

My Mother's Sand Crabs

Every year I used to make sand crabs at the beach.

On my 8th birthday, my mother brought me to the beach. I found a red crab mould there. It was the ocean's, called to the shore to end up in my hands.

My mother taught me how to pour sand into the mould:

Fill the bottom with wet sand, sprinkle dry sand on top, and top it off with another helping of wet sand.

My mother's hands would overlap mine, her soft fingers patting the sand into the mould. One by one, each painstaking composition after the other, the beach swelled with crabs. They danced with each other. They hula-hooped and dug their little pincers into the sand and fenced with the waves lapping onto the shoreline.

Every birthday she would bring me to the beach and we would celebrate with the crabs. We would make ten or so crabs and leave them for the night.

One particular birthday, so long ago that I cannot remember which, we returned to find them all gone. A picnic mat was littered nearby, along with a box of chicken nuggets strewn to one side and remnants of frosting smeared on the grass. Strands of party poppers flew into my face. Tiny human footprints scattered the expansive horizon and the breeze lifted faint sounds of children running across the beach; nothing remained of our crabs.

My mother quickly picked me up and said, "They've all returned to the ocean. They've all packed up their bags and gone into the sea. They've all grown up." She carried me in her arms, turning me away from the destruction that I didn't know lay just ahead of us.

I believed her then.

Now that I have just turned 35, perhaps I, too, have grown up.

I pull myself up from the bed, the lights automatically turning on when I enter the bathroom.

When I'm done brushing my teeth and washing my face, I make my way to the dining table where a stack of pancakes jiggles on one of our fine china plates. A card sits by its side, reading:

Happy Birthday! I'll be back by dinner to celebrate. My boss didn't allow me to take leave. T_T Hope this makes up for it!

I devour the pancakes in a fashion unbecoming the way each layer has been stacked on top of

each other, the careful sprinkle of powdered sugar on top, the maple syrup pooling around the base. The pancakes were piping hot and I didn't want Leslie's hard work to go cold. My partner has gone off to work and my office remains empty. Technically, it's our office – our work-from-home schedules align perfectly so that when they go to work, I stay at home, and vice versa. I think of the Digiworld setup lying inside; the boxset arrived yesterday, and I spent most of last night exploring Digiworld Singapore.

I go to my office and strap on the Digi-suit. It's not a suit, per se, but rather a headset and a concave plastic device that I can attach to the back of my neck where my hypothalamus is located. My fingers fumble with the sleekness of the suit and I accidentally drop it onto my desk, knocking over some items.

A paperweight made of jade. A holomonitor so we can do our work. A five-second holoimage of my mother and I, when we holidayed in Korea three years ago.

We were at the beaches in Busan, huddling in our puffy winter jackets. I asked a local to take the image for us – the five seconds start with us trying to figure out how to make a heart with our fingers, and ends with us succeeding. She looks absolutely radiant, outshining even the sun dipping its rays into the ocean in the background. I can't see the tiredness in her face, the way her body had been rendered frail by cancer.

I'd wanted her to experience it all, then.

Just a few more years and she would have been able to experience it all with Digiworld.

I put the items back in their place. Sitting in my chair, I put on the headset. My vision goes dark, and suddenly I can't feel my hands and feet. I can't feel the weight of my butt on the chair, nor hear the rumble of my stomach nor see the waves of neon green that we all see when we close our eyes.

The interface lights up with the words:

User: xfxxRobIN03

Password: *****

I log in and the world comes alive.

Digiworld was released recently by a social media giant, touting the promise of VR elevated to the likes the world had never seen before. Indeed, the lines between the digital and the virtual were blurred to the extent that it was an exact carbon copy of Earth ten years ago. Corporations started to implement workspaces, people physically travelled less and used Digiworld more, and countries set up their own official spaces there.

Now, one can try on clothes at Orchard in the same manner as real life, without the hassle of

cramming into the MRT to get there. One can take a walk in the park or go clubbing or eat at a restaurant – all made possible with Digi currency. One can choose to leave Earth and enter unique spaces hosted by those could program them – forums, games, outer space; everything and anything has a Digiworld counterpart.

I spawn into Singapore – that’s where I last left off, anyway.

Even in Digiworld, Singapore is blisteringly hot.

I can solve the problem easily by teleporting to a nearby mall, but I’m not interested in escaping the heat. I’m at East Coast Park. The last time I saw it was when my mother was still alive, before the government started their land reclamation project to extend the shoreline.

The perfectly paved bike roads and walking paths run alongside the ocean, filled with families leisurely riding a quadricycle, couples skating hand in hand, runners persevering on their route, occasionally wiping sweat off their forehead.

All the sights and sounds fade into a blur as I make my way down to the water’s edge.

Once my slippers firmly rest on sand, I say the word, “Inventory.”

Out of thin air, an inventory icon pops up in front of me. I use my palm to click it. The names of items in my inventory appear in a list. I don’t need to scroll to say, “Red crab mould.”

I press the confirm icon, and everything returns to normal. The mould lays in front of me. I go through the motions, making a crab the way my mother taught me.

I wait for the waves to recede into the ocean, and then I plop my crab down onto the matted sand. Not a second later and the crab is enveloped in frothing white.

My mother’s voice whispers in my ear. “Let go.”

Whenever I look out into the ocean, memories of her last few days come flooding. I remember staring at the plaster peeling off the hospital walls, at the mould crawling across corners like an infected bloodstream.

I look down to my ankles deep in the slush.

Moulted exoskeletons of the sand crabs swirl around my feet.

I make another crab.

And another.

And another.

Until I am certain that this beach is filled with the remnants of crabs that my mother and I used to make. They have all returned home, and so has my mother.

“Happy birthday,” I say, with no one around.