



By Charlotte Stevenson

**S**ometimes you make a decision, and then later on you realize you made the wrong one. Other times you make a decision, and later on you still believe you made the right one. And there are still other times when you make a decision, and later on you are still not sure. That is the way my decision was. I can't quite blame myself for making the wrong one, and yet I don't feel as if I made the right one. Instead, I just feel an ache—the ache of not knowing, the ache of doubt, and the ache of not being able to do anything anyway.

I used to fish a lot off the piers in Half Moon Bay. Actually, I fished and I caught crabs. Usually on Sundays I would go out on the pier along with all the other fishermen to see what I could catch. The only thing was, the fishermen were out there for food. Whatever they caught, they would tear off their hooks and plop into one of their big white cans with silver handles. For me, though, fishing or crabbing wasn't for food, and I didn't have a big white can to plop things into. I just liked to catch things and then throw them back. Some days I didn't catch anything, but I still loved being out there in the wind and salt and ocean. Sometimes I would catch a lot, even a big Dungeness crab with a red back.

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*Charlotte Stevenson lives in Los Altos Hills, California, and submitted this story while in ninth grade at Castilleja School in Palo Alto. "I spend most of my time playing sports," she writes. "Last year I made both the swimming and basketball varsity teams at my school, and last summer I began water polo." Like the character in her story, Charlotte loves all animals (especially dogs); she helps them by participating in environmental and animal rights groups. Last fall, one of her haikus was published in Frogpond magazine.*

The fishermen got pretty jealous. They'd look out from under their dirty, weather-beaten caps or spit over the side of the railing. And when I threw the crab back, I could tell they didn't know what I was doing. This one guy with a gray beard who was always sitting on his white can as though he thought the fish were going to burst through the lid would crank the reel a few times and let it go, crank the reel, and let it go again.

For me, catching crabs was an art. First you find the little metal box in the crab pot, lift the gate, and use a knife to chop up dead squid to put inside the box. Then you latch the gate and lift the net up over the side of the railing. The net falls and splashes into the water, and then you watch it disappear down next to the pilings. The white bodies of the squid almost glow in the murky water, and you can follow their glow about eight to ten feet below the surface. You keep lowering the net until the rope goes slack, and then you tie it to the railing.

You leave the net down for about five minutes, maybe more, maybe less, depending on if it is crab season or not. In October you can catch about three or four crabs every time you put the net down, but in January you might only get a net of seaweed. You pull the net up fast, because you want the crabs to be held in by the pressure of the water.

I usually would put the net on the pier, and then carefully attempt to pry the crabs' claws off the squid inside the box. Once you get the crabs off the squid, you can pick them up, but only by their backs or else they'll pinch you. The big black spider crabs are good at getting their pointy, long arms around behind them to poke you in the wrist. Some of the spider crabs have legs at least ten inches long. You don't pick those ones up. The more common Dungeness crab is easier to handle. Their shells are usually about the size of your hand. They have red claws out in front, but they are pretty easy to avoid. Their second, third, and fourth legs aren't too long, so you can hold them by clamping your hand around the back of their shell and abdomen. If you still think the crab will pinch you, then you can put your hand inside the cuff of your jacket and then clamp your hand around it.

When I was really little, I used to carry them around the whole pier. I used to whisper to them to tell their friends that this is what happens to them when they go up in the nets. Of course, I didn't know that crabs don't have ears or, for that matter, probably don't see all that great, (continued on page 29)

I'd whisper to the  
**crabs:**

**"Tell all your friends to  
avoid those nets!"**

joist hanger, I feel how impossible my situation is. My legs are wobbly and I desperately want to keep clinging to the ladder, but I need both hands on the beam. Letting go, both of my hands pull and pull and pull.

Now that I'm balanced on the ladder on one foot, my body is suspended in the air, and the world is frozen in silence. The ground below me swirls like a tide pool. I am far away from everything and everyone.

"Need any help, honey?" the whiskered carpenter calls.

"No!"

Again, everything is quiet and I am alone. Leaning against the ladder for a moment, I close my eyes. Concentrating on gathering up my strength, I wonder how much strength I have.

I've always been a weakling, unathletic . . .

"Let me come up and get that beam from you," he says.

"No, I've just—"

I wring out every drop of my strength, and it flows like liquid energy, black and pulsating, from my body to the wood. The beam snaps into place. With one more thrust, it is nestled into the hanger beautifully.

"There," the whiskered carpenter says. "You did it."

Once I've climbed down, I look at the beam in the far corner of the ceiling. A regular beam. Who will ever know, or care, that I put it up there?

"It's been a good day's work," the whiskered carpenter says. "Can I help you with those tools?"

For the first time all day, I let him help me, and we smile at each other, striding out into the sunshine. Bursts of light sparkle all over the room, and the teeth of a chain saw are gleaming. Getting ready to leave the Victorian once again, I notice a new person in the room. I turn around.

"Hi, I'm Frances," a proud, serious woman with crinkly beige skin tells me. "I will be living here soon."

Words fly away from me, and I quietly look into her warm dark eyes. Suddenly I know that my work at Habitat isn't about hammers and beams anymore—it's about a person. A person who will live in the house I help to build, a person with a family, a life, and a name. Frances. Maybe the story is finally coming together, and maybe the story is my own.

"Thanks for coming," Frances says. ★

## Tell Them Who We Are (continued from page 26)

not to mention seeing out of water. But I did it anyway. And it's only now that I can see why I did it. I would show them the white cans while the fishermen looked at me with their weary sea eyes. I told the crabs that the fishermen were not kind like me, and that they should tell all the other crabs on the bottom of the ocean what happens above the waves. I told them to warn all the other crabs about the white cans and the man who has a gray beard and who reels and reels. I told them to tell their fellow crabs what we do. Then I would take a piece of squid and hurl it out as far as I could so the seagulls would go after it and leave. After that, I would silently drop the crab off the pier, down between the pilings, and watch it disappear in the murky waters.

One Sunday I went down to the pier with my net and a box of frozen squid that I had just bought at John's Bait Store on the way over. I set up my net in the corner of the pier, dropped it into the water next to a piling that was covered with gray barnacles, and tied the rope to the railing. While I was gazing out at the boats tied up in the harbor, I heard laughing and a cracking sound behind me.

I turned around to see two boys, about fifteen or sixteen. At their feet was a red Dungeness crab on its back. Its third leg was lying unattached beside its body, and the other legs were kicking around, trying to turn itself over so it could run. I remained in my corner. One of the boys, the one with stringy brown hair, put his foot on the crab. The antennae flickered back and forth in front of the black eyes. The other boy tried to pick up the crab, but I guess it got one of its legs around, because he slammed it down against the boards of the pier and yelled, "Ouch!" The stringy-haired one kicked it across the boards. My eyes burned. I wanted to hit them so hard. I wanted to send them flying into the ocean.

They chopped off its second leg with a knife. The crab proceeded to hobble on its front claws and back legs, trying to find the ocean. They kicked it again. And again. Its body

slammed against the wooden railings. Then one of them tossed it into a white pail by their net.

I didn't say anything. The crab was dying, and I wanted more than anything to run and grab it out of the can and drop it into the ocean where it could die in the waves. But I just stood there, hating those boys and hating humanity.

Even now I'm not sure what I would do if it happened again. I wanted more than anything else to hit the

Of all the  
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boys, and yet I wouldn't have stood a chance against both of them. Asking them to stop wouldn't have helped, because they were the kind of boys who would just do something even more and right in your face if you asked them to stop. Sometimes I think I failed to do the right thing, and that I was just as much a part of it all—by just standing there and doing nothing—as were the actual torturers.

Sometimes I think about the seagulls who crack crabs open on the rocks, pick at them, and fight with each other, tugging at the red meat between their beaks. I wonder if we too are seagulls sometimes, but my heart just can't accept it. And yet, of all the animals on this planet, I think that humans disgust me the most. There are times when I am almost ashamed to be a part of humanity.

I think about how scared the crab must have been being torn apart in this unknown world above the dark waves that it knew. I'm beginning to wish I had just thrown the crab over the pier. I don't care what would have happened to me. At least I would have known that that red crab was safe beneath the waves. At least then he might tell all the other crabs living in the dark waters not to go up in the nets, not to go above the waves. At least then he could have told them about the knives, the white cans, and the boys. At least then he could tell them who we are and what we do. ★

