

FISH OUT OF WATER

Diana Friedman

This is a true story.

Often at night, after a 16 hour work day, I would lie in bed motionless, except for my hands which moved all on their own. The left one first, pulling a salmon off the cold metal table, turning it dorsal fin up, and handing it to the right, the two of them sliding it down into the catch tray. The left then, lifting the tail while the right twisted the neck so the pole went straight through the gaping hole where the head used to be. The left, pushing forward until the pole came out the rear end with a little pop, followed by blood and soupy brown gunk. Then the fish was on its own, pulled into the machine, my left hand already reaching for another.

Vroom, went the belt with a deep roar as it caught the fish, chugga chugga, passing it down the machine and spraying it with water, and then screeee, a high pitched wail as the blade came up to slice the belly. Finally, the glop of the intestines and organs spilling onto the floor, barely audible above the whine of the machine. Sometimes when we moved fast the noises would all come together in 3/4 time like a song: vroom chugga chugga, vroom chugga chugga. Buried in three pairs of socks and black rubber boots that reached to my thighs, my foot would tap to the rhythm of the fish getting carried off through the machine, vroom chugga chugga, vroom chugga chugga.

One night as I faded off to sleep, I saw myself right side up, pole in my wide open mouth and out my rear, my whole body sliding through the machine, vroom chugga chugga, vroom chugga chugga.

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We hate to admit we miss it. It seems impossible. But every year when May swings by, the new fleet of birds chattering and

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rolling songs off their tongues, the winds quieting down, dropping and shifting toward summer lolls, my old friend Sally and I transcend the physical boundary of distance that now sits between us, and independently and simultaneously think of the orange and purple sunsets streaked like finger paints into the gray blue sky. Retreating tides of the shallow bay we watched from the rusted, beached boats. The two small whales that greeted us at Frank's Lagoon by the airstrip, scraping the barnacles off their bellies in the breakers and then gliding effortlessly back out to sea.

In Port Moller, Alaska, at the northern end of the Aleutian Chain, the sun did not bother to set; it merely circled around the top of the sky. That far north, a well seasoned man explains to me one night soon after I arrive, directions are not symmetrical; north swallows up 180 degrees, while the west, south and east share the rest. For a month I do not see the daylight fade. The days go on and on, unbroken and unmoved by the dim appearance of the moon and a few stars.

Sally and I, recent college graduates, have by chance, 4,500 miles from home, found one another at this fish factory, and bonded like flies to sticky paper. Early season, before the work picks up, we wander the low tides of the bay, tiptoeing around the perfectly cylindrical and smooth orange sand dollars that blanket the mud flats. The intensity of the light and distortion of space delude us into thinking we can see past the horizon. Deceptive, but empowering, like the day we walk to the other side of the bay and back again in a few hours, and are not the least bit tired because we don't realize we've walked 12 miles.

During those rare free moments, I prowls the beach for treasures, my eyes working to filter the jewels from the junk in the rough sand. Over the course of the summer I find a 1950's Coke bottle, three solid glass balls from Japanese nets, a bear claw, and a dead walrus. In this corner of the world, as I am soon to learn, everything gets washed up but nothing gets washed away.

Those days are few, though. Soon after arriving, we work every day in the fish factory, where we are all androgynous, bound in layers of underwear and ratty sweatshirts, big boots, our hair up

under scarves, hats and bandanas. Some of us have double aprons and big yellow plastic sleeve and leg liners to keep the fish blood from sliding down under our clothes. Save where they place us on the line, save where the men somehow wind up in the "harder" positions that just happen to pay more, males and females are barely distinguishable. They won't let us "girls" on the forklift, because we don't possess the requisite gearshift and ball bearings.

Those of us with any energy left after work covet the floating long-shore positions. They pay higher wages because the work involves loading off a dock and onto a boat, a task covered by a separate union. After 5 p.m. it is paid at time and a half, close to 18.00 dollars an hour, which is a lot of money in 1985 for all of us here. The guys from the fish house get rotated through the forklift positions as well as being selected for the relatively simple task of checking off boxes as they get loaded on the ships. I approach Dale, the boss of the camp, telling him nicely I'd like to long-shore. After I have been passed over often for an 18 year old boy who is a slacker on the line and makes the rest of us compensate for his laziness, I am no longer so amiable. I have a brain, I tell Dale. I drop hints about letters to the president and discrimination lawsuits to people who like to gossip. Dale is a young, handsome man, here with his young, pretty wife and young, cute baby. Dale, I want to say, wake up. This is the 1980's. It's simple: if you can change a diaper, I can long-shore.

I run for ILWU local 37 union rep. against Luis, an older Filipino man with a pot belly and aviator glasses. In the few years since the company, Peter Pan Seafoods, has been sold to a Japanese firm, the union has been under attack. My college diploma still wet with fresh ink, I am convinced that I am the one who can best organize the workers and represent us to management.

But it is my first year here and there is much I don't know. Most of the white people vote for me, the Filipinos for Luis, although Virgil, who vacillates between teasing me and sneaking me beers, crosses over on my behalf. Luis wins hands down and I am annoyed because I didn't even get to make a campaign speech before the vote was called. Luis, the man who has repeatedly told me I cannot rack the fish as they come off the line because I am a girl, is

now going to represent me to the company. He puts his arm around my shoulder and says: It's okay. We're all brothers here. We will all work together.

Brother and sisters, I mutter, grudgingly conceding defeat.

Later, after the union meeting, Luis asks us to bow our heads so that together, we can all pray.

In general, the men here are only good for one thing, and most likely not even good at that. In July I test out this hypothesis. I have had none all summer and I take three in one weekend because they are all leaving Monday and that's the way I like these type of men: leaving. Friday, a wilderness trip leader from Arcata, Saturday, a fisherman from Seattle, and Sunday, a geology student from Fairbanks. All have rock solid bodies, firm and well defined muscles from weeks of exercise and hard work, unlike their minds, which appear to have atrophied to empty caverns. No matter: their minds are not what I'm after.

Mel, an energetic and friendly man in his 50's, who is supposedly just out of jail, is working next to me on the line one day when we are hand cutting the fish. He tells me I have a perfect body— just the right amount of meat on my hips, not too little, not too much. And then, like a locker room buddy, he asks me for information about my preferred sexual activities. I turn the question back to him and he obligingly launches with great specificity about how he likes to have women sit on him, but not on his face. All the while we're scraping out the insides of some enormous female king salmon, throwing the thousands and thousands of bright orange and red eggs into buckets to be later packed into fancy wooden boxes and shipped off to Japanese gourmet shops.

Virgil, sitting down next to me at evening break during a long day, touches the hair on my arms and says, Shave this. It's ugly. Why you got so much anyway, he asks, pulling on it a little too hard. My fist goes like it has a mind of its own and before I know it, I've slugged him on the upper arm. My limbs are out of control from being overworked. He is shocked I hit him. I have hurt him and he rubs his arm with a wounded look on his face. But he stops bothering me about my arms.

Fernando, a scrawny 19 year old Filipino with beautiful sad brown eyes follows me all over camp. When he thinks no one is looking, he tries to kiss me. During meals he sits across the room and stares at me. And stares. And stares. His eyes do not leave my face for up to 30 minutes at a time. I try to be sensitive and recognize that this is acceptable behavior in his culture, but I cannot get used to it. I make faces and stick out my tongue to get him to stop but this only seems to encourage him more.

I prefer to hang out with Jaime, Fernando's friend and roommate who has actually asked to be nicknamed Tinkerbell. He prances and skips about, flirting with everyone to prove he is up for the job. He tells me about his boyfriends and girlfriends back home in Seattle and I admire his courage to gender bend in a place like this.

By midsummer Fernando gets up enough nerve to invite himself over to my room, where he sits quietly on the other end of the bed and makes goo-goo eyes at me. So I talk, not knowing whether he is really listening. One day, I ask him what he does when he's not here. Pick grapes, he tells me. He sees my surprise and asks, kind of laughing, kind of sarcastic, What did you expect from a Filipino? Something inside of me tightens, but by the end of the summer, after working together on clean up crew every night, where we have water fights with the power hose, we reach an easy place and walk back to the bunks together teasing each other and holding hands.

Mid-July, we are peaking, hundreds of thousands of pounds of salmon a day and we are in the factory from 7 in the morning until 11 at night. My hands ache from the constant dampness and motion. I fight to keep pace, because the men on my side insist that I don't go fast enough, and they set up down the line from Kurt, who works the machine across from me. Somewhat to my consternation I cannot let it go. I cannot resist the challenge to disprove the slander, and I work even harder.

At night though, on the advice of the nurse, I coat my hands with a thick layer of Ben Gay and two sets of plastic surgical gloves to keep in the heat. Regardless, in the morning my hands are frozen shut like crab claws from the swollen muscles. I gently peel off the

gloves one finger at a time, immerse my limbs in a sink of hot water, and then slowly unfurl the talons one by one as the blood returns. By the end of breakfast, they are more or less uncurled, enough to put my work gloves back on.

Two men from the company that makes the machines visit and they time Kurt and me without telling us. Later, they announce that he and I are the two fastest people on these machines in Alaska that they have ever clocked.

So who are the women at the Peter Pan Seafoods fish factory, where the men are boys and the rest of us make up the deficit?

There is Jackie, a large woman with long straight dark hair from Hawaii, who comes only for a month and steals Sally's rings that she was considering buying, because, as she told her friend before leaving, she is poor and Sally is Jewish, and can afford it anyway...

There is Misha, a strong and energetic 17 year old straight out of high school, a basketball player on her first summer adventure away from home. She grunts in disgust when I lift my pants above my boots and show her my hairy legs. She thinks they are that way because I have not had time to shave them, not realizing that I live in Berkeley, and it has been four years intentionally...

There is the other Diana, a short and sturdy Filipina woman from Seattle who in her other life is a cosmetician and always manages to look well groomed even after working with fish and blood for 12 hours. She gives me the best haircut I have ever gotten, for all of seven dollars, in the middle of the communal bathroom in the trailer where all the single women stay...

There is Gail, from Everett Washington, who is 19, small and pale with dark, curly hair, who likes to sit in my room and make popcorn with me and listen to me talk about anything in the world. She says she likes boys, but no one believes her...

There is Sally, tall and dark and mysterious, a self described nerd, and founder of the hug club, which provides platonic affection for anyone in need. She has made her way here from London via Anchorage, in search of adventure, escape, and capital to fund her

next adventure, and much to her own surprise, winds up snagging the cutest, most popular guy in the camp...

There is Mignon, a small thin blonde woman with a sharp nose who the fishermen cannot resist calling out to: I'd like a piece of filet, she sure is good enough to eat. One evening she offers me a pop and I have no idea what she is talking about, thinking she wants to give me ice cream or a punch in the nose. She looks at my eyes and tells me what a relief it must be for me to not have to worry about putting on eye shadow every morning since I have such gorgeous and thick eyelashes. One night she is drinking a beer with Sally and me on the beach and one of us mentions being Jewish, I think it is me, and Mignon says, Oh. I knew a Jewish person once. She was okay. And she nods to let us know we're okay too...

In August, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game closes Dutch Harbor and much of the fleet comes in to dock for showers and supplies. We light a bonfire of broken pallets on the beach and Dave, a chunky fisherman with a brown beard is playing his guitar and invites me to join in. I get mine and he shows me some new riffs and we jam, although I have to stop every few minutes because my hands keep falling asleep. The fog meanders across the bay, finally diving through the hazy twilight, and at 10:30, as we are wailing one of my favorite Beatles songs together, I think I am approaching my own version of paradise.

Until Lee Ann shows up with her beautiful soprano voice and somehow gets us switched into the Jesus songs. I stand up to stretch and go out back and drop my pants to get rid of some of the beer, feeling the wind cool my bare bottom. As I watch my pee hit the sand and make little dark spots, I can hear them yelling and calling for their savior.

The next morning, Sunday, we get our first day off in 7 weeks and I stay in bed until lunch. I dream of bright, fleshy fruit, the likes of which I have not seen for two months. I put my head under the pillow to block out all light and sound, all the better to feel those grapes, strawberries, plums, peaches, and blueberries kissing my deprived taste buds.

And then, at breakfast one cloudy morning not too many days later, Roy the mechanic comes storming in with his rifle announcing he's just shot a bear out by the dump.

Did it charge you, someone wants to know.

No, he announces. It was that two year old grizzly that's been digging through the dump. Would have hurt somebody, someday. I took care of it.

Someone else asks if he's going to save the fur or any pieces to take back home.

You bet, he nods proudly.

Good work. Somebody else slaps him on his back.

Sally and I head out to the fish house to start work, heads down, reminded that despite our best intentions to forget it, we are here to slaughter.

Late season an uncharacteristically benign rumor flies through our trailer and a few of us wander to the end of the dock to check it out. It is true. Misha is driving a forklift, picking up empty pallets and moving them to the other side of the room and back again. She is practicing for next year. We are astounded. How did you get up there, we ask. Did you grow a penis? No, she laughs, John lent me his. John is the owner's son, her new boyfriend.

As the season slows down, I play my guitar more and my hands don't fall asleep so quickly. Around 7 one evening there is a knock on my door as Sally and I are working hard on Me and Bobby McGee. Friedman, calls Dale's voice, want to long-shore? Be out on the dock in 15 minutes. He's pulled Sally and me, and we check off the boxes on the sheet on our clipboards, clocking up the big bucks, as the other workers loads the pallets of fish onto the Japanese freighter rocking on the waves at the end of the dock.

By the middle of August, we are working only two or three hours a day and we all sleep a lot to make up for the lost hours. One afternoon Sally gets me out of bed to see the volcano steaming and smoking across the bay. We sit quietly, resting our backs against a stack of pallets, munching peanuts. For a long time it threatens to erupt, and then all of a sudden, it simply stops.

By early September the tides come in higher and higher and flood the boardwalk between the trailers and the mess hall. When we hang out in the bunkhouse closest to the bay, we can hear the stormy water slapping the pilings underneath.

We are informed one morning that we will be shipping out the next day. We are ready—a gray boredom has hung over the camp the last few weeks along with a heavy fog and drizzle. I gather up my shells, sand dollars and bones to return to the beach. Walking away from camp out to the tundra, I see a faint movement in the mud flats. I squint and can vaguely make out two baby brown bears wrestling. I look back to the trailers and see a few people with binoculars out on the porch quietly watching the cubs.

I drop my hands in the icy water, halfway wanting to throw in my body to cleanse it and exchange some part of my soul. I cannot wait to get my hands on my enormous paycheck that will fund my coming excursion to Europe, but my heart bears down when I realize I most likely will never be back.

I shake the water off my hands which have already gone numb from the cold. Putting the sand dollars up to my lips, I whisper thank you, to the bay, the bears and the beach, and then I fling the shells as far as I can into the water, and head back to my room to pack.

THE END