

TALES OF WELL-SEASONED WOMEN: A LITERARY EXPLORATION OF GENDERED
EXPERIENCE IN ALASKA'S COMMERCIAL FISHING INDUSTRIES, 1980s – 2010

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Introduction

Historical

Alaska's commercial fishing industry has historically been portrayed and perceived by Western culture as a predominantly masculine domain. This nostalgic idealization is embedded in longstanding notions of gender binaries that presupposed particular vocations as being too rigorous for women. These perceptions were often fraught with and bolstered by traditions, superstitions, and socially substantiated barriers that reiterated unspoken rules regarding women's place in the constellation of the industry. As patriarchal ideals of previous eras have shifted and relaxed, increasing numbers of women have found their way into the business of commercially harvesting fish and shellfish from Alaska's abundant waters.

Reliance on the bounty of the sea has been a way of life for Alaskans since time immemorial. Prior to Western contact, the Indigenous peoples of the region had established complex cultures that revolved around hunting and gathering resources from marine and terrestrial environments.¹ Led by Danish explorer, Vitus Bering, on behalf of the Russian tsar, Europeans began foraying to Alaska in the year 1741. Soon after, Russians systematically subjugated the Unangan and Aleut people by force to hunt for the Russian fur trade. Target species primarily comprised sea otters as well as other maritime animals. Beginning in 1848, large-scale commercial whaling by outside interests commenced in the Arctic and Pacific Northwest and expanded to include walrus and seal hunting in subsequent years. The baleen market fell in 1871 and the whaling industry all but evaporated with the growth of the petroleum industry.

Russia notoriously sold Alaska to the United States in 1867, and during the first thirty years of American ownership until the gold rush of 1897, Alaska's non-Native population was primarily composed of soldiers, missionaries, prospectors, and explorers. During this time, the commercial fishing and canning industries began to flourish with more demand for cod and salmon in particular,

attracting not only fishermen, but also shore-side cannery workers. According to a recent Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development Report tracking the history of Alaska population settlement, “fishing became the primary source of population change between wars ... Southeast Alaska — with its ice free waters, fishing heritage, and proximity to Seattle fish markets — was the major beneficiary of this change.”²

Alaska achieved statehood in 1959, and for the first time, the State was in charge of managing the fisheries. During the early years, the burgeoning commercial fishing fleets continued to exploit the abundant finfish and shellfish resources found in the ice-free Gulf of Alaska (GOA), and it wasn’t long before target species were suffering great depletions. Increased competition, globalization of business, and rapidly advancing technologies were also probable factors. The State responded by enforcing fishing limits, gear restrictions, and limited entry permits. Thus, from 1972 until the introduction of the Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) program in 1994, the halibut and black cod (sablefish) longline seasons were conducted in aggressive, derby-style “cowboy” fisheries. While other species such as salmon, crab, shrimp and herring continue to be managed by state and federal agencies, the “wild west” motif of combat/cowboy fishing endures and reflects the rugged, individualistic, frontier American ideal that many folks associate with Alaska.

It is noteworthy to consider how this legacy of nationalistic idealization of the frontiersman has continued to flourish over time, despite the fact that America and Alaska both have become more “civilized” and less “frontier.” While the defining feature of Americans may be their tendency to exemplify rugged individualism, why are the associated characteristics deemed explicitly as positive, masculine traits? Maritime scholar Jennifer Schell attributes some of this to the historical literature of post-colonial/pre-antebellum America, whereby certain authors “sought to transform trappers into national heroes” and did so by analogizing them with the highly regarded New England whalers of the era.³ That American whalers were seen as highly masculine heroes who

conquered nature is not the point of contention, but rather that the Western masculine ideal is so deeply tied to conquest and exploitation should be disturbing - and yet it is quite the opposite. While the early frontiersmen were widely perceived as a mixed bag of racial, ethnic, and culturally diverse men from the lower ranks of American society, Schell contends that the accepted literary narrative on national masculinity was actually a “work-centered vision of American-ness that avoided regional specificity.”⁴ In choosing this construction, the early writers of western narratives laid the foundation for “others to expand the cultural conversation ever further and immortalize the heroic capacity of cowboys ... and various other manly American physical laborers.”⁵ Her point is significant; the continuing storyline of our nation and our people is tightly hinged to a concept of hard work exemplifying masculinity, and by extension, patriotism.

To illustrate this distinctive facet of Americanism, Frederick Jackson Turner’s biographer, Ray Allen Billington, published a deep analysis in 1958 of how the “American” character was defined and understood by Turner and others of his era. Billington contends that Turner’s “frontier hypothesis” is that the American character is a “unique social organism” which can be directly traced to the experiences of settling the continent from east to west over three centuries.⁶ He further asserts that characteristics such as mobility, optimism, inventiveness, openness to innovation, materialism, and exploitative wastefulness, were all what Turner considered to be “frontier traits.”⁷ Based on my experiences in the final years of “gold rush” derby-style commercial fishing, I would concur with Turner’s assertions that the above-described traits are typical of people *in frontier contexts*, despite the fact that some contemporary scholars might disagree. Are these qualities uniquely American? It would seem likely that they are, based on the premise that the context of any frontier will always be distinctive in its location in time and space.

When the American western frontier expands to the sea, the above-mentioned qualities are extended with it. While these traits are evidenced in Alaskan fishing communities, there is also an

entire body of literature that explores similar precedent in earlier American seaboard communities. Themes such as heroism, nationalism, and masculinity prevail as linchpins of maritime writing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Schell reiterates that these literatures bolstered romantic archetypes that were considered to be “authentic symbols of American ingenuity, individuality, and patriotism.”⁸ Nevertheless, these ideals reflected a period in history preceding the advent of mass transportation, communications, or other modern technologies, and should therefore be recognized as temporal at best. Contemporary conceptualizations of American-ness still cling tenaciously to the frontier leitmotif, as evidenced by modern day reality television. Shows such as *Dirty Jobs* and *Ax-Men*, for example, serve to reinforce the American tenets of frontierism, hard work, and manliness. These productions have huge fan followings, and are available through many forms of social media. Every season, another slew of reality shows are released on a public eager to consume more of the “American hero” rhetoric, suggesting that the theme is far from removed from the western consciousness.

Alaska – the Last Frontier

In an insightful investigation on how Alaska exemplifies the iconic frontier, Judith Kleinfeld contends that America’s foundational epic, the *frontier romance*, shapes the plot lines of many lives and is in essence, the “master narrative” for most non-Indigenous Alaskans.⁹ She explores the ways that an environment influences (adult) people – particularly a place infused with powerful symbolism such as the North is, and how these notions of place help shape people’s lives. Kleinfeld asserts that for many, “the North is a theater for dramas of the self to be played out.”¹⁰ Much of her analysis draws on the works of Dan P. McAdams, who provides an in-depth examination of how certain American’s lives are defined by experience(s) of redemption – a key theme to the frontier romance. McAdams maintains, “Individual redemption stories translate a deep and abiding script of *American exceptionalism*” and furthermore, that Americans strongly identify with stories of redemption.¹¹ He

points out that American exceptionalism is a cultural phenomenon that refers to a preoccupation with “specialness,” and stems from the Puritans seeing themselves as *the chosen people of God* – those destined for greatness.¹² Although that particular understanding suggests a value system that is no longer necessarily mainstream, the general idea of exceptionalism finds validation in the Alaska-as-the-last-Frontier narrative as well, and is expressed both in historical literatures and reality television.

These observations are similar to those that appear in a study conducted by Hogan and Purcell in 2008, who argue that “hegemonic rural masculinity in Alaska” is a key marker of Alaskan uniqueness – even and especially in the context of late capitalism.¹³ The authors assert that Alaskan working-class masculinity is embedded in both landscape and frontier nostalgia through discourse, images, and practices surrounding “the myth of the ‘real Alaskan,’ – a cultural symbol deeply coded as masculine, rural, and white, and which repudiates or marginalizes that which is feminine, urban, and Native.”¹⁴ The importance of nostalgia to this equation cannot be overlooked; for Alaska represents to the “outside” a place where one can go back in time prior to capitalism, pollution, and the stresses of a consumer society. As cultural consensus determines what it means to be masculine, those ideals become entrenched in the symbolic systems of language, thought, relations, and institutional structures ultimately leading to a hegemonic consciousness. In the case of the “real Alaskan,” the ideal is defined as tough, heterosexual, authoritative, and successful. As we shall see, male and female characters in the following stories challenge this particular archetype by behaving in ways, whether by intention or coincidence, that blur the lines between conformity and dissent.

Gender and Fishing

The commercial fishing industry in coastal Alaska has generally been a male-dominated arena – regardless of whether the participants were ethnically of Indigenous or western extraction. In a compelling analysis on the roots of power in fishing, Paul Thompson contends that in order for commercial fishing to be successful, it has relied heavily on the work of women in three principal

ways: “the *direct productive contribution* of women’s labour, ... *creating the next generation* both in a physical and moral sense, ... [and] the special responsibilities which women carry because of the *absence of men* away at sea.”¹⁵ The direct productive contribution refers to women working at the seaside as well as the processing aspects of the fishing industry, and certainly not the at-sea catching portion.

Thompson further asserts the “bearing and raising of children” has been “primarily women’s in all human societies,” while the special responsibilities refer to the financial, familial, and discretionary concerns that often empower sea-wives with a sense of authority while the men are at sea.¹⁶

Perhaps the most comprehensive documentation, albeit the furthest removed from Alaska fisheries, are found in scholarship about whaling-era narratives. Lisa Norling compiled a wide range of source material in her research on the economic, social, and cultural shifts in the whaling communities of southeastern New England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her sources included correspondences between women onshore and men at sea, abundant legal and financial records, family papers, journals, mailbags of “dead mail,” account books, court records, local and industry newspapers, church records, and reform agency records to name but a few. Norling analyzed the effects of Quaker and Puritan value systems combined with the socially constructed “Cult of True Womanhood” on both individuals and communities, as well as the idealized expectations of women that were often hard to achieve in light of the realities of maritime life.¹⁷ Her findings revealed “not only the conflicted development of liberal individualism for men ... but also the development of its female corollary, Victorian domesticity.”¹⁸

Victorian idealized expectations of women included that they be tender, modest, chaste, selfless, sympathetic, maternal, pious, domestic, and also *diminutive*. Norling contends that wives were often considered to be “deputy husbands” for prolonged periods when men were at sea because they had to do everything that a husband would normally attend to, including procuring resources for living, heating, eating, and handling all finances.¹⁹ Additionally, wives were expected to

maintain good Quaker standards of domesticity and humility. Essentially, the reality of their lives often was in direct conflict with the expectations of the society that they inhabited.

In the following stories, you will meet characters that move from the peripheries to the centers of their world. Some will challenge the status quo by their very presence on board, others will defer to the men on board. Regardless of the motive or marital status, women on board commercial boats provide fresh perspectives on the experience of sea-work.

Dona Davis, Jane Nadel-Klein, and CE Sachs conducted research in Scotland and Newfoundland between the early 1980s and the late 1990s in order to bring a gendered viewpoint into maritime literature. They aspired to do so by providing an anthropological lens to gendered experiences by conducting ethnographic investigations. In their research, they discovered that dichotomies such as land/woman and sea/man were prevalent in the associated coastal communities. Furthermore, they found that women who did commercially fish were perceived to be “exceptions” – as women doing men’s work in masculine occupations.²⁰ These findings were conducted at a time when women were beginning to participate in the Pacific Northwest commercial fisheries in greater numbers, and the significant revelation here is that these particular ethnographies reveal the necessity to further investigate the various ways that fishing forms part of the symbolism of gender.

In the following stories, you will see that there are parallel contrasts in presumed gender roles, and furthermore, that many of these expected duties are challenged time and again by men who help out with children, and women who do what is considered “men’s work” as well as and sometimes better than their counterparts.

Fishermen’s dependency on seaside women for successful fishing ventures is explicit in Indigenous contexts as well, where women perform various rituals and roles. In a study analyzing the shifting roles of Tlingit women in Southeast Alaska’s subsistence salmon harvest, Virginia Mülle

and Sine Anahita contend, “women’s roles have been embedded in the history of male activities and practices,” and explain their primary functions as both highly participatory and gendered.²¹ For example, long before western settlement, coastal Alaska Native women had already been active participants in Alaska’s subsistence fisheries for millennia. Their roles, however, were essentially shore-based and specific to subsistence food processing. For women to utilize the means of production was considered taboo, and an effective literary illustration of this ancient prohibition is found in the novel, *And She Was*. The author, Cindy Dyson, weaves a story around generations of women in the Aleutian Islands as perceived through the eyes of the protagonist. Beginning with the earliest years of Russian conquest of the Aleut and Aliutiq people, cultural taboos relative to gender prohibitions such as hunting, fishing, or even touching the associated tools, were violated by the females out of necessity. As the Native males were steadily enslaved, their women were forced to hunt and fish for survival and thus continued to carry the burden of guilt and shame affiliated with these trespasses. The weight of these deeds are carried by generations of mothers and daughters and further used as justification for continued defilements by women against long-held taboos.

Feminist author Heidi Hartmann argues, “The material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men’s control over women’s labor power,” submitting that the relationship between capitalism and patriarchy is deeply entrenched.²² This division of gender was often reinforced by the social construction of a dichotomy whereby women were associated with land and safety much the same as men were with sea and danger. This relationship was further pronounced by the inherently stressful dual roles that land-bound women had to adjust to on a regular basis, whereby, as Davis, Nadel-Klein and Sachs put it, “while their men are at sea, women must become ‘reluctant matriarchs’; when their men are at home, women must turn into dutiful wives.”²³

For centuries, while the division of labor seemed to be clear-cut, there were in fact many exceptions in which both female kin and occasional outsiders have actively participated in aspects of

fishing that were perceived to be masculine-exclusive domains – many of which are recorded in diaries and logs of whaler’s seafaring wives, lady sea pirates, and other renegade nautical maidens. These women were, however, still clearly defined by the fact that they were doing men’s work, and were often “portrayed as exceptions within the male domain of the sea.”²⁴ Beginning in the 1970’s, however, women in the Pacific Northwest began to pursue commercial fishing as a novel enterprise.

In the following tales, you will meet women who resist the old gender narrative simply being ordinary workers in unconventional spaces. Some will struggle tenaciously to prove themselves worthy of equal pay shares while working alongside men who don’t face the same challenges solely because of their anatomy; others will scarcely be aware of their unique positions.

New Frontiers

The ongoing lure of the American frontier and the continuing westward movement took an imprecise turn north to Alaska soon after Statehood in 1959, when recently “discovered” oil reserves begged release from the bowels of the North Slope. As Judith Kleinfeld observes in *The Frontier Romance*, simultaneous with this black gold rush occurred an era of social revolution that liberated from America’s melting pot an onslaught of wilderness seekers, draft dodgers, war veterans, opportunists, and romantics young and old, all looking to “recreate in their imaginations ... celebrated American virtues of self-reliance and community” through the frontier narrative that was being played out generally in the Pacific Northwest, and more specifically to this writing, in the young state of Alaska.²⁵

Whether the allure was grounded in the promise of big wages, the fantasy of man versus nature, or simply a chance for new beginnings, the population of the Northwest continued to grow steadily; and while the symbolic imagery was particularly enticing to males, women were beginning to assert themselves into the land and seascapes of the coastal Northwest. Females were no longer only perceived as merely helpers or passive actors in the coastal frontier narrative, but were showing

up work-ready with rubber boots and gloves, oilskins, knives, and metaphoric war-paint on the docks, at the harbors, in the watering holes, and other historically androcentric venues. It could be possible that more women took to fishing at this time because the feminist movement was underway in the U.S. by the 1970s, which dovetailed with the reality that many of the cohort seeking new beginnings in the Pacific Northwest were also expressing rebellion against the value systems of previous generations.²⁶ Then again, there have always been women who were non-conforming by nature, and consciously crossed socially sanctioned lines of gendered work in order to have a shot at higher earnings. Nevertheless, commercial fishing remains as one of the most physically demanding, labor intensive, and high-risk vocations in the U.S., and very few women of childbearing age are willing to take the gamble.²⁷ In the stories that follow, you will be introduced to female characters that either brought children on board or carried thoughts of their children with them.

While some women were finding their way onto the decks of boats however, they were not necessarily viewed as equals by the men whose domains they entered. In those years, the Alaska narrative was one of a hyper-masculine, frontier environment teeming with testosteronic juices marinated in a discourse of domination. With regard to masculine spaces, as in the commercial fisheries, this structure most certainly reflects Hogan and Purcell's notion that "masculinity is inextricably connected to its geography," however, in this case, a more apropos term might be seagography.^{28, 29}

It is useful to comprehend the nature of commercial fishing in coastal Alaska and what the work entails. It is also valuable to keep in mind that various strands of history braid different maritime fishing traditions together. Many of these customs and beliefs have deep roots in old world Euro-Scandinavian practices as well as Alaska Native ways of knowing. In these traditions, men went to sea and women stayed on land doing the work that was considered appropriate to their sex. These gendered designations are so culturally entrenched that Thompson contends:

In most fishing societies the division of labour between the sexes seems in one respect quite sharp. Work ashore ... is left to the women, or shared; but work at sea is reserved for the men. This feeling can be so strong that in many places women will not be allowed on a boat which is setting out to fish, and certainly in the past fishermen might take it as a bad omen, and perhaps even turn back home, if they met with particular women on their way to the harbor. Sea work was men's work; for women to have any place in it would be a pollution.³⁰

Despite the societal mosaic of which many coastal communities may be composed, these old world beliefs that women in maritime contexts were "bad luck" persisted into the early twenty-first century in many parts of coastal Alaska, though these ideas faded as the spirit of capitalism (equal opportunity) trumped even the superstitious mores of old sea captains and crews.

The few positions that women had at sea generally did not include deck work, which requires strength, agility, endurance, and constant vigilance – characteristics that generally and historically have not been perceived as feminine attributes beyond the accepted housework and child-rearing applications. Therefore, in a maritime context, women were usually hired to work on fishing boats as companions, cooks, and occasionally for sharing wheel-watches.

In the decade preceding the implementation of individual fishing quotas (IFQs) in Alaska in 1994, many of the longline and shellfish industries went from being "gentlemen's fisheries" to free-for-all derbies that exemplified the ideals of western capitalism.³¹ Many species were harvested until they were in danger of disappearing, while safety was often sacrificed for maximum production. The narrative of man subduing nature was held sacred in Alaska's commercial fishing fleets. It was further venerated in Western consciousness as a utopian picture of fetishized masculinity.

While the overall western constructions of femininity did not generally envision women in these contexts, females were increasingly beginning to procure positions in one of Alaska's preeminent good old boys clubs. There were many reasons this occurred, the most obvious being

the law of supply and demand: Sometimes a reliable male deckhand was hard to find, and depending on the urgency of the situation (such as impending weather events, hot tip reports, or regulatory time limits), a woman could manage to find herself hired on as crew. Some women stepped on boats with the knowledge that they were perceived as placeholders by their crewmates. Skippers who offered to pay one-quarter to one-half shares for women reinforced this sense of ephemerality.

As fortuitous as landing a paying job on a fishing boat might have seemed to the gals who were hired in those early years, the true test of seaworthiness came far out on the water. Learning to navigate, read charts, tie knots, splice line, cut and salt bait, set and haul gear—those were the fun parts of the job. The actual catching, killing, cleaning, and processing also reflected the industrial labor model that had already seen women in complementary roles. The ultimate litmus test had to do less with critical skills on deck, than with being able to work doggedly despite the high probability of confronting the nefarious sea witch, *mal de mer*, or seasickness. Several medical studies conclude that while the severity of symptoms are experienced equally by men and women, females tend to report higher incidences of experiencing seasickness.³² Women may simply be more at ease expressing their intense discomfort; however, the most significant implication is that seasickness impacts a person's ability to maintain dignity, composure, and work duties in an environment that is high-stakes, competitive, and aggressively masculine. In most cases, any deckhand with debilitating seasickness would be tolerated, but not necessarily invited back for another trip if he or she was unable to perform the work.

Many fisher folk are able to adapt to the ocean within a matter of days, gender notwithstanding. Therefore, assuming that a deckhand has acquired her sea legs, further trials test an individual's overall ability to endure living and working in close quarters with relative strangers who are virtually always male. This is actually more complicated than it seems because most workboats were designed with men in mind, and thus are limited in amenities beyond structural seaworthiness

and functionality. Privacy is at a premium. Sleeping quarters are shared spaces, except on exceptionally large boats. Many of the older typical work vessels lack interior house plumbing, meaning that a female deckhand is often faced with devising skillful ways to execute basic bodily functions. Something as simple as dumping the contents of a honey-bucket must be performed with an awareness of an audience in the wheelhouse or on deck.³³ Furthermore, most fishermen are not shy about urinating on deck and will brandish their privates with little regard for their shipmates. While this is considered appropriate masculine behavior, it is noteworthy that many men display distress when women demonstrate similar behaviors - and in fact, some fishermen have been horrified to discover that women experienced menstruation on board. The latter fear was so pervasive on some boats, that some skippers would not permit menstruating women on board or near the gear.³⁴

Other spaces of contention related to cooking meals for the skipper and crew. It was a not uncommon assumption that when a woman stepped onto a commercial boat she would naturally take up the galley duties, as if there is a universal proclivity for females to gravitate towards the kitchen.³⁵ Moreover, there was often on a commercial fishing boat a manifest understanding of galley work as being *not masculine* - and therefore *feminine*, and degrading by default. It was also commonplace in the lexicon of some crews, that the person designated to perform galley duties be referred to as everyone's "bitch," a loaded word choice in any setting - but especially loathsome when used to describe the token woman in this occupational environment.

What all of the above ultimately suggests is that a large part of success for women in commercial fishing enterprises depended on her ability to develop thick skin. The ability to endure *all* aspects of fishing, then, included not just the physical work, but also the intellectual aptitude to tolerate all forms of teasing and harassment, and perhaps most significantly, to maintain a strong sense of self. In the following stories, you will meet characters that challenge these norms in

surprising ways. The manliest of men - the professional crab fisherman, will cook and perform standard galley tasks even when a competent woman is on board. On another vessel, a salty skipper will take on childcare duties without his masculinity ever being questioned. Women will step into masculine spaces and make them their own. Some will redefine their femininity in order to build bridges with male counterparts, while others will sever ties in the same process.

The common thread that runs through all of the stories is one of reframing the narrative so that the perspective is drawn from a gendered lens. This way, women in maritime contexts are no longer merely whispers in the margins, but rather they are the self-assured voices of female characters that cannot be ignored.

Contextualizing the Stories

In order to effectively set the stage for any fictional narrative, there must be a somewhat universal understanding of the precursors, or foundation, that the tales are built upon. The Alaskan setting of these stories is a place that is fairly fresh in terms of statehood, beginning in the early 1980s and lasting through the early 2000s. It is a time when the image of pristine wilderness is pervasive and unsullied by persistent environmental degradations. Exuberant young folk, mostly from the “lower forty-eight,” are breaking away from the suburbs and cities and making the journey to Alaska. They are seeking opportunities for profit, adventure, redemption, rejuvenation, rebirth, or perhaps escape. It is noteworthy that these are many of the same incentives that attracted the earliest western outsiders to America, and these motivations were further reiterated when Alaska’s first pioneers began arriving from other homelands in the early territorial days.

The continuing conception of Alaska as a highly symbolic American frontier is a culturally constructed paradigm that has been created and perpetuated primarily through the lens of western, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant males. Recall Hogan and Purcell’s aforementioned depiction of the real Alaskan, and combine with that the notion of a unique sort of nostalgia woven into the mythos

of the place. The specific nostalgia they refer to is both “reflective” and “restorative,” and is furthermore projected onto the land and seascapes, thus imbuing them with authenticity and ensuring the validation of the constructed narrative.³⁶ The authors contend that Alaska is a place, “where historical identities are still being formed, but where the domination of nature and the ability to survive in a challenging landscape are key signifiers of masculine fitness.”³⁷ At a time when the manifest paradigm was that of alpha males dominating nature, it was highly unusual for men to welcome the audacious women who first dared to insert themselves into Alaska’s commercial fishing industry. Yet, that did not stop some women from returning to fish season after season, and increasingly it did even less to preclude the waves of younger and more confident women who dropped their lady-anchors in the industry.

Furthermore, the confluence of both time and space impact how a story is told and retold throughout history. While few women had directly participated in the Alaska commercial fishing industry historically, those who did were often perceived as outliers and their stories were thus relegated to the fringe. Because the roles of women at sea have changed in recent years, the commercial fisherman as a “purely masculine” phenomenon has become demystified in the process. As this trend continues, the value of gendered perspectives by women in these spaces will continue to be vital as they help to discern changing patterns of power and domination over people and nature. Such exploration will also increase understanding of the various ways that women “negotiate the real Alaskan identity – especially since it is so deeply coded as male,” as Hogan and Purcell suggest.³⁸

The following tales explore the frontier mythos of Alaska through lenses ranging from anthropological to historical and feminist. The stories themselves include fictionalized versions of true accounts that have been stylistically distorted for dramatic effect. Overarching themes include the American West frontier culture, the North as a state of mind, and one of Alaska’s most precious

resource extraction industries - the commercial fisheries. Other motifs explore social constructions of adventure, redemption, and sexual politics. Additionally, each story rests on nautical and meteorological imperatives, as those are unwavering and universal aspects of maritime work.

Set in coastal Southeast Alaska, and spanning the 1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century, *Tales of Well-Seasoned Women* introduce the reader to female characters who endeavor to construct and construe their identities as deeply feminine while operating in masculine social contexts. Male characters also contend with their own issues of identification and reveal their individual struggles with sustaining high levels of hyper-masculinity in maritime environments.

The first story, “The Glass Baitshed,” revolves around the commercial halibut fishery during the two decades following the introduction of the Magnuson-Stevens Fishing Act in 1976. Once considered a “gentlemen’s fishery,” the commercial halibut and longline fisheries lasted for five months at a time. By the early 1980s the same fisheries had been reduced to brief and dangerous events of brazen exploitation, initially lasting for two-weeks and incrementally reducing from weeks, to days, to hours, until 1994 when the industry became “rationalized” as a limited entry harvest. During the derby decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the limited openings were highly lucrative, exceptionally dangerous, and steadily grew in participation. The era ran concurrently with the Reagan and George H. Bush presidencies, reflecting a time in American history that was unapologetically marked by “cowboy” capitalism. Rapidly advancing technologies, which steadily improved maritime navigation and safety measures, further increased harvests.

The story introduces a crew that participates in one of the intense forty-eight hour halibut derbies out of Southeast Alaska, with a specific focus on how the men and women on board navigate their gender roles and relationships in the midst of a well-choreographed, industrialized killing adventure at sea. Led by skipper Marco McManus, the crew of the f/v *Lady Lou* have an intense week at the office as they set out to catch as much halibut as their vessel can hold in the

allotted time. Marco is notoriously short-tempered, arrogant, and somewhat of a sociopath. His wife Dalisay (Dali), a small statured Filipina woman, tempers his malevolent tendencies with her energetic yet compassionate demeanor. Dali is as tenacious in her work ethic as she is in her loyalty to Marco. The deck boss, Patrick (Big) Johnson, is a levelheaded and highly competent fisherman. He grew up in Alaska and has a solid work ethic. He serves as an ideal liaison between the unpredictable Marco and the crew. Jack Benoit is the greenhorn – a strapping farm boy out of the Midwest, this is his first time commercial fishing. He is hired on at less than a full share, and will be expected to work very hard to earn even that much. Big's best friend is Jerry Jeff (J-Cube) Justice who brings his girlfriend, Heidi Seymour, along for the trip. J-Cube is a full-share deckhand with several years experience. Heidi has lifelong experience in salmon fishing, but only gets offered a half-share by Marco. She reluctantly accepts the pay only because she wants to experience the derby-style fishery with her boyfriend. The title of the story is reflective of the proverbial concept of a "glass ceiling." The baitshed itself is the physical location on a hook-and-line (longline) commercial fishing vessel where gear is baited, overhauled, and repaired. It is where the crew spends the majority of their time during any fishing season.

The next tale, "Catch and Release," revolves around the protagonist, Valerie Rahn, and her toddler, Sadie Lynn, who spend a summer on board the f/v *Bylgja Maid* trolling for Pacific salmon. The first name of the vessel, *Bylgja*, refers to one of the nine daughters of the Norse gods of the sea, Ægir and Ran, and literally means "billow" or "wave" as indicated in the Prose Edda. The story focuses on the challenges that Valerie faces in bringing her young daughter on board a non-traditional cement boat that is both precarious in its condition, and is skippered by a good-hearted captain, Arne Jorgen, with a penchant for substance abuse. Valerie initially perceives this setting as a healthier option than the violent and abusive situation they had been a part of in previous years. Some of the other characters include Hugh Sibelius, a level-headed Alaskan boat captain who is

Arne's fishing partner; his two sons, Markus and Tony, both who need to stay close to work and far from town; and the proprietor of a remote village bar, Petal, and her daughter, Mouse, both of whom offer Valerie an option that is tailored to her situation.

I wrote this story with a desire to capture the romance of the "yeoman farmer" at sea, along with exploring themes of redemption and healing in a gendered workspace. The title reflects the theme of "catching" fish, while simultaneously "releasing" the past. Valerie's resilience in the face of adversity is also significant, particularly within the framework of the setting, and her role as a single mother with a spunky toddler in tow. She has to make choices that aren't always the easiest, or even the best, but in the end, her character is shown to be a good deckhand, devoted parent, and friend.

The final selection, "The Boys that Go to Sea," occurs on a herring tender, the f/v *Zelda Bee* that is moving product from Sitka, Alaska to Prince Rupert, British Columbia one spring after 9-11. The thrust of the story is not about the infamous sac roe herring fishery, but rather about the transport, which is slow and somewhat mundane until the end. The protagonist, Holly Bliss, is hired on as an emergency temporary replacement for a deckhand who, as a felon, cannot enter Canadian waters. The *Zelda Bee* is a western crab boat for part of the year, and her crew consists of skipper Ivan and deckhands Danny and Kris. All three are all longtime Bering Sea fishermen that come to Sitka for the annual spring sac roe herring fishery, which is considered to be easy money for Western tender crewmen. Holly lives in Sitka, where she is raising a teenager alone, and cannot refuse the brief opportunity to earn a stack of cash under the table. While her experiences *as a woman* in the commercial fisheries are extensive, she holds the Western fishermen as aristocracy of the Alaska fleet, and keenly notes both the work and play ethics of these "frontier heroes." The initial setting and pace of the transport provide a slow and reflective occasion for observation of the natural environment, as well as the chance for Holly to "prove up" in the company of men who see her as a little girl and refer to her as "Blondie" and "sweetie." The story takes a tragic and ironic turn that

illuminates the rampant drug and alcohol culture of many hardcore fishermen, while simultaneously exploring social constructions of gender, labor, and frontier environment.

Project Origins

Tales of Well Seasoned Women came about as a result of my coursework at University of Alaska Fairbanks while in the Northern Studies program, in conjunction with my background in Alaska's commercial fishing industry, labor jobs, and bartending. I developed an interest in gender studies after becoming familiarized with the Arctic Council and the Arctic Human Development Report (AHDR) through the Anthropology Department. After studying extensive literature pertaining to social impacts of climate change in Polar Regions, I began to wonder why there was so little information coming from women, children, Indigenous voices, and other marginalized groups.

As I explored these questions, I came to see a pattern of acceptance in the notion that many of the "gendered aspects of social, cultural, and political life were obscured by the supposedly 'neutral' norms and ideals," those which tend to be based on longstanding hegemonic norms and values.³⁹ I was particularly fascinated with the Arctic Council's Sustainable Development Working Group's report from the *Taking Wing Conference* held at Inari, Finland in 2002, where the focus was on raising awareness of the status of women across the Arctic. Crosscutting themes included social, economic, and cultural changes, as well as issues involving women and work, violence against women, and self-determination of Indigenous peoples. I was hooked, and knew that I wanted to pursue these topics, but was not sure where to begin. With my background in commercial fisheries and creative writing, I saw an opportunity to open the curtain on a small window in history when Western women were beginning to appear more frequently in Southeast Alaska's commercial fishing industry.

In preparation for writing, I combined my knowledge of cultural, political, and Indigenous anthropologies of the North with subsistence concerns, gender issues, education, and the impacts of

rapid change on traditionally static cultures. I analyzed traditional folklore and mythologies, etiology of language transmission and cultural identities, oral traditions, along with maritime, historical, and Alaskan frontier literatures. I aspired to braid elements from all of these sources as a framework for writing about Alaska's commercial fishermen and women.

In reconsidering the *Taking Wing Conference* agenda, my primary objectives were to apply an authentic gendered perspective to the literature of Alaska's maritime history, and in doing so, to help bring women, children, and Indigenous persons away from the margins of the imagination in these contexts. My secondary purpose was to emphasize the brief era preceding the advent of nearly universal access to modern technologies – a time when the craft of the mariner was a skill requiring a lifetime of practice, with the incentive of learning the trade exceeding Facebook likes or Twitter retweets. Finally, while contemporary reality television shows such as *The Deadliest Catch* and *Dirty Jobs* portray Alaska's commercial fishermen as idealized, heroic men subduing nature, the following *Tales of Well Seasoned Women* shifts the focus to merely ordinary - and often flawed, men and women at work in extraordinary environments. It is my pleasure to invite you along for the adventures.

NOTES

1 With regard to the capitalization of the first letter in the word “Indigenous” throughout this writing: This model is a precedent set in Alaska Native Studies courses that I have taken at UAS and UAF. While this stylistic choice may not be typical in mainstream academic circles, it is the preferred and respectful model by the mentoring professors of this writer.

2 Eddie Hunsinger and Sara Whitney, *A History of Alaska Population Settlement*, (Juneau, 2013), 9-11. <http://labor.alaska.gov/research/pop/estimates/pub/pophistory.pdf>. Accessed July 20, 2015.

3 Jennifer Schell, *A Bold and Hardy Race of Men: The Lives and Literature of American Whalemens* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2013) 202.

4 Ibid., 208.

5 Ibid.

6 Ray Allen Billington, *How the Frontier Shaped the American Character* (American Heritage Publishing Company, Incorporated, 1958).

7 Ibid.

8 Schell, *A Bold and Hardy Race*, x.

9 Judith Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012).

10 Judith Kleinfeld, “A Woman in Search of a Character: Adult Development in the Alaskan North,” *Northern Review* 15/16 (1995).

11 Dan P McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

12 Ibid.

13 Maureen P Hogan and Timothy Pursell, “The ‘Real Alaskan’ Nostalgia and Rural Masculinity in the “Last Frontier,” in *Men and Masculinities* 11, no. 1 (2008).

14 Ibid., 81.

15 Paul Thompson, “Women in the Fishing: The Roots of Power between the Sexes,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27, no. 1 (1985): 5.

16 Ibid., 5.

17 Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab Had a Wife* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 3-5.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Virginia Mülle and Sine Anahita, "From 'Without Fish We Would No Longer Exist': The Changing Role of Women in Southeast Alaska's Subsistence Salmon Harvest," in *Gender, Culture and Northern Fisheries*, ed. Joanna Kafarowski, (Canada: CCI Press, 2009), 29.

22 Heidi Hartmann, "From The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, eds. Wendy K. Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski. 4th Ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013) 309-10.

23 Davis, Nadel-Klein, and Sachs, "Gender, Culture and the Sea," 52-3.

24 Ibid., 53.

25 Judith Kleinfeld, *The Frontier Romance* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012) xx.

26 Justyna Goworowska and Todd K. Gardner, "From Historical Migration of the Young, Single, and College Educated: 1965 to 2000," in United States Census Bureau's Population Division Working Paper, no. 94, (2012) http://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/migration/files/Pop_Working%20Paper_94.pdf

27 Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, News Release: National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2013 (Preliminary Results), (September 11, 2014) <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cfoi.pdf>

28 Hogan and Purcell, "The 'Real Alaskan,'" 68.

29 Sea-ography is my word. Its application is intended to expand the definition beyond the borders of "earth writing" to become "sea writing." A more appropriate term might be "oceanography" but that word choice seems contextually inaccurate.

30 Thompson, *Women in the Fishing*, 5-6.

31 "The Longline Pioneers," John Sabella & Associates, Seattle:USA. 1996. Film <https://youtu.be/rjle1vxntl>

32 National Institute of Health, "Women Suffer More Motion Sickness," in *Western Journal of Medicine* 172, no. 1 (2000): 42. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1070722/>

33 A honey-bucket is a 5-gallon bucket that serves as a deck toilet on many boats. Often a thick line is tied to the bucket so that it can be filled with seawater both before and after usage.

34 I worked on some boats where the skippers would not let me in the pit without changing

into different gloves. I also worked on a third boat that was hauled out and was asked to come back after my cycle was ended. This was my experience with different skippers in the 1980s. It may also be documented in investigative literature – but if not, it certainly is now.

35 The area on a maritime vessel designated for cooking and is the “galley.” On the majority of smaller fishing boats, the galley is often located within the small “house” on deck where captain and crew sleeps, eats, and utilizes to break from weather.

36 Hogan and Purcell, *The Real Alaskan*, 81.

37 Ibid., 68.

38 Ibid., 82.

39 University of the Arctic, Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies 332, Module 7, Women and Gender Relations in the North, 123. http://www.uarctic.org/Module_7_n9XB5.pdf.file (retrieved November 14, 2011).

The Glass Baitshed

Opening day morning, 6:00 a.m., with six hours left 'til the gun goes off. Marco started the engine up, and was on the radio with his buddies. He chugged coffee and felt restless. He squinted at his reflection in the window. Those crevasses on his face seemed mighty deep for a forty-two year old man.

Big stood on deck with a cigarette and looked out across the water. Whitecaps waltzed in the breeze, but it could have been the changing tides. The weatherman had promised fair seas with winds to twenty knots for outside waters, after all. He pulled up a float bag that hung over the side from the night before and carried it to the troll pit where all the bags were stowed.

Dalisay stood before the mirror in the galley and drew her eyebrows in. She contemplated putting a couple trays of cinnamon rolls in the oven. Marco loves those things, she thought. He calls them "poppin' fresh gutbombs." She smiled at her reflection. It felt good to be needed.

Jack sat on his bunk, and fingered the new seasick patch behind his ear. He was dressed and ready, but felt as anxious as his first kiss. Big told him to be the first guy on deck and the last one off, and his motivation suddenly increased when he heard muffled grunting and moaning coming from the bunk behind him. He took one deep breath and snuck out of the foc's'cle.

Heidi moved quietly beneath her man. She was as excited by the scent of his hair and skin as she was by the gentle rocking of the boat. The steady thrum in the vessel's wooden ribs reverberated in all the right places. She was glad Jack left them when the engine started up. Jerry Jeff had assured her they wouldn't be getting horizontal together for a few nights, and they'd be too exhausted to do anything about it anyways. She couldn't wrap her mind around that, and so she arched her back instead and let him bring her home.

J-Cube thought about how much it turned him on when his woman called him by his Christian name, Jerry Jeff. Especially when he was inside her. Fishing and fucking were his two

favorite pastimes, and so the day was already starting off perfect. He thought he smelled sweet rolls baking and moved his hips just a little faster.

One week earlier

A spring gale curled over the top of the water boosting an already steady surge in the harbor. Fishing boats bobbed about in their stalls like sloppy drunk folk dancers. One brazen raven swooped down from a nearby stand of cedar trees and perched atop the edge of the wheelhouse of a jouncing wooden boat with the words *Lady Lou* carved into the starboard bow. Cru-u-u-k, cru-u-k the raven called over the wind and rain. A heavy blue tarp rippled above the deck from the wheelhouse to the hayrack, and fat raindrops plopped steadily off of its edges. Cramped directly beneath, at the center of the deck, four bodies stood pressed up against a large wooden box that served as both a worktable and a fish hold cover. The tabletop hosted a moderately organized assemblage of knives, hooks, gangions, and various implements of gearwork. A hill of salted, semi-frozen chunks of bait herring lay in the center, where it would be reduced and replenished frequently through the days ahead. Nested before each person at the table, coils of groundline would ascend and descend as each skate was baited and moved into piles at the stern of the vessel.

Despite the inclement weather, the small harbor was a hive of energy as fishermen pulled carts loaded with gear, bait, and various sundries along the docks in preparation for the first halibut longline fishery of the year. Anchors, flags and buoy bags were hoisted over vessel railings, along with hand-truck loads of groundline and salt. Small clusters of fisher folk sometimes stopped to talk shop adjacent to the dock ramp that pranced erratically with the incoming swells.

Still a state-managed fishery, halibut season was set to open in one week, and participation was especially high due to open-access, cheap permitting and abundant resource. Once known as a gentlemen's fishery, the halibut and black cod longline fisheries had devolved to dangerous and

frenzied free-for-all derbies. For a few years now, anyone with a boat and a permit could participate in the longline gold rush. Participants ranged from one-person rowboats to full capacity schooners with twelve-man crews. The f/v *Lady Lou*, a 48-foot wooden vessel that was used as a salmon troller for part of the year, fell right in the center of that span.

Captain Marco McManus stood in the stern pit, his barrel-shaped body bent over the stern railing, legs like tree trunks. He was twisting a wrench to secure the gear chute in place, and a steady stream of raindrops bounced off the hayrack and onto his large head. “Goddamn mother-fucking sonnuva bitch piece of shit!!” he hollered.

Patrick “Big” Johnson, his deck boss, stood at the table and pushed hooks through chunks of herring with one hand while flipping coils of line into a pile with the other. Having fished with Marco for the last nine seasons, Big was indifferent to his skipper’s tantrums, “What’s the problem, Mac?” The crew at the table had been having a lukewarm debate about the merits of Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign, and everyone stopped arguing to hear what was the matter.

“I’ll tell you what the goddamn problem is!” he shouted, “while all y’all are over there jerking your jaws about who-the-hell-cares what, I just stripped my knuckles on this piece of ...” His words trailed off as he flung the wrench into the water and kicked the wall of the pit. “Get over here, Big! Bring the baling wire. Move it!”

The crewmen exchanged meaningful glances. Big put his work aside and went into the house, returning moments later with wire and snips in hand. He sidled up on the opposite end of the chute and held on to it. Marco cut wire from the spool and forcefully wove it in and out of the through-hole as a temporary measure. When he finished, he spat into the water below and climbed out of the pit, leaving Big to figure out the next move. “I’m going to the hardware store,” Marco barked to no one in particular. His jaw set firm, he climbed over the railing and marched up the dock, the wind and rain seemingly parting in his angry wake. Even the raven cru-u-u-k, cru-u-ked and flew off.

Big returned to the table and resumed baiting gear, a cigarette clenched tight between his teeth. His best friend, Jerry Jeff Justice, “J-Cube,” stood directly across from Big and spoke first. “I’m just saying, words ain’t gonna stop kids from doing drugs. The only thing that’ll keep kids from doing your drugs is doing ‘em all first.”

J-Cube’s girlfriend, Heidi Seymour, stood to his left. She elbowed him hard in the ribs. “You ought to be the poster child for birth control,” she sniped.

“You just figuring that out now?” Big asked, his bushy eyebrows arched in amusement.

“Look, I agree that ‘just say no’ is a ludicrous slogan, but at least the conversation’s on the table now,” Heidi argued. “It’s like the good ol’ boys are finally coming outta the dark ages.”

“Say, what’s this right here?” J-Cube asked, casually dropping a small pipe and bag of weed on the table. “Anybody wanna ‘just say no’ to this?”

To his surprise, everyone said ‘no’ simultaneously and burst into laughter.

“Heidi, you don’t count,” he said for the benefit of the newest member of the crew, Jack Benoit. “She don’t smoke; it makes her paranoid. What’s your excuse?”

Jack grew up a Wisconsin farm boy and, up until he recently left for Alaska, had never stepped two miles beyond the town he was born in. Drug abuse was a big city problem, and as far as he was concerned, it could stay there. “I don’t smoke neither. Don’t care none if anyone else does. It just ain’t my thing.”

“Hmm, I think he just said ‘no’,” Big observed.

J-Cube eyed Jack with suspicion. “So what exactly do you do for fun?”

“Same thing as everyone else, I reckon. Hunt, fish, drink beer, chase tail.” He was still learning how to wind his gear, and Big reached over to move a few coils around on Jack’s skate.

“Thanks,” he nodded to Big.

“Hey, if the gear tangles, you’re gonna get blamed. Might as well learn ya how to do it right the first time, so maybe that don’t have to happen, greenie,” Big teased.

J-Cube had loaded the bowl and lit it. “But you’re gonna get blamed anyways, greenie,” he echoed, his mouth on the exhale.

“Jeez guys! There ain’t no need to be jerks. You’re gonna scare him off before we ever leave the dock, so cut it out,” Heidi insisted.

“You on the rag?” J-Cube asked. Heidi’s eyes darkened to slits, and she took a step back. She reached for a cigarette, adding a dramatic pause, since the pack was next to the big knife, and her hand easily could have gone either way. She lit the smoke and kept on baiting gear.

“You didn’t really just say that to your girlfriend, didja?” Big stopped baiting and stared hard across at J-Cube - who did not engage. Big squinted his eyes and smiled painfully at Heidi.

Heidi grinned. She liked Big – sometimes even more than she liked her idiot boyfriend. “Well babe, don’t think you’re gonna get down there to find out anytime soon, ‘cause I’m just sayin’ NO. We’ll see whose ‘on the rag’ then.”

J-Cube looked sheepish but did not apologize. He did, however, flash an angry look over at the new guy. Somehow, it had to be his fault, damn it.

Standing on deck at the harbor in inclement weather, day after day, had started to take its toll on everyone. Weeks of preparation were spent getting ready for a huge crapshoot that depended on a solid crew, tight mechanics, and most importantly – cooperative weather. Even then, if everything went smooth above deck, the ultimate contingency was finding the resource in an area that no one else was tapping. A lot of money was on the line, and any number of factors could impact the ultimate success or failure of each crew.

No one on the *Lady Lou* expressed this tension more than Marco. While he was recognized for his successful longline and trolling seasons, he was also notorious for his violent temper and had a hard time keeping deckhands on account of it. As for his wife, Dalisay, Marco wed her when he figured out that she would never leave him, and probably wouldn't kill him in his sleep either. She had spent more than one occasion in the emergency room or the women's shelter, but she always returned to her man. People talked; it was disconcerting, after all, to see the petite Filipina woman at the market with the occasional fat lip or broken arm, but then again, it was her choice to stay, right? The small community had an unspoken doctrine regarding domestic violence: *Mind your own damn business*. And that was exactly what folks did.

On the boat, it was not as easy to avoid Marco's wrath, but any deckhand worth his salt quickly learned how to keep out of his crosshairs. For one thing, the only predictable thing about his temper was the unpredictability of it. Big had figured out how to keep in his good graces for the last nine seasons, but his current incentive was partially triggered by rumors of a federal fishing quota system that would limit longline jobs in the near future. He intended to keep ahead of the curve and felt confident that if Marco had to choose one crewman above all others, he would choose Big; if not for his loyalty to the man, then certainly for his skill as an engineer and deck boss.

J-Cube was also a respected deckhand, but he had only been crewing on the *Lady Lou* for two seasons; this trip was the first his girlfriend would be joining them. Although Heidi had been trolling for several years, this was her first time longlining. She did not care one speck of spit for Marco McManus, but when the opportunity to longline with her sweetheart came up, she could not resist. J-Cube's premise was, "More crew equals more fish, and that equals more money, babe." She couldn't argue with that logic. Besides, she liked Dali, she adored Big, and maybe she wouldn't have to deal with Marco much at all. A week, maybe ten days of preparation, then forty-eight hours of fishing, and another week to overhaul the gear; Heidi was certain that she could manage that short

span and then just collect her check. Her confidence was short-lived, however, when her boyfriend announced that Marco said she could go with them for half a share – same as the greenhorn, Jack! She was insulted and almost refused, but J-Cube promised that a half-share on the *Lady Lou* would still earn her a minimum of five digits before the decimal point. “Also,” he hinted, “when the fishery goes limited entry, I want a shot with Marco. You, my sexy bitch, might be the lucky charm that he remembers when it comes time to decide.”

“And how will that help *you*?” she teased, flattered that he called her his ‘sexy bitch’.

“Babe, ya said it yourself: men are led by their britches. He’ll think of you, and then he’ll think of me. Shazam!”

“Shazam,” she repeated. The money was certainly important, but hearing that Marco offered her only a half-share was a double affront. Not only was the portion an offense, but also that he had negotiated with her boyfriend instead of her was a hard slap. In the end she relented because she wanted to do halibut with J-Cube. So maybe women were led by their britches too, she mused.

Snotty storms played out over the next five days until a friendly weather window opened to leave town just two days before the fishery was set to start. Much of the “small boat” fleet would try to get to their chosen grounds in the next twenty-four hours in order to jockey into position before other boats showed up. The crew of the *Lady Lou* was no exception. The boat was set to longline, the gear on ice, and the fuel and water tanks topped off. Everyone had picked their bunks and stowed their belongings. Dalisay went to get the groceries, and the rest of the crew drove over to the *Highbliner Bar* for hotdogs and cold beers while they waited for her return. Marco sat at a back table with some of the other captains to review their intended strategies. Big, Heidi, Jack and J-Cube sat in a line against the bar, flanked by fishermen on both sides. Most of the men sported beards, faded ball-caps, and dingy coveralls. Town dogs sat still as sentinels beside their masters’ feet. Most every

body at the bar wore brown boots speckled with dull fish scales, so it was a wonder the dogs were able to discern one pair from another. The cigarette smoke was nearly as thick as the noise of music and loud conversation in the room. Following an informal tradition, some crews would pass through and raise a toast before heading out to the grounds, and when Dalisay's jeep pulled into the lot, the crew of the *Lady Lou* ordered their round of shots.

Big led the toast, "Here's to the cut that never heals;" and everyone in earshot who knew the words chimed in, "The more you rub it, the more she squeals; There ain't no soap in heaven or hell; That can wash away that halibut smell." All around, shot glasses clinked like bells, and then J-Cube added, "Let's go kick some butt!"

Marco and Jack got in the jeep with Dalisay, and the others drove to the harbor in J-Cube's truck.

"Did you guys see Jack's face when Big made the toast?" Heidi asked.

J-Cube shrugged his shoulders, "What about it?"

"He just looked, I dunno, surprised maybe. Amused? Like he didn't quite get it," she answered.

"Shit, I bet you're right. He's still pretty wet behind the ears," Big chuckled. "Then again, that's the only way Mac can land a new deckhand anymore. Best kind is a big ol' boy with a strong back and a weak mind. We'll need him for landing all those barndoors, that's for sure! My back ain't getting no younger."

"Ya think I should ask my friend, Bethany, to stop by the boat after we get back to town? Ya know, so she can explain it to him," Heidi hinted.

"Hmm, let's see how he does on this trip first. We might wanna kill him before we get him laid," J-Cube countered.

"Good point," Big concurred.

Heidi kept quiet; she knew he was right. The next forty-eight hours on the *Lady Lou* would be Jack's proving ground as much as, if not more than, hers. The big difference was that men judged other men harshly in this arena; whereas women were still seen as tokens in the industry, especially in longlining. Heidi knew her novelty would most likely relieve her of the critical scrutiny that Jack would undergo. Besides, Dali would be there, if only as an auxiliary to the captain, though Heidi suspected that she was getting a full share since she was his wife. Not that it mattered much, for Heidi was just as happy to have another female aboard. All that testosterone could be overwhelming for just one gal to contend with. Two women, for the short haul, might be downright civilized.

They arrived at the harbor in time to help Jack unload boxes of groceries from the jeep. Once the crew got down the ramp, the *Lady Lou* was already warming up, the diesel smoke rising from the stack. Dalisay arrived a few moments after; she never passed an opportunity to use the harbor bathroom before they all cozied up on the boat. As soon as she reached the dock slip, Marco hollered, "Let's go!" and Big jumped off to untie lines. The boat charged out of the harbor and was underway, heading out to the deep water where multitudes of oblivious, diamond-shaped fish meandered along the sea floor, both eyes pointed up and looking for the next meal. For the millions of unsuspecting flatfish that took the bait each season, however, the Latin proverb, *nullum gratuitum prandium* was effectively demonstrated. For them, there would be no free lunch.

J-Cube stood in the galley with Heidi and Jack and showed them where to store groceries. The house was impossibly small for a crew of six, so they stashed most of the food that didn't fit beneath the galley seats in boxes and stowed the rest in the oversized fish hold - regardless of whether it was perishable. That included everything, except for the abundance of paper plates, towels and toilet paper. Those items had a separate hideaway that J-Cube could hardly wait to show his girlfriend.

“Hey, come on outside with me,” he whispered in her ear, his arms chocked full of paper products. She liked the way that sounded and excused herself from Jack in the galley. Out on deck, J-Cube handed her some of the paper products so he could use one arm to hoist himself up the ladder above the wheelhouse. Then she climbed up and handed him one item at a time as he stuffed it all beneath a worn aluminum boat that was tied down to the house.

She climbed up and looked around. “Nice view up here. Kinda sooty, though,” she noted. The stack was producing a rich excess of carbon, and the breeze was blowing it her way. She hunkered down on the opposite side of the house and J-Cube nudged up against her. She turned, and their mouths met in a cozy kiss.

“Ya like it up here, babe?” he attempted to brush soot off her face but merely smeared it. He decided not to mention it yet; maybe just enjoy the carefree moment while it lasted instead.

“I do,” she admitted. “It’s really nice doing this together.”

“Yeah, it is right now... but things will get ugly real fast, and I don’t want you to take anything personal when we’re knee deep in the fish.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I mean that ya think you know how Marco gets, but you ain’t seen nothing yet. He’ll stay on the roller way longer than he should, and you just gotta do your best to let stuff slide off your back. Nothing’s personal here, it’s just fishin’, okay?”

“Alright, babe,” she brushed his beard and kissed him again. “Are you gonna have this talk with Jack too?”

J-Cube laughed. “Nah. He’s a greenhorn and needs to learn like everyone else does: trial by Marco.”

“Well thanks for sparing me,” she rubbed up against him, catlike. “At half share, though, I think sex ought to be part of this deal too,” she hinted.

“Knock yourself out, ma’am,” he stood up and stepped down the ladder. “I can’t be fooling around with no bearded ladies. My girlfriend would tan my hide.”

“What? You little turd!” she touched her face, as if she imagined she’d find fur.

“Go wash your mug. You can use my razor!” He laughed into the wind.

A few hours out, the breeze had stiffened, and Big had dropped the poles and tossed the stabilizers into the water. It was getting on dusk, and a fleet of mosquito boats dotted the distant skyline. Jack was out on deck and not looking well. Big went over to talk with him and suddenly Jack turned and clutched the railing. He dropped to his knees like a fallen giant, and pressed his head against the hull. The boat kept rolling along, when suddenly he jerked himself up and heaved over the side. Big stayed nearby but averted his eyes. Jack dropped down and hauled up twice more before he finally stayed down, his back against the hull. His face, drained of all color save grey, was drenched in sweat. His lips quivered, and he held onto his gut.

“Hey man, ya ain’t looking too good.” Big bent down near him. “Lock your eyes on the horizon. Try to make that your reference point. I’ll grab ya some water.”

“Oh hell. Feels like I’m dying, man.” He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and looked up, “Where’s the horizon?”

Jack pointed over the side of the boat, “Right there. Just keep your head up.” Big went inside the house while Jack gripped the railing and tried to fix his eyes on the distant line. Big returned in short order and handed him a plastic mug.

“Thanks, man.”

“Ya gonna live?”

“I got a damn seasick patch on too, for all it’s worth,” Jack pulled his hair back above his neck to reveal a small tan circle. “How long does this last anyways?”

Big shook his head, “Being sick? Huh, hard to say. I know guys who fish all their lives and puke in any weather, flat calm or blowing eighty. Some guys never hurl, but they can’t get out of the rack. I got seasick too when I started fishing. Best thing you can do is keep your point of reference on the horizon, and not on the boat or water. Ya know what I mean?”

Jack nodded weakly. “I sure hope this passes fast. I need this job, man.”

“C’mon up here,” Big motioned him to follow along the side of the wheelhouse to the bow. He sat down with his back against the wheelhouse, well below the windows, and Jack pulled his hulking figure down beside Big. They both gazed ahead at the sun disappearing into the thin horizon. A daring palette of vermillion, tomato and tangerine brushstrokes against a lavender sky helped Jack momentarily forget his discomfort.

“That’s a promising sky... and good timing for us. That’s the worst thing ‘bout these derbies,” Big noted, “You only got two shots a year to get as many fish as you can, and the dates are set way in advance and lined up with the tides. Fact is, small tides equal big storms - every damn time. A lot of guys in this here small-boat fleet have to poke their noses out to fish, no matter how bad the weather is. Every year we lose some boats, some guys, and a whole lotta gear. It’s even worse out west.”

“So are ya saying that this boat goes out in any weather?”

Big nodded, “Yeah, Mac – or Marco as you know him, will go out in any weather if he thinks he can get away with it. Sometimes though, if the seas are too rough for even the bigger boats, then a lot of the fleet will stand down til the next opening. Marco doesn’t want to lose everything, so even he has his limits - though they aren’t always the ones I’d choose.”

Beads of sweat soon reappeared on Jack’s face. “You doing okay, man?” Big asked.

“I still ain’t feeling so good, but it ain’t as bad as while ago. Reckon I had to get rid of those ‘dogs and booze more than anything. I just wanna figure out how this hook and line fishing works, and aim to be doing whatever I’m s’posed to do whether I’m puking or not,” he insisted.

“Onboard, it’s called ‘chumming’.”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“Chumming, ‘cause you’re feeding the fish on top. Which ain’t such a bad thing really, if ya look at it in a circle-of-life kind of way.” Big lit a smoke. He offered the pack to Jack, who shook his head, “Naw, thanks.” Jack stretched his legs out and thought for a moment.

“Oh, I get ya. I fed the fish at the top and they’re feeding the fish at the bottom, and we catch ‘em, and... Pretty much just like farming.”

“You got it. It sure ain’t brain surgery. You’ll see. Ya just gotta be careful – it’s the most important part of the job. When the gun goes off, everything is gonna happen fast as fuck, and if you aren’t clear about where to be, you’re just gonna get in the way,” he paused, “and that could be deadly for you, or worse, for someone else.”

“How’s that?” Jack asked.

“It’s like driving drunk. You get in a wreck and hurt yourself or die - it’s your loss. You hurt or kill someone else, it’s their loss first, but your loss forever after.”

They were both silent for a while, though Jack wondered if Big was speaking from personal experience. Big did not elaborate on the analogy, and Jack did not pursue it. The sun was gone, and the bright sky had faded to an indigo blue. When the first stars began to appear, it was as if hummingbirds had poked their needle-noses into the dark fabric letting specks of light glow through. The cool breeze mixed with the smell of roasted meat wafting from the house. It lured Big to stand and stretch. Jack followed suit.

“Hey thanks, man,” Jack said, “I’m feeling better than ever about how this is gonna go down. Is it cool if I hit my bunk for a spell?”

“Oh yeah, it’s always good to sleep when there’s no work, but if you’re still feeling green, then ya just might keep your ass out on deck awhile longer. Maybe that patch will help some now that ya fed the fish gods,” he smiled and edged back alongside the wheelhouse.

Jack remained on deck and tried to find the horizon, but it was no longer discernable in the night. He studied the dark island silhouettes off the starboard side and thought about his family back home. He wondered if any of his kin could even begin to imagine the beauty of Alaska.

“Devil Went Down to Georgia” was booming in the wheelhouse. Marco stood at the helm, the wooden handles of the old steering wheel barely visible from behind his burly outline. The binnacle itself was an overwhelming morass of newspapers, half-eaten microwave burritos, fish lures, tide books, bullets, tools, and general filth that blocked the bottom quarter view of the windows.

“Dali! Get in here! I need your eyes,” he bellowed above the music. Big materialized beside him instead.

“Where’s my fuckin’ wife?” he growled.

“She’s in the galley, but I got eyes. What’cha need?” Big asked, his voice ever serene.

“Damn straight, she’s in the galley,” he smirked. “Look at the chart and tell me how deep the entrance to this bay is coming up on the radar,” his voice lowered. “Can I bring her in on the southeast end?”

Big bent over the chart on the small table and adjusted the light. His finger traced the outline of the cove then stopped for a moment so he could compare the shape with the radar. He checked the Loran and the fathometer both to be certain, “Looks like Stillstar Bay; that sound right?”

“Yeah, that’s what I was hoping. I think there’s a dandy li’l anchorage on the southeast end, all sand and mud.”

“There’s some shallow spots, less than five fathoms if you get in too close,” Big pointed towards the intended destination. “Keep to center,” he advised.

“Get me in there, and I’ll buy ya a beer.”

Marco throttled down, and the *Lady Lou* tiptoed into the anchorage with Big as his eyes. J-Cube wandered up to the bow and waited for the signal to drop anchor. Jack suddenly materialized as he stood up in front of the portside window intending to assist J-Cube. Marco clutched his heart, his eyes bugged from his head, “Where the fuck did he come from? Son of a bitch scared the shit outta me!”

Big howled with laughter at the sight of his captain’s face, “He’s been out there a couple hours now. Had himself a little spate of seasick.”

Marco turned the hydraulics on and signaled his thumb down, and J-Cube let the anchor unfurl until he was given the sign to cut it. Jack stood by, his countenance stoic under the glow of the deck light. “So long as he can land the hogs, I don’t care if the bastard drops dead after we get done,” Marco said in a low voice. Big had the sense to hold his thoughts on the matter.

Dalisay announced dinner was ready, and everyone sat down in the galley to eat, including Jack. He was cautious in his selection, putting a few potatoes on his plate, barely touching the meat or other accompaniments.

“What’s the matter, farm boy, you don’t like my wife’s cooking?”

Jack’s face bloomed pink, and he stammered, “No, it’s great. I just ain’t that hungry.” Everyone looked uncomfortable, anticipating the worst, but Marco kept right on shoveling food in his mouth and said nothing more.

The next morning when the sun was high, J-Cube, Heidi, and Jack rowed over to the beach with several buckets and filled them with rocks of various sizes. Big and Marco hauled the buckets on board, and Dalisay cut squares out of an old seine net that was stashed aft in the lazarette. The crew used gangions to weave the net squares around the rocks, and J-Cube explained to Heidi and Jack how these would be used as sash weights to keep the longline down on the bottom. Dalisay affixed stainless steel snaps to each weight, and the full buckets were lined up against the railings in preparation for the next day.

Dalisay and Heidi had begun to develop an easy camaraderie that no one had anticipated. Perhaps because Dalisay was older, married, and mysterious in the eyes of the rather unsophisticated girl, Heidi looked to her as an exotic mother figure of sorts. Dalisay appreciated the sassy, brassy, young American spirit that Heidi exuded. They worked well together the first night in the galley, and by the following day, Dalisay was getting out on deck more than ever, helping with preparations and showing Heidi how things went down on the *Lady Lou*.

"Looks like the ladies are gettin' on good." J-Cube shared his observation with Big and Jack while they sharpened scrapers and knives.

"I wonder how long 'til Mac puts the kibosh on that?" Big asked.

"Aw, c'mon. Heidi's good people. You know that, bro," J-Cube pointed out.

"Hell yeah, she is! But Mac don't trust free spirited chicks around his ol' lady," Big spoke quietly, even though the music was blaring. Marco had just installed new mounts for the stereo speakers. Forty-eight hours of sleepless slaughter would demand the relentless thrum and twang of hard rock and country songs blasting on deck: A soundtrack to kill by.

"It ain't none of my business who Heidi talks to, but you'd think he'd be damn glad seeing his woman happy. Oh well. I came here to kill fish and get rich. How 'bout you, Jack? You ain't said

two words today. You ready to get your cherry popped?” J-Cube spit on a white sharpening stone and picked up a 10” heading knife.

“Well yeah, when ya put it that way! I wanna see how all this goes down already.”

“Good – hey look!” J-Cube pointed out south, “We got company coming!” Two boats, maybe one and a half miles out, were charging towards the bay. Big squinted his eyes, “Looks like Charlie on the *Lotta Lee*... and that would be...”

“Gizmo on the *Ironside*,” J-Cube added, dropping his voice down. “Phew. It would suck to have to share water with anyone that ain’t been invited to Marco’s piece of the pie.”

“No shit, I seen him pull his AK-47 out and start shooting off the bow when he thought someone was stepping on his gear,” Big drawled, and Jack’s eyes widened as the infamous incident was retold.

As the boats drew closer, Marco came out with a large hibachi in his arms and set it up on deck. He went back inside to the radio, and soon Dalisay and Heidi came out carrying trays heaped with deer steaks, skewers of vegetables, and rolls. Someone dumped warm cans of beer and soda into the ice coolers just as the *Lotta Lee* and *Ironside* entered the mouth of the bay and pulled their poles in.

“Toss bags over the sides,” Big yelled.

“Get up on the bow to catch lines, Jeff. Heidi, grab some line and secure it to the starboard stern, Charlie is pulling up on that side,” Marco yelled over the loudspeaker, causing everyone to jump and run. Soon the boats were all rafted together and the smell of barbeque wafted in the breeze. Charlie had a four-man crew and Gizmo’s boat was bigger, so he had six. There was much laughter, storytelling, and bragging as everyone got mentally prepared for the final countdown. After a few hours, the sun was setting and the boats pulled apart and dropped their anchors nearby for the last chance to sleep and pray to the sea-gods.

Opening Day 6:30 a.m.

Poles up and purring, the *Lady Lou* steamed out into the big water. Jack was down in the hold handing skates of baited gear up to Big, Heidi, and J-Cube. They assembled the piles evenly on deck. A few more mosquito boats appeared on the horizon; Marco's blood pressure ticked up, up, up. The music was turned down low in the wheelhouse so that he could listen to everyone else gabbing on the radio and maybe determine whom he might have to kill first.

Dalisay finished cleaning up the galley and then set out several bags bloated with candy bars and quick snacks. She made sure the coffee pot was still hefty and then pulled a seldom-used sugar bowl down from the cupboard and set it near the center of the table.

Jack fixed his eyes on the horizon. Sea birds seemed to swoop up and kiss billowed clouds that pressed against a velvet blue sky and reminded him of his mother's eyes. That thought helped him get his bearings as the *Lady Lou* rolled up and down, bouncing into the mighty Pacific. Big pointed out a large pod of porpoises running alongside the boat, and Dalisay came out to say that was a sure sign of good luck. The deck was set with all of the necessary accouterments to get the gear wet.

Marco had arrived on the spot where he wanted to drop the first set, and he slowly circled the boat until the countdown began. The crew pulled on their oilskin bibs, bandanas, and ball caps. Big began to remove the covers off of the skates and married the first four or five ends to each other with loop-to-loop knots. He had gone over all of the knots with Jack and Heidi several times in the days leading up to the trip but provided a quick refresher in context. J-Square wound electrical tape around a knife sheath and affixed it to his girlfriend's bib-strap. Jack followed suit after J-Cube explained how a quick access "Vicky" knife could save a person's life.

"Once the skates start uncoiling, the gear is gonna go flying out of that chute fast and furious, and the hooks will be flying even faster. Ya get snagged when we're setting, you're goin'

over. No ands, ifs, or buts about it. You go slow, you be careful, and if ya do get snagged, grab your Vicky and cut the gangion fast as you fuckin' can."

Jack nodded and Big piped in, "Yeah, and if Mac likes ya, he might turn around and scoop ya up."

J-Cube turned to Heidi and tipped her chin up, "When you're coiling the line down into the bucket, stay focused. The crucifier sometimes pulls hooks in ways that can take your face off, and I like yer face just the way it is, so be fucking careful." He tapped her nose with his rubber-gloved hand. "Ya bob and weave, babe. Got it?"

Heidi blushed at his stern advice, "Got it. Bob and weave."

"Did you just say you are naming your kids 'Bob' and 'Weave'? That's damn witty," Big teased, then added, "And remember, if a hook catches you or your clothes, just holler and cut the gangion. Don't think, just cut."

"Thanks guys, I'll be careful. Especially since I just found out about my kids."

Marco poked his head out of the wheelhouse, "Two-minute warning: You ladies ready to dance?"

The crew all whoop-whooped their battle cries, and soon the official countdown was blasting from the fresh deck speakers: "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one!"

J-Cube had already affixed a flasher and two float bags to the first flagpole, and those went over first, with groundline, anchor, and sash weights following. Marco's head flashed in the doorway again to make sure gear was going out and then disappeared back to the wheel. Big pushed the skates onto the setting table, while Heidi and Jack removed skate covers and laid sash weights down whenever they were told to.

True to J-Cube's description, Jack noted how the gear was flying out, and that the hooks were spinning wildly as each skate uncoiled and disappeared fast into the ocean. He stole a glance at

Heidi and noticed that she was touching her knife sheath. They exchanged nervous smiles and quickly refocused on bringing skates to the setting table.

After a dozen skates had unwound from the chute, Marco poked his head out and hollered, “Finish it off now!” and J-Cube motioned for groundline, which he quickly fastened to the last skate. Within moments, Big shouted, “Flag and bags!” J-Cube attached the last flagpole, “First string down!”

They repeated the same sequence five times more, until several hours later over six miles of gear was strategically laid along the seafloor at depths ranging from fifty to one hundred fifty fathoms. In the tight window between sets, gloves came off, and bodily functions were attended to. Some lit cigarettes, while others relieved themselves over the side. Heidi went in to use the bucket closet, because she could, and made it back on deck in time for the next string to go out.

Dalisay took over the wheel while Marco went out on deck. “Good job, girls. We’ll be on the gear and ready to start pulling in a couple of hours. You can start now with getting the pussy outta the ice. Get it cut for the turn around, and I don’t wanna hear no whining neither. I got us all a little treat in the sugar bowl, and once we start pulling, y’all are free to help yourselves,” he winked. “Now get to work!”

“We got ‘pussy’ on ice?” Heidi asked.

“Wonder what’s in the sugar bowl?” J-Cube smiled.

Big answered both questions, “Octopus, and blow. He swapped an uzi for coke and cash with Gizmo’s deckhand last night. He told me this morning.”

Lynyrd Skynrd’s “Free Bird” was flying from the speakers while Jack watched the horizon and thought about chumming. Everyone else was thinking about the sugar bowl. J-Cube removed the hatch cover from the hold and told Jack to get in and start handing up boxes of ‘pussy’ while Heidi got the knives and cutting boards out. Jack came out of the hold after a while and said he

wasn't feeling so well, and Big took him aside and told him, "Do what ya gotta do to get over it, son, then get cutting. Tick tock." Jack skulked over to the side of the wheelhouse and retched for a few minutes. Then he wiped his chin, pulled his hat down low, and returned to the bait table where open boxes of thawing bait lay waiting. It smelled fresh, and not the same as herring either.

"Why octopus now?" he asked.

"Trends change," J-Cube asserted, "Ol' Marco and his cronies get to talking about hook-spacing, herring versus squid or chum... it's just another way to make fishing seem more scientific, I s'pose."

"Or it could be price or availability," Heidi suggested.

"Yeah, that's probably the real cause," he nodded.

"Whatever the reason, here's how ya cut this critter," Big picked up the biggest knife on the table and chopped a block into chunks. Jack watched and then started cutting. Big sent Heidi down to hand up the rest of the bait, and she noticed the ice was hard in the bins. "Then deal with it," J-Cube hollered down. She took the ice devil out from its corner and happily stabbed the ice apart until her body throbbed from the effort. One ton of flake ice meant something entirely different to the girl trying to break it apart on a heaving sea. She climbed out from the hold and saw that the sky was already dark, but the deck lights were bright. She set about to cut up octopus; however, the only knife left to use was rather unwieldy, so she asked if anyone would trade her. None of her deck mates would concede to her feminine wiles, not even her boyfriend, leading her to speculate that the honeymoon might be over before it began.

It was nearing 10:00 p.m. at the end of the first day, and Dalisay had the binoculars pressed hard up against her face. The Loran numbers on the paper were close to the numbers on the screen, and she was sure she saw a beacon flash in the darkness. She reached behind to the bench sofa and

prodded her husband, "Wake up, I see the flag." He did not respond, so she pushed a little harder, "Marco! The flag. Get up." His enormous bulk beneath the brightly crocheted afghan reminded her a puffed-up walrus wearing a potholder. God, how she loved the man.

Marco sat up and growled like a bear. "Gimme those," he snapped and took the binoculars from Dalisay. He stood up and peered out at the flag and then looked at the Loran. "Alright, baby. It's show time. You ready?" He reached over and pulled the tiny woman in for a hard kiss.

"I'm always ready for you, baby," she beamed back.

Marco turned the music down and told the crew to get ready for the first flag. The deck erupted as the crew hurried to put on cotton liners, gloves, and wristers for protection. All the coco mats were down, the knives and scrapers had been honed to razor sharpness. Marco throttled down and nudged the *Lady Lou* right up along the pole. Big leaned over the starboard railing with a long handed hook and caught the flag and bags, quickly pulling them towards the boat. "Got it," J-Cube yelled, and then he removed the bags and flags while Big laced the longline through the roller and up into the gurdy, through the crucifier, and down to where Heidi stood ready to coil the gear into tubs with skate bottoms in place.

Gusts of wind were boiling up on the starboard side of the boat, and the hydraulics groaned even before the line began to move through the works. "If she's groaning now, that means a fish on every hook!" J-Cube announced.

"It means the weatherman was stoned, 'cause the wind is picking up," Big noted. Jack imagined his mother's eyes on the horizon as he waited for something to happen.

After a few agonizing minutes of just groundline, the first hook came up, and there she was, the maiden halibut, about fifty pounds and swaying gently towards the *Lady Lou*. Marco gaffed the fish and hauled it over the roller, dropping it into the first checker. J-Cube held the head up and stuck a knife in the gills, causing thick red blood to seep like spilled paint. A steady train of fish was

suddenly coming on board, and Jack followed J-Cube's lead by sticking his knife between the gill plates and bodies. Marco let some of the smaller halibut go through the crucifier, but the trip was still young, and he wasn't tired enough yet to let many pass through.

Heidi wound the incoming line into triple coils, dodging the flying hooks and regretting that she had not braided her thick hair back. As soon as the first skate was completed, she broke the knot apart and yelled for Jack, "Come and get it!"

Jack grabbed the tub and kicked another underneath the coil station and ran towards the bait table with the skate. The very first thing he did was slip on the slimy deck and drop the tub, spilling three hundred feet of stuck gear at his feet in a tangled ball. He stood up and gingerly lifted the mass back into the tub and silently prayed that one looped end would be near the top. He didn't think anyone noticed, since everyone was locked into his or her own duties. Big saw but said nothing. There was no point in embarrassing the kid.

Marco basked in the glory of the first string. There were a lot of big fish, many over fifty pounds, some over one hundred. He yelled and cursed at Dalisay every few minutes to turn this way or that, stay straight or slow down. She understood his temper and held her tongue. Between the sheer amount of big fish and the direction of the wind, the first string took six hours to haul. Morning light had broken through, and the crew was still full of energy, though some job shifting might have to occur if they were going to keep up with all the fish still in the checkers.

Seabirds swooped and dove all around the *Lady Lou*, many catching discarded guts in their beaks midair as the ceaseless stream of slimy innards flew off the deck in all directions. Jack was moved to the dressing table, and Heidi took a turn at baiting hooks. Her hands were nimble, and she was fast, while Jack had barely knocked out many skates at all. She didn't want to appear too good at baiting and overhauling gear; otherwise, the crew might refer to her as a "master baiter." Though it was intended as a salty compliment in the lexicon of longlining, it felt more like a boundary violation.

After Marco finished on deck, he pulled a can of beer from the cooler and went into the wheelhouse. He pointed the boat towards the head of the second string and sent Dalisay out on deck. She appeared soon after, dressed to dress fish. Her bibs were too big, so she had rubber bands around the bottoms to keep the slime from getting in her boots. Her wristers went all the way up to her armpits, and she had to stand on stacked coco mats in order to reach the hatch cover. Dalisay bent down and pulled the biggest fish she could reach up on the table and set to work cutting out the gills and guts in one pull.

“You’re mighty tenacious for a small woman!” Jack noted. She grinned and reached deep into the fish and yanked the gonads out in one fierce pull.

“My first pair of the year!” she exclaimed, holding up the thick, milky structures that evoked words like isosceles and hypotenuse. She gave each sack a quick peck, and then flung them over her back into the lumpy waves.

“I was thinking of making a pair of earrings out of some dried ‘nads and wearing them to the Christmas party this year,” Heidi commented from the bait table.

“Yes!” Dalisay squealed, “I want to do that with you!” J-Cube and Big swapped an uneasy glance.

“Damn. That’s awkward,” Jack said.

“Nope. That’s ‘art’ from the sea. Just like earbone earrings or giant corals,” Heidi countered. “Gotta think outside the box, or else you’re the same as everyone else.”

“Yeah, but won’t those earrings stink after a while?” Big protested.

“Yeah, stink like money!” J-Cube submitted.

“Maybe, but so what? I’ll be at the annual Fisherman’s Christmas party wearing fresh ‘butt ‘nads that I yanked out with my own hands! C’mon, Big. Even you gotta admit, that’ll take some

mighty big balls if I pull it off,” Heidi joked. The men all cringed at the word picture, while Dalisay and Heidi howled.

“Babe, that’s enough,” J-Cube chimed in. “You’re freakin’ me out bad.”

“Fine. But I’ll be making something nice for you to wear also,” Heidi promised, “maybe a bolo tie out of these?” she suggested, holding up a blob of intestines. J-Cube grimaced, and tossed a big halibut down the hatch. Dalisay began to like the idea even more, “I’m in!”

In time, Marco announced they would be getting on the next flag within the hour, and everyone doubled their efforts at dressing the fish. Big took Jack down into the hold to show him how to ice fish and then left him there. As the *Lady Lou* closed in on the next string of gear, Big hollered down to Jack to get back up on deck. He peered down into the hold and was annoyed to discover that Jack had not made much of a dent in the icing, and sent him back down to keep at it.

“Damn it,” Big whispered to J-Cube, “I’m losing my patience with the greenhorn. I’m about ready to keelhaul his ass.”

J-Cube patted his friend’s shoulder. “I’ll go get the line,” he teased.

Dalisay hosed herself and her spot at the table, and then left the deck so she could get back on the wheel in short order. Heidi ran inside to use the bucket and put a bandana on her head before returning to the coiler. She was getting hungry, but no time to eat now. The sugar bowl sat on the table, looking as ordinary as a cup of tea. Heidi peered under the lid and saw that it was indeed a heap of white powder. She was tempted but decided to wait. She grabbed a handful of candy bars instead and ran on deck in time to see the flag come on board.

The sky had been graying for a while, but when the *Lady Lou* turned into the wind to capture the flag and start the next pick, angry whitecaps frothed and slapped hard against the hull. It set the tone for the next several hours. Although the second string came in with even bigger fish than the

first, there were hellacious snags which hung up in the shiv and crucifier, slowing the haul down and frustrating the skipper who screamed and yelled without respite, his face swollen and rosy with rage. Marco threw his gaff on deck, and Big reached over, offering to run the roller.

“No fuckin’ way!” Marco screeched, and Big continued to stick fish in the gills and toss them in the checkers. Everyone did their best to keep on top of the fish, and even Dalisay sensed the situation from the wheelhouse and switched to some upbeat music.

An abundance of rockfish came up on the third string, and Marco raged about the possibility that another boat had set them down, even though there were no other boats close enough to convict. Then he concurred that there were not enough sash weights to keep the full line on the bottom. He couldn’t really blame anyone but himself for that. He had been the person to determine how many went out from the onset. “Damn thing clotheslined, and these ugly-ass bastards ain’t worth a penny a pound,” he complained in reference to the profusion of spiky orange fish on the gear. “And look at all these hooks with bait still on! This bitch never hit the bottom, damn it!”

“It’s Jack’s fault,” J-Cube joked.

“Where’s the new girl at anyways?” Marco yelled, his tone lifting, “We got us a bona fide barn door coming up! YeeHaw, here we go!”

Big yelled into the hatch, “Need ya on top, Jack! Git on up here!” He didn’t want to look down; it would probably just make him mad. Jack poked his head up and hoisted his bulk out of the hold. He felt the excitement around him, though it took a moment to register the reason.

“Get over here, princess!” Marco shouted at Jack. “Grab the shark hook off the house, J! Heidi, get ready to pull hard!” Everyone stopped to steal a peek over the side of the boat, and Marco instructed Dalisay to hold the course.

“Ho-lee shit!” J-Cube whistled, “Look at that slab! She must be eight foot long!” The hooked fish swayed slowly beneath the roller like a private dancer. It shimmered from dark to light and back again; cold eyes fixed in a blank stare despite the fact that a large steel hook had ripped around the lips and into the cheek. The hydraulics hummed, and the taut and quivering line sizzled with tension.

From her vantage point, Heidi didn’t think the fish seemed all that big, but she wasn’t sure how she’d feel after it was landed. “Well, it looks like it’s hooked pretty good,” she noted as the fish quaked hard on the line.

“Yeah, just the same – Dali! Get my gun!” Marco bellowed towards the house.

“The new one?” she shouted back.

“Dumb bitch,” he said under his breath, “No! Get the .22 holstered under the bench. Hurry up!” He turned around, eyes wild and asked Heidi, “Who the hell uses an uzi on a halibut?”

She laughed and shrugged her shoulders; she had no idea what the correct answer might be.

“See, I told ya we need a harpoon on board!” Big observed as he jammed the shark hook into the halibut’s face. Jack puffed his chest out and stepped forward to grasp the shark hook with his large mitts. Big tossed a line over the boom and brought it down, throwing two loops over the head of the monster. Dalisay lit out of the house waving a sleek Ruger in both hands like it was Christmas morning, and for a moment, the silence on the *Lady Lou* was deafening.

“Jeezus!” Marco hollered, “Be careful with that, Dali!”

“Can I do it?” she begged.

Marco’s mouth barely moved, but the words “*give it*” cut like a whip in the wind. Dalisay pouted, but obediently flipped the pistol over to her husband.

“Good girl,” he said, “Now get back on the wheel; we’re drifting over the line.” She obeyed, and Marco nodded at Big, who stepped aside and put his hand on Jack’s shoulder to move him back.

Marco checked the clip and fired one clean shot into the halibut's head. The behemoth dangled limp against the boat. Marco turned to Heidi, "Put this inside!" and she grabbed the pistol to stash it in the galley. Jack was so impressed that he forgot to be sick. The crew reefed on the line for twenty minutes, pulling the old grandma on board a few inches at a time.

"She's gotta be over four hundred pounds dressed!" J-Cube guessed. "How tall are ya, greenie?"

"Six-two," Jack answered and then laid down beside the hog.

"Jeez! She's a good foot longer than you!" Big stuck a knife in the gills and let it bleed, "You guys watch out for the tail on this one, it's a widow-maker."

"We gotta get these checkers cleared, and get back on the gear, or all these fish ain't gonna be worth shit! Move it!" Marco snarled.

Heidi got back to coiling, J-Cube and Big dressed, while Jack got to stick gills and help Marco land the hogs. The halibut, smiles serene and eyes glazed, piled up on deck. Mottled brown skin with both eyes on one side, and soft, white bellies on the other; the central nervous system of the *hippoglossus stenolepis* kept the persistent flat fish flailing about for hours after their beating hearts and gills had been ripped out and digested by seabirds.

When it finally came time to clean the barndoor-widowmaker-grannie, not one of the men could reach deep enough to grasp and dislodge the gonads. Jack thought she needed a name, and suggested "Big Martha," which resonated with everyone enough to stick.

Heidi climbed atop the hatch cover and tied her slicker tight around her head, exposing only a small patch of her face. "Someone hold my legs. I'm goin' in." She took a deep breath and began to push her head, neck and one shoulder as far inside as she could stretch. A few seconds passed and she slid back out, her hand devoid of anything but copious blood. She held one finger up, "hang on," and then dove back in, resurfacing momentarily with one small ovary.

“That don’t look right,” J-Cube observed.

“I almost had the other one, but it’s just so damn big! It’s clinging to it like a virgin,” she said from beneath the slimy slicker. She put her gloved finger up again and caught her breath.

Marco had been watching from the roller, and held his side laughing. “Dali! Git out here. You gotta see this shit!” He turned to J-Cube and gave an approving thumbs-up, “That’s one hell of a woman ya got there.” J-Cube stood a little taller against the cleaning table; he already knew it, but it was always nice to be reminded. Jack, however, was positive that he’d never seen anything like that in his life. He wasn’t so sure he ever wanted to see it again.

Dali appeared in the doorway, the light from the house a shimmering aura surrounding her petite form. One long blue tip match lodged vertically between the bone sockets of each eye, propping her eyes open like Alex the Droog undergoing aversion therapy in *A Clockwork Orange*.

“That’s one hell of a woman ya got there, Mac,” Big observed.

“Wheelwatch is hard on her little chinky eyes,” Marco pointed out, then turned to his wife, “Dali, watch and learn.”

Heidi realized that she was no longer going after gonads for the sake of work. With a captive audience, she had no choice but to perform. She barked like a seal and dove back into Martha’s innards, shimmying down until she had a good grasp on the stubborn ovary. She squeezed as hard as she could and yanked, re-emerging slowly until her hand reappeared dragging one long mass of bloody pink egg cluster. Dali cheered and said, “Got it!” referring to the instamatic camera that hung suspended from her wrist. Someone finished cleaning the sweetmeats from Big Martha and sent her down into the hold. Heidi went inside to wash her face and use the head. She felt nauseated, exhausted, and, for a while, invincible.

After the diversion had passed, there was much less talking. The crew had grown weary from incessant lifting and bending, cutting and yanking, scraping and pulling, and keeping upright as the

boat rolled and rocked through the night. After a while J-Cube disappeared inside for a “dip.” Big followed suit, and Heidi went in after. Even Jack decided to try after Marco suggested it might relieve his menstrual cramps.

Because he was so satisfied with the last set, Marco decided there were enough skates rebaited to set another string of gear down where they just picked the last set.

“What about sand fleas?” Dali asked with regard to the original gear still soaking on the lines.

“What about ‘em?” Marco snapped. “They gotta eat too. And so do I, so fix me up a plate of whatever ya got goin’ in that Filipino cook pot of yours. Then you can get back on deck when we charge for the next string.” He swatted her bottom, and she headed to the galley.

The crew of the *Lady Lou* slogged along all through the night and into the next day to keep up with the tens of thousands of pounds of fish that had wound up on the wrong side of a hook. Occasionally, long dead and even gutted halibut would reflexively snap their tails without provocation. Heidi knew this could happen, but was stunned nonetheless when she got knocked to her knees by an expired hundred pound slab on the deck adjacent to her workstation. She responded by punching the fish in the head, “Fuck you and your stupid dead face!” she barked, then stood back up to carry on with cutting and scraping. She checked the faces of her mates, and not one appeared to have even noticed. She laughed aloud.

“What’s so funny?” J-Cube asked, his eyelids heavy.

“Your face,” she admitted. “Your beard is covered in slime and snot. It’s sexy.”

“And you look like you’re heading off to the Manson Family Reunion,” he mumbled. She traced the words “helter skelter” with gloved fingers onto the fish in front of her. “I can’t believe I’m still standing. I mean, holy shit, everything hurts so bad, and my gloves ain’t been dry since I don’t remember when. My hands and arms feel like frozen burger,” she whined.

“That’s not cool,” Big said, “you gotta go get some dry liners and gloves or your hands’ll never recover.”

Heidi was embarrassed. “All my gloves have bad tears in ‘em now.”

“*All* your gloves? Wasn’t there a whole pack of twelve?” J-Cube demanded.

“I only brought half. I figured that would be plenty for two days...” she confessed her ignorance. Her boyfriend shook his head, dismayed.

“Then you better go in right now! Lotta parasites in the blood and slime,” Big insisted. “Tell Dali ya need a borax soak and she’ll set you up. See if she has some extra gloves in your size.”

“Ya might of mentioned that *before* I climbed into Big Martha!” she joked. In truth, she was less comfortable with stopping when everyone else was working, than she was with a mouth full of parasitic fish juice. “Well I ain’t stopping now. Everyone else probably has meat hands too.”

J-Cube interjected, “Young lady, it wasn’t a suggestion. You gotta take a break now and get your hands dry and disinfected, or you might not have any choice later.” Then he whispered in her ear, “You’re doing great, babe. Now git!” She was already imagining some buttery biscuits and a cup of java that didn’t taste like cold, thick, metallic goo. “All right, if I have to,” she grumbled, pulling her wrists off and hosing down.

The moderate weather held, and Jack prayed that he would make it through another day and night. The constant urge to run to the rail and involuntarily “feed the fish” was stronger than even the constant throbbing of swollen hands and feet, hunger, or even exhaustion. The work was hard, and he felt that he hadn’t been warm since he left Wisconsin. Above deck was a bloodbath of epic proportions, while down in the hold it was slippery, slimy, icy and miserable. He wanted to curl up and go to sleep, but how could he, when even the women seemed to be managing? Perhaps this experience was meant to be incentive to enroll in the community college back home, he mused.

Dalisay stood at the dressing table and turned her face into the wind. “My kind of day,” she smiled, her chin up. Blood and bits speckled her soft features. “It’s good to get out on deck, otherwise being on the wheel all the time makes me want to go to sleep.”

“And I’m sure our skipper is happy to get back in the house and see who’s doing what around us,” J-Cube noted, his arm hidden deep inside a fish right up to his pit.

Big scanned the horizon a full three sixty, “Looks like there’s a couple, three boats that could set us down, but so far, so good,” he knocked on the wooden hatch cover.

“I’m just glad we’re finally getting the checkers down,” Heidi remarked, her eyes trained on the depleting piles of flat fish covering every inch of deck space. “We still got how many strings soaking? Three?”

“Four,” Dali pointed out. “They’re all shorter than the first sets, but they’re all sitting where we’ve had good sets already. I think we’ll have plenty enough time to haul them all before the gun goes off.” She sent another fish down the hatch.

Jack shouted that he was coming up, and emerged from the hold just as another fish was going down. He got conked hard in the face and his hat flew back into the deep hold. Heidi thought that she had never seen anyone look as dejected and out of place as Jack did. She and Dalisay exchanged a loaded glance, a women’s code.

“You should take a break, buddy!” Dalisay said, her voice encouraging. “Get yourself some fresh coffee and a snack.”

“A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down,” J-Cube added.

Jack looked over at Big, who was tossing rockfish and other non-target species into a tote away from the halibut. Big did not respond; he hadn’t heard the exchange over the music. Jack walked over towards him and bent down to throw a quillback rockfish into the tote but missed his target when Big’s head got in the way. Big howled and flung the fish. “Fuck!”

Jack froze where he stood. “Aw shit. Sorry, man.”

Dalisay jumped off her mats and ran over to Big, “Lemme see,” she insisted, and he bent down so she could inspect his scalp. “Looks like you got a couple good holes there; better go get that taken care of now.”

“Fuck that! Look at this!” He took a step back to reveal a small spike, a broken spine, jutting out from the side of his hand.

“Oh man! Damn. That’s a game changer right there!” J- Cube said.

Heidi and J-Cube both reassured Jack that it was not his fault, that accidents and injuries were expected. Jack was not so sure, but he’d been feeling nauseous and exhausted for so long, that he didn’t care much about anything. He just wanted the nightmare to end.

Dali led Big inside and set him up to soak the hand after she cut the glove off and deftly removed the pernicious spine. The puncture was small, but deep, and the poison could be painfully debilitating. Marco was not impressed. He informed him they were coming up on another string in a few minutes. He told Dali to get ready for the wheel, and turned to Big, “I need ya on deck, man. You’re gonna have to pull out your tampon and deal with it.”

“Fuck, Mac, I know that! Just gonna quick-soak the poison out, disinfect, and wrap it up good as new.”

“That’s why I keep taking ya back every season, boy. You don’t fuck around.” Marco smacked his back hard. Big took some painkiller and a fistful of candy bars. He washed it all down with cola and cocaine, and returned to deck not long after the gear was already coming in steady.

Jack was trying his hand at coiling. Heidi stuck her knife into the newest guests coming over the roller, and dragged fish into checkers. Marco yelled and cussed, while J-Cube helped haul and stick. Big came out and took over for J-Cube, who went back to full-time dressing. Dali had installed

fresh matchsticks in her eye sockets, and hummed songs that her mother would sing to her when she was a child.

Many hours later, the moon yawned goodnight from behind thin clouds as the sun peeped over the eastern horizon. The sky looked like denim, the fading stars like rivets. Poles down and stabilizers out, the *Lady Lou*, squat and bloated, hugged the coast of the mainland and chugged slowly towards the Southeast Panhandle. To anyone looking down from the heavens, the boat would have looked like a floating crime scene. Five people stood on deck, knee-high in fish. One person sliced, another scraped. Someone pulled, someone tossed. It was languid and slow; their movements barely perceptible. Every surface of the vessel, from the waterline up, was covered in a grisly patchwork quilt of flung organs, blood, and slime. The dead and bloated bodies of hundred-year old rockfish bobbed bright orange all around the boat. Their bugged eyeballs and distended air bladders demonstrated the terrible consequence of their one-way trip up from the deep. Even in the early morning mist, a thick cloud of feisty birds swarmed and pulsed around the vessel, their squawks and squeals a horror-show symphony.

Marco sat at the wheel and watched the sky change. His body felt sore and tired. There was no way he was going out to work on deck. That was for his minions. Besides, he had to keep an eye on the bilge pumps; they were working overtime as it was. There had been three mayday calls in the last day and a half, though none were close enough for his boat to respond. One vessel sank and lost everything, including two crewmen. As for the *Lady Lou*, Marco conceded that there was some gear loss, and a few minor injuries – but they had not broken down, and no one died. They had set and hauled ten strings, plugged the hold, and the crew was knee-deep in ‘em. He figured after all the fish were stuck and dressed, there had to be forty-five to fifty thousand pounds of fish on his rig. Far as he was concerned, this trip would go down in the books as his best so far. He called the processing

plant to say they were coming in deck-loaded and gave his ETA. Then he went out on deck and opened the cooler for a beer. All the ice had long since melted, but it didn't matter – it was cold enough.

“Anybody want one?” he called out. No one answered, save Dalisay. “Too tired,” was all she could muster, and those words covered everybody.

“Alright, we got a delivery appointment for ten tonight. If ya wanna start napping in shifts, that's fine. Big, you work it out. First thing, get some burlap and the deck hose over these bitches on deck. Fuckin' sun decides to shine today!” He turned and went back in the house. Big and J-Cube got burlap bags and began to cover the fish in the checkers.

“Is there even enough burlap bags on earth to cover these?” Heidi asked.

“We'll tear up sheets if we have to. Just try not to waste the good fish,” Big advised. “And you can start tossing the rockfish. Tasty as they are, they ain't worth shit, and we won't be able to get to them in time anyways.”

“Keep the ones in the tote,” Dalisay stipulated, “Just throw a bag over the top.”

“Yah, okay,” Big agreed, “You want first nap, Dali?”

Everyone looked over at her, “Sure! And then Marco will come out and put a burlap bag on you!”

Big laughed; she was right. Captain didn't want her sleeping and setting a bad example. It was stupid, but it was Marco. “Heidi, you wanna go?”

“I do, but I can't take my gloves off but once. That's why J-Cube been helping me get my britches on and off to go pee, ya pervs!” she forced a half-smile. “Anyways, it means I should be the last to go down.”

Big couldn't believe it. The chick was only half-share. “Alright. How 'bout you J-Cube? Jack? Who's up for some down?”

“I'll take it,” Jack volunteered, looking at J-Cube for a sign.

“Go. Git yer beauty sleep, princess,” J-Cube answered without looking up.

“Damn,” Big joked, “I thought for sure I had a shot at getting horizontal.”

“Sorry, your highness. Better luck next time,” Dalisay poked.

And so it went for the rest of the day and up until they unloaded. Everyone got a brief shot at a nap, a meal, and when they couldn’t unfurl their fingers - a 20-Mule Team soak. Later that night, the crew pitched off an impressive forty-seven thousand pounds of dressed halibut along with some bi-catch. After the *Lady Lou* was deemed “clean enough,” Marco granted his crew a forty-eight hour furlough to take extended naps, showers, and meals.

Big stopped at the bar and ordered a stiff drink, but after the bartender took one look at his hand, she sent him off to the hospital in a cab where he received a tetanus shot and painkillers.

Jack wandered around looking for a hotel room. When he found one, he stripped down and got in the hottest bathwater he could tolerate and fell asleep.

After they locked the boat up, Marco and Dalisay went home and snorted the rest of the coke. They immediately got in a fight that ended with a set of matching shiners.

J-Cube and Heidi stopped at the liquor store for a bottle of wine and went to J-Cube’s trailer, where they sat down on the living room floor and fell fast asleep before they got their boots off. No corks were popped that night, but then they finally opened their pay envelopes, Heidi was stunned to discover that Marco had given her an extra one-quarter share bonus. J-Cube was not surprised at all.

Catch and Release

At the tip of the tongue of a notorious bay located between Cape Spencer and Yakutat, a cement boat rocked steadily with the incoming tide. The Fairweather mountain range framed the forested fjords where glacial blue streams and vein-like rivers converged at the frothing ocean. Flanked by glaciers at the rear, and denuded of trees along the sides, Lituya Bay was renowned for big tides year round, and several tsunamis in the last century alone. Despite the fact that a massive tsunami removed part of the face of a mountain in the back bay in 1958, the inlet frequently served as a happy haven for fishermen plying the abundant grounds between Cross Sound and Yakutat.

It was still the darkest part of the morning. The heavy stone boat, the f/v *Bylgja Maid*, was anchored on the north side of Lituya, and three other troller boats sat nearby, all bobbing steadily like apples in a cauldron.

Down in the foc's'cle, a young woman with dirty brown hair, a farmer's tan, and a rapidly advancing case of tendonitis, opened her eyes and listened in the stillness. Her bunk was a snug nest of baby dolls and books for the small child who adhered to her body like a barnacle to a keel. Intuition dictated that her skipper was already sitting up in the wheelhouse sipping on his heavy mug of coffee, thick with brandy and good intentions. She imagined he was on the radio, chattering away with other fishermen, all speaking in the codes and amplifications that their vocation dictated. An engraved brass plaque on the back wall of the pilothouse summed it up efficiently:

Early to bed

early to rise

fish all day

make up lies

Valerie Rahn enjoyed working on this boat, not only because she and the owner, Arne Jorgen, had been friends for years, but also because he let her bring her toddler, Sadie Lynn, along

for the season with no strings or penalties. It was the sort of opportunity that came along all too infrequently for single mothers in the fishing industry, and she could not resist. Workboats were notoriously not the same as playgrounds for children, yet a few unconventional families fished salmon together every summer in Southeast waters. Arne had grown up in a fishing family and had sired a passel of kids himself and so he had no qualms about hiring a seasoned female deckhand with a kid in tow. Valerie had been living aboard a workboat with Sadie for the past few years and knew that her daughter was at ease with the lifestyle. She was unruffled in her abilities to perform her duties effectively in addition to being a full-time mom. This attitude was integral to her success, as she would not consider working away from Sadie at this fundamental time in her childhood. Trolling was not only a good source of income; it also provided unparalleled opportunities for adventure and education. Most significantly, she thought a summer on the *Bylgja Maid* might provide a healthy distraction for both of them in light of the sloppy exit from her last romantic relationship. She craved the dynamic tension between the stability and unpredictability inherent in the summer fishing season.

Valerie stretched and gently pried the human mollusk from her body. Sadie snored quietly, unstirred as her mother peeled strands of silky hair off her ruddy cheeks. At three and a half years of age, she was long out of diapers but still wore pull-ups to sleep in order to avoid accidents in the shared bunk. A pee-up berth was not an option, as there were few opportunities to dry out the egg-crate foam mattress carved to fit into the irregular shape of the forward quarters. A different skipper had often reminded Valerie of the Seven P's of Production, "prior proper planning prevents piss-poor performance," an adage which seemed even more a propos when applied in this context.

Valerie knew she could stay in the bunk and sleep for a few more hours unless Arne hollered for her, which he only did once that season. It was three weeks before and had occurred on one of

those early-summer mornings when the sun was already peeking out from beneath the horizon before 3:00 a.m. and she was hard asleep after a long, late night working on a hot bite. The *Bylgja Maid* was twelve miles out from the coast and had been drifting for a several hours unattended. The plan was to troll back to the hot spot after Arne got his “nap on,” as he always insisted that real sleep was something to be done between seasons, not during. Valerie, however, was not too proud to sleep and did so at any opportunity; though she never slept well on the drift due to the constant uncertainty. They were drifting that morning, so she was already on edge when Arne’s voice came blaring through the loudspeaker.

“Val! Val! Valerie! Get up here now!”

She jumped up, still in a daze, “What? Huh?” and then boom! Her forehead smacked hard against the portside of the empty bunk above and knocked her back down. Despite the darkness, Val was sure she saw tiny animated bluebirds circling about her head. She attempted to stand again and then, as if on cue, the boat pitched hard to the starboard, and smacked the right side of her head on the opposite bunk above, nearly knocking her out.

Arne poked his head down after awhile and saw Valerie lying face down on the bunk. He hollered, “Fire, sweetheart! Move it!”

“For real?” she was dazed by the surreal quality of his voice.

“For real. Topside now!”

“Survival suits out?” she yelled after his head disappeared from her view.

“Yeah, they’re on deck, but it’s not too bad, girl. C’mon, git moving!”

His words and tone should have been enough to shock Valerie into action, but her head throbbed, and she was momentarily confused. She managed to scoop Sadie, her float coat, a blanket, and a stuffed animal into her arms before she sprung up the ladder wearing only dingy long johns. Valerie jammed her naked feet into the nearest rubber boots, which happened to be the wettest, and

she sprinted the length of the deck to the wheelhouse with arms full and her head buzzing. The little bluebirds need to fuck off, she thought to herself. Her boots were so soggy they made a splonch, splonch, splonch sound that caused Sadie to giggle.

“Sadie Lynn, look at mama,” Valerie said, holding her face close. “I know you’re sleepy, but you can’t be in the bunk right now, so please do *exactly* what I tell you. Okay?” Her curly head was tucked against her mother’s shoulder, and she nodded ever so slightly. Valerie zipped Sadie into her float coat and plopped her onto a nest of survival suits still in their bulky orange bags. Wrapping the blanket and stuffed dog against the child, she whispered, “Okay babe,” her voice steady, “you’re gonna sit very still right here in front of the wheelhouse with Snowy and not move ‘til I say so, okay? I want you to sing the monkey song, and I’ll be back before you finish. Will you do that for me?”

“Yes, mama,” she answered with such complacency that Valerie dared to hope she might fall back to sleep right there on the deck. She kissed Sadie’s face and the stuffed dog’s also. “Don’t move!” Valerie began to sing, “Ten little monkeys jumping on the bed...” and Sadie chimed in, “one fell off and broke his head! Mama called the doctor, the doctor said, ‘No more monkeys jumping on the bed!’”

“Good job! I wanna hear both you and Snowy singing the whole song,” Valerie insisted with wide eyes and a big mommy grin. The sky had a dull yellow tinge and there was not a whisper of wind out. She reminded herself to exhale, then turned and ran into the wheelhouse to see that there was, in fact, a tiny fire blooming in a narrow space between the swiveling captain’s chair and the less tricked-out first mate’s seat. Arne was struggling to grasp the pin out of a fire extinguisher with his stubby fingers.

“Heads up!” he shouted, tossing the red cylinder at Valerie. She yanked the pin hard and depressed the so-simple-even-a-girl-can-use-it trigger, releasing a thick plume of heavy, white foam

that shot out all at once over the center console surprising them both by smothering the flames on contact.

“That was easy,” she exclaimed, somewhat dumbfounded by the amalgamation of chemical odors layered on top of the usual musty, fishy, diesel wheelhouse smells.

“Easy for you!” he said, his furry face barely masking his grimace. “I been trying to put it out with oil rags and coffee... Turns out brandy ain’t a flame retardant,” he smirked.

“Jeez Arne, you put the ‘tard’ in retardant!” she laughed and opened a window on the starboard side just as dense particles of white powder began to settle about the house. She shut the window immediately.

“Make up your mind, woman!”

“Well, hell’s bells! Where do I put Sadie? She’s sitting alone on deck, and I don’t want her alone in the foc’s’cle yet, and she sure as hell can’t be in here!” her strained voice bordered panic.

“I already checked everywhere in the house and am pretty sure it was centralized right here. I need to go take a look around down below, and if you don’t want her up here, then go hang out ‘til you’re comfortable. We’re just drifting.”

Valerie felt guilty ditching him, but she couldn’t very well leave Sadie alone.

“Thanks, Arne,” she said, turning towards the door.

“Sure. Hey, what the hell happened to your face? I thought I was getting a hot chick for the troll pit. You look like a damn Neanderthal!”

“Ouch. Remind me again, Captain Charming. How is it you are still a bachelor?” They both laughed. “I’m not sure what happened,” she continued, her fingers gingerly touching her forehead, “but I gotta get my kid settled. Talk later, okay?” Arne nodded and followed her out on deck. He bent down and smiled at Sadie. “Hey kiddo, why aren’t you cleaning humpies right now?” She looked at him, her lids still heavy on her green eyes, and shrugged her shoulders. “I dunno.” Sun or

no sun, it was still the middle of the night for the kid, and Valerie would have to comfort her back to sleep while resisting the urge to lie down and nod off beside her.

Arne headed down to the engine room, while Valerie sat down and pulled hard at her wet boots. Sadie snuggled onto her lap. “How you doing, babe?” she asked, trying to sound nonchalant. The smell of fire extinguisher chemicals permeated the air and made Valerie’s heart race.

“Me and Snowy is watching the sunrise.”

“It’s very pretty, huh?”

“And Snowy said it smells funny, ma,” she continued in her little singsong voice.

“Well that’s probably because Snowy farted and is trying to get you to notice.”

“Um, Snowy doesn’t fart, mama, she’s not a real dog,” she insisted, “and that smell is like something I don’t know what.”

“You think it could be my wet dawgs?” Val offered, nodding at her pruney feet.

Sadie let out a child-sized chuckle, but she was clearly tired and not in the mood for her mother’s brand of morning banter. “Well, ya never know what Captain Arne has going in the crockpot,” she said hoping to divert the conversation. “Besides, I bet you wanna go back to your cozy bunk and snuggle for a while.”

“I have to go potty,” she said with earnestness. Val stood up, knowing that Sadie usually noticed that she had to go moments before it was too late. She stuffed her feet back into the wet boots, and with babe in arms, trotted back to the foc’s’cle where a five-gallon bucket and a makeshift Styrofoam seat waited for the kiss of a toddler’s tender tush.

After Sadie finished, she said she wanted to snuggle and read books to her babies, which was fine with Valerie because she needed the child to stay put for a while, so she could return to the wheelhouse and hear her skipper’s newest fish-slaying strategy before he took his morning nap. She was also eager to hear what he would be saying on the horn about the fire, as the radio version

would surely be full of the deceptively minimalist embellishments that fishermen use when they have a microphone and captive audience. It was important to know the context of any ribbing that might come her way in the future – Valerie needed to be on top of her game.

After telling Sadie a story and rubbing her back, Valerie set a box of raisins and a juice in the corner of the bunk where the mattress abutted the wood frame. A typical boat baby, Sadie was back to sleep soon enough and would not wake again for a few hours. Valerie pulled on clothing over her long johns and switched out her waterlogged boots for a dry pair. She carried the wet ones up to the galley to dry by the stove and poured herself a big mug of coffee from the perpetual pot. One thing that should never happen on a workboat is a dry coffeepot, and with that in mind, she poured new grounds into the guts and more water into the base. She filled a mixing bowl with water from the sink to wash her face and brush her teeth, and she dared to glance at her reflection in the small adjacent mirror. She was horrified to see two well-formed bruise knots on her brow and immediately grabbed one of the ball caps hanging over the stove and put it on, pulling the bill down low. What I can't see can't hurt me, she mused.

Arne was clanging about below deck, so Valerie meandered into the wheelhouse and checked the electronics to make certain they were not in any further danger. The *Bylgja Maid* was drifting lazy in deep sea and there were no pinnacles, rocks, or proximal boats on the radar. She picked up a hand broom and began to sweep white powder off of all the surfaces, making sure there were no smoldering secrets in the seats or the rolled up charts. She checked above, beneath, between, and behind every bit of real estate in the house. It wasn't long before she discovered a greasy bong stashed beside the captain's chair. It was a simple two-liter MacGyver-style apparatus, filled with dirty water, copper tubing, and what appeared to be a resinous lug nut for a bowl. A telltale dusting of white powder topped off the contraption. Nearby, a tired-looking baggie of weed, also covered in chemical dust, sat near the SE point of the compass rose. Dammit, she thought. She didn't really

want to see that, but she had to confess that she had always known how much Arne liked his morning glow. The conversation had never come up between them since, while Valerie acknowledged a certain amount of denial on her part, the situation felt much safer than the one she had left not so long ago. Nonetheless, a flurry of rage coursed through her. On the one hand, it was none of her business what her captain did. On the other, being carefree was not an option when they were so far removed from potential rescue with her kid on board. This was one of the spiky thorns on the blushing rose of this job, a fact that Valerie knew she could ill afford to dismiss.

Arne's shiny pate poked up from below. He looked around and put his faded white fisherman's cap back on. "Everything good down there. How 'bout you?" he asked while unzipping and turning around to relieve himself over the bulwarks. Men had been doing that in front of Valerie all her life; she appreciated that he had the courtesy to turn around.

"I tidied up a little. Everything looks fine topside. What the hell happened anyways?"

"I don't know for sure," he said, turning back around with a little shrug and jump that Valerie thought of as his *piss shake*, "but we're gosh dang lucky it was minor. We're pretty far from the pack today, and things could've gone ugly mighty fast." They stepped inside the cramped wheelhouse, and Valerie's pulse quickened. Particulate chemical dust freckled the rays of sunlight.

"You're telling me? I got my kid on here! It was hard enough to keep my cool when I had to drag her outta the rack and set her on deck alone for a few terror-filled minutes," she snapped.

Arne's shoulders hunched down. "Sorry, Val. I really am. Sadie settled in now?" he asked, his eyes refusing to meet hers. He massaged the throttle and the boat lurched out of neutral and eased forward, slowly building speed. Arne's eyes swept the horizon, and he lifted binoculars out of a pouch on the wall and held them to his face - an all too convenient diversion, Valerie thought.

“Sadie’s fine. She’s back in her bunk asleep, and all she said was that it smelled funny. I’m sure she’ll share her own fresh spin on this when she grows up,” she paused to regain composure, “but I can’t put her life in danger, Arne. My daughter *has* to be fuckin’ safe. Otherwise, we gotta get off the boat,” she insisted, tears teasing the corners of her eyes. She pulled her cap down low and looked away; a tense stillness filled the wheelhouse.

Arne checked the compass against the electronics and then steered the boat westerly a few degrees at a time. The bag of weed – its discovery obvious by the broken shadow of white chemical dust framing the edges, rested on the compass between the chairs. Arne wrapped his grubby fingers around the baggie and deliberately slid it down to his lap.

The radio, set at channel 16, crackled over the quiet, “*Bylgja Maid, Bylgja Maid*. This is f/v *Skookum*, WES 7693. You got me there, Arne?”

Arne lifted the microphone to his mouth and waited while the call was repeated. Then he answered, “This is the *Bylgja Maid*, WDX 4588 on one-six. Switch over, *Skookum*? Over.”

“Roger that, *Bylgja Maid*. f/v *Skookum*, WES 7693, out.”

Arne returned the VHF radio microphone to its hanger and transferred to the single sideband mic. He adjusted the squelch and checked the dial on the secret channel.

“You got me here, Hugh?”

“Roger dodger. Top of the morning to ya, Arne. You drift east overnight?”

“Yah, that we did.”

“Weather decent your way?”

“Hard to tell, yet. Just got on course a few minutes ago. Had us a little trouble this morning, but everything looks good now. You? What’s the temp?”

And so the conversation progressed for a long while, nothing really meaning what was said, because fishermen knew that other vessels had their ears on specifically to discover where the hot

bite was. Questions about marine conditions, pets or wives, for example, were often just prearranged cues leading towards more secret codes and hints.

Arne and Valerie's code with Hugh was LUTAFISKER, with each letter standing in place of the numbers zero to nine. They used this acronym in clever radio conversations describing quantities of fish, longitude/latitude, gear types, and other information that was often too precious or alternatively humiliating to broadcast far and wide.

Commercial fishing, after all, was a highly competitive business. At times it spiraled into combat conditions and foul play. Valerie had once worked on a boat whose skipper was infamously remembered for standing in the door of his wheelhouse and firing his AK-47 at a vessel that allegedly committed a minor violation of fishing ground etiquette. Fortunately, Arne was cut from different cloth. He was not remotely interested in engaging with other boats. In fact, he tended to stay far removed from the fleet except when absolutely necessary due to weather or enormous schools of fish begging to be caught from a limited area.

Most fishermen teamed with at least one, and often two or more, other boats throughout the various seasons. Motives ranged from safety in numbers to efficient production. Arne Jorgen and Hugh Sibelius, however, became running partners that season shortly after Arne mentioned that he would be taking Valerie along for the summer. Hugh had fancied the cut of her jib and saw an opportunity to stay in contact, maybe even anchor up and visit on a harbor day. Arne had informed Valerie that, one morning at the bar over coffee, he and Hugh had worked out a fresh code, complete with new key words, and a designated secret channel on the sideband radio. Arne told her that the arrangement alone was worth her full crew share, and she bloomed with satisfaction and encouragement, thinking that she was a lucky charm.

Hugh was near fifty years of age, though most folks would have been hard pressed to guess which side of the decade he was closer to. He had both his son and grandson on board for the

season. Some folks speculated that the latter was on board to inhibit him from loafing about the village, as he was a chronic inebriate already caught in the crosshairs of the legal system. Hugh was half-Swede and half-Tlingit, a standard mix in the Southeast panhandle. His fishing savvy was legendary, as was his inclination to be a lone wolf *and* a ladies man. Valerie admired that Hugh remained utterly devoted to women despite the fact that an angry ex-wife had bitten half of his left ear off in a jealous rage. She looked forward to getting to know the wily old coot over the summer, and outside of the public gaze.

Three weeks had passed since the fire, and fishing had gone well with silvers coming in bright and steady. The weather was cooperative most of the time, with the exception of a few bay days that kept the *Bylgja Maid* on anchor due to exceptionally snotty seas. The mechanical gear was running fine as well, until one July afternoon when thick, black smoke poured from the exhaust stack suggesting an oil leak. Two dead fuel injectors ultimately rendered the vessel stuck like a duck in a bucket for three days while they waited for parts to arrive by floatplane.

The first day on the pic, after Arne could do nothing more with the engine, he untied the old wooden dinghy from the top of the *Bylgja Maid's* wheelhouse, and the three went ashore to have a look about for beach treasures and enjoy a picnic. Valerie thought it would be good for Sadie to get off the boat, but the child had such stubborn sea legs that she developed land sickness soon after they hit solid ground. Valerie strapped her into a pack on her back where Sadie slept and sweated for an hour or so. When Valerie finally unpacked her, the poor kid puked until she dry heaved, and fearing she might dehydrate, they all rowed back to the *Bylgja Maid* where Sadie's health was presently restored.

The following morning, Valerie woke to see the *Skookum* on anchor nearby. Hugh had rowed over in a stout wooden dory and climbed up the rope and plank ladder that Arne had left

unfurled over the side. He had come over to investigate mechanical conundrums with Arne, while his offspring had rowed over to the beach. Valerie and Sadie baked cookies and visited with Hugh for a short while before he pulled anchor and rolled back out to the grounds. Later in the day, Arne filled a blue plastic tote on deck with seawater for a kid-sized, sun-warmed tub party. Sadie played in the tote for hours while her mother sat nearby to write letters and enjoy the serendipity of the day.

The floatplane arrived early on the third morning, and Valerie brought Sadie into the troll pit to jig for halibut and watch otters frolic while Arne worked on getting the engine back to snuff. They finally pulled anchor in the early evening, just in time for a night bite. An unusually prolific combination of tides, currents, gear, and luck brought such a big clatter of fish that Valerie couldn't get off deck until it was almost time to get back on again. She and Arne alternated pulling, cleaning and icing fish with wheelwatch and Sadie-watch until the bite died off nearly fourteen hours later. They were so deep in fish at one point that Valerie brought Sadie out on deck dressed in miniature raingear and oversized gloves and let her clean pink salmon using makeshift spoons for scraping. Arne had put a tattered cap on her head and set up a little cleaning station that would protect her from falling on deck, and tiny Sadie relished the opportunity to "help." She was content to be in the thick of the action and utterly unfazed by the constant crime scene atmosphere that was part and parcel of fishing. The metallic blood, sticky slime and cold saltwater were all familiar stimuli that had permeated her life since birth. The child seemed to comprehend exactly what happened to all the fish that swam against the current, choosing instead to go with the flow herself. For that trait alone, Valerie was most happy indeed.

Once the summer solstice had passed, the days grew shorter, and it wasn't long before Valerie was on the same early schedule as her skipper. In the early morning hours, a pink and orange glow cracked the horizon open while Valerie watched from beside the spinning anchor drum. Arne's

head appeared to float in the window as he peered down from the wheelhouse. The hydraulics groaned against the weight of the heavy chain being drug up from the ocean floor and once the anchor was secured, Arne switched the power off and nudged the throttle forward. The *Bylgja Maid* crept out of the bay while Valerie lashed unruly totes and buoys in place, making certain that the deck was secured before setting up the gear and troll pit for another day on the drag. The run to the fishing grounds would take a few hours, so Valerie stopped in the house to top her mug off with black coffee before she lowered herself into the troll pit where she spent most of her days catching, killing and cleaning fish.

“Top of the morning to ya,” a cheerful Arne boomed from the wheelhouse. He gave the *Bylgja Maid* more throttle as they departed the bay. Valerie strode in and sat shotgun to Arne.

“G’morning, skipper,” she raised her mug towards him. “What’s the report? Is Hugh still fishin’ – or just wishin’?”

“Oh, you know that stubborn ol’ Swede is exactly out where he was yesterday... looking to find that one fish he lost!” He laughed loudly and took a long pull on his morning libation.

She smiled. “Got any scores yet?”

“Well, as of now, he’s only got a couple dozen fish, so we’ll probably go a little further west and see what that looks like,” he said, his eyes narrowing to a squint. Valerie followed his gaze and was disappointed to see that the pinky-orange glow of dawn had become obscured by distant squalls. She noted the high-circling seabirds, grey outlines brushing against grey sky.

Arne nodded at the barometer on the wall, “Pressure just started dropping, even though the weatherman promised a fair forecast last night.”

“Is that the first time you been lied to, Arne? Welcome to my world!”

He laughed. “Oh my jaded friend. Looks like we might have some weather ahead. Coast Guard doesn’t update for a few hours yet. Ya got everything on deck tied down except the totes,

right?” Valerie felt a little shiver course through her. Arne didn’t mind fishing in any weather, but Valerie was worried about her precocious daughter who had grown very comfortable lately with running from the house to the pit *sans* float coat.

“Yeah, I trimmed it all when we pulled anchor, but speakin’ of lies, that pretty pink sky tricked me! Reckon I’ll go check everything again with weather in mind.”

“Good. Why don’t you put the birds on the poles before we drop ‘em,” he suggested, referencing the stabilizers that were intended to reduce the pitching and rolling. Since they were wooden, the bantam birds actually had very little effect on the big stone boat. But Valerie nodded in the affirmative and set her coffee cup down.

Stepping out on deck, she was instantly misted by the fingers of a proximal squall while she set about re-checking lines and buoys. After shackling the stabilizers to the main poles, she tapped on the wheelhouse with a socket wrench, and Arne came out to help her drop the poles until they were out about forty-five degrees from the house on each side. In decent weather, the poles were down in order to secure fishing lines to the boat during the operation of setting and catching; however, when a boat was merely running across the deep with her poles down, it was so that the stabilizers could be utilized to full effect. When Valerie asked why his stabies were wooden and not galvanized steel like most boats, Arne declared, “Only wusses and guys with yachts use those fancy things,” in a clear nod to his stubborn Norwegian ancestry. His ex-wife did not concur, and so he got the wooden stabilizers years ago as a way to appease her whenever his kids were on board. Valerie silently thanked the woman for her wisdom each time the barometer fell. Wooden birds were better than nothing.

After the poles were down, Valerie checked in on the still sleeping Sadie to make sure that her float coat was on the bunk in case she thought to ascend from the foc’s’cle without an adult present. Most mornings, Valerie instinctively knew when to check in. After finding Sadie lying in her

bunk singing or reading to herself, Valerie would help her dress and bring her topside for the morning. That morning, it was still early, so she went back up to refill her coffee and get to work on deck.

Her favorite spot on any workboat, the troll pit, provided a sanctuary of unspoiled calm and simplicity juxtaposed against the chaotic challenges of perpetual toil, shifting weather, and daily mechanical tribulations that required stamina and creativity to resolve.

Fingers splayed wide, Valerie maneuvered herself into the deep pit. She folded back a burlap bag and uncovered the array of spoons, plugs, flashers, and hoochies that rested on the stern shelf between the pit and the railing. These were attached to hooks and leaders that were further secured to stainless steel snaps. A variety of lures were available for salmon fishing, and within each gear type there was a vast selection of styles to choose from. Depending on what sort of intuition or radio report a skipper goes with, his deckhand may have to switch out all the gear or perhaps only part of it. When coho get into a feeding frenzy, for instance, a person can run just about any style of lure and fish will bite it. Organized by the order of placement on the steel troll wire as the gear was being lowered and pulled up, Valerie swiftly worked from left to right along the row, inspecting each swivel, snap, and hook for damage or excessive wear. Repairs would be made when possible and gear would be replaced when necessary.

Built in the 1940s during the Second World War, the *Bylgja Maid's* hull was a composite of reinforced cement and steel, and the vessel itself had been maintained in a manner commensurate with the habits of the most recent owner. In the case of the booze-swigging, pot-smoking, hard-fishing skipper, it was no small coincidence that the condition of the *Bylgja Maid* was quite rugged and well worn. Since it was not Valerie's nature to judge by outward appearances, she tended to recognize the goodness in the skipper as directly proportional to the sea-worthiness of the boat.

Arne, like many a seasoned skipper, made do with jury-rigging repairs whether he was on a hot bite, out of money, or just out of commission, and he adapted his boat to fit the conditions of the day. A fisherman bellied up to a bar in Yakutat once conspiratorially informed Valerie that when the *Bylgja Maid* hit a rock, her skipper poured several cans of zinc bottom-paint mixed with gravel into the gouges and covered the entire mess with chicken wire and Z-spar epoxy, and promptly returned to the fishing grounds. Stories like that were not uncommon. They provided fodder for initiating greenhorns and amusing wary deckhands alike.

The truth was that the big stone boat was originally constructed with the sole intention of transporting munitions to bigger naval ships; however, Arne had turned her into a commercial fishing vessel, thus cementing his reputation as an unconventional scallywag. It was generally understood that what the *Bylgja Maid* lacked in standard workboat amenities was more than compensated for by her sheer size and bulk. He employed her to transport large cargo, to tow other vessels, and perhaps most significantly, Arne was known to occasionally exploit this advantage out on tight fishing drags when smaller boats got in his path. The tactic came with the danger of estranging himself from the mosquito fleet, though Arne did not seem to care. Well aware that any maritime situation could turn nasty faster than a fart could dissipate in the wind, he had more faith in his own mastery than that of other men.

Arne came out of the pilothouse and announced the fish report. “Hugh says there’s a nice little bite two hours west of here, so we’re gonna head over there, drop the gear down about an hour out and see what happens.” He scanned the array of lures that Valerie was working on. “He said they’re hitting the hot-pink-on-diagonal silver spoons – look for number 345, and also use these hoochies above the leads.” Then he handed her a bag of blue-green, silver-speckled miniature octopus shaped lures.

“Okey doke. Did you want these on all the strings?” she asked, referring to the four main wires that would be going up and down with leaders, lures, and hooks snapped on every fathom and a half.

He pondered a moment then nodded, “Yeah, go ahead and run the spoons down to thirty fathoms on each string, then stick a hoochie-flasher combo in the middle and go down another twenty-five fathoms with spoons ‘til you hit the leads. Hoochie and flasher on the last snaps on all lines. Let’s see if Hugh is the only one who knows how to catch a fish,” he winked.

“Yah, you betcha,” she drawled to her own amusement, mimicking Hugh’s standard response. “Any noise from the small-fry yet?”

“Nope. Ya want coffee?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’ll go take a peek at her anyways and grab a cuppa mud on the turnaround.” She set the bag of hoochies beneath a number 345 spoon and covered all the lures with burlap. Arne crossed his arms over his chest and stood back to watch Valerie hoist herself out of the pit. It had become a continuing source of entertainment between the two of them each time she endeavored to get her truncated figure out of the deep troll pit. This occasion was no exception. He roared with laughter the first time he witnessed her landing a 40-lb. king salmon over the rail. Afterwards, he could not resist getting on the radio to broadcast the story of his fun-sized deckhand’s raingear-clad ass bent high while she defiantly struggled to get upright with the gaffed slab of black-lipped royalty pulling her towards the water. He had painted quite the word-picture, and she had heard about it over and over again on the radio.

Once she was out of the pit and on deck, Arne winked and said, “Ya make me so gosh-durned happy every time you do that!”

“Yeah, well, sexual harassment will not only be tolerated on this job, it will be graded,” she said flatly, and then upped the ante with a high-five as she strolled off towards the foc’s’cle.

“Damn,” he whimpered beneath his breath, “I gotta bring my A-game to my own boat? Ain’t that some shit.”

The squalls had petered out in the northwesterly direction that the boat was heading, although the wind had picked up some. Valerie had just used the honeybucket and was hoisting it up the ladder when she heard Sadie. “Hi Mama,” she yawned, “I’m hungry.”

“Well, top of the morning to you too! Do ya want any of this yummy honey before I toss it?” Sadie scrunched up her face and shook her curly head, “*Ewww, no!*” Valerie rolled her eyes and stuck her tongue out as she climbed from the foc’s’cle to empty the bucket overboard. She returned moments later and Sadie kicked her blanket back with plucky little legs.

“C’mon you. Let’s get this party started. Fish ain’t gonna catch themselves!” Valerie scooped her up for a tight squeeze before helping her dress for another day. When the weather was fair or better, Sadie stayed on deck in a little hammock and played with her doll-babies and books. If it was raining, she wore child-sized raingear; but mostly she stayed in the house with whoever was on the wheel. When both Arne and Valerie had to be on deck then Sadie accompanied them, except in the worst weather when she was relegated to the house. The routine worked well, and Valerie knew she was quite fortunate to have such an easy-going child.

As soon as Sadie was situated at the galley table, Valerie heard the engine slowing down and then Arne yelled, “Let’s get ‘er wet!”

Valerie jumped up and pecked Sadie on the cheek. “Mama’s going to work. You be a good girl and just holler if you need Arne. No going on deck without...” she paused, to which Sadie exclaimed, “my float coat!”

“Good girl. Okay, I love you. Eat your breakfast, and I’ll see ya in a bit.”

Back in the pit with a steaming mug of coffee in hand, Valerie heard the hydraulics start humming, and she turned her hat around so the brim was in back. She pushed her sleeves up, pulled on a pair of orange rubber gloves and took one last pull of unadulterated coffee. Once the fish started coming up, it would only be a matter of time before slime, scales, blood and the occasional asshole or eyeball ended up in her mug. It was a natural and inevitable part of fishing, and Valerie had long suspected that while sophisticated folks might enjoy cream and sugar in their hot morning beverage, she had acquired an odd affinity for saltwater and fish guts in hers.

Opening the hydraulic valve on the portside gurdies, she lifted the first lead cannonball up from its tray, slowly lowered it over the side of the *Blygia Maid*, and proceeded to release it into the water. The gurdies whirled, and the first set of beads appeared. Valerie realized then, that she had forgotten to snap the hoochie-flasher combo, and switched back into reverse. The sixty pound lead creaked back up and taunted her from just beyond arm's reach until the boat rolled slightly starboard, bringing the steel wire close enough to snap the combo in place and release it back down into the water. The valve was opened at half-speed, and she watched for the next set of beads to appear. At every fathom and a half, she fastened a snap between a pair of beads on the wire. Attached to each snap was a long line of heavy filament leader with a lure and hook on the end. All of the new spoons and hoochies were laid out on the shelf, and she married each snap to the wire gap between each set of beads with one hand, then tossed the business end of the leader over the side with the other. Valerie put one full string of lures in the water within minutes and had locked the first gurdie in place while simultaneously opening the valve to the adjacent gurdie, the "bag line." She repeated the procedure on the second string; only more wire was spun out after the gear was down in order to attach a Styrofoam float bag that would keep the gear string out and away from the first line. After the gear was out, she stepped over to the starboard side of the pit and repeated the same series until finally all of the gear was fishing.

She listened for the sound of any lines vibrating, which might hint that fish were already on the line. Since it felt quiet, she climbed out of the pit and strode up to the house. There she found Arne on the wheel and Sadie hunkered down on the bunk behind him, her stuffed dog, an array of books, and a miniature tea set sprawled about.

“Mama!” she screeched, her face all pearly teeth and dancing eyes. Valerie went over and scooped her up, “Are you keeping Captain Arne entertained, Miss Sadie Lynn?”

“Yep. We’re having a coffee party, but he has his own coffee,” she giggled, “and we aren’t sharing.”

Valerie winked at Arne and mouthed a *thank you* his way. “It’s okay not to share sometimes, babe. Do you want to come out on deck and play for a bit?”

“No. I wanna stay with Captain Arne and drive the boat.”

“Alrighty, then” she winked at Arne again. “What do ya say, Cap’n?”

“You need to run that gear a few sets and see if Hugh’s hot hoochies are paying; Sadie is good right here,” he yawned and stretched, “but I’m thinking about a nap after a while. I’m hoping this weather will hold, but might as well get some shut-eye while the gettin’s good.”

Valerie could see that his eyes were glazed over, as they often were by mid-morning. Arne was awake most days several hours before she was, and their usual routine on fair weather days was that she took over while her skipper went to sleep. She inspected the fishfinder screen and saw that they were passing over pinnacles with feed balls all around. Arne smiled and said, “Go get ‘er, girl!” and Sadie echoed, “Go get ‘em, girl!”

Back in the pit, Valerie opened up the valve on the portside gurdie and began to bring in the first line she had set. A more seasoned fisherman could discern different sounds and tension on the wire to determine salmon species, the occasional bottom fish, or the scourge of trollers: excessive jellyfish that slowed the gear down and made for less than optimal catching. This was the most

exciting part of trolling, and Valerie relished the anticipation of what might come up on the gear as the first snap appeared on the wire. It was loose in the water, and she pulled the leader in and affixed the snap to a taut wire on the stern shelf. The gurdie groaned, and she slowed the valve for the next snap, also loose in the water. As she pulled the leader, however, a coho flashed, and she grabbed her gaff from the shelf. Shutting off the hydraulic valve, she held the leader with one hand and pulled the silvery salmon up to conk it on the head with the gaff in her other hand, rapidly releasing the leader line while simultaneously sticking the gaff hook in the fisheye. She hauled the salmon over the stern and threw it into the checker bin behind the pit. The entire action from start to finish generally took less than ten seconds per fish, but it had to be completed in one perfect movement, or fish could be lost or damaged, making them less valuable “number two” fish.

The beauty of wild troll-caught salmon had to do with the care taken in the at-sea processing, as hook and line fishing was supremely more intimate than net fishing. Each fish was procured individually, bled and cleaned carefully, and laid to rest in a bed of shaved ice until they were unloaded and sold. After each fish was in the checker, Valerie stuck a knife in the gills to bleed it, and she returned to pulling up the remaining hooks on the string, some of which had fish, some of which did not. Once she pulled the string, she set it back down with all the lures in place as they had come up. She repeated these steps on the portside bag line and twice more on the starboard lines, with an overall haul of twenty-seven bright coho for the set of sixty-odd hooks. The fish weighed in at an average of eight pounds each, and paying \$1.25/pound, she figured the *Bylgja Maid* had just made three hundred dollars. If she could repeat this performance every hour for the next ten hours, then that would be about three grand, of which she would personally clear twenty percent; the final equation justifying the adage, “The worst day fishing is still better than the best day working.”

When the gear was back down, Arne came on deck to hear the report. He was holding Sadie’s hand, and she was holding her puppy. She let go of Arne and ran towards the pit, but Valerie

put her hand up, “No float coat? Back inside right now, missy.” Sadie’s lip curled and she sat down on deck and began to cry. Valerie was standing over the cleaning tray, ripping guts and scraping the bloodline from a fish. She looked at Arne with questioning eyes, and he shrugged his shoulders then bent down to take the child’s hand, “C’mon, let’s get your coat on. Arne forgot.”

Sadie refused to budge and instead she melted into a tantrum. Valerie’s heart beat faster as she contemplated her options. Arne picked the child up in his arms and spoke calmly, “It’s okay, Sadie. Let’s get your coat and then we’ll come back out.”

“Honey, listen to Captain Arne. You can come right back out and help mama. Please?”

Arne brought her back to the house and then returned a few minutes later with Sadie dressed in her rain bibs and float coat. She ran towards her mother, arms open and a simpering grin on her face. Although the *Blygja Maid* was moving forward slowly at troll speed, the boat continuously rolled from side to side causing Sadie to stumble on the thick deck hose and nearly bounce overboard. Valerie gasped and flew out of the pit just in time to catch her, but the drama was short-lived as the child righted herself before the situation escalated. Arne was staring off at the horizon and missed the entire sequence, only realizing that Valerie jumped out of the pit after he saw the bloody fish-print across her torso. He let forth a peal of laughter that caused his deckhand to look down and scowl.

“Damn it!” she muttered, wiping flecks of fish off her bosom. The fact that there was very little freeboard between the gunwales and the waterline had not initially seemed problematic to Valerie, though a saltier wench might have recognized that it would not take much for a body to go straight over into the drink even on the calmest sea. This notion was reinforced by the sheer physics of the situation. Whenever a heavy vessel, particularly one with a dense cement keel, rolled along on any sea with even a light swell or more than a breeze, the boat not only pitched hard, but it also took

longer to right itself. What that ultimately suggested, was that a thirty-pound child could literally be catapulted off like a cannonball, disappearing forever in the blink of an eye.

Sadie's eyes widened, "Mama! I came to help you work."

"Uh huh. Good girl, I'm so glad you came out. Please let's not run on the deck again, okay? You almost went for a swim, missy," she said in an unsteady voice. She took a deep breath and turned towards Arne, "We got twenty-seven on that haul, all bright. Most were in the middle, not too many near the top or bottom."

"That's not bad. I reckon we could stick it out here for a couple hours and see how it plays out." His voice lowered, "I think someone is ready for a nap," he hinted, his eyes crinkled in the corners.

"You or her?" Valerie asked through gritted teeth. She climbed back into the pit and resumed cleaning the salmon. A few scales had scraped off in the upset, but not bad enough to matter.

"Both. She's been getting kind of saucy, and I'm getting kind of sauced!"

She rolled her eyes and picked up another fish. Putting the knife tip in the asshole, she drew a clean cut across the length of the belly and stopped just before the gill plates. Cutting the plates loose, she tossed them overboard with one hand and yanked the guts out in one piece with the other. She reinserted the knife along the inside bloodline and then quickly flipped the knife to the spoon end and scraped the thick jelly out. Sadie handed her the deck hose that was running, "I'm helping you, ma."

"Thanks, babe." Together they rinsed the fish. Then Valerie tossed it deftly into a saltwater tote. "Alright, Captain. We'll finish cleaning these, and then come in for, um... story time."

After all the fish were clean, the girls hosed off, and Valerie helped Sadie remove her raingear. They went into the house and traded places with Arne, who went to the pit to run the gear

while Valerie put her daughter down for a nap in the wheelhouse. He was steering from the stern, so she fixed herself a bowl of venison stew from a Dutch oven on the stove and returned to the wheel. She switched around the radio channels listening to hear who was in the vicinity and trying to guess how other boats were doing based on their cryptic conversations. Against her better judgment, she glanced over at the barometer and saw that the pressure was still dropping. She sighed and waited for the hydraulics to stop humming, and soon after she went out on deck. Arne was cleaning a coho in the tray, "Thirty-two, plus bombers on both deep leads," he said.

"Well that's decent, especially if it keeps up," she countered. "Anyways, if ya wanna sleep, now's the time. The rugrat is on the couch, and I put her float coat on the floor next to her. She knows not to come out without it, but being as she is three, and forgets to stop when she has to pee... I reckon I'm not surprised she ain't gone over yet." She was not smiling, and Arne kept cleaning fish.

"Yeah, that was my fault. I'm sorry," he offered the olive branch.

"It ain't your fault, Arne. I've just been thinking that without bulwarks... I dunno. Maybe I shouldn't have come on this summer," she trailed off, lost in thought.

"My ex, Nancy, didn't like the kids on here neither," he noted. "I s'pose I coulda built some sort of bulwarks around the rails, but I'm so dang used to things like they are. I just never really thought much of it... 'til now." Valerie nodded, and he continued, "What if we build a couple of kid-sized monkey's fists with some of the snarly halibut gear that's down in the lazarette?"

"And do what with 'em?" she asked, wondering where he was going with his thoughts.

"I'm thinking to mount them in a few spots on deck, down low where Sadie can reach. Smart as a whip, that one, and you can learn her how to reach for 'em when she crosses the deck."

Valerie's face slowly curled into a smile and she kept nodding, "I like that a lot! It'll give her something to think about - grabbing the knots, which will slow her little ass down, *and* make me less stressed!"

"Yep, that's my goal. Keep mama happy so we can keep on fishin'!" He beamed as he finished cleaning number twenty-two and then hauled himself out of the pit. "Ya know what else? She'll probably be making monkey fists by herself in no time! That kid is so damn clever. Ya done good, Val."

"Thanks, boss. Now get yer nap on. I got fish to kill."

The day had proceeded uneventfully for much of the morning. The fish were heavy on some sets and sparse on others. Sadie slept for two hours, and Arne for three. Valerie kept an eye on the weather. The winds had been building in a slow progression that was fairly proportionate to the barometer dropping. She was habitually extra vigilant with Sadie on board, particularly because while she trusted Arne and saw him as a dear friend who would never deliberately put her or Sadie in danger, she recognized that his penchant for alcohol and drugs occasionally superseded his sea smarts. As for the *Bylgja Maid*, she had come to accept that it was not the safest vessel in the fleet, but Valerie's conviction was that they were in less jeopardy on the seemingly impractical vessel than they had been for the last three years on the f/v *Sea Charm* with the odious Otis.

That beautiful little wooden boat, and the permits to fish it, had belonged to both her and Otis, but he took it all when she left him. That over-educated narcissist from New Jersey blue blood had initiated them into an extremist evangelical church that some of his new friends led him to. She tried to appease him, but just could not buy into the whole religion thing. He began with beating her up and concluded by breaking her down. When he went before the church elders and kneeled at the altar begging their forgiveness, they suggested that Valerie was an immoral jezebel who needed to be exorcised of her demons. She disagreed; she liked her demons just fine.

The church took Otis, he took the boat and permits, and she took off with Sadie. While she did not feel so debased by their judgment, she was thoroughly humiliated by her own dick-blindness. Before Otis found Jesus, he really was an attractive man. Nonetheless, while she was never the brightest light in the harbor, Valerie understood that the best path to purge him from their lives would entail a secure transition that offered her distance and Sadie consistency. Catching fish on the *Bylgja Maid* with her friend Arne would meet those needs for a time, and perhaps someday she might be able to release the hurt as well.

By late afternoon, the sea had seemingly grown in viscosity. Swells that had been building all day were by then long waves with troughs so deep that the horizon would disappear at each surge for moments at a time. It made trolling almost impossible, as Valerie would nearly evaporate from the pit each time the boat rolled through a long wave. The slow and dizzying effects of this condition were such that everyone felt slightly off-kilter, with Sadie too miserable to move at all. As long as the winds were less than thirty-five, Arne declared from his pilothouse perch, he wanted to keep fishing and so Valerie kept at it for another set after which she reported that only a handful of fish were landed.

“The gear is down and fishing, but it’s really sloppy out there, and I’m wondering if you’d like to come out and pull the next set with me?” she ventured.

“Yeah, I can do that,” he answered cheerlessly. “FYI: there’s a pan-pan for man overboard down in Cross Sound.” Valerie’s eyes widened in a combination of fear and excitement. That was the area where the “God Squad” hunkered down for inside fishing. A ruthless smile teased across her face. Not missing a beat, Arne added, “Yep. I heard him on the radio - the *Sea Charm* is in the vicinity, but I don’t know much else yet.”

“How ‘bout that?” she whispered and turned to check on Sadie. The child was curled up and whimpering. Valerie sat beside her and stroked her hair. “I’m sorry you don’t feel good, babe. It’s pretty lumpy out there today, huh?”

“I’m gonna puke, mama,” a frightened Sadie volunteered moments before the heaving commenced. Arne had already placed an oil rag and dishpan beside the couch; Valerie held Sadie’s hair back and helped her through the ordeal.

“The autopilot’s on, so I’ll do this set and you stay with the kid. Keep your ears on for info on the pan-pan and also, for Hugh on the sideband,” Arne stood up and pulled a sweatshirt over his head. “I might pull it all and run inside. We’ll see.”

She reached for his hand, “Thanks, Arne. I am *not* loving this day right now.” He patted her hand and Sadie’s head also, “You’ll feel better soon, Sadie girl, you’ll see!”

Arne went out on deck and proceeded with running the gear. Valerie felt confident that the enormous swells would motivate her skipper towards inside waterways, especially after Sadie’s fortuitously timed pukescapades. The child was still sobbing quietly but persistently, and Valerie rubbed her back for a few moments before standing to get a wet towel. The oil rag was a nice touch, but clearly not appropriate for a puking toddler. After getting her in fresh clothing and bedding, she brought her into the galley for water and some pilot bread. Sadie was not interested in eating, and instead asked her mama to sing “Angel from Montgomery.” Valerie rocked her and sang until the child nodded off to sleep on a foam bench at the table. She brought the soiled tub out on deck and tied a line to the eye on the end, flinging it overboard for a rinse. Looking towards the south, she saw a few boats like mosquitos in the far distance, however, as the *Bylgja Maid* sank into the billowing troughs, the little fleet disappeared until the next rise. Her skipper was in the pit, and she was quietly gratified to discover that he was struggling to stay on top of the gear. Untying the tub,

she spun around, unseen, and returned to the house. Things were looking up, she thought as she hunkered down in the Captain's seat.

Thirty minutes passed, and Arne materialized in the doorway, "Gimme a hand out here?" Valerie unclipped her damp orange gloves from above the stove and stepped on deck. Arne was pulling in the birds, one side at a time.

"What? Huh?" She could not register the logic of his actions.

"C'mon," he snapped, "bring the pole in!" Valerie was annoyed but did as she was told. Once both poles were up and secure, Arne walked into the house, and Valerie's heart sank as the slow up and down swells had quickly given way to hard slams from port to starboard. She stood on deck for a few moments and tried to guess his plans. The gear was all up, the deck was trimmed, and the boat was still idling at troll speed. Valerie wandered into the house and hung her gloves back up, peeked at sleeping Sadie, and skulked into the wheelhouse where she found Arne talking on the sideband radio. His legs draped across the binnacle, the mic clasped in his gloved hand, and his eyes squinted into the distance. Hugh was on the horn, his voice a slow drawl, "... out front of Graves... 230 by noon... swell down... wind up... Cross Sound."

The *Bylgja Maid* meanwhile, was slamming harder from side to side, and there soon came a vicious crash from the galley. Valerie turned and ran to find Sadie on the floor, her face ruddy and covered in sweat. She burst into tears when she saw her mother, who scooped her up in time to dodge a cast iron skillet that had knocked a cupboard open and went flying rogue. Sadie and Valerie froze, their eyes locked on each other. Valerie chuckled first, and then Sadie followed suit, soon both racked with tears and silly laughter, making the entire situation seem all the more ridiculous.

"Oh baby, what we gonna do?" Valerie kissed her daughter's forehead, and carried her back to the wheelhouse.

"We can color!" Sadie suggested.

“Good idea. Let’s see what Captain Arne has to say first, though. Okay?”

“Kay.”

Arne hadn’t moved much, though the throttle had been engaged and the *Bylgja Maid* was picking up speed. Her bow was pointed southeast, and it appeared that their course was set for Cape Spencer. Arne wrapped up his conversation while Valerie looked at the chart on the table. She guessed they would hit Cross Sound in about eight or ten hours if they quartered into the swells.

“Tell your girls I said good night,” Hugh’s voice crackled over the sideband.

“Good night, Hugh!” Valerie called out. Arne spoke into the mic, “Val just said good night, but I didn’t have the mic on. We’ll see ya when we get there.” He turned the volume down on the sideband and looked at Valerie, “Sounds like the fish are moving inside, so we’re gonna go down there and take a look around. Gotta be better than this lumpy crap. How’s Miss Sadie doing?” he asked her directly. She held her arms up to him, and he pulled her on to the binnacle so she could face him. A little snot bubble bloomed from her nostril, causing them all to erupt in a fit of giggles. He pulled a cowboy kerchief from his shirt pocket and wiped her nose, causing Valerie to squirm in horror.

“So. What was the big crash boom?” he chuckled.

“That was a fuckin’ wake up call, that’s what it was! A cast iron skillet flew outta the cupboard and,” she dropped her voice, “it came within inches of knocking one of us out,” her eyes flashed towards Sadie. “Scared the hell outta us so bad, I damn near found religion.”

“Again? Well, hell no, we can’t have that!” he said, scooping Sadie down to his lap “No one got hurt then - so no harm, no foul?”

“Grrrrrrr,” Valerie scowled, “she fell off the bench, and it scared her. She’s okay, but it’s been a tough day all around. For fuck’s sake, why’d you pull the stabies in? I mean, seriously, we can run with them down, can’t we?”

“Yeah, I s’pose it’s treacherous enough out here in front of Lituya. Reckon I coulda waited till we cleared this nasty stretch, but the fact is the bite is happening now, and there’s just too much drag with the birds in the water.”

Sadie interjected, “Birds poop everywhere, right mama?”

“So do you, Sadie. And so does Captain Arne, huh?” Valerie teased, though the sting in her voice hinted at her frustration. Sadie’s eyes widened in disbelief; Arne shook his head. She continued in a different tone, “Mr. Jorgen, how long til we drop gear, ya think?”

“Well, the wind’s starting to come up, but it’s coming mostly out of the north. I reckon at eight knots, we could be there in about five hours. Get in for a little night bite and drop the pic for an early start. The forecast is southeast twenty-five tomorrow, but we ain’t there yet.”

“Good enough. We’re gonna go color for a while, then maybe I’ll make some bread and a pot of soup once the swell dies down some,” she offered.

“Oh man, that sounds good. I might have to get my smoke on before dinner. Work up an appetite, ya know,” he winked.

Valerie was gathering Sadie up to leave, then turned and locked eyes with Arne, “What about the pan-pan? Did Hugh know what boat or who it was?”

He grinned uncomfortably, chewing tobacco peeking out from the corner of his sparse teeth, “Yah. Jimmy on the *Leta* was out front of Yakobi, and he tells the Coast Guard on two-two that he’s pretty sure he snagged a body on his gear.”

“No shit!” she squealed with barefaced delight, “Who was it?”

“He ain’t sure. He said ‘yellow raingear... heavy... got hung up on his bag line.’ Didn’t know if he should gaff it or shake it off, but every damn time it would come up between the beads, it would slide back down again. Says he tried to hang on to it, but it kept sliding away! Finally when he figures its gonna bust his pole, it just disappears back into the drink.”

“Whoa, that musta been intense!”

“Strange thing is, there ain’t been no reports of anybody going overboard, and no fresh missing persons neither.”

“That you know of...” Valerie’s eyes twinkled, “Hmmm, I wonder though - did anyone find out what kinda gear he was running? The secret hoochies?”

Arne burst out laughing. “You know what, I’m gonna be sure to tell Hugh you said that. And make damn sure we don’t run that same gear!”

“You betcha!” she cackled. “We don’t have enough ice left for a slab! Though Otis is probably down that way with his puritan posse... Damn, if he ever wore yellow raingear, you *know* I’d be ringing the bell all night long!”

“Careful,” he hissed, his eyes flashed at Sadie, who was playing with her stuffed dog on the floor. Valerie blushed, “Yer right. Thanks, captain. We’re off to color.”

The run south went easy enough, and they made it around the Cape Spencer lighthouse by dark-thirty. Too late to fish, they dropped anchor in a little bay east of the Cape and hunkered down for the night. Hugh had not disappointed, the bite was solid on both sides of Cross Sound, and only a small fleet of inside competitors to share the grounds with. Most of the little mosquito boats gave the *Bylgja Maid* wide berth, no doubt realizing that sometimes size does matter. After only a few days, the boat was plugged full, and that same evening Valerie announced they were nearly out of usable ice. Arne went down into the hold to see for himself, and sure enough, it was time to pull the gear in, bring the poles up, and make a run for the nearest cannery.

Once Arne had committed to the plan, he got on the horn and checked in with his running buddy on the *Skookum*. They were fishing near enough that both Arne and Hugh had agreed to keep the secret channel on at all times so they could hear if anyone else was using it. They still spoke in

code, regardless, because several of the fishermen working these grounds were aggressively territorial, as if they had been given exclusive rights to the fish below Cross Sound. The second day on the drag, Arne got so fed up with one of the holy trollers cutting close on a pass, that he stood on the bow as they rolled by and took a piss over the side, hollering, “I peed on all these fish, so they’re all mine, you asshole!” Valerie was grateful that Sadie was playing in the hammock on deck and had missed the melodrama.

A full moon cracked open over the mountains like a fresh egg on the griddle. Valerie sat in the co-pilot seat and straightened hooks from a bucket beside her. The outside light was fading, and with the exception of the dull glimmer of electronics, the wheelhouse was almost too dark for seeing her efforts – though hook bending relied more on manual dexterity than visual acuity. Arne tilted back in his chair and keyed the mic, “You on here, Hugh?” After a few moments of silence, there was static and then Hugh’s voice boomed back.

“Yah, you betcha. How’s the wife?” he asked, referring to fish scores and not women.

“I’m leaving the bitch,” Arne teased. “Outta ice and fulla shit,” he continued, this time his nod was to fish in the hold, and not a faulty bilge.

“I see. You going to homeport, or just down the road?”

“Probably go down the road. Turn around in a day or two. Give the girls some time to get a sauna,” Valerie smirked quietly in the dark. Arne continued, “Maybe have a couple beers at the office, ya know.”

“Yah, yah. That’s good. Tony says he can stretch the ice another day, maybe two – but I need to do an oil change pretty quick here. Was gonna ask if a tender could bring a drum of Delo to the scow at Hoktaheen.” He paused to speak to his son, then continued, “Don’t wanna go to that boardwalk town and lose my deckhand just yet.”

“Roger that. Well, lemme know if you need me to throw a drum on here. Good fishing, man. I’m out.”

Arne sighed and looked over at Valerie, “Well, ya good to go to Pelican?”

Valerie did not look up from her task, but her smile was like phosphorescence on dark water. “I’m good to go wherever we end up... though I ain’t been to Pelican since I had Sadie. Gonna be interesting, that’s for sure.”

“Why don’t you get some rest now, and I’ll give you a holler when we get near town,” he offered.

“Sure thing. I’d love to study my eyelids for a while,” she nodded. “Hey, will we have time for laundry? Oooh! And showers? Oh, and the Wet Dry Goods Store!” She had set the hook bucket aside and was pacing about the wheelhouse bursting with sudden enthusiasm.

Arne laughed, “Slow down, chainsaw. We should have plenty of time for all that. I ain’t even called the cold storage yet to set up offloading and ice appointments, so we’ll know more after that. I doubt the turnaround will be less than a day or two.”

Valerie barely reined in her glee and said goodnight. Arne refilled his mug halfway with tired coffee and topped the remainder with a healthy splash of brandy. He unrolled the chart to check for any hazards he may have forgotten about, and then satisfied with his course, he sat back and stared out the wheelhouse window in thought. While the town of Pelican was not marked as a hazard on any chart, it was no secret that many a fisherman had been wooed to peril by the siren song of Petal’s Bar & Grill. Hugh had met two future ex-wives there. Over the years, Arne had spent countless hours at the notorious watering hole and had left the town on more than one occasion with both his wallet and fish hold empty. Valerie had once seen a fisherman fall twenty-plus feet off the boardwalk at minus tide and break his collarbone. He was so inebriated that he stood up and tried to climb back up the pilings, busted bones and barnacles be damned.

A small boardwalk community of about two hundred folks, Pelican revolved almost entirely around commercial fishing due to its ideal location between the superb fishing grounds and the bigger communities of Juneau, Sitka, and Hoonah. The town featured one processing plant, two liquor licenses, a family café, and a dry goods store that sold everything from Vienna sausages to fishing gear and postage stamps. There was a delightful old Finnish-style sauna with icy showers adjacent, hence the “wet” appellation (although it could also have referred to the eternal rainfall that kept Pelican in a state of perpetual dampness).

The true merit of Pelican, however, was that what it lacked in the amenities of modern civilization was perfectly balanced by the reciprocal state of *lack* as a positive attribute. The insularity of the community was largely due to the fact that the isolated town was far enough removed from the crosshairs of any formal governing body. Access was limited to sturdy boats and floatplanes, both of which were further restricted by chronically inclement weather conditions. In other words, more often than not, anything could happen and occasionally did – without the intervention of outside forces. For instance, when an angry grizzly sow woke up on the wrong side of springtime and wandered into town one night, a bartender deputized a small man with a big gun and steady arm as “Chief of the Pelican Department of Pesky Critter Control.” The griz got shot and skinned on the boardwalk and the meat was divided up for the community to enjoy. If you weren’t there, however, it probably never happened.

The ride in had been uneventful; Arne passed a handful of boats heading back towards Cross Sound, and the radar revealed several others in front of his vessel. He drank more coffee, each pour as enhanced as the first, and was eventually overcome with weariness. He woke Valerie and asked her to take the wheel for spell while he napped, and she came stumbling out of the foc’s’cle bleary-eyed and muddled and sat down in the captain’s chair. Arne mumbled goodnight and went

directly to his bunk where he was snoring loudly in no time. The wheelhouse reeked of weed and she furiously slammed the window open before dashing back to the galley for a mug of coffee. The aluminum pot sat on the diesel stove bone dry. Livid, she ran back to the wheelhouse, checked the wheel and radar and saw that all was well before returning to the stove to make a fresh pot. An empty jug of brandy lay in the sink atop a pile of dirty dishes. Valerie returned to the wheel, her anger percolating right along with the coffee.

She stuffed a cassette tape in the player and cranked up the volume. Waylon Jennings moaned, "I ain't living long like this." Valerie ejected the tape, tossed it out the window and said aloud, "No, you ain't." She rummaged through the cassettes, and decided not to play anything. She was just too mad and might end up taking it out on all his crappy tapes. She couldn't believe how self-absorbed her skipper was. She knew that they would be in town soon enough, and she had a mind to blow off steam herself, but it would not be an easy option with Sadie around. She looked at the radar and thought she recognized Lisianski Inlet about a mile or more behind. She picked up the chart and then compared longitude and latitude readings on the Loran, and the realization sank in that the boat was nearly in Pelican. Arne was out cold, and she wondered if she would be able to bring the boat in by herself. She got her coffee and sat down in the pilot chair. Taking a deep breath, she picked up the mic and hailed the only discreet person she could think of.

"Fishing vessel *Skookum*, this is the *Bylgja Maid*, WDX 4588, over." She waited a minute and tried again. "Fishing vessel *Skookum*, this is the *Bylgja Maid*, WDX 4588. You got me there, Hugh?" Another minute passed without response, and Valerie keyed the mic again, "*Bylgja Maid* clear. No contact with *Skookum*. *Bylgja Maid*, WDX 4588 out." She pulled the throttle back a few degrees to slow down and think. Pelican Harbor was easy enough to get in and out of, but the boat was huge, and she couldn't be sure about figuring tides, current, depth, or hazards; none of it. Her head was swirling, and she felt like puking.

“Valerie,” a voice crackled beside her. Her eyes widened in realization that it was Hugh on the secret sideband channel. Though it didn’t sound like Hugh, she figured it was someone that could help right now. She picked up the mic and replied, “This is Valerie. Who is this?”

“Hey, Val. Yah, it’s Markus – Hugh’s deckhand.” Of course! She was so relieved to hear his voice on the other end but did not want to disrespect her captain, regardless of how pissed off she was at the moment.

“Markus! Thanks for the jingle. I need to talk to your granddad. I hate to wake you guys up, but it’s urgent.”

There was a long silence, and Valerie grew anxious until finally there was static and a crackle. Hugh keyed the mic and cleared his throat loudly, “Valerie. This is Hugh. What’s going on?”

“Hugh! I need your help! Arne is shitfaced, and we’re about two miles outside of Pelican. Can you help me bring the boat in? I ain’t too sure about bringing this big slab in by myself.”

“Well I’ll be dipped,” he drawled. “That son-of-a-gun is outta commission?”

“Yep. He’s in the rack, sawing logs and probably pissed himself by now.”

“Alright, give me your Loran numbers - and take her down a couple knots.”

“I already took her down. We’re at troll speed right now. Got a pencil?”

“Yah. Go ahead.”

“Lat 57-59’10” north; Lon 136-17’09” west.”

Hugh checked his charts and then came back to Valerie, explaining what she could expect when she got near the harbor. They agreed that the best bet would be to tie up alongside the cannery, and he waited while she hailed the fish plant on the radio. The manager assured her that there would be crew waiting to catch her lines.

Valerie was wound up tight as an unopened jar of pressure-cooked salmon. She agonized over whether she should leave the wheel to drop float bags over the side or not. She decided against

leaving the pilothouse for any reason short of Sadie needing her. Sadie! Jesus, she hoped the child stayed asleep until this ordeal was over.

The *Bylgja Maid* was coming up on Pelican to her port, and the sky was lightening on her starboard. Morning couldn't come soon enough. She was more anxious about slamming the dock than anything else - mooring a seventy-foot cement boat would not be the same as bringing smaller, lighter vessels flush against the pilings. The tide was slack; that was a gift she hadn't banked on. Nonetheless, she secretly yearned for *anyone* to skiff over to rescue her before this final stretch. Luckily, Hugh was standing by on the secret channel, speaking in his steady voice and providing calm encouragement.

As soon as the cannery came in view, she steered slowly to the port, and the moment before the bow tapped a piling, she killed the engine. That wasn't supposed to happen, but fortunately an intuitive plant worker saw no one on deck and he sprang down the dock ladder and jumped onto the *Bylgja Maid*. He grabbed the midship line and tied it to the nearest piling. Arne suddenly staggered into the pilothouse, "What happened? Why'd we stop... what? Aw, shit."

Valerie handed the mic to Arne and ran out of the wheelhouse for the foc's'cle. Her heart was competing with her bladder as to which might burst first; however, her eyes were the dark horses that won that race. She sat down on the honey bucket and sobbed, a combination of angst and excitement surged forth.

A tiny voice whispered out, "Mama? What's wrong, mama?"

Valerie gathered herself. "Hang on, babe." She stood up and blew her nose. She tried to look composed, even though she suspected the kid could read her better than she could fathom herself. She sat down on the bunk beside Sadie and brushed her hair back. "I was just so tired, honey. I needed to cry it out. Ya know how you feel SO tired sometimes?" Sadie nodded and reached up to touch Valerie's wet face. Valerie continued, "Well, that's how I feel right now."

“Then you need to snuggle with me and Snowy!” she smiled with her old soul eyes, “Come. Lay down, mama. I’ll rub your back and tell you a story.” Valerie kicked off her boots and obliged. Even though she knew it was her job to be the parent, she was plumb tuckered and gladly accepted the innocent offer.

Sometime later, Valerie woke up and had no idea how long she had been sleeping. Sadie was on the floor beside the bunk with her coloring books and markers sprawled out. She had dressed herself in an awkwardly buttoned red and orange flannel shirt, bright pink stretch pants, and an exceptionally loud rainbow hair tie. Valerie burst out laughing, “Wow, you look ready to go to town!”

Sadie beamed and said, “I’m hungry, mama. Can we have breakfast?”

“That’s a great idea. Lemme get some fresh clothes on, and we’ll go see what’s going on.” The boat was stock still when the girls held hands and ambled across the deck. Sadie looked out at the houses across the creek, “Where are we ma?”

“Welcome to Pelican, Sadie. Over there is Sunnyside, and this side is the town. Your dad and me used to fish out of here before you were born.”

“Like eggs?” she asked.

“Huh?”

“Sunnyside up. Eggs!”

Valerie laughed, “By golly, you are hungry! And you’re spot on! Maybe we can go get some breakfast at the café with eggs and all the fixin’s.” Arne was nowhere in view, and Valerie had decided to avoid speaking to him until she was ready, so she held on to Sadie and helped her off the boat and up the ladder. It was flush against the pilings, and the tide was low, so the climb would have been

steep for anyone. Sadie held on to the ladder, and Valerie held on to Sadie and the ladder, and they moved up to the dock as one body.

“Hello,” smiled a middle age Filipino man pushing a tote full of bright troll fish. His head was covered with a clear plastic bonnet, and his boots appeared to be too large for his feet. Valerie returned his hello, and Sadie turned her head admiring the shiny fish as they passed by. A woman with dark brown hair poking out of her cap like springs rolled by driving a forklift. Her pleasant face dimpled when she smiled and waved. Valerie squeezed Sadie’s hand and walked into the cannery office. There were two desks in the front and a young, plump girl looked up from the nearest desk, “Can I help you?”

“I hope so. What time is the *Bylgja Maid* set to unload?” Valerie lifted Sadie up onto her shoulders as she spoke. The woman smiled and stood up. One blackboard on the wall listed fish prices, while another listed workers and shifts. The woman glanced at a clipboard hanging from a nail on the adjacent wall, “*Bylgja Maid*, 2:00 p.m.”

“Thank you,” Valerie turned and walked out towards town. They walked to the café and sat down. The server brought coffee and menus. She brought some crackers for Sadie, who was beginning to feel the effects of being back on land. Valerie let the child lie across her lap when she complained of feeling dizzy. It wasn’t long before she paid the bill and they headed back towards the boat. Walking along the boardwalk, she realized she would need assistance getting Sadie back on board the *Bylgja Maid*, as going down the ladder alone would not be an option. Passing Petal’s Bar & Grille, she thought to peer inside to see if any of her friends were around. In the back of her mind, she supposed Arne might be there also and was not particularly surprised to find him bellied up to the bar with a pint of beer and a plate holding nothing but a few token remnants of toast and eggs. He was engrossed in conversation with the bartender, an attractive Native girl not much younger than Valerie.

She sidled up to the counter beside him, “Howdy, Captain,” her face a mask of sincerity. Arne’s eyes glistened in the dark and smoky room. Dollar bills embellished with names, pictures, and numbers covered virtually every surface from ceiling to floorboards. Valerie had tacked a few up in her day and would have enjoyed looking for them if she wasn’t on a mission. The bartender crossed her arms over her chest, “What’re ya having?” Valerie shook her head, “We’re good, thanks,” and turned to Arne.

“My girls! I was just finishing up and gonna head back to the boat next. I thought maybe you were still sleeping. Ya want some breakfast?”

Sadie stretched her arms up, and he lifted her up to the bar to face him. “Sadie Lynn! Don’t you look purdy?”

“I got dressed all by myself,” she announced.

“Well ya done good.”

Valerie interjected, “We just came from the café, so we’re good, though little missy here ain’t got her land legs yet. I was wondering if you might help me get her back down to the boat?”

“Yah, you betcha!” he winked, but Valerie was not amused and offered only a weak smile. It was in fact, her non-reaction to their shared joke that forewarned Arne that she was still simmering. He paid his tab, sucked down his beer, and promised the bartender he would see her later. Valerie hoisted Sadie up on her shoulders once again, and they walked to the door. A piece of paper bordered in bright red roses and duct tape was tacked in the center of a bulletin board by the door, surrounded by business cards, messages to fishermen, and various public notices. She stole a glance at the sign and kept on walking until she was back in the bright sunlight.

The three headed down the boardwalk towards the cannery with few words exchanged. Valerie and Sadie pointed out cats in windows and boxes of flowers to each other. When they got to the boat, Arne went down the ladder first, and then Valerie handed Sadie down to him when he was

level with the top rung. Then Valerie descended, and they worked as a team to hand her over from the ladder to the boat. To a bystander, it might have looked like a low-budget circus act; however, it was effective in getting the job done.

Still a few hours before the scheduled offload, Valerie got her daughter settled in at the galley table to have a snack of pilot bread with jam and milk. The empty brandy bottle was gone from the sink, and the dirty dishes looked like they had been rinsed but not washed. She set Sadie up with play-dough and promised she would be back shortly. She went to the wheelhouse where her skipper perched with his legs crossed over the binnacle. The smell of weed lingered, and Arne's eyes suggested it was recent. He sat listening to the radio, switching channels and attempting to snoop out information on hot scores and locations.

"There's a bite on at Soapstone," he announced.

"That's good," Valerie nodded, "What do ya hear from the *Skookum*?"

"Sounds like they're gonna come to town instead of going to Hoktaheen."

"Why's that?" she bit her lip.

"Couldn't get the oil, and then I guess they lost a couple leads and some gear, so he figured to make a run here."

"Oh, I talked to him this morning," Valerie said, fully aware that she had just opened Pandora's Box. "I still owe him a thank you." There was a long and palpable silence between them. Arne looked like he had to poop. Valerie didn't care. The lid was off and she boiled over. "I told ya from the get go, my kid is on board and she's gotta be safe! You were outta control last night!" She paced while she raged but tried to keep her voice down. "That was bullshit, and you know it! We can't stay on anymore, and that sucks, because I adore you and Sadie does too. But it's the end of the season, and I'm sure you'll figure something out," she turned her back away to hide her tears.

Arne's face was sullen. Hugh had mentioned that she was mighty upset that morning, but he didn't think she would up and quit. Damn.

"I'm sorry, Val. I fucked up. I didn't mean to put ya in a situation that upset ya bad enough to quit. You had your own boat; you know how it gets sometimes."

She turned to face him and hissed, "You had your own kids! You know how it gets! Jesus! I'm a single mother. I don't get child support. I don't get welfare. I need to work. Sadie's father ain't around, so it's up to me to be responsible, and honey, this ain't being responsible. I love ya, man, but this fat lady's singing." Then the tears fell free, and Arne stood and held her. Sadie appeared in the wheelhouse - intuitively or by coincidence, and inserted herself into the fold announcing, "group hug!"

When the time came, Valerie unloaded 14,000 lbs. of troll-caught salmon - the majority of which she had caught, cleaned, and iced on her own. After the load was sold, they untied the boat and manually pulled it along the pilings and away from the cranes. Arne left the *Bylgja Maid* and wandered back down to the bar, "to look for a replacement" while his deckhand shoveled all of the old ice out of the hold and washed and sanitized all of the boards and bins in between tending to Sadie. She climbed out many hours later, and inhaled a cold beer that a stranger on the dock offered her. She had hoped for a chance to take a hot shower, but her dream dissolved when she discovered it was the middle of the night and logistics were not in her favor. She washed up in the galley instead, like any other end of day on the water, and crawled into the rack beside her sleeping daughter.

The following morning, Arne awoke and drove the boat over to the harbor. Valerie did not bother getting up to help; she knew it would be something he could manage alone. Eventually, she and Sadie went for showers and breakfast in town. Sadie was getting more used to her land legs, and the girls loitered about the boardwalk for a while, taking advantage of the late summer sunshine

reflecting off the water. On the walk back to the harbor, they stopped at Petal's Bar & Grill. Valerie removed the sign from the bulletin board that had caught her eye the day before and approached the counter. She did not see any familiar patrons, however a hulking blonde fisherman was behind the bar and pouring coffee for two older men seated in the corner. The room smelled thick with a tangle of smoke, stale beer and greasy fries. She pulled Sadie up in her arms and whispered, "You okay?" and the little girl nodded, her face complacent. The bartender approached, "Hi, what can I get you ladies today?" his toothy grin a pleasant, if inconsistent, attribute of his fierce Viking features.

"I'm wondering about this job," she pushed the sign across the bar counter. "Is it still available?" He raised an eyebrow and studied the advertisement. "I don't know anything about it," he shrugged, "but Petal's in her trailer around back, it's the Airstream. Why don't you go talk to her?"

"Thank you." she smiled and turned for the door. Sadie's head strained back to capture one last glance at strings of blinking Christmas lights and clamoring pinball machines. They went around back, and Valerie put Sadie down. They walked up to the door of a sausage-shaped, dull aluminum trailer with faded picket skirting, and further enhanced by a variety of antediluvian plastic flowers. Valerie knocked and waited. Soon, a Tlingit woman, perhaps near thirty, with disheveled, dark hair and brown doe-eyes opened the door and tilted her head at the strangers.

"Can I help ya?" she asked, and looked down at Sadie with a happy smile.

"I'm looking for Petal."

"I'm her daughter. She's watching the VCR with my kids. Something I can help ya with?"

"I was wondering about the bar job. The bartender sent me back here to ask."

"Yes! It's for the night shift, 5:00 p.m. til 5:00 a.m., and as many nights as you can handle. I've been covering it for a while, but my kids are getting ready to start school again," She lowered her voice and leaned towards Valerie, "I can't do it, even though mom thinks I can. My husband's gone fishing a lot, and the kids are just too demanding."

Valerie nodded in agreement, though she was still reeling from the shock of hearing the hours. “Um, that’s a lot of hours in a shift! Not that I couldn’t do it, but as you can see, I have a little friend here,” she nodded towards Sadie and squeezed her hand.

She squatted down, “What’s your name?” and Sadie hid behind her mother in response.

“She’s kinda shy around strangers,” Valerie smiled, “Sadie Lynn, it’s okay babe. Say hello!” The child shook her head and stayed hidden. The woman said, “I’m Mouse. Hi Sadie Lynn.” Valerie laughed nervously, “I’m Valerie, and we just got in the other night on the *Bylgja Maid*.”

Mouse opened her mouth in astonishment. “You’re Arne’s deckhand? Holy crap, I heard about you! Maw, come here!” she hollered into the trailer.

Valerie’s face burned, “What did you hear? I got a rep, and I don’t even know what I done!” she grimaced. Mouse opened the door wide, “C’mon in. Mom will wanna meet ya. Are ya really interested in the job? We could work out babysitting.”

“That would be great. Let’s talk after.”

Mouse brought them past the galley and into the center of the trailer. The inside was bloated with old furniture, and every surface was covered with kitschy collectibles and bric-a-brac. A large, middle-age woman with loud orange hair and a floral muumuu sat on an overstuffed paisley sofa. Four bouncy children and a small, unattractive animal that appeared to be a cross between a Chihuahua and an otter surrounded her.

“Maw! This here is Valerie. She was on the *Bylgja Maid*, but now she’s lookin’ for a job at the bar!”

The woman leaned forward and pursed her lips. “I see. You ever work in a bar?”

“Yes, ma’am,” she stammered, “but I’ve been fishing all summer.”

The children were all fixated on Sadie, and one girl who looked to be about ten years old took Sadie’s hand and steered her to a nearby coffee table strewn with stickers, crayons, and game

pieces. Valerie nodded to Sadie, “okay,” and she sat down with other children for the first time in a very long while.

“So I hear. Ya know, Artemis Jorgen used to ‘deliver wood’ to me when he’d come to town” she winked. Valerie’s eyes swept the room for a stove, not sure whether this was truth or a double entendre. “Is that Arne’s dad?” Petal nodded slowly, sizing her up. A notoriously shrewd businesswoman, she could discern more about most people than they knew about themselves. She suspected that this girl was an open book.

“Yah. I miss ol’ Arty. He was a pistol.” Mouse tittered, and Petal swatted at her.

“So, where are you staying now?” Petal asked.

“We’re on the boat, but he’s leaving soon as tomorrow. He said he’d pay for us to fly home, but I dunno, I was thinking it would be good to work for a while yet.”

“Uh huh. Well, here’s the deal, you could work night shifts, and I could rent you a room in one of the guest trailers.”

“How much would that be for a week?” Valerie asked.

“Price is one hundred a night for customers, though I’d give you a weekly rate of five hundred. You can eat from the grill on your shifts, no charge.”

Valerie considered the offer. “I see. What does the job pay?”

“Seven an hour plus tips. And the tips are good,” she smiled broadly and gestured at the room around her, “real good.” Valerie acknowledged the trove and smiled back. In her mind, she was calculating the hourly wages and the rent, and if her math was right, then after rent was paid she would net about twelve dollars a night. Plus tips. For twelve hours of work. She took a deep breath and stepped back. “Huh. Lemme think on it and I’ll get back with ya in a few hours,” she looked over at Sadie playing with the children, and it occurred to her that her kid looked at ease. “Thank

you so much for your time. You do have a lovely home.” Petal nodded and smiled, her lips pulled tight across her teeth. The bait was cast.

“C’mon Sadie, time to go babe.” Sadie stood up, her face a picture of sadness, and the other little girl said, “And you can come play again tomorrow!” Sadie chewed her lip and looked wistfully at the kids. Valerie took her hand and said goodbye.

Mouse laughed, “We’ll see,” and she turned to escort them out. “I’m going in at nine tonight, so if you want to come by the bar and talk about babysitting, I can talk then.”

“That would be good, except I ain’t bringing her in at night. I been in Petal’s at night and, well, I don’t gotta tell you!!” Valerie and Mouse both laughed. Mouse scrawled her number on paper and handed it to Valerie, “This is the bar phone. Call me if you can’t come in and talk. At least *I* can talk there.”

“Thank ya so much. I’d like to sit in and see what the tips look like for real, and then I could decide. Otherwise, I can’t afford to be working for experience - ‘cause that sure as hell don’t pay the bills.”

Mouse smiled and nodded in appreciation, “True story.” They parted ways, and Valerie strolled back to the boat with Sadie who was dragging tail and ready for her nap. They stepped on board, and Arne was sitting at the galley table with Hugh, Tony, and Markus. The house was dense with cigarette smoke and the smell of unwashed fishermen. A chart was rolled up on one end, and a near-empty box of little sugar donuts sat in the center. There was a small hill of cigarettes in a glass bowl, which also held sticky loose change, a stub of pencil, and two worn out fishing spoons pressed against the sides.

“Hey guys!” Valerie’s face lit up. She gave Arne a hug, and snatched two donuts, handing one to Sadie, whose tired eyes and pink cheeks reiterated that it was indeed time for a nap.

“How you doing, lady?” Tony asked.

“Hey,” Markus said with nonchalance.

“Good to see ya,” Hugh chimed in.

“Where’s my hug?” Arne asked Sadie. She walked over slowly and laid her head on his leg. He lifted her up, “Someone looks ready for a nap,” and gave her a peck on the cheek. Sadie rested her head on his shoulder, and Arne patted her back.

“I’m gonna go put her down, and I’ll be back in a bit.” Valerie took Sadie from Arne and walked out. Someone whistled, and someone laughed. Valerie smiled and carried Sadie to the foc’s’cle. After she got her settled in, she returned to the galley and visited with the guys. She felt awkward, but thanked Hugh in person for his help in bringing the boat in. He tapped her hand and said she done a fine job, he was just there for backup. No one spoke much for a while, and then Arne said, “Tony will take your spot if you still want to go. This don’t mean I want you to go, but if you wanna go...”

Valerie looked at Hugh, and he nodded at her. Markus lit another cigarette. Valerie poured herself a cup of coffee and pointed at the pack of Marlboros, “May I?”

Both Tony and Markus said, “Sure,” at the same time, and Valerie tapped one out of the pack. Markus flicked his wrist, and his lighter popped open producing a flame. Valerie puffed weakly and thanked him as she exhaled. She did not know where to begin, but Arne piped up first, “Some guy at Petal’s said a pretty girl with a little kid came in asking about a job today.”

All eyes were on Valerie. She burst out laughing, “I wonder who it was?”

“Fuckin’ Pelican. Ya fart on one end of the boardwalk, and they can smell it on the other end before ya even knew ya just farted,” Tony mumbled into his coffee. There were a few snickers.

Arne continued, “You thinking of working for Petal? Are ya crazy?” The *Skookum* crew laughed. Valerie noted that Arne hadn’t looked so sober in days. Her forehead furrowed, “I was thinking about Sadie. This ain’t working out, she’s just too little for this big ol’ boat, and well, Petal’s

daughter, Mouse, has a small crew of rugrats. She said she might babysit... Sadie looked so happy playin' with the kids today."

The men all sat stone still and expressionless. None of them ever seemed at ease talking about anything beyond fish, boats, work, or sex. Children were insignificant bleeps on their collective radars, and not one of the four could offer Valerie a single nugget of wisdom.

"Your skipper is obligated to return you to your homeport," Hugh finally said, and Arne agreed with him. "You don't have to stay in Pelican, Valerie."

"I know, I know," she put her hands up to her forehead. "It's just, what are we going back to? We were living on the boat, and Otis took it. He took everything, and his church cronies said it was all part of 'God's plan'. Well fuck that. At least here I *know* he won't be in my crosshairs, 'cause bars ain't in his religious playbook."

Valerie knew she might as well be crying to the wind, for these guys were even less comfortable with drama than they were with children. "Sorry. I appreciate that you would fly us home. But maybe there's a reason for the job at Petal's... and Mouse... and the whole deal lining up here." She stamped out the cigarette and pushed it along the side of the bowl between the lures.

Arne patted her arm, "Whatever you decide, I'll be on standby. The fish are coming inside now, so I'll prolly be around here for a few days anyways. In case you change your mind."

Hugh concurred, "Yah. And Tony can come back with us if you do change your mind, Val." Tony nodded to seal the deal.

"My momma always said it was not only a woman's prerogative to change her mind, it was her damn responsibility!" Valerie razzed. Arne looked uncomfortable and Hugh's boys chuckled. Valerie went back to the foc's'cle to pack; already her load felt lighter.

The following day, Valerie and Sadie moved off the boat and into the trailer behind Petal's. It was a bittersweet departure, but Valerie knew it was the right thing to do. The *Bylgja Maid* left the dock before noon, and the f/v *Skookum* had already headed for the fishing grounds some hours before sunrise. Valerie took Sadie to Mouse's trailer before her first night on the job and waited for her daughter to settle in. She knew that the kid was nothing if she wasn't resilient.

At five o'clock sharp, Valerie stepped into Petal's Bar & Grill. The Viking, whose name was Henry, stuck around to train her, and she found that the customers took to her right away. Some even began calling her the Valkyrie, and she sported the new name like a sleek fur coat.

The Boys that Go to Sea

In an ideal world, a girl might be able to determine her existential fate as it correlates to the meteorological conditions of the world she inhabits. Had that been the case for Holly Bliss, she might have battened down the hatches and stayed indoors, thus protecting her karmic barometer. As it was, spring commenced with robust winds and ceaseless showers, as was typical for the coastal rainforest environment in Southeast Alaska. Some days, the icy rains would swell thick with snow, while at other times the snow might accumulate only to melt off by mid-day. Pungent skunk cabbages poked up alongside unfurling fiddleheads and lichens that embroidered the boggy dirt and muskegs. The steady pulse of shifting precipitation further enhanced the atmosphere. Bald eagles perched high in trees and on boat poles to scan for easy marks, while ravens enjoyed the spoils of upturned trashcans and lackadaisical residents. Near the harbors, seabirds screeched and chattered in friendly voices, no doubt announcing the increased flow of marine life returning to the Sound. By the middle of March, one particular fishing fleet had also descended on town for the annual Sitka Sound Sac Roe Herring Fishery.

A week later, the season was in full swing, meaning that enormous schools of Pacific herring had returned to the vicinity of Sitka Sound as they did every year to procreate, proliferate and propagate all over the intertidal and subtidal zones of the Alexander archipelago. A commercial seine fleet of fifty-odd exclusive permit-holders, along with upwards of seventy-five tender boats had streamed into the local harbors days prior to the anticipated spawning event on vessels with homeports from a myriad of coastal communities spanning the Pacific Northwest. Fishermen and processors hired professional pilots with single-prop planes to fly acrobatically above the designated grounds and spot swollen masses of herring below, keeping an eye out for where the best concentrations of fish would be once the fishery biologists and managers came to an accord on the best time and areas to open up a season. They all came to Sitka with high hopes of filling their nets

and tanks with as much of the silvery finfish as they could in a series of strictly enforced fishing episodes. The primary objective of the sac roe fishery was to capture the swollen females immediately prior to the moment of roe discharge because that critical window was when the roe would be most valuable to the target markets.

Once the herring were landed, they were pumped out from deep seine nets and into one of the many tender boats that transported the product to commercial processors at various locales. The tender fleet consisted of large and sturdy vessels, most of which did double-duty in the Bering Sea crab fisheries, and thus possessed significant storage capacity in their holding tanks. Each vessel's crew worked together to pump the fish out of the seine boat nets and into large holding tanks that re-circulated chilled seawater in order to maintain top quality product until the fish could be delivered to a processor.

The main engines purred steadily, the heavy vessel underway with nearly 160 tons of silvery herring divided among three packed fish holds. In the wee hours of the morning, nosing between busy hives of seiners and tenders pumping fish and tending nets, the f/v *Zelda Bee* carved a steady path out of the Sound on the first leg of her journey to Prince Rupert. By sheer serendipity, Holly Bliss found herself on board the vessel, a ninety-foot crabber/tender out of Dutch Harbor.

Tuckered out from the last sixteen hours of manual labor, cold wind, and the constant alertness that is forever part of working on a commercial boat, she sighed into cool darkness and flicked a half-smoked cigarette over the side of the boat. Aware that her entire body was glazed over with a suit of tiny, iridescent fish scales and slime, she didn't care the least about hygiene, because fuckin'-aye, she thought, I can pay my rent when this is all over! Her only motivation at that moment was to get acquainted with her bunk while the getting was good.

The following day, Holly woke up closer to the crack of noon than dawn. Having eaten little since stepping on board, she was eager to climb down the ladder and head for the galley to rustle up the enormous steak and pile of spuds left over from the night before. Once the boat had gotten underway, she offered to cook dinner for the guys while they trimmed the deck and held a little “safety meeting” in the forepeak. Despite the awareness that she might be setting a dangerous precedent, Holly couldn’t wind down from the day’s events, so she had thought to make herself useful instead. No one complained, and she was at ease in the well-stocked pantry.

She warmed up her morning meal and set a place at the table, impressed by the orderliness and organization of the galley. She devoured her meal while contemplating how much binge work was comparable to binge drinking. A person craves carbohydrates after either event. Holly scanned a sloppy spread of fishermen’s trade journals and men’s entertainment rags, peppered with an impressive assortment of Hollywood gossip magazines and tabloids. She poured herself a tall glass of sugary juice and began with the story headline, *Bigfoot Sighted at Scene of Twin Towers*. An hour passed, during which time she polished off the remains of an open bag of cookies, read about too many soap stars, and worked a crossword puzzle. Still no one had come by the galley for so much as a cup of coffee.

She mulled over the events of the preceding day. It had all happened so quickly once she stepped on board. As soon as the fishery commenced and seine nets were wet and counting, the tenders were hailed, and Holly’s first taste of tender work began as the crew of the *Zelda Bee* uploaded seventy-six tons from the seiner *Devil Dog*, seventeen tons from the *Josette* and sucked forty-one tons off the tender *Bristol Queen* with the Transvac pump. The latter haul lasted seven harrowing hours because of a continuous series of equipment failures. It began with the suction pump, and culminated with rusted off clamps and melted gaskets. Fortunately, the owner of the *Zelda Bee*, Alvin Anders, owned another crab boat and both were participating in the fishery. He

immediately sent his ace engineer, Timbo, over from one vessel to fix things on the other as they broke down. When everything seemed copacetic, Timbo returned to Alvin's primary boat, the *Prospector*. In a matter of minutes, a hydraulic line on the big ten-ton crane blew.

Ivan was already pissed off and getting grumpier by the minute. Holly knew the value of staying relevant in any situation, and so she climbed up the crane and took to twisting wrenches on bolts while the other guys worked on the hoses below. Once that clusterfuck of a mess got squared up, the crew returned to extracting twenty-two more tons of herring off the *Shadow Spirit*, thus topping off the tanks of the *Zelda Bee*. As soon as the boats untangled their mechanical bits from each other, the crew of the *Bee* pulled up their buoys and trimmed the deck before retiring their rain gear to the forepeak, and then Captain Ivan took them steaming into the inky night.

Holly washed her dishes and wiped down the galley before stepping out on deck for a smoke. Feeling grateful that she had relaxed and refilled her own tanks, she heard Ivan announce over the horn that it was time to get to work. Her crewmates, Danny and Kris, stepped out from the forepeak radiating dank smoke and smiles, and commenced to show her how to break down the equipment for cleaning. Three hydraulic cranes that were bolted on the deck of the vessel were used by the crew to manipulate an assortment of steel tables, chutes, bins, hoses, clamps, and various fish-processing accouterments around the expansive deck in preparation for offloading the herring in a few days. Holly had worked with cranes on other types of boats, but this was her first time with these big rigs, and it took some time and practice for her to learn the nuances of each piece of equipment, and how to reassemble and return items to their proper place on deck. Ivan watched from the pilothouse and every so often would announce his opinions over the loudspeaker, sending the crew into fits of laughter or frustration. Holly had been careful to note how every aspect of the operation had a specific order and rhythm, and she was also aware of how her mates kept watchful

eyes on her every move - just in case she had any penchant for altering their meticulously ordered universe.

The crew employed drywall scrapers to remove all the sticky roe off of every surface from the scuppers up. Holly recognized that, not unlike her time in the galley, that particular chore was part of her comfort zone and was content with her efforts. After several hours of scraping, smoking, and joking, they finally filled buckets with hot soapy water and scrubbed at the most stubborn scales, eggs and slime, finishing their days work with sanitization and a stunning sunset. Holly's hands were bloated and blistered beneath her work gloves, and her back felt as if it had been kicked hard. She was therefore delighted at the prospect of taking a shower. She just needed instructions on using the rain locker.

She climbed into the pilothouse and found Kris on wheel-watch. He worked at a crossword puzzle with a stubby pencil, his eyes occasionally sweeping the electronics.

"Hey there! Anything I need to know about using the shower?" she brushed her hair out of her eyes, admiring the neon blue glow of marine electronics while trying to appear nonchalant.

"Like what?" he asked, his mouth curling slightly beneath his bushy mustache.

"I dunno. Like, are there any special valves to open or magic words to say to get the water to start or stop? How long do I have?" she blushed and continued, "I mean, I come from the Podunk wooden troll fleet. I ain't been on too many boats with showers, let alone flushing heads. Humor me." Her face twisted into an awkward grin, and Kris put his pencil down.

"Honey, we got forty-thousand gallons of potable water on this boat. Take as long as you like; we all appreciate ya being clean," he laughed, "As for magic valves, there ain't nothing to it. You'll figure it out."

Once she stepped in and got the water just right, her thoughts drifted to the little troller she once had, the f/v *Rocky*, and how its forty-gallon water tank had taught her the true meaning of

perseverance. She recalled staying out on the fishing grounds every summer for days, sometimes weeks, without ever getting much more than a marginal sponge bath. Whenever the opportunity for a full shower did come about, it was usually at a fish-buying scow in a cove, or else at a shoreside cannery. The latter option was the least desirable, as the facilities had a tendency to be utilized by cannery workers, transient fishers, and some less savory folk who passed through town. Those showers were indescribably foul. Holly shuddered at the recollection of trying to wash herself while holding her tiny daughter to protect her from any contact with cannery cooties. In those days, the definition of extravagance was a new piece of cardboard for a fresh floor mat. With that thought, she turned off the sumptuous hot water, stepped out onto plush carpet, and got on with her life.

Holly arrived on deck later to a brick brown sky and salt spray rising over the bow as the *Zelda Bee* sliced steadily across Cape Decision. She lit a smoke, one hand a protective cup over the flame. A thin, persistent mist coated every surface and Holly pulled her cap down over her face. The sun winked briefly from behind chalky grey billows in the West, a teasing light that would come and go, as clouds scurried along with the wind. The wind had been blowing a steady 30 knots and the sea had grown dark and moody. Holly considered the meteorological lore that had once seemed so intuitive: *red skies at night, sailors' delight; red skies at morning, sailors' warning*. With the continuous advance of twentieth-century maritime technologies, however, it seemed to her that the modern mariner's craft rested more on access to costly equipment and satellites than on experience, intuition or refined practices. Mnemonic words and symbols held much less power than an interfacing radar, navigation, weather, and communications system in the wheelhouse.

She felt melancholy, recalling the faces of old-timers who had shown her how to use charts and to read the sea and sky, when a solid figure appeared in the doorway of the forepeak. Danny's

rugged face split in a big grin, and he carved a path across the deck towards her. He was clad in a hoodie, sweatpants, and sophisticated sneakers; heavy black ear protectors swaddled his sinewy neck.

In his late forties, sporting wonky teeth and a near-bald pate, Danny was still cuter than a speckled pup. He was furiously funny and an ace on deck. His boundless energy, strength, and prowess put him at the top of his game. He'd been working on the water since he was twelve years old and was as knowledgeable as Neptune about the ocean, the vessels, and the lore associated with it all. When tied to the dock, Danny partied hard, throwing down money like a lottery winner in a Wal-Mart. His upper body and hands sparkled with the diamond and gold king crab bling casually sprinkled about his neck, fingers, and wrists. His story-telling skills were the stuff of legends: Danny was a treasure trove of maritime anecdotes, bawdy ballads, and historical references that nobody could either confirm or deny with any surety. Sometimes, he was a born-again Christian, and at other times, he was merely another incarnation of the Buddha. His joyful spirit and massive muscles made him all the more intriguing.

"Howdy wild thing!" He stood beside Holly and scanned the deliciously temperamental Inside Passage. "What do ya think of my office so far?"

"I love it," she replied, "I sometimes forget how lucky I am living here, and then days like this here come along and I'm so freakin' happy all over again."

"Yep, it's sure prettier than out West, and I grew up out there thinking *that* was the most beautiful place in the world," he replied, wiping his nose on his thick, ropy forearm.

"Home is home," she concurred. "But I'm wondering, is it a bad thing to say I'm sorta glad Kris can't get into Canada?"

"Nah," he put his arm around her shoulder, "he knows he was a bad boy, and we're just happy you could step in for this trip. Who knows, maybe this'll be a regular gig for you, 'emergency deckhand'! It's not like Kris is the only felon in the fleet."

“That could be lucrative,” she agreed. “But I don’t get why he’s on the boat now if I’m here to replace him?”

Danny coughed up a luger and spit over the railing. Then he proceeded to break the situation down for her. “We’re gonna detour to Ketchikan and drop him off first, then we shoot down to Rupert to unload, and we pick him up on the way back up.”

Holly nodded, her eyes vacuous, and Danny continued his explanation, “If there are more openings while we’re gone and other tenders can’t handle it, then we take all the fish that we can and turn back around. If we stay with the same company, then we go back to Rupert and do it all over again. That means another trip for you if ya want it.”

“Ah, I get it,” she nodded. “Alvin just grabbed me from the bar and asked if I could be ready to go for a ‘boat ride’ in two hours. Details were sketchy, and I didn’t even know it was on the *Bee*, so thanks for solving that mystery, Scooby Doo.”

“Sure thing, sweetie. Come hang out with me on the wheel anytime.”

“Who’s on now?” she asked, incredulous that an enormous boat would be tearing through Chatham without a body on the wheel.

“I am,” he winked, “Ivan’s taking a nap. Bye!” Danny turned the latch on the heavy steel door leading into the house and disappeared behind it.

Oh yeah, the autopilot. She suddenly remembered the now common navigational aid that keeps a boat on course for long periods without requiring much more than occasional human interaction. She was a little suspicious of new technology, and even though the crew might not have had trust issues with electronics, Holly had already decided that she would not be leaving her post when she had the wheel. A multi-million dollar mistake was more responsibility than a single mother with no financial assets could take on, end of story.

Holly fixed a cup of hot tea and meandered up to the pilothouse where she found Danny talking on the satellite phone. She was about to leave, when he waved her over with a smile and she sat down in the co-pilot seat, patiently waiting until he finished his report. Her chair was identical to the Captain's, maybe fifteen feet away on the portside, and another stack of random reading materials and game books was scattered on the binnacle in front of her.

"So, that was Anders. He hopes you're enjoying the ride. He said there was another opening late this afternoon in Silver Bay and our combine did all right. Spawn line is almost 12 miles now, so we might get back in time for one more load, but hard to say 'til the Department makes a morning announcement."

"Yeah, once the fish get East of town, it's just a matter of time before the whistle blows and the season is over. Twelve miles of spawn today will be fifteen by this time tomorrow."

"Listen to you, old woman! A regular marine biologist."

"Danny, you know I been part of this fishery on some level every year for the last couple decades. It don't take a fuckin' genius to figure out simple patterns!"

"Just teasing, girl, lighten up!" he insisted, "I know you know your shit. We all respect ya for that."

"Yeah, I know... it's just that this whole gig sure caught me off guard. I mean, I was bellied up to the bar one minute, and the next I was making arrangements for my kid to stay with friends since Alvin was in a pinch. He made it sound so important and he was surrounded by a bunch of his cronies. How could I refuse? He promised me a chunk of cash – under the table – and seeing as that sort of opportunity don't come along often, I couldn't resist!" Holly glanced over at Danny to gauge his reaction. Even in the dark she could see his eyes sparkling.

“Sweetie, we’re glad you are here! Ain’t too often we get women on board, especially good lookin’ ones. So no explanation necessary! I mean it, we’re all glad you’re here.” He opened the pilothouse door, cleared his lungs and spit out the back.

“Maybe so, but it sure is extra nice to invite me up here when you sound like you’re getting sick, my friend! Can I buy you a cup o’ tea?” She stood up and walked the length of the wheelhouse to give him a side hug.

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks, though.” He rested his massive arm about her shoulder and they shared a laugh. The time passed easily once they settled into shoptalk and gossip, compared notes on who was sleeping with whom, and what summer plans looked like for each of them. Soon Holly’s eyelids grew heavy, and she slipped off to her stateroom, leaving Danny to keep the boat chugging Southbound into the dusky evening.

Holly woke up and looked out of the porthole near her bunk. The sea had calmed, just a breath of wind, and the sky was purple as a fresh bruise. She guessed it was getting on the other side of midnight and wondered how close they were to Ketchikan. She climbed up into the wheelhouse and saw the great bulk of Ivan, sitting in his chair. He was talking on the sideband radio, and she recognized the cadence and syntax of classic “skipper-speak”- the clipped and practical words spoken with a particular type of nonchalance in describing such conditions as weather, water, catch, and crew.

He gestured her to come sit with him, and she tiptoed up and sat shotgun, quietly looking out across the deck and bow and into the vast night. The pilothouse was also mostly darkness, broken only by the occasional whispering glow of red, blue, and green lights designating various marine electronics seemingly floating above and upon the binnacle. Holly guessed that the *Bee* was

cruising at eight or nine knots, but she could not be certain from her vantage point, as the true speed was showing on the one screen that was obscured from her line of vision.

Ivan's meaty thumb pressed the microphone transmitter and he announced that his crew was "plus-one with the little blonde gal from *Herrington*." The voice on the other end asked, "The one with the tits?" and he replied, "Roger that." Holly was briefly mortified but not really surprised. She knew deep down she didn't get hired on just because she could make a mean martini. She peered over at the radio, and the big man's eyes followed hers, his thin smile curled behind the mic. Holly reckoned that Ivan knew she was checking to see whether that conversation was broadcast over mainstream airwaves or not. *Assholes*, she thought to herself. He signed off shortly and glanced flatly at Holly, who gave him stink-eye in return. The silent exchange served to reveal Holly's displeasure only enough to enhance Ivan's amusement.

"Herrington?! Really, Ivan? Don't all the girls in Dutch have tits too?"

He roared with laughter and then reached back to adjust the new satellite radio. With hundreds of stations to choose from, Holly was both annoyed and amused to hear Black Sabbath's "Iron Man" pound into the wheelhouse. Why did all these old salts have to keep playing tunes from whatever era they got stuck in, she wondered. She could practically hear her eyeballs rolling back inside her head. "I hear tell that classic rock works as birth control for them thar titted-types," she drawled.

"I'll keep that in mind, blondie," he said with a grin, and then there was no other sound except for Ozzie's acid growls in the dark. She walked across the bridge and looked at the chart on the computer screen. "We in Sumner Strait? Cool. Did ya know there are actually some elk down this way around Zarembo and Etolin?"

“I heard about that transplant some years back, though I never seen ‘em,” he said. His eyes scanned the chart, and Holly traced her finger along the glowing screen indicating where the elk were rumored to be.

“I used to hunt elk,” Holly said, “though that was a couple of husbands ago.”

“A couple of husbands, you say? I’ll be damned. Anders said you were a handful,” he laughed.

“Well, a girl’s gotta stay on top of her game,” she countered and edged her way back over to her co-pilot seat.

“I shot a couple of elk over on Afognak. Damn good eating.”

She nodded in agreement and continued, “Where you from again, Ivan? Is it Kodiak?”

He made a deep growl that sounded like *ken-nee-kock*, and Holly tilted her ear towards him, “Say what?”

“Chenega,” he grimaced, “over in Prince William Sound. You probably ain’t never heard of it. Used to be called a little village even before the big wave came,” he paused a moment, not so much for effect as it was just the way he spoke, then continued, “on Good Friday when I was a kid. Wiped out all our houses, and most of the village cleared out to other towns.” After a long, thoughtful silence he added, “Our dad made us stay in Chignik with aunties ‘til he got done doing what he had to do.”

“Whoa, I was thinking you were from the western peninsula,” Holly said, “but I’m way off course!” She was embarrassed because she knew for certain that Ivan was Alutiiq, but hadn’t been aware that his people were ever situated from as far-off east as Prince William Sound. She chewed on that for a moment and tried to remember the south-central and western coastlines, making a mental note to look that up on the chart when she had a wheel watch. “I honestly can’t say that I’ve ever heard of it. Do you still live there now?”

“Nope. No one much there anymore,” Ivan took a deep breath, “and people that stayed behind got slammed again when Hazelwood painted the coast in ’89.” Holly silently recalled the devastation of the infamous oil catastrophe. He continued, “After a year in Chignik, we moved over to Unalaska. That’s where my house is now.”

“Well, damn, Ivan. I’ll have to look ya up next time I get out West,” Holly teased, and he mumbled back, “Bring some of your *Herrington* honeys along and see what happens.”

“You betcha,” she giggled, “and I will call ahead so youse guys can have your backs waxed for the landing party.”

“Good plan,” he shot back.

“I’m gonna go get some grub. You want anything from the galley?”

“I’m gonna smoke a bowl. See ya later, blondie.”

“See ya later, captain.”

Holly descended the ladder and fixed herself a cup of tea and spread some home-pack smoked salmon on pilot bread. She sat at the table and thought about Ivan. He probably hadn’t interacted with women outside of barrooms much, and when it had happened, he was inclined towards awkwardness - especially in the environment of a western Alaska commercial fishing enterprise. It was the sort of setting where, with few exceptions, women were generally absent physically, yet seemingly ubiquitous as the subtext of many a conversation. Holly paid attention to such things and had noted this before in some of her predominantly man-centric workspaces.

In that context, Ivan would have been a typical middle-aged skipper who was probably born on a boat, though some folks said he was so salty that he was also conceived on one. Never seeing a classroom beyond elementary school, he worked his entire life climbing the ranks from scrawny skiff-boy to crab boat highliner, and earned his first million before his thirtieth birthday. Once his basic needs were met, he spent the bulk of his money on frivolities like women and booze.

Holly recalled that before she ever stepped on his boat, she had heard him say these words, “The best place for a woman is on my lap. Face down.” It was classic Ivan: brief and to the point. It was also the reason why he remained a lifelong bachelor. At well over six foot tall and 300-plus pounds, he was a force to be reckoned with. While he may have been brilliant at his career and financially set for life, Ivan was exceedingly ornery, crude, and seemingly unafraid of anything – except, perhaps, of women.

Holly was sleeping hard that night when she woke suddenly, sensing the boat had slowed. She sat up in her bunk and thought she dreamt that Danny was standing in the door of her stateroom telling her to get up. The door shut, and she obeyed the hallucination, putting her clothing on reflexively. When she stepped out of the stateroom, Danny and Kris were standing nearby, both holding mugs and talking in hushed voices.

“Geez, you’re a hard sleeper. I was in there with you for an hour before you woke up,” Danny said. Kris snickered, and Danny’s eyes danced mischievously. Holly looked at both of them in confusion before she understood.

“In your dreams, baby!” she shot back, suppressing a nervous giggle.

“You were talking in your sleep,” Danny continued, “something about a film crew and a couple of midgets...” Both his voice and eyebrow shot up on the last syllable, and Holly leaned towards him and flicked that eyebrow back down.

“What time is it?” she asked, still not quite awake.

“Little after three. We’re sliding into Ketchikan to get rid of some dead weight,” Danny said, his razzing now directed at Kris who was dressed in town clothes and a backpack.

“Does this mean you’re coming with me?” Kris teased back at Danny.

“Who cares? This means I gotta go pee,” Holly said, walking away from the duo. She didn’t know how long they would be at the dock, but she knew that this might be her only chance for a while to empty her bladder.

Nearly three hours passed before the boat pulled away from the downtown dock at Casey Moran Harbor. Sheets of rain had been coming down sideways, typical for Ketchikan, and Kris made a vow to Ivan to be back at the dock and “ready for work” when it was time. Danny and Holly waved when Kris climbed over the rail and walked towards the street, his cap down low, fat curls poking out the sides.

As far as Holly was concerned, the entire scene looked very *film noir* with the empty streets and torrential rain, and Kris stepping into a dark yellow taxicab with dull headlights piercing the darkness, the only sound the swish of the wipers. As if reading her mind, Danny intoned like a television detective, “It may be a dark and stormy night, but it’s gonna be a mighty drunk out couple of days.” They all knew that there was a distinct possibility that Kris would get so obliterated that he would miss the boat. It happened to guys all the time, and with Holly on board, his spot would be covered – but it wouldn’t look good from a professional perspective. Holly hoped he would be at the dock when they returned in a few days.

Ivan kept wheelwatch while the remaining crew returned to their respective staterooms. It would be a while before the next shift change, and Holly’s time was coming up fast. She would get her rest now, because it would not be cool to sleep on the wheel for her first watch on the *Bee*.

When she woke next, it was mid-morning but the sky was such a dark slate color that it was hard to discern the time of day. Slushy rain whipped against the house, and although the *Bee* was on the Inside Passage, it was still quite snotty out with foamy whitecaps breaking the blurred line between sea and sky. Holly dressed for the second time that day and went directly to the wheelhouse.

Ivan sat perched on his chair and thumbing through a magazine portraying a scantily clad siren astride a sweet ride on the cover. *Ladies of Daytona* appeared to have provided just the right amount of distraction from the dull panorama of southern Chatham Strait.

“Hey boss, you ready for a break yet?”

The big man yawned loudly. To Holly, his mouth resembled a row of chewed on corn kernels in lieu of teeth.

“Yep, I’m good to go. You ready now, blondie?”

“You betcha,” she nodded and stepped back as Ivan heaved his bulk off the chair.

“The autopilot is set up for the whole trip, so all you gotta do is make sure we keep on course. I know you got this – Anders is banking on ya, but don’t be shy about asking Danny anything. He’s gonna come up and relieve you in four hours.”

“Okey doke,” she winked, her voice dropping, “Is he also gonna take over watch then too?”

Ivan snorted and said, “That’s between you two,” and then wobbled down three stairs, disappearing into the master stateroom adjacent to the wheelhouse.

Holly sat down in the pilot chair and looked over the electronics with different eyes than when she was up visiting before. Like it or not, she was on the wheel now and felt both nervous and excited. The electronic navigational chart interfaced with the global positioning system, radar, sounder, and autopilot - all of which combined to provide instant and utterly precise nautical information that had, until very recently, been accessible only to seasoned mariners. It suddenly occurred to Holly that her many years of hard-won knowledge were now instantaneously accessible to virtually anyone with computer software and half a brain. Alas, new frontiers were opening up everywhere and Holly knew that only those willing and able to adapt were going to be worth their salt in coming years.

The computer screen informed her that the *Zelda Bee* was still about nine hours north of Prince Rupert, and they were traveling at 8.5 knots. What she hadn't figured into the equation was having to buck tides and strong currents all afternoon which ended up slowing the boat down, making for a long stretch at the wheel. Danny came up for a check-in and when Holly assured him that all was well, he too went off for a nap. She enjoyed being on the wheel of most boats, and found it to be even more pleasant sitting in this comfortable workspace with all the cutting edge amenities. Additionally, towering windows wrapped around the pilothouse, which was situated two stories above the deck and provided a sweeping panorama in all directions. This wheelhouse design seemed to render the view more picturesque, as if she had stepped into a watercolor painting.

Slender rays of light would pierce through the clouds occasionally, but Holly didn't fall for it. She knew a sucker hole when she saw one. Though the sea had laid down some after a few hours, the wind and whitecaps kept the ride lumpy. It surprised her how well the *Bee* took the weather, and more so, how well she had taken it. She attributed the smooth ride to the fact that the boat was still loaded to the gills with herring in all three tanks. The cargo provided extra ballast to a flat steel hull, making for a mighty smooth ride.

Danny eventually took over the watch and Holly retired to her stateroom for a rest before they reached their destination at Prince Rupert. Late in the afternoon, Holly pulled on her orange bibs and walked out on deck to join Danny. She arrived just in time to ready the line at mid-ship for mooring the *Bee* to an obscure dock at Prince Rupert where two haggard-looking customs agents with clipboards and pasty faces stood waiting for them to secure the boat in the gray drizzle.

Danny sidled up to Holly and whispered, "Look sharp, sister." Holly made a discreet *pfft* sound. "Damn. I was hoping for some studly Mounties," she lamented. She followed Danny's lead and maintained a poker face in an attempt to appear serious and

professional. It was a wasted effort after all, as the Canadian agents were indifferent to herring tenders. They merely glanced at everyone's passports and asked Ivan the sort of questions that required *yes* or *no* responses. After they exchanged papers, the crew untied the *Bee* and Ivan pointed her toward the processing plant.

Holly recalled some discussion at the beginning of the trip regarding the shifty middleman who had brokered the deal between the fishing boat owners and the designated buyer. Danny and Kris had joked that the herring processing plant might be at or near marginal standards. With her background in the labor side of fishing, she could not readily fathom the complexities of these sorts of operations. She therefore had no idea what to expect when the *Bee* tiptoed into an obscure inlet and slowly inched up alongside a tiny wooden dock. It was 12' x 40' at best, and it was anchored in a deep drop between a handful of thickly forested islands. There was, to Holly's astonishment, just one small suction pump bolted onto the dock with nobody around to direct or assist with the offload. Ivan came down from the pilothouse and laughed with his crew at the ludicrous scenario.

"Someone from the plant will be over to help unload," he said.

"Do ya think this dock can handle the load of another body?" Danny scoffed. It seemed unlikely that the Podunk operation would be able to effectively remove and receive upwards of three hundred thousand pounds of herring without splintering under the weight of the operation.

"Reckon we'll find out soon enough," Ivan said. He was hard to read, but Holly sensed that he was none too happy with the arrangement. "Go ahead and take the bolts off the tank covers, but don't take the covers off 'til we see what these people have in mind."

Danny already had the drills out, and showed Holly where to put bolts and covers when the time came. Meanwhile, the mosquito buzz of a small skiff announced the approach of the Prince Rupert plant manager. A Native man, Donald, presumably a member of a First Nation, waved hello and stepped out of his skiff and onto the dock that buckled slightly as he tied a snug clove hitch to

the same cleat that the bowline was tied to. After introductions were made, Donald discovered that the pump was out of gasoline and so got back in his skiff to retrieve more from the plant. Ivan returned to the pilothouse to consult with Alvin Anders on the satellite phone, while Danny set about explaining to Holly what they would be doing over the course of the day. Tension was palpable; things were seemingly not going as planned, and fishermen tend to be a superstitious lot in the best of situations.

Donald returned after another hour had passed. By then the ashen skies had congealed into murky darkness. Ivan had turned all of the bright crab lights on so that each fish tank sparkled in silver and red once the hatch covers were removed. The rain maintained its steady drumming, though the gassed-up pump soon diluted that sound. The crew got to work relieving the *Zelda Bee* of 156 tons of herring, one slow suck at a time. The entire production was roughly akin to the expediency of resurfacing a glacier with a Zamboni.

After eight and a half hours, the herring was pumped off of the vessel. Once the final paperwork was handed over, the crew untied the boat and went out in the bay to sit on anchor while Ivan conducted business on the radio. Danny and Holly, meanwhile, each lowered a ladder into separate tanks and began the work of scrubbing out all the scum and goo. Holly soon discovered that 312,000 lbs. of pre-spawn herring, when jammed into tight quarters for several days on the move, would slowly beat the roe out of each other. This situation had two noteworthy consequences, the first being that the enterprise lost money on a certain percentage of the product because once the valuable fish were spawned out, they became effectively worthless to elite sac roe purveyors. The second result had a more immediate impact on the crew, as a thick coat of rubbery roe covered the interiors of each holding tank. Cleaning it required several hours of strenuous scraping and scrubbing, employing heavy hand-tools. This labor was further exacerbated by the fact that the forward hold had been overloaded by about a dozen tons, causing an enormous metal screen

covering the proximal bilge to be crushed in from the excessive weight and pressure. Hundreds of rogue herring were impaled and stuck deep in the screen crevasses – a situation that could become disastrous if the herring were sucked into the bilge. Only someone with small, strong hands and the ability to hang sideways in tight spaces could dig the herring out piecemeal.

Holly seized the opportunity to justify her salt-worthiness by assuming modified kama sutra positions for several hours while she dug and plucked every last herring from deep within the twisted metal fissures with her bare hands. Her body contorted into awkward positions as she manipulated her fingers into the stubborn spaces, leaving her hands both swollen and shredded. In the end, however, she was quite content with herself knowing that what she lacked in strength and savvy was compensated for by sheer tenacity.

Meanwhile, seeing Ivan and Danny working together as the herring were being offloaded was an exercise in humility for Holly. The two men were so practiced and in sync with each other that she felt inconsequential in comparison. No matter how much she wanted to jump in and be useful, Danny was everywhere all the time. Holly could barely figure out where to be or what to do, and then Danny was there and it was done. She knew that the men had been working together at their routine for so many years that they were like an old married couple. She assumed that when Kris was there, he had specific duties that she should have been able to step up and perform, but she was not sure what those responsibilities were and felt frustrated that no one directed her on deck.

Danny told her later on that her persistence in clearing out the crushed bilge screen saved the boat both time and money, as the only other option – short of risking bilge failure, would have been to remove the screen with a cutting torch and wait while another was rebuilt, delivered, and installed. Although Ivan never acknowledged her efforts, Holly was confident that Danny would retell an animated version of the incident somewhere down the line, and perhaps her ears would ring

in accord. That would have to suffice, because in her experience, skippers rarely commended professional deckhands for doing what they were hired to do – regardless of gender.

By the time the *Bee* pulled anchor and departed from Prince Rupert, Holly felt satisfied. She was tired and sore all over, but she had worked hard, learned something new about herself, and made hamburger out of her hands. In her estimation, it had been an honest day's work.

The weather had calmed down some, and the vessel had a following wind with a forecast for fair skies ahead. The *Bee* would be able to turn more knots in less time with empty tanks as long as they hit tides and tailwinds all the way. If the weather got too sloppy, they would simply pump seawater into the tanks for added ballast and weight. It was still dark out. Holly took the first watch so Ivan could grab a shower, a meal, and a night's sleep. Danny was in the galley cooking up Swedish meatballs and rice, and the savory smells wafted up into the wheelhouse making Holly dizzy with anticipation. After a while, he poked his head up the stairs and said, "Hey! Dinner's ready. You want me to bring ya a plate?"

"Hell yeah! It smells amazing!" she answered. He soon came up carrying a plate heaped with three enormous meatballs – each one nearly a quarter pound of meat, sitting on a haystack of jasmine rice dappled with mushrooms and white sauce.

Holly was warmed by the gesture and rewarded him with a grateful hug. "This looks dangerously delicious, by golly gosh, but do ya think it will be enough?"

"Well sweetie, if it ain't, I know where more is," he winked and started back down the steps.

"Thanks, Danny. I can't wait to dig in!"

She steadied the plate on the edge of the binnacle and set to work on the mountain of food. The meal was delicious. It occurred to her that these Western-reared fishermen surely were a divergent breed from the men she had grown up around. These guys were all so salty and fiercely

independent, a fact that was reflected in their good cooking and meticulous work ethic. This made perfectly good sense to Holly, given that it would be difficult to keep good women around, since these guys were either working hard or playing harder. It was just as well then to not die alone *and* hungry. As Bering Sea crab fishermen, they were the quintessential *bad boys* of the fleet. The odds of injury and death were far greater in Western crab fisheries than any other. Extended periods of grueling labor in intense weather conditions, doing battle with continuous ice, rogue waves, and minimal sleep, were merely some of the justifications for giving these guys *carte blanche* with their excesses when they were not at work on the Bering Sea.

Over the last few days, Holly had noticed a level of professionalism that she had never seen on board Southeast trollers, longliners, or dive boats. While she had dated a few crabbers, she had never considered the consistent traits of the breed until this trip. For instance, the guys were all very tidy and efficient on deck, and every aspect of work on the *Zelda Bee* was uniform and precise. Everyone tied knots exactly the same, stored gear and tools in the same places, and assumed certain roles based on their preferred or assigned skills. There was a persistent unity and rhythm reinforcing the notion that this was *the real thing*, and there was no room for error. What Holly found ironic was that many of these same men made exceedingly sloppy, high-risk behavioral decisions when tied to the dock – at least in her observation.

Danny came up after a while and leaned up against the binnacle. “How ya doing, sweetie?”

Holly chuckled. She loved that he always called her *sweetie*, as if she were still hanging around after a one-night stand and he couldn’t remember her name.

“I’m doing good. Finer than frog fur, in fact. My belly is full, and I’ll be good and ready for a nap here after a while. Thank you so much for that dinner, it was amazing!”

“Glad you liked it,” he smiled.

“Do ya mind if I run to the head and then grab a cuppa dark ‘n dirty real quick?”

“Ya know you can do that anytime you want, right?” he tilted his chin down and locked eyes with her.

“I don’t feel comfortable leaving the wheelhouse at all when I’m on. I know you guys do it, but I can’t risk any shit happening. I got a kid to think about,” she insisted.

“No worries. I’ll be right here.”

“Thanks, sweetie,” she teased. “I’ll be right back.”

After Holly had been four hours on the wheel, Danny came up and took over while she took a shower and some shuteye. When she woke next, it was morning and the *Bee* was still a few hours outside of Ketchikan, heading to pick up Kris and pass through the gods at Customs. Holly thought that he would most likely still be drunk, or at the very least have a wicked hangover. She also knew that no one would say one word about it because of *the code of the fleet*: whatever happened in town X, stayed in town X. In other words, if no one ever remembered, then nothing ever happened.

What did occur, however, was that Ivan called Danny and Holly up to the pilothouse and suggested that if anybody was holding anything that might be considered contraband by U.S. Customs, it was time to make such items disappear, adding that there would be extra points for anyone who shared. Holly helped Danny bury several jugs of vodka and one traveler of whiskey beneath steaks in the chest freezers. Two small bags of weed were secreted away soon after an unprecedented mandatory “safety meeting” in the forepeak. Everyone was quite relaxed by the time the boarding party arrived.

The *Bee* slid into Ketchikan around eleven a.m., and three buxom and burly women representing U.S. Customs and Immigration immediately boarded. Dressed in crisp uniforms and matching caps to convey professionalism, they somehow appeared cartoonish to stoned Holly who imagined that they all might be called “Bubba,” in a different setting. Two generic-looking male

DEA agents arrived soon after. A sleek German shepherd that stared at Ivan with dull eyes accompanied them.

One of the Bubbas explained that they were specifically looking to find terrorists and WMDs. Holly relaxed. *Of course!* 9-11 had occurred a mere eighteen months prior. While there may have been some questionable personal items stashed around the *Bee*, to the best of her knowledge, they certainly were not carrying any saboteurs or armaments.

After several hours of poking and prodding about the vessel, the visitors satisfied by their own efforts, exchanged paperwork with Captain Ivan and departed. Ivan returned to the wheelhouse to consult with Alvin Anders by satellite phone, while Holly and Danny sat at the galley table and rehashed the details of the visit.

“I’m telling ya, they all looked like linebackers to me. I just kept thinking they were named ‘Bubba’ and I was trying so hard not to laugh,” Holly confessed.

“The Bubbas!” Danny howled with laughter, “I could see that. They were kinda menacing. Even the shepherd looked kinda uptight around ‘em!”

“Yeah, well, it didn’t help much that I was stoned immaculate” she admitted, “I felt like my stupid grin was melting down my chin.”

Danny was near tears from laughing so hard. “You looked fine, sweetie...” he continued, “c’mon now, this ain’t yer first rodeo!”

“Naw, but I’m definitely out of practice. I’m a momma first, and partying don’t suit my lifestyle.”

“Yeah, I know that about ya. It’s all good. Now, where the hell is Kris? He woulda loved this... the fuckin’ Bubbas!”

Holly got up for coffee. “Ivan said we’d be leaving within the hour. I hope Kris is on his way.”

“He’ll be here.” Danny stood up and went for the outside door. “He knows the game.”

Later in the day, the *Bee* was Northbound in Clarence Strait and Holly sat shotgun in the wheelhouse while Kris vacillated between the pilot’s chair and the captain’s couch behind them. He stepped onboard just in time to toss a line from the dock, and Holly was spot on about his condition. She went up to visit him and ended up sharing the watch while he dozed on and off. The afternoon had blossomed into one of those unicorn days on the water: hard to believe it really existed without seeing it for yourself. From her pilothouse perch, Holly thought it looked like a postcard out there with the sun shining in all directions under bluebird skies. The water was glass-flat, the tides near slack, as the *Zelda Bee* charged homeward with Prince of Wales to the west and Revillagigedo Island to the east. Holly smiled and wrapped her arms about herself, recalling that she had once been advised to always take some of a good day’s sunshine and tuck it away in a pocket for a rainy day. That way, she would always be able to pull it back out and rub it over her face and arms whenever she needed a dose of warmth and contentedness. Today was that rare collection day.

Into the evening and still northbound in Clarence Strait, a slow drizzle began falling and the wind purred past twenty knots. Tarnished clouds shuttered the fading sun as an otherwise brilliant day faded out. Kris and Holly hung together on the wheel all afternoon, and Holly realized that although she had known both him and his wife, Karen, for a few years, this was the first time they had ever had an intimate conversation outside of watering holes. She had questions.

“How long you been fishing, Kris?”

“Hmmm. Let’s see. I started out of Dillingham after I got busted for B & E and did my stint at juvie, and I was fifteen then... so, about thirty, thirty-five years I s’pose.”

“So, which fisheries do ya come from then?” she persisted.

“My uncle Jan had a gillnetter and I worked in the Bay for three summers before I got hired on a longliner.”

“That was that back in the derby days?” Holly asked, excited for a possible link to her own salty start.

“Oh yeah. Those were the days! Not like all the regs and quotas and bullshit we got now,” he noted, and she nodded in agreement.

“I know, right?! I cut my teeth longlining Southeast back before quota days too, and I always had a hankering to go west. I bet you seen shit I only dreamed about!”

He laughed, “Yeah, if you dream about fifty-foot seas and storms and a whole lot of nothing but islands without trees.”

Holly sat riveted as Kris described the Aleutians and Pribilofs and wondered if he had committed to whining or bragging about his adventures. Then he began to talk about the crab fishing.

“My first season crabbing was on the *Odyssey* in ‘78, and we killed it with Bering Sea reds and St. Matthew blues. Of course the money sucked me in, but I knew I was hooked after the Bering Sea started to feel like home,” he smiled, his eyes dark grey and distant. “After that was opies - and that shit just dragged on and on, but when it was over I knew I was going back next season... and the rest is history.”

“What about that there?” she asked, her eyes shifting towards a half-missing pointer finger on his right hand.

“Crab pot got it when I was fishing in the Sea of Okhotsk.”

“Where? The Sea of whaaa?” she interrupted.

“Okhotsk. It’s southwest of the Bering Sea. Russian waters,” he continued, “No way we were gonna turn around for one American finger. That’s how them Ruskies did it, just kept feeding

me vodka while Stefan stitched the stump. He finally gave me some morphine out of the emergency kit afterwards. Stingy little bitch! Twelve years later, and I'm still pissed off at him for that."

"Wait, why were you fishing in Russian waters, and Stefan who?"

Kris snorted, "You know which Stefan. The same one you been fucking."

Holly's face burned. "Alrighty then. Ain't nothin' sacred around here."

"Nope," he said matter-of-factly, "That story was old news before we left Sitka."

"Yeah, well I make no apologies," she shrugged. "Now tell me about the Russian gig."

Kris's face relaxed as he launched into a story about an obscure joint fishing venture between Russian fishermen and a Seattle processor that was made over drinks one winter just after the Soviet Union started to break up. It all seemed very cloak-and-dagger to Holly, though Kris tried to make it sound like an exclusive opportunity to participate in deep-sea *perestroika*.

"Not long after the Kodiak crab went tits up, everyone was still looking to fill the void, and I happened to be at the right place at the right time when Marsh Thorsten made a deal with these Ruskies to bring two of his boats plus pots and crew over to their side of the pond and show 'em how it's done."

"No shit," Holly exclaimed, "that must have been one hell of an experience!"

"Yeah, it was... we brought a couple of them Old Believers from – ya know, the square boat fleet?" Holly understood that Kris was referring to Kenai's Russian Orthodox, the "OBs," who lived like the Amish in the lower 48. Kris continued, "So we brought 'em along thinking they would help us communicate, but funny thing was, they didn't trust the other Ruskies either! Seems they were concerned that they might be reported back to the KGB for defecting, even though it was after the breakup and the other guys didn't want to talk about anything except crab fishing and women. Them Ruskies were some tough fuckers, and they figured things out pretty quick too 'cause once we got on the crab, those guys were happy as pigs in shit."

Mesmerized by his tale, Holly yearned to know more. “I can’t even imagine what it must have been like to be so far away from America, especially someplace as dangerous as Russian waters!”

“For one thing, it ain’t so far away, and for another,” he grunted, “it ain’t near as dangerous as last call in Dutch.” Holly chuckled; she suspected that could be true. “The Bering Sea looked about the same, and the crab were the same, so really it was just another day at the office.”

“How long were ya actually there?”

“About three months. The boat homeports out of Kodiak, and it was maybe two thousand miles each way.” He paused a moment to work out some math in his mind. “Though with travel and stops in between, the whole gig took, yeah, really four months.”

“That’s intense, dude. What was it like working with those guys? Did ya’ll learn some way to communicate or was it up to the OBs?”

Kris thought about the question for a moment before answering. “Well, I remember that the weather got mighty shitty for a few days right off, and Marsh wanted to see how much they’d take, and I’ll be damned if those bastards ever quit setting and hauling! It was a pissing contest between us and them to see who would last longer,” he laughed. “Their crew leader, Sergei, was this big gorilla that rarely spoke the whole trip. Don’t think he had more than a couple, three teeth in his mouth, but there was always a lit cigarette sticking out of there even though the wind never blew less than 35 on the best days. Another guy, Nikolai, actually knew a few words in English, and he was cool. We tipped a couple horns with them a few times when we went aboard their huge processor boat, but mostly we just showed them how we catch crabs and then helped them figure it out with their rig. It was odd how they couldn’t wrap their minds around the concept of profit, but they sure as hell understood how to work and how to drink,” he grew quiet for a moment, and then continued, “When we were on the other side, by Kamchatka, Marsh wouldn’t let any of us get off the boat *at all* when we were in port. We stayed on anchor the whole time we were in Petropavlovsk and we were

fine with it – especially the OBs. Those guys never went back for another go around after the first time, which turned out to be a wise decision.”

“Why was that?” Holly pressed.

“The Russian government got belligerent after a few years of this international business, and eventually Marsh sold out his shares to the Japs. By then, there were ten catcher boats, and I don’t think the other eight were ever returned to their home ports in the U.S.,” he paused to great effect, “... meaning that Marsh got out while the getting was good.”

“Huh? What? How did that happen? Where’s the other eight?” Holly asked, enthralled.

“I was only on for two seasons because I met my future wife by then and didn’t want to do it anymore – meaning that I still ain’t entirely sure of those details. I do remember hearing that the Ruskies shut down the whole operation after a couple of years and mothballed the entire catcher fleet somewhere near the border of North Korea. Some of the fleet was their boats, and some was ours, but they were originally homeported out of Seattle and Ballard, so I don’t really know what ever happened to our boats.” He grimaced and stood up to stretch. Holly was awestruck.

She bid him goodnight and then went out on deck for a while to mull things over with a cigarette. She was happy to see the familiar misty bays and navigational markers along Chatham Strait, happy to know the islands and towns, the flora and fauna of southeast Alaska, U.S.A. It was nearly inconceivable for a girl with no stamps on her passport to imagine what it must have been like to experience a place as seemingly exotic and precarious as Russian waters at the end of the Soviet era. Whether Kris’s tale was entirely true or not mattered little. She relished his retelling for the vicarious adventure of it all.

Kris was wild to the core. Holly recognized that he was less motivated by profit than he was by adventure. Some of his friends called him “Detroit,” and Holly assumed it had to do with where he spent his youth, but she never felt comfortable calling him that, even if he did possess a slick city

way of talking and acting. She was glad to work with him because of his easygoing nature and also because he never hit on her or made her feel like meat. When she first came on board the *Bee*, Kris took Holly around and showed her small things that mattered in a big way, such as how one finicky head flushed, where the second meat freezer was, and how Ivan preferred his coffee. He checked her lines to be sure she was using the right knots for each application, and showed her where the tools were in the forepeak. Most significant to Holly's liking however, was that Kris never made a big production out of things the way most men did to ensure their alpha status; instead, his directions were discreet and magnanimous. She appreciated that he was good and strong on deck, certainly as talented as any of the men she had worked with, and like so many of the best deckhands, his body was trashed from the hard labor, and his mind was toasted from the incessant booze, blow, and painkillers – all elements that blended well enough to make him a good man in her eyes. She had always cherished men with slightly damaged souls, and Kris fit the description as well as any.

The next day of travel was uneventful; everyone got to rest between watches, and Holly did not have to take the wheel at all. The morning of the final leg of the journey came all too soon as the *Zelda Bee* hit all the tides right and smoked through Peril, Neva, and Olga Straits before cutting a path into Sitka Sound. The sea was calm as a sheet of paper, though an ominous steely line of squalls grew thick in the distance.

Kris was on the wheel again when Holly emerged from her stateroom. After going down to the galley for coffee and bacon-flanked toast, she climbed back up to the pilothouse in time to catch a mighty pretty sunrise slice the horizon open. The stillness was enveloped by just the steady hum of the mains.

After a while Kris broke the silence. “I talked to Karen when I was in Ketchikan, and she asked me about taking this summer off from tendering to spend some time with her at the lodge in Unalaska.”

Holly sipped her coffee and nodded, “That sounds nice.”

“If Ivan is down with it, would ya be interested in taking my spot for salmon season?”

“That could be tempting,” Holly answered, “but I don’t know about leaving my kid for another summer while I work away.” She paused a while and then continued, “Damn, do ya think the Big Man would even want me on here for an entire summer?”

“I don’t see why not. You’re a good hand and everyone likes ya. The boys said you done real good this trip.” Holly’s face burned, but the house was so bright from the sun’s reflection on the water that she hoped he would not notice. He continued, “Besides, tendering money is solid – not crab money, but it’s definitely good green. The work is easy enough; ya just did this gig and you know how to run the cranes, so just imagine this with salmon instead of herring. You’re a troller, this should be a no-brainer for ya.”

Holly sat quietly and tried to mentally work out the logistics – what about the kid? She just started middle school. Would she even notice if Holly left? Would she understand or would she turn to a life of crime because her momma got all selfish and left her in town that one summer she went tendering out west?

“Huh. It sounds doable, but I would have to figure out how to pull it off. I mean, Annie is at that age where maybe she’ll mind, or else maybe she’ll be damn glad to see me go. It’s hard to tell.”

Kris laughed and said conspiratorially, “Yeah, bitches.”

“Hey asshole! My kid ain’t a bitch.” Holly’s eyes flashed.

“I know. Sorry babe, that was outta line. I never had kids, so I ain’t too bright on the subject.”

She held her tongue. There were rumors of miscarriages and she didn't want to be cruel.

"It's okay," Holly smiled weakly. "I know you didn't mean it about *my* kid."

"Here's the thing," he continued. "My contract with Anders has me locked in year round, ya know, if I want to do crab on the *Bee* then I gotta do salmon and herring too. I gotta do crab season no matter what – that's my mainstay. But after we finish chasing herring up to Kodiak and Togiak, I'm gonna wanna make Karen happy."

"So, what makes you think that Alvin Anders or Ivan, for that matter, will let you bend the rules to satisfy your wife? And even if they do, what makes ya so sure they'll let me take your place?"

"Because Anders has a thing for you, and Ivan wants a body on deck for the summer. Danny is easy to work with and you two would have a blast. It ain't brain surgery, you can do this."

Holly mentally stowed away his comment about Anders. She had suspected that was the case all along, but found him repulsive and would give no tinder to the gossip. She picked some binoculars off the binnacle and surveyed the Cape for the features of home shore. "Alright," she murmured, "Let me give it some thought for now."

Kris persisted, "We both know you ain't gonna wanna go west for crab – so that's job security for me." Holly nodded in agreement, even though she wondered if she ever would go crabbing if the opportunity presented itself. Her gut said *no* – it was no place for a single mom. Nope.

"Alright Kris," she repeated, and lightly brushed his calloused hand, "I'll think about it and let's talk more after we get to town." He kept his hand on the binnacle and pointed ahead with his chin at the sinking fluke of a humpback, "Look, whale." The lazy morning sky yawned open to reveal purple clouds billowing thick around the ancient volcano on Kruzof Island.

"Alright darlin'," he said, "let's get to the dock and tip a few horns, and see what the Big Man thinks."

Holly slipped back down to the galley as Danny made hotcakes and bacon and she poured herself another cup of coffee. They discussed the recent conversation with Kris, still fresh in her mind. Danny was upbeat and confident that she would have the gig – and even went so far as to say that if he had thought of it first, he would have asked her before Kris got to it.

Soon, Ivan appeared fresh from the shower with his hair combed and wearing something other than his standard grey sweatpants. He was clearly getting gussied up for a night with a woman – and since her community was rather small, Holly suspected that she knew who that woman was. Ivan informed them that the last herring opening yesterday had been a mop up, and the sac roe season was officially over for the *Zelda Bee*. Their combine would be following the herring to Kodiak next and then to Togiak, before getting ready for the summer salmon season. In other words, the fleet would be pulling out of town *en masse*, much as they did every year at that time. Holly did not hear when Ivan told the boys they would be leaving Sitka, but she suspected that there was only a small window before the boat departed without her.

Ivan returned to the wheelhouse for the last stretch of water into town, and the steady buzz of the engines slowed to a chug on the approach towards the breakwater guarding the harbor. Holly stood out on deck with Kris and Danny, who were admiring the recently constructed seawall.

“That breakwater sure makes it nice to stay in this harbor,” Danny commented. “It used to be such a sloppy swell rafting the boats off the dock. And there weren’t too many other options. I sure like it.”

“I know, right?!” Holly interjected, “I lived at this harbor for years and never even had any idea that a breakwater would make such a difference. In fact, funny story: I met my last future ex-husband when he came to town to build the breakwater. He ended up staying on to build the new harbor, and we got hitched.”

“So ya went man-hunting out on the breakwater?” Danny teased. Kris chuckled and lit a smoke. Holly blushed.

“Nope. I met him when I was working at the bar. It was kinda cool, ‘cause even though I did the dive fisheries, he knew about the abalone taking over the rocks before anyone else did. We went out there in a skiff on the very first Easter Sunday after the breakwater was almost completed and scored an obscene amount of abs off those rocks.”

“Damn, I wouldn’t mind some abalone steaks. Can ya hook us up, sweetie?” Danny winked at her and she laughed, “Probably not anymore.”

Kris said, “I’m ready to get to town,” and he started across the deck to get the bowline ready for tie up.

Soon the *Zelda Bee* was nuzzled up against the dock and Holly had gathered her sea-bag and stepped down off the deck. She just wanted to get home and figured she would see everyone later before they left.

“Hey, blondie!” Ivan hollered. Holly hesitated, thinking she should wait until he called her by her proper name. When he didn’t, she turned around anyways.

“What’s up, captain? You wanna hug goodbye?”

He put his hand up and disregarded her comment. “I just talked to Anders and he said if you wanna come up and tender for Togiak that he’ll pay for your ticket.” Ivan’s face was stoic, but his dark eyes twinkled.

Holly’s face split into a grin. “Well now, ain’t that some shit to think about! How long do I get to make up my mind?”

“You know what, little girl, that’s between you and Anders. But I’ll be around town at least ‘til the morning tide change.” Holly leaned across the railing and forced an awkward hug on Ivan.

“Thank you so much,” she said, and right then Kris and Danny came on deck looking all cleaned up and ready for some socializing.

Holly gave them a once-over and asked, “Uh huh. And which of you two studmuffins will be calling me for bail tonight?”

They both laughed and Danny asked, “You wanna come with us for dinner down on the *Betty* later?”

Holly wrinkled her nose. The f/v *Betty B* was Stefan’s boat, and it was tied up at the farthest end of the dock nearly flush against the old boat harbor. She glanced over in that direction, thinking how nice it would be to see him one last time until next season. “I dunno, I need to get home to my best girl.”

Danny seemed to read her mind, “Hey, no worries, sweetie. You can bring her along later if ya feel like it. You know where the boat is.” Kris cleared his throat a little too loudly, and Holly shot him some dagger eyes.

“Thanks guys, I’ll let you know. Meanwhile, anyone need a ride to town?”

Ivan had other plans, but Kris and Danny hopped in the back of her pick-up truck and she took them as far as the liquor store, promising to bring some cookies before they all headed across the Gulf. Holly had decided that she would not be visiting the *Betty B* that night.

The following morning, Holly woke up much too early and made some coffee. Home had never felt so safe, she thought while peering out the window for Annie and Blue to return from their walk. *Be here now*, she whispered as she steeled herself for a Saturday morning writing class over on the island. She knew she had to stay present in the moment regardless of whatever was on either side of her day.

The door slid open, and Blue bolted in, her brown eyes dancing with excitement. Annie shook rain off her jacket and clutched Holly. “Hi mamma. I missed you.” Holly buried her in a long hug, and the dog jumped up trying to get in on the embrace.

“Good morning, my little chickee! I missed you! And you too, my Blue!” Holly bent down and the dog licked her face in concert with a body wag and dancing paws. “Would ya like some breakfast before I get going?”

“Where you going now?”

“I have class on Saturday, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. I guess I forgot. I already had some of our cookies, mamma, but I was thinking about making breakfast for you today,” she winked.

“I like your thinking so much that I’m gonna put some personality in my coffee and keep ya company.” Holly reached up to the cupboard and made that happen with a generous splash of Irish cream, while Annie pulled various items out of the pantry and set about making a meal.

Holly sat back and quietly watched her adolescent daughter. It felt as if she was seeing her through a gauzy curtain of time. The child’s youthful awkwardness had slowly given way to grace and confidence, and Holly suddenly realized just how much Annie’s metamorphosis had depended on her own steady presence over the years. It hit her hard to realize how independent the girl had become, and more so, Holly acknowledged that there were only a few years left until their roads diverged.

“What happened last night, mamma?” Annie asked. She was putting strips of bacon in a skillet. “You were gone for a long time, and you said that you were just bringing some goodies down to the boat.”

Holly stood up and cracked the sliding door open for a cigarette. Good golly, she thought, I’m not ready for this. After a few moments of no response, Annie turned and faced her mother; the

question hung between them like a stiff shroud. Holly averted her eyes, “It was a dark and stormy night...”

“Really mom? You’re going to go with that?” Annie shook her head, her eyes full of disapproval.

“Well it was!” Holly insisted, putting her smoke out and stepping back inside. “What really happened, babe,” she continued, “was that Kris was hammered when I found him and he needed some help getting to the boat is all.” Her voice cracked and her eyes glistened. Annie stepped close and said, “It’s alright, mamma.”

“He told me to get in the skiff or get away,” the tears were flowing and Annie stroked her mother’s hair, “and I started to walk towards the skiff, then all of a sudden I saw your face in my mind and I just couldn’t,” Holly sobbed.

“Its okay, mamma. Don’t cry,” Annie said, to which Holly wiped her eyes and attempted to regain her composure, embarrassed for the outburst.

“Sorry about that, Annie. I’m s’posed to be the grown-up here!” she admonished herself, *fuck fuck fuck! chill out*, while blowing her nose. “Let’s not worry about this right now, babe. I promise everything is okay. I’m just tired from the trip is all.”

“I don’t care, mom. Thank you for not getting in a skiff with a drunk guy.”

“You’re right, babe. I gotta practice what I preach,” she concurred, but beneath a forced smile her emotions ran deep and Holly sure hoped she had made the right decision.

After the meal, they cleaned up the dishes together and Holly soon departed for her class, leaving Annie and Blue to keep each other company for a few hours.

She first passed the big boat harbor and saw that much of the fleet had departed, but that the *Bee* was still at the dock, along with a handful of seiners that fished in their combine. Holly could

not see anyone on deck, and though her heart was pounding like waves on rocks just after a storm, she parked her truck and lit a smoke to contemplate going down to the boat. *Alvin already paid me last night. I was effectively finished with the contract. I done delivered homemade eats for the trip across the pond, and besides, class begins in ten minutes.* She flicked her cigarette out the window and drove over the bridge to the university building. She parked her truck directly across the narrow channel and stared out at the adjacent harbor. Though she could hear the sturdy groan of engines and generators running, indicating that more vessels would be departing in short order, Holly could not will a body onto the deck of the *Bee* just by staring at it, and so she willed herself to walk into the building and go to class.

The first exercise each week was to sum up and share their journals with the class. The writing format required that students begin with a daily haiku, and then compose a poetic description of the weather, their experiences, and finally a sincere snapshot of their emotions. Very arty and challenging in theory, but what Holly had penned the night before was more like emotional word vomit spewed across lined pages before she passed out, a drained soul.

Friday 28 March, 11:35 p.m. – Back at Sitka

Hard rain sliced my face

Bastards would not help me look

A big bull barked “bye”

After I got off the boat, I went home and made cookies with Annie. I had my sweats on and was wanting to just crawl into my own bed and read books after being gone all week, but first had to run the cookies for the crew and pickled crab for Kris (to bring back for Karen) before the boat left. I would not stay in the bar and drink, I only wanted to go home, but Kris was so wasted and the bartenders kept serving him because he was

tipping tens and twenties for each shot. I finally got him out the door and pointed towards the harbor, but then he wanted to get some cigarettes before going to the boat. So I laced my arm through his to the next bar and got him some smokes. He wouldn't get in my truck for a ride back to the Bee — he said he would be taking Joe and Candy's seine skiff, and because it was not my business to know more, I didn't ask why he was taking their skiff. I suspect he had gotten it during the dinner party on Stefan's boat.

We walked back down the street towards the harbor, and he was swaying and wobbling and I latched on to this exceptionally inebriated crab-daddy like I was his big sister. It was comical trying to keep him on a steady tack to the harbor. At first, I was more embarrassed by the fact that I was out in public wearing sweats and looking like bedtime for Bonzo, but as Kris kept stumbling off the curb and into the street and my shoulders strained trying to prevent him from falling down the harbor ramp, I began to question my priorities.

From the ramp I could already see that the keys were visible in the ignition and the skiff was hitched to the dock by two stout lines.

He went for the bowline first as I seized the keys.

"Gimme the keys, little girl," he growled in an unwavering whiskey voice.

"No, you are too fucked up. I will drive you to the other harbor."

"Give. Me. The. Keys. I am the skipper of this boat," he towered over me and his body language suggested that he was about to wrestle me down.

I told him he was too wasted and to let me drive.

He pulled the keys away from me and I wobbled a little at his pushing and pulling. Then he got in the skiff, put the keys in the ignition, and when the engines fired up immediately, he tried to untie the starboard line from the dock. He fumbled and struggled and nearly fell down, but I didn't move.

I set down the bag with cookies and pickled crab beside the half-empty case of beer that had been sitting in the skiff only a few hours. I offered again, this time saying I would even take him in the skiff— even though I'd never operated a seine skiff and wasn't even sure if I should.

He glared at me as I casually retied the bowline to the dock. "I'm the skipper. You want to come? Get in. If not, then get lost." (I am writing these in quotes because his words stuck me hard and I didn't forget them.)

I considered getting in the skiff with him, and I even started to take a few steps in his direction. I thought to glance back at my truck parked near the top of the ramp thinking that it would have to be moved or I would get a ticket for sure. At that moment, something caught my eye and I turned around in time to see Annie's face materialize in the blowing rain. No, she wasn't actually there, she was home with Blue waiting for me, but her image burned in my mind and I KNEW WHAT TO DO. I told him goodnight and then turned and walked up the ramp. It was bent at a 45-degree angle and the tide was coming in. I got in my truck and watched him fuck with the bowline that I had put a couple bitches in to slow him down. It was dark, and the rain started coming down in hard sheets. I couldn't see him, as much as I could hear the skiff engine go into reverse, so I started my truck and pulled out of the parking lot. If I turned left, I would be home in less than 5 minutes. But I turned right instead, wanting to just follow the skiff past the fish plants and cold storage to the next harbor where I could watch him pull in and get up alongside the Zelda Bee.

It was too dark and I lost sight of him right away. After I got down to the harbor where he should be arriving at any minute, I sat in the truck and waited, my wipers barely keeping up with the rain. It was so very dark, and the parking lot lights seemed to be duller than usual. After a while, too long, it occurred to me that maybe I had missed his entrance, so I got out of the truck and ran down the harbor all the way to the very end where the Zelda Bee was tied up. There was no skiff tied to it.

I was already soaked and began to run frantically up and down every finger in the dock thinking that he had gotten lost and just slid into another stall. No one was out anywhere on the slick docks and I was getting to feeling resentful that he wasn't where he was supposed to be.

I went over to the seawall where the f/v Betty B was tied up. I didn't want to climb down the ladder and show up looking like a wet rat, but by then I was getting scared for Kris.

I opened the heavy door and went inside the house and called out. No one answered, so I went up to the bridge and woke Stefan up. I was so embarrassed because I am sure he thought I came for a playdate, but I told him what happened and he came out on deck and looked around with me to no avail. He said they were leaving in a few hours, and not to worry because Kris was a big boy and would be fine. So I left the boat and ran back up to the harbor and then drove to the first harbor to see if the skiff was back in its stall, which it wasn't. I drove back to the big boat harbor and ran up and down all the floats. That time I got spooked by a big bull sea lion that came up and barked at me way at the end of the big finger that the Bee was tied to.

There was no sound or sign of the skiff anywhere. I had been climbing up and down dock ladders, jumping on and off different boats to see if he was rafted off a rogue vessel, and had even gone back to the Betty B and woke up Sig and Evan. I got down on my knees and begged them, crying (I am still embarrassed about this), "I ain't never asked any man to help me before. I don't know what to do. Please help me find him." They told me, "Kris does this all the time and he can take care of himself and what I should do is JUST GO HOME AND GO TO BED." So here I am. I feel sick and worried and wonder if he is alive. Somehow, I don't think so.

R.I.P. Detroit.

Less than an hour into class Holly could not focus. She looked out the window and saw the Harbormaster towing an empty seine skiff towards the harbor. Her stomach in knots, she excused herself from class and called Danny. No, Kris was not on board with him. She called Ivan who said he was on his way. They met up on the deck of the *Bee* in time to watch rescue divers lift a wilted body away from the breakwater. Giant Ivan clutched Holly's shoulder and they stood sobbing alone. Rain trickled from an ethereal curtain of clouds, and the only sound Holly could recall was the swish and sigh of the sea as it pulled away from the rocks.

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