Clab's Craws

by Marc Lowe

It all started at dinnertime. We were sitting around the small gas burner on cushions, crossed legs tucked snugly beneath the short-legged table, happily eating out of a large, steaming *nabe* pot filled with an assortment of seafood and vegetables, when Older-Brother cracked a crab claw and screamed. At first glance it appeared to us all as though he had simply crushed an abnormally large quantity of the crab's red and white shell, but when Younger-Sister also screamed, followed by Father and Mochi the dog, I realized something must be terribly wrong. Mother, bold as always, moved in close to assess the damage, and then announced, "Kowaru-kun has crushed two of his *dactyls*!" She said the final word in English, looking directly at Younger-Sister and then at me (we both have to take our high school and college entrance exams, respectively, at the end of the term), but since neither of us comprehended her meaning (not to mention poor Father, who can't speak a lick of English save the expressions "My name is ____," "I work for ____," "Nice to meet you," and "Shall we dance?") she repeated herself in plain Japanese: "His *fingers!* As soon as we get back from the hospital, you and your sister are going straight upstairs to study your English vocabulary." Always the strict *Education Mama*.

In the meantime, tears formed in Older Brother's glazed-over eyes as he gazed in disbelief upon his mangled digits; his pointer fingers were indeed cracked and mashed—they were practically indecipherable from the crab claw he had crushed with so much vigor earlier, but before anyone could do anything there was another loud/soft snap that sounded as though it had been muted by its own inward force. Father wailed a muffled wail and, in turn, Younger-Sister screamed (again), followed by Older-Brother and Mochi the dog; Mother then said, "He's munched his own maw…" "…along with the crab's claw!" I added this time, making sure to say "crab's claw" in English, and paying special attention to the way I pronounced the 'r' in "crab" and the 'l' in "claw," so as not to say

Copyright © 2011 Marc Lowe. All rights reserved.

“clab's craw,” a common mistake for us Japanese, and one that would have resulted in Mother's bitter disapproval. She didn't seem to notice the care I had paid to this vital task of juggling ‘l' and ‘r,' however, concerned as she was with her husband, whose mouth now resembled a convex egg with a hard red and white tail emerging from its reddened center. Older-Brother was so dumbstruck at what had happened to Father's face that he seemed for a moment to have forgotten about his own not-insignificant problems.

Younger-Sister and I looked at the *nabe* pot, and then at each other. There were no more claws left to crack or crunch, or so it appeared at the time, so I fished out a flat slice of carrot with my chopsticks while she speared a stalk of leek. “What's this called?” I asked her in English. “Um, callot,” she replied. “Wrong, it's ca*rr*ot,” I said with a smirk, trying to get Mother's attention, but she was too busy attending to Father's de-mouthed jaw. Younger-Sister made a face at me, and then asked, “OK, what's this?” “It's a lllleek!” I shouted, jumping up and down in my seat like I used to when I was in middle school. This made Younger-Sister so angry that she stood up and walked out of the room, screaming profanities in Japanese at me the entire time. No matter: I had won the battle. Mother would have to admit that I had better pronunciation *and* better retention. I rose from my seat and looked around, but the entire family (including Mochi) had apparently already left for the hospital with Older-Brother and Father in tow. Alone now, I peered into the still-hot *nabe* pot and discovered to my surprise a tiny crab's claw lying at the bottom, hidden beneath a large slice of cabbage. Cracking it heartily with my teeth, I sucked the sweet white meat from it and sighed.