered so well: a perfect pear whelk, with alternating bands of burnt orange and nacre, polished by the tide to a delicate glow; its long tapering stem; its tight spiral apex; and the open fold revealing a darker orange interior—an elegant, if compact, home. In its place was a filthy, unwieldy, carbuncled husk, to which there clung small bits of wet garbage and sea gunk. On closer examination it was clear that two common shells—one dark brown, the other a dreary shade of green—had been roughly fused together. There is no scientific term for such a monstrosity.

From the shell's opening there emerged two cautious antennae, testing the air. Then several furry claws, bronzed by age, tapped the white counter with their hardened pincers. With a sudden display of agility, the animal pivoted, scraping his shell

against the porcelain  
mine. I gasped.

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"Do you remember  
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against the porcelain. His black beady eyes fixed directly on mine. I gasped.

"Hello, old friend." The voice was hoarse, scratchy. I glanced around the bathroom—I even ducked down and looked for feet in the stalls—but I knew it was pointless. I was the only person there.

"Ah. So you don't recognize me."

I stared at the hermit crab. His claws were drawn up beneath his shell, folded like the legs of a kneeling child.

"I'm sorry," I said. I kept looking around, but to be honest I was just trying to buy myself some time. The voice was coming from within the shell.

"I don't blame you," said the hermit crab. One of his antennas gestured behind him toward the mirror. "I can't even recognize myself."

"I just—I'm sorry—"

"It's Hermie."

I couldn't believe it.

"I know, I don't look the same. Or sound the same. But a lot of years have passed since our summers in Sarasota. You don't look the same either, by the way."

This was true. The last time I had seen him I was roughly four feet tall. My voice hadn't yet broken, and I had yet to lose my baby fat. Now I had a full beard.

"Do you remember?" said Hermie. "The dunes of Siesta Key, on Turtle Beach?"

I grinned, despite myself. "How could I forget? It's just that—well, it's been a long time."

"So you remember our days on the shore?"

"Sure I do. In fact, I now study coastal regions for a living. That's the reason I'm here, in Salzburg—"

"What about The King's Castle?"

I smiled at the memory.

"The King's Castle," I said. "I forgot we called it that. It took the whole afternoon to construct, because I only had that little red pail with the broken handle, but by the end we had battlements, an arcaded pavilion, even a gatehouse."

"Yes, and remember the high tower where you put my throne, and the waterslide that you pushed me down, into the moat, and . . ." He trailed off as that long-ago day in the sun seemed to wash over him.

"It's good to see you, Hermie."

There was an awkward silence.

"What about Man-Buried-Alive?" I said.

"Ha!" said the crab. "That was a good one. I was always a little bit scared at first, but then I would dig my way out."

"Except that one time."

"Well that was not fair, putting the pail over the sand. I assumed it was night, and that you had left me behind."

"Oh, I didn't keep you under too long. As soon as I heard your claws scratching against the plastic, I let you out."

"I think you might have waited a few minutes. I could hear you cackling. But then you set me free, and I loved you all the same."

"That was one of our best adventures." I smiled at the memory.

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said Hermie, laughing. "

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"There were also the seaweed salads that you made for me," said Hermie, laughing. "With sea salt dressing."

"You had quite an appetite."

Hermie squealed. "It was delicious!"

"No wonder you had to find yourself a new shell!"

Hermie's laughter stopped.

"That's not the reason I have a new shell."

"No," I said. "Of course it's not."

"Turtle Beach—it's completely gone."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"They tore it up. Exploded the beach and inserted columns. They put up an apartment building much too close to the water. This was some time after you left."

"I see."

"Then the hurricanes came. They got worse and worse. They swallowed up the beaches whole." His voice got very quiet. "Why did you stop coming to Turtle Beach, anyway? Where did you go?"

"I don't know," I said, but of course I did. I just couldn't bear to tell him the truth. I did not stop coming to Turtle Beach, at least not at first. I just stopped visiting Hermie. My mother explained to me that ten-year-old boys were too old to play with talking hermit crabs, or any other imaginary friends. A few years later I went off to boarding school, and then to college. I never returned to Sarasota.

"Can't you pick up and move to another beach?" I asked.

"I tried—first to Venice, then Casey Key, then Manasota. The whole key is disappearing. Everywhere there is sticky

water, sharp unnatural pebbles, and invisible seaweed that tastes awful."

"I'm actually working on this very issue. The sustainability of coastal environments. Erosion. Rising sea levels. The title of my talk today, in fact, is 'Differential seed and seedling predation by coenobita: impacts on coastal composition.'"

Hermie didn't seem to know how to respond. "I have no place to go, old friend."

I started to wonder how Hermie could have gotten into the bathroom in the first place. The windows were sealed; he was too large to enter through the sink drains, or the urinal. And how did he get from Sarasota to Salzburg?

"What about the rest of the old gang?" I asked. "Stella the Starfish? Ernie the Urchin? Gulliver?"

"They're dead. Long dead. Every last one of them. Clammy and all her daughters too. I found Clammy myself. Her shell—it's too horrible to say." His voice cracked. "Her shell had turned green. She had been poisoned."

"Oh. I'm very sorry to hear that."

Hermie propped himself up with his claws, a gesture that appeared to require heavy physical exertion. A gesture of supplication.

"Do you remember how we would bob in the ocean?" he said. "How you would hold me in the palm of your hand, and when a wave went over your head, you would lift me above the surface, in the air?"

I nodded, but I didn't know how to respond. With a quick motion—I couldn't help myself—I checked the time on

my cell phone. There was no signal.

"I'm sorry to say this, I

"I wondered," said Hermie, "an irrational optimism."

"Excuse me? I don't know

"A new home? A safe place for the sea forever more?"

"I—I don't know what you mean. With my wife and young ones."

"A daughter? How old is she?"

"She's three," I said. "I have a son."

"Does she love her mother?"

"She's never been to school."

Hermie's antennae twitched. "Incalculable sadness."

"Maybe I can live with you."

"I don't know. It's just a shellfish."

"My! I hope you would stay. All we've been through."

"No, of course not, I

"Just think of all the friends we could join us, if you would go again in search of the Dum Dum Tree?"

"First of all, there's no going through."

my cell phone. There were only five minutes left before my speech.

"I'm sorry to say this, but I have to go give my talk presently."

"I wondered," said Hermie, his ancient voice animated by an irrational optimism, "have you found us a new place?"

"Excuse me? I don't know what you mean."

"A new home? A safe, clean home, where we could play in the sea forever more?"

"I—I don't know what to say. I live in Philadelphia now. With my wife and young daughter."

"A daughter? How old is she?"

"She's three," I said. I didn't like this line of conversation.

"Does she love hermit crabs, and other sea creatures?"

"She's never been to the ocean."

Hermie's antennas lowered to the counter, slowly, with incalculable sadness.

"Maybe I can live with you?" His voice was small, frail.

"I don't know. It's just that—well, my wife is allergic to shellfish."

"My! I hope you wouldn't consider serving me to her. After all we've been through together . . ."

"No, of course not, I didn't mean to imply—"

"Just think of all the fun adventures we'd have. Your daughter could join us, if you like. Really. I wouldn't mind. We could go again in search of the Dum Dum Tree. Remember the Dum Dum Tree?"

"First of all, there's no way that airport security would let you through."

He stared at me, his eyes fixed like little black stones. But I realized he couldn't possibly be crying. There are no tear ducts on a hermit crab's eyestalk.

"I'm sorry, Hermie."

He didn't speak for some time. His knuckles scraped against the white counter, as if he were trying to dig a hole in the porcelain. I glanced again at my phone. Two minutes left.

"I have to go."

"Old friend?" Hermie's voice was resigned, stiff. Feeble.

"Before you leave, can you just do me a single favor?"

My stomach dropped.

"What is it?"

"Can you carry me into the toilet? It took a long time for me to crawl over here. It was difficult to climb up the sink. I don't know how I might possibly get back down again. I could fall. My shell is fragile."

Of course! The toilet—that was how he had gotten here. The explanation relieved me. I suppose, in the initial surprise of seeing Hermie again, I had momentarily lost my ability to think logically.

Delicately I picked up Hermie. His shell was beaded with moisture, and gave off a faint, metallic scent, like flaked rust. He withdrew his claws so as not to scrape the skin of my palm. He was surprisingly light, as if his shell was filled with nothing more than air. I opened the door of the nearest stall and bent down next to the toilet.

"On the seat here is fine," he said. "Thank you."

I rested him there.

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I nodded. "Bye, He

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Hermie

"One last thing," he said. "When I sink to the bottom, would you be so kind as to flush?"

I nodded. "Bye, Hermie."

Shakily he raised one of his claws in valediction. Then he pivoted himself and, with a shove, pushed himself over the rim. The water splashed up. Hermie sunk to the bottom of the bowl. I looked at him one last time, then I flushed. The force of the jets lifted him. In that moment there was something about the colors of his shell, as he spun around the bowl, that brought back with sudden clarity the King's Castle and Man Buried Alive, Ernie and Clammy, the Dum Dum Tree and the Kaleidoscope Fountain. I was back on Turtle Beach, holding my red plastic pail, my feet breaded with the fine yellow sand, the rush of the tide powerful in my ears, the sun hot on my face.

Then it was gone. I lowered the lid. It seemed like the right thing to do.

If I can say so myself, I think the paper was a success. I might just submit it to the *Hydrobiology Review*. I didn't even feel nervous when I delivered it. There were nearly twenty-five people in attendance and later, at the cocktail hour, no less than four of them offered me their compliments.