

Résonance

Volume 2

Article 13

2020

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Recommended Citation

Boucher, Marc T. (2020) "Cajun Crabs," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/13>

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Cajun Crabs

by Marc T. Boucher

“Caitie! Go check your goddamn lines! That’s why we’re here, ‘member?”

Caitlyn Arceneaux keeps reading her book for a few moments before looking up from her lawn chair, a sign to her older brother that, at eleven years old, she does not enjoy his constant orders. Eamon glares at her while he waits, breathing his impatience loudly through his nose, much like he has done most of the morning.

“*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*,” she finally says slowly, drawing it out. “*Dog Days*. The one I got last week for my birthday. Really funny, *cher*.”

“Well, read at home, *’ti Bougre!* We gotta get crabs for dinner. Shit, Caitie!” He suddenly smirks, “Gonna tell ‘Daddykins’ that I swore again?” Caitlyn gives him a practised eye-roll, and mumbles, “This’s all so boring.”

She is still miffed by the crabbing lesson she had to endure only three hours ago, meted out like a punishment by her abrasive fourteen-year-old brother. He was getting worse, especially when he was left “in charge,” like he was today. After smiles and hugs, Caitie and Eamon had watched their parents leave in their boat, *Geaux Arceneaux Geaux* written across the back. They waved over the noise of the engine, promising to return with black drum and largemouth bass, both plentiful in the Rockefeller Refuge in southwest Louisiana. Not surprisingly, Eamon’s alter ego, always lurking just below the surface, soon emerged, the bully reserved for his sister and her friends. The transformation was almost complete even before the sound of the motor had faded away.

“Listen up kid! We got work to do.” Formal, like a drill sergeant, every word just a little too loud. “First, we need to cut this string into pieces ‘bout twenty feet long, an’ we need twelve of them. Think you can do that all by yourself?” He scowls as he hands her a ball of butcher twine and a pair of scissors. Caitie ignores the tone, tired of bickering with her brother. “Okay, get started,” he adds, almost yelling. “I’m gonna get some stones, and bring back the chicken legs from the cooler.”

Caitie waits until he leaves, and measures out one full length of string. With that as a guide, she has them all cut before Eamon returns. He seems somewhat

disappointed that she's succeeded, and begrudgingly counts out half of the pieces. "Okay, we each got six. You're gonna have to set up your own lines, so watch me. An' you'll have to look after them too. So don't get caught up in that stupid book!"

He ties a first string to one of the dozen stones he has placed on the pier, all in a row about three feet apart, four feet back from the edge of the concrete landing. "Watching me? I only wanna show you once!" He then ties a raw chicken leg to the unattached end of the line. Peering down to the murky water five feet below, he drops his tethered bait, losing sight of it almost immediately as it sinks six or seven feet below the surface.

"Okay, that's it. Simple enough? Even for you?" He looks over, a malevolent grin distorting his face. "Those're your stones over there, so do the same thing with the other lines." Caitlyn hesitates for just a second, enough to spark a predictable reaction from her brother. "Hey don't worry, they can't bite – or even kick!" He explodes in a harsh laugh. "They're legs, get it?"

Caitlyn decides not to respond, to remind him that she and Mum are the ones who prepare most of their Bar-B-Qs, while he's throwing the football with Dad. She quickly sets up her six lines, a little intrigued by the process, but unwilling to ask questions, knowing that they would only become the source of more derision by Eamon. She finally sits down in her chair, and opens her book. Within minutes, Eamon summons her, deciding to make a first check of his lines.

"Okay, kid, get over here. Watch me. This's how you need to check your lines for crab, and it's easier with two people. Ya ready?" He begins to pull up one of his strings slowly, staring intently at the line where it enters the water, trying to glimpse the chicken leg before it breaks the surface. "You gotta pull your line up real slow, until you can see whether there's a crab biting on the chicken, just holding on. That's what they do." Caitlyn leans over the water to look.

"Wow, look at that! Got one hanging on!" He's now excited. "See it?! It's biting on the chicken. Get the net quick!" Caitlyn picks up the two-foot hoop net, attached to a ten-foot aluminum handle, and stands beside her brother.

"You gotta be careful not to pull the chicken up too fast, or yank it out of the water. The crab'll just let go, and fall back in." He concentrates on his line while

speaking. “Ya gotta hurry! Now hold the handle, and slip the net into the water under the chicken. Ready? When I jerk the line, the crab’s gonna fall right into the net – dinner!”

Caitlyn lowers the net into the water, and positions the hoop about one foot below the chicken. “Okay, bring it up slowly. Keep it under the chicken, Caitie!” he yells. “Okay, I’m gonna pull the line out o’ the water.”

Within seconds, the crab falls squirming into the net, and they have a first contribution to their Cajun dinner. It’s exhilarating in a way, and totally novel for Caitlyn. Eamon carries his catch to the cooler, holding it like a sacred blessing, part of a communion rite. He places it tenderly on the bag of crushed ice, ecstatic, maybe even a little nicer, forgetting why he needs to be a bully. “See that? Pretty simple. You can do it easy. And when there’s a crab on your line, I’ll get the net. All set?”

She catches on quickly, and within hours, they collect over twenty crabs between them. For Caitlyn, however, the excitement soon dissipates, and the process becomes boring and routine. Much to Eamon’s frustration, she checks her lines less and less often, and even takes time from her seductive book to bask in the colourful world around her.

She has never before seen so many different kinds of birds together, some circling overhead, others chatting from the trees, most hoping for a free meal. The gulls strut on the landing, screeching their direct orders, spoiled by the many returning fishermen who deliver the precious guts of their cleaned catch. Only a few feet away, the turkey vultures and ravens look on, apparently able to contain their hunger with more patience and dignity. On the opposite shore of the little inlet, a few alligators are basking in the sun, bulls and cows together, gaping, their mouths wide open, trying to remain cool. There is even a small one on their own side of the water, not far from the dock. It has moved once, but at less than three feet long, it is really too small to be considered a threat.

Caitlyn checks her lines ostentatiously before Eamon can slide into another moment of uncontrolled apoplexy, providing stressful entertainment for the many living creatures at the Rockefeller Refuge. She finally settles down with the *Wimpy Kid* in her comfortable lawn chair, giggling aloud at some of the hilarious

predicaments Greg Heffley must endure with his older brother Roderick...he reminds her of her own. She reads fewer than three pages when Eamon suddenly summons her in a high-pitched call, excited and nervous, all in a tone she has not heard before.

“Caitie! Come here! Quick! I got something HUGE on the line!” Caitlyn runs over, grabbing the net as Eamon slowly draws up his string, the line taut and vibrating. She stands next to him, positioned to lower the net. “Christ! This is really massive!” He continues to pull slowly, bent over, staring intently at the water five feet below, totally absorbed in trying to see what he has snagged. Within seconds, the nose of a very young alligator breaks the water, its genetic smile in full display, the entire chicken leg in its mouth, a toy more than a meal.

Eamon groans, as though he’s being attacked, “UNNGGHH!” Petrified and confused, he loses control of his bladder, his denim shorts quickly transforming into a darker shade of shimmering blue. He is still staring down when the alligator releases the chicken, slowly ducking back into the water, oblivious to the mayhem he has just caused. Eamon drops the line with the mangled piece of chicken, the spell broken.

Still rattled, he looks down at his wet shorts, trying to process it all, a growing awareness of the spectacle he must present. He looks over at Caitlyn, blushing, tears rolling down his cheeks, a release from the intense trauma of the past two minutes. There is total silence, except for the sound of slowly dripping urine staining Eamon’s Air Jordans.

“That was scary,” whispers Caitlyn, still in a state of mild shock. She puts her hand on Eamon’s arm. “Really scary, Eamon.” She glances down at his shorts, and then at his face, humiliated and embarrassed. He begins to turn away, bracing himself for the derision he would have surely lined up for her. “I know...I’m a *vrai couillion*”

“You just need to get cleaned up.” She looks down to the trees at the end of the landing, only fifty feet away. “Mum and Dad won’t be back for at least an hour.” She drops the net onto the landing, and removes her floppy pink shorts, the ones her mother had thrown to her from the boat that morning, insisting that she wear them over her bathing suit. She suddenly remembers her brother sneering at her for “trying to look like Mum,” now wearing her mother’s new Nike shorts, bought at the Acadiana Mall that very morning.

“Here, put these on. I’ll rinse your clothes, and let them dry them on the bushes. Won’t take long in this sun.”

She smiles over at him for the first time. “Nobody has to know.” She begins to leave, and turns around to face him, not used to seeing her brother speechless. “I’ll take the lines in, okay? I mean, we’ve already got twenty, that’s great! Everybody’ll be happy.” And I can get back to my book, she thought.

She is retrieving her third line before Eamon, motionless since the alligator disappeared, begins to shuffle to the end of the dock. “Thanks,” he mumbles through snuffles.

Minutes later, she retrieves Eamon’s wet clothes, and goes to the other end of the dock near the trees, where she will be able to hang them on one of the many cypress shrubs. As she is rinsing them, she smiles to herself, and works with a new intensity. She lays Eamon’s underwear on some lower branches, and looks over at her brother, staring off into the distance in his new pink shorts. She fills the pockets of his denims with several large stones, and lets them slide into the water, lost forever to the land of the marauding alligators.

She walks back toward Eamon. “Sure is getting windy. Your clothes are on that last bush. Should be dry before Mum and Dad get back.”