SWEATSHOP MEMOIRS

By Todd Matthews

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IT IS 3:00 A.M. on a Sunday morning, and I am standing in the live tank of a factory trawler 150 miles out in the Bering Sea. There really isn't anything "alive" about the live tank. It is one of two stainless steel rooms (roughly 20' x 20', one on the port side and one on the starboard side of the vessel) that serve as the holding tank for the ship's fifteen-ton catch. The net is dragged along the bottom of the ocean, scooping up anything and everything in its path, and brought up every two-and-a-half hours. The net is then emptied into the live tank, where its contents force open a small door that leads to a sorting belt.
But sometimes things get stuck.

Which is where I step in.

I am dressed in $250 rain gear---boots, overalls, jacket, gloves---and shoveling piles of dying sea life through the live tank's small door. Sometimes I slip on the slick surface and scrape my chin against the rough claws of a pile of snapping crabs. I grab a large dead skate by its massive tail and push it through the door. If the catch is still "fresh" and the net has just been dumped, then I have to struggle with asphyxiating fish that slap against the sides of my legs. My boots fill with seawater and my face is dry and chapped from the saltwater of a fire hose that helps to break up the dried clumps of crabs, shells, and seaweed.

Thirteen more hours of this and I'll be able to get a shallow six hours of sleep before my shift begins again at midnight.

I realize now, whether I like it or not, that I am a factory processor.

FOR MANY YOUNG men and women, it is a rite of passage to spend a season commercial fishing in the Aleutian Islands. In the Pacific Northwest, especially, college newspapers barrage readers with advertisements for employment opportunities in the commercial fishing industry:

Find Summer Employment In
ALASKA!
Fishing Industry
Learn how to make up to $28501month
plus benefits (Room & Board)!

In 1996 I signed a contract with a commercial fishing company in Seattle. I wrote a check for my friend to pay my bills with while I was away, boarded a flight to Alaska, and spent ten weeks commercial fishing in the Aleutian Islands and the Bering Sea. I worked sixteen hours a day (from 12:00 midnight until 4:00 p.m.), seven days a week, for the duration of my contract. In less than three months I made more than $7000.

I also saw a co-worker fall off a twenty-foot ladder and onto the icy planks of a boat's storage freezer. I saw another crewmate develop a fungus that swelled his feet to three times their size and turned them charcoal black. I showered once every ten days. I slept six hours a day, seven days a week, for two- and-a-half months.

The work is indeed grueling but, for many young people, also ideal. Many college students spend their summers commercial fishing in Alaska and earn the equivalent of a year's salary in less than three months. For others, it is a lucrative career choice that carries the promise of making as much as $100,000 a year before they reach the age of thirty-five. The shifts are long and exhausting. The work is physically demanding and often disgusting (sixteen hours pulling the guts out of codfish or stacking thirty-five pound slabs of wrapped frozen fish in a 2,400 square-foot freezer). Danger also lurks. Stories of ships becoming top-heavy with ice and capsizing are not uncommon. Deckhands falling overboard and dying in the icy waters of the Bering Sea are also typical occurrences.

In many respects, commercial fishing meets the demands of the person who is both adventurous and money-hungry. It is a chance to do hard physical labor and earn large amounts of money all in an environment that is remote and possibly life-threatening.

ON THE DAY I arrive in the port of Dutch Harbor, on the island of Unalaska, the sky is choked with fog. The airplane sneaks behind a thick fog bank for several moments before emerging to offer a view of the sloping hillsides of the Aleutian chain (on which sit several volcanoes) and, surrounding the islands, a gray-and-black body of water as flat as a sheet of lead.

It's a trick for pilots to land airplanes in Dutch Harbor. The airport is small and complemented with a tiny landing strip. To the west of the landing strip is a large bay. To the east is an equally large bay and an additional mountain. And as if there weren't enough obstacles, the tall and looming Ballyhoo Hill sits to the south. Pilots flying in from the east essentially scale the mountain, skim the bay, and hope a heavy gale doesn't force their airplane into the side of Ballyhoo Hill. All of this results in airplanes sort of like dropping onto the landing strip: a feat that is both heroic and jarring.

I arrive in August. Dutch Harbor is a sleepy remote port, a place that reminds me more of the tiny fishing villages on the East Coast than what Dutch Harbor really is: the nation's largest fishing port. Later, when the deckhands on the boat tell me about how, back in the 1980s, Dutch Harbor was a Mecca for bar room brawls, drugs, and fishermen and -women who came into port with large amounts of cash, their stories sound more like urban myths. As I ride in a van with my fellow crewmates toward our boat, the island appears deserted. The roads are unpaved and spiked with rocks and shells. Crab pots are stacked three stories high on the side of the road. What Dutch Harbor lacks in traffic lights and street signs and just plain civilization, it more than makes up for in untouched land, an enormous bay, and a cloudy silver-gray sky so massive that it envelops the horizon like a giant spoon.

Our van finally arrives at the boat. The driver parks haphazardly and my crewmates and I file out of the van. Our boat is a large, blue-and-white processing vessel measuring 100 feet in length. It sits tied up next to a cluster of other boats along a narrow spit of land. I grab my bags and board the boat. There is a flurry of activity. Staterooms are assigned, bags are unpacked, crewmates 'are introduced. Dinner is served in the galley and, later, movies are shown on a television VCR in the galley. A few hours later, a head count is taken and the entire crew is accounted for. The boat's engines start with a loud and thunderous clatter. Shortly thereafter, we leave Dutch Harbor for the expansive waters of the Bering Sea.

MY WORKDAY STARTS at 11:15 p.m., when the ship's cook comes into my stateroom, switches on the fluorescent light, and hollers, "Time to get up!" I lay in my cramped bunk for a moment, my muscles sore from the previous sixteen-hour shift. I am unshowered and wearing only a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. The stateroom is cramped and musty, more like a locker room than a bedroom, and constantly reeks of fish guts and body sweat. There are four bunks-two top and two bottom---and four tall narrow closets, all of which have been crammed into a space smaller than the interior square- width of a mini-van.

My shift varies with that of my stateroommates' shifts; just as one person wakes for work another prepares to sleep. There is a constant rotation of people in and out of our stateroom. I have an upper bunk, clearly illustrating that this is my first time commercial fishing. I'm constantly sore and my muscles ache, all of which makes negotiating my way down from high atop my bunk difficult and perilous. The boat's pitching and listing is constantly felt from my bunk, giving a sort of waterbed aspect to my sleep.

I stagger out of my stateroom and into the galley. Because my shift starts at midnight, dinner food is served. It's hard to imagine eating a steak, baked potato, green beans, and a Pepsi for breakfast, but this is indeed my first meal of the day. I chew my food slowly, trying to wake up. Others on my shift slowly stagger down to the galley. We eat in a sort of daze, chewing with little effort and watching a clock on the wall.

At 11:45 p.m., I stagger out to the changing area. I pull my fluorescent orange Helly Hanson rain gear off a hook; my gear shows wear-and-tear after less than four weeks into my contract. The rain gear "bottoms" are overalls with adjustable straps. I was starting to develop a rash from the salt water, so, in addition to the "bottoms," I also wear a waterproof jacket with hood.

I pull on my wool boot liners, which are still damp from my previous shift, and stumble around for my rubber work boots. I grab a set of earplugs, pull on a pair of dry cotton liners for my hands, then slide on a pair of rubber work gloves.

It is now 12:00 midnight and time for work.

I'M ESSENTIALLY RESPONSIBLE for three jobs on the boat. Since this is my first contract, I am assigned to the gut line for the majority of my shift. The veteran fishermen call it the "slime line" for reasons that don't take long to figure out. Our boat is fishing for Yellowfin, a small, flat "bottom fish" roughly the size of a ping-pong paddle and yellow-green in color. For two- and-a-half hours our boat will drag a net along the bottom of the ocean floor, scooping up everything in its path. The net is then hauled back on deck, dumped into each of the live tanks housed in the factory below deck, and the catch is sorted on a belt. The Yellowfin is then forwarded onto belts that lead to four separate cutting machines. Workers feed the Yellowfin through the cutting machines, slicing off the heads and tails and leaving a mid- section square of the fish with part of its guts still attached. It is my job to yank the guts out of the fish as they pass on a conveyor belt in front of me. As brainless as the job sounds, it is difficult on the body. The Yellowfin squares pass on the belt in front of me-at a rate of about one every second. If the net has just been dumped and the catch still fresh, some of the Yellowfin squares will still be wiggling as I yank their guts; a truly eerie sight, and one that takes awhile to get used to, is that of a fish that is essentially without a head or a tail yet is still asphyxiating. My fingernails are bruised red and purple from poking at guts, and my back retains a temporary hunch from leaning over the belt for nearly eight hours during my shift.

Another job of mine is to clear out any jams in the live tank. The crew of our boat is constantly trying to sort, cut, and pack the hauled back nets as quickly as possible. The live tanks are constantly emptied and filled. If the fish dry out and collect in stubborn several-hundred-pound clumps in the live tank, it constitutes a huge delay. When this does happen, I climb inside the live tank, clutching a fire hose that squirms and twists in my hands while I awkwardly chop away at tall clumps of dried fish, crab, seaweed, and miscellaneous marine debris with a heavy-duty shovel. Despite the fact that the cuffs of my rain gear are rubberbanded around the ankles of my boots, seawater inevitably leaks in and soaks my feet. Several times I slip on the slick surface, losing the firehose. I try to avoid the firehose's spray that is now shooting haphazardly while I attempt to comer the firehose and regain control. I gather my footing and step on something squishy and waxy-looking, the mystery object shimmying and wobbling like what I can only describe to be either a Jell-O mold or a silicone breast implant; it is in fact a good-sized octopus half-hidden beneath a large mound of crabs, skates, seaweed, and a decent chunk of the ocean floor.

It's back and forth like this-from the slime line to the live tank-for the first eight hours of my shift. I break for a quick, thirty-minute lunch at 8:00 a.m. in the galley, then head back out to the factory.

I spend the second half of my shift working a job called Case-Up. After the fish are cut and gutted, they are sent along a conveyor belt to the packing station. A half-dozen people pack the fish into large stainless steel pans and slide them into the five freezers onboard. The fish are pressed and frozen---each freezer containing I 00 pans-for four hours. My job on Case-Up is to open the freezers and remove the solid, thirty-five pound pans of frozen fish. I crack the pans over a large dip tank---sort of like a stainless steel "kitchen sink"---loosening the heavy blocks of fish from the pans. The frozen blocks are then dipped in water and handed to another co-worker, David, who bags and tapes the fish, eventually sending the wrapped "cases" down a chute into one of two freezers in the hull of the ship. After each factory freezer is emptied and the fish are wrapped, David and I climb down a twenty-foot ladder and into a freezer in the hull of the ship. The hull's freezers---there are two, one on the port side and one on the starboard side---are massive, each measuring roughly twenty feet deep and 2400 square-feet. Working in the freezers, David and I build stacks of frozen cases twenty feet in height, eventually filling the entire freezer. Once the starboard freezer is full, we move to the freezer on the port side. During the course of a twelve-day trip at sea, David and I will stack over 16,000 thirty-five pound frozen cases-some 560,000 pounds of fish.

At 4:00 p.m., it's quitting time. My crewmates and I degear as another set of workers begins its shift. Working on the boat are twenty-seven people who are divided into three shifts of nine workers each. My shift works from 12:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Another shift works from 4:00 p.m. to 8:00 a.m. The last shift works from 8:00 a.m. until 12:00 a.m. midnight. This ensures that the factory is constantly in production and, ultimately, the boat is making money.

I pull my feet out of the thick boots, peel off my rain gear, and stagger into the galley to eat dinner. My crewmates and I load up on steaks, potatoes, green beans, corn, bread, pie, and ice cream. There is an endless supply of food and I've never eaten better than during my time working on the boat. The ship keeps the crew fed with meals high in protein and carbohydrates. Every four hours there is a hot fresh meal ready in the galley.

My stomach full and muscles sore, I disappear to bed, changing into a pair of sweats, wool socks, and a T-shirt. I'm asleep by 5:00 p.m. I sleep for less than seven hours, before the light in the stateroom is switched on and it's time to work again.

"HOW DID YOU lose your teeth, Hobbs?"

It is break time, and I am sitting on a bench in the factory, trying to scarf down three corn dogs with mustard, a handful of tater tots, and a Jolt cola in the ten minutes we are allotted for a break. I am still dressed in my full rain gear, and my pant legs are covered in a slimy menage of fish guts and scales.

"Big old fight in a bar in Sturgis," Hobbs replies. Short and hairy, with a surprisingly high and whiny voice, Hobbs most reminds me of an Ewok from Return Of The Jedi. Hobbs is in his early-thirties and has been fishing for many years. "Some dude hit me with a baseball bat. I beat the shit out of him, though." Hobbs is missing several of his upper teeth and wears a dental plate; he speaks with a slight lisp as a result. It is not uncommon for Hobbs to remove his teeth before eating, placing the dental plate on his fish-gut-covered thigh and proceeding to half-gum-half-chew his food. One time Hobbs forgot to remove his dental plate before biting into a cheeseburger. "Shit," he said, pulling the plate out of his mouth, along with a partially-chewed tangle of American cheese and ground beef.

I have never worked with a group of people covering a larger social spectrum than my crewmates. There are the wealthy career commercial fishermen who have worked on boats for their entire lives and haven't any experience working in another profession. Others are working in order to perform some kind of quick lifestyle change; one person is vowing to work as a commercial fisherman for as long as it takes him to pay off the rest of his mortgage. Another is homeless and hoping to turn his life around. And still others---myself, possibly---are working in this remote comer of the world to make some sense out of their lives; in many ways, quitting your day job, abandoning the city, and retreating to a world of sparsely populated islands free of contemporary "clutter" (e.g., televisions, cellular phones, compact disc players) is something that some souls crave. I know I won't be a commercial fisherman for the rest of my life, but I can at least experience what it's like, if only for a few months.

George started working as a commercial fisherman when he was sixteen years old. He is the smallest guy on the boat, yet very strong and well built. When he speaks, it's usually only when he's called upon and, even then, he speaks in a low mumble that is hard to hear over the grind of machines in the factory. He is twenty-three years old and, when not living and working on the boat, makes his home in the Pacific Northwest. There is very little expression in George's eyes and face. He simply works hard, does a good job, and makes a decent living. As quiet and shy as he is, George is experienced and cordial enough to answer my questions. My back is killing me, and I can barely bend over to pull my boots on. For the first few days of my contract, I'm constantly tired and have no appetite. My energy is tapped, and I have very little strength. The long hours are physically and mentally taking their toll.

"Will I get used to this?" I ask George one day, while taking a break.

"The first week is always the hardest," George replies. "The people who still haven't gotten used to it after the first week are the ones that quit their contracts. If you can make it through the first week then you'll make the rest of the contract."

For some of my other crewmates, the chance to make close to $10,000 in ten weeks is an opportunity for them to turn their lives around. One of my stateroommates, Jeff, is twenty-three years old and homeless. He and I are the only people on the boat for whom this is our first experience commercial fishing. Jeff is tall and thin, with stringy brown hair and a full beard. We work different shifts so we rarely have a chance to talk; when I'm pulling off my rain gear and retiring to bed, Jeff is just starting his shift. But on those occasions we do talk, usually during breaks in the galley, it is amazing just how different our reasons are for working up here. Jeff is a vagabond. Before he signed his contract with the fishing company, he was "squatting" in empty warehouses with other homeless people in Seattle.

"This is great being on this boat," he says. "At least I have a place to sleep and I'm fed."

I find myself pulling for Jeff throughout his contract. He's constantly late to his shifts and, when the foreman threatens to fire him, I pull Jeff aside. "Man, don't screw this up. Just think, you get through this contract and you can go back to Seattle with some money in your pocket. A lot of money."

Just as Jeff starts to show up on time for his shift and get his act together, he is plagued with a horrible saltwater rash. His hands and arms crack and bleed, and he's constantly applying medicinal ointment and dressings. His bed is littered with used bandages and tubes of ointment. Early in my contract, I developed a saltwater rash much like Jeff's. Mine spread across my arms, hands, wrists, and even my chest and stomach. I applied dressings and ointment just like Jeff and, a few days later, the rash was gone. I was lucky. As for Jeff's situation, the constant bleeding and itching from the saltwater rash is something he struggles with for the duration of his contract.

PART OF THE key to staying healthy on a commercial fishing boat, at least from my perspective, indeed has a lot to do with luck. At any time, and with great frequency due to fatigue, fingers get sliced, people slip and fall on slick surfaces, and deckhands fall overboard. A crewmate told me a story about working on a different boat and, when reporting to his shift one morning, two people who had been working on deck the night before could not be accounted for; it was determined that they fell overboard and drowned in the Bering Sea. The injuries on our boat are less dramatic. Another person on the boat, Tran, developed a mysterious foot fungus that turned his feet black and swelled them to three times their size. It was learned, later, that Tran's boots had a small leak and he had never replaced them because they were too expensive (NOTE: Each crewperson on the boat is responsible for purchasing their own gear which, on average, runs about $250 for a complete set of rain gear, boots, and hooded rain jacket). Working sixteen hours a day in warm damp boots led to the fungus. He soaked his feet for days and was unable to work for a week. Tran's boots were placed in a plastic bag, splashed with a bit of lighter fluid, and set afire on deck of the boat.

There is no such thing as a sick day on the boat. I was surprised when Tran was allowed a short leave while his feet healed. Four weeks into my contract I caught a cold and, shortly thereafter, the flu. For sixteen hours a day I worked, gutting fish, grappling with fire hoses, and stacking heavy cases---all the while pausing every now and then to throw up into a 55-gallon rubber trash can; if the trash can wasn't nearby, I'd simply puke on the factory floor. I was offered a "cocktail" of TheraFlu and Ibuprofen as a reprieve. And I was expected to continue working. There are no weekends or holidays in commercial fishing. Days that pass without working are days that pass without making any money.

I spend half of my shift working Case-Up with David. David is a strapping and seemingly tireless Samoan who's been working on fishing boats for nearly two years. This is his fourth contract and last year he made close to $30,000 in six months. To look at David, you wouldn't think that he is only nineteen years old. He has a thick goatee, a prominent jaw, and he is built like a linebacker. He rarely smiles. He looks threatening, like a thug. In reality, he's very mellow and patient. The grind of factory machines and the constant listing of the boat does nothing to shake up his infinitely relaxed persona. While we work, David chain-smokes and listens to rap music on a portable stereo cranked loud enough to drown out the incessant grind of the factory.

Unlike most of the other experienced fishermen, David has worked in a profession other than commercial fishing. It is the opportunity to make a large amount of money in a small amount of time that keeps him returning to Dutch Harbor.

"When I worked a regular job back home," David says, "the paychecks always seemed so small. I was always used to seeing an extra thousand-dollars on my paycheck. So I went back to fishing." The extra money David makes allows for a great deal of financial freedom. He isn't even twenty years old and he's already paying to remodel his parents' home.

"So you're up here for the money?" I ask.

"Yeah. Except, I'm not going to make much during this contract. Maybe ten-thousand dollars. This is a bad time of year for fishing. We don't get paid much for the fish. I'm just working this contract so that I can get a spot on the boat next season. That's Roe season.

I'll probably make thirty-thousand dollars during the next Roe season."

"How much longer do you think you'll keep fishing?"

"I don't know," David says. "After next season, I think I'll quit. I have a factory job lined up at a computer company back home in California. And I want to go to college."

But there is something in his voice that is revealing; a common tone that is found in the other experienced fishermen. Many vow that this is their last contract and living in cramped staterooms and working sixteen hours a day is no way to live. Yet, when the season is over and their bank accounts replenished, they are the first to renew their contracts.

David is the first to admit that the job can take its toll both physically and---just as important---mentally. "The thing about being up here," he says, "is that there's nothing you can do if something happens back home. Once, there was this guy who found out his wife had a miscarriage. He went crazy. He started chasing people around with a knife."

Later in the day I work on deck of the boat. The sky is crowded with pasty-gray clouds. A few sunbreaks highlight the Bering Sea in angled bars of glowing light. The sound of the boat's engine is deafening and mutes the screeches and squawks of gulls that jostle for space near the ship's overboard chute. The refuge of cut fish---heads, tails, guts, etc.---plop into the ocean, along with a large number of dead Halibut and Skates. The gulls are smart, sitting on rolling waves at the base of the overboard chute and snacking on bycatch.

Despite hearing numerous stories about how the Bering Sea is crowded with factory boats, on this afternoon no other ship can be spotted in any direction. No land can be spotted, for that matter, and at times it feels as though our crew of twenty-eight are the only people on the face of the earth.

I'm sitting with one of the deckhands, Larry, and waiting for the haulback of another fifteen-ton bag. Larry is thirty-two years old and lives in New York. Tall and muscular, he has dark hair he keeps wrapped under a tightly fit bandana. His face is covered with a thin glaze of beard stubble and he talks with a slight Eastern-European accent that echoes his years of growing up in Prague. Before he started commercial fishing, Larry worked in a corporate office in New York City making eighteen dollars an hour. "I got sick of my old job," he says. "I worked in an office for five years and just wanted to get outdoors. So, I came up here."

Larry's path from processor-to-deckhand is rare. During his first contract, one of the deckhands quit, and Larry jumped at the vacant spot. Most processors spend years in the factory before being promoted to Combi (i.e., apprentice) and, finally, deckhand. Yet, by the end of Larry's first contract, he was already working as one of the ship's deckhands. This is his fourth contract.

As with most of the others on the boat, it is the money that lures Larry to commercial fishing. "At my old job, I always had a steady paycheck, but I could never save any money. I remember after I finished my first contract on the boat, I came back with ten-thousand dollars and paid off all these old credit card debts. Then I started saving money. Also, most jobs, you work a year and get two weeks off. Here, you work three months and take half a year off."

Larry got into the commercial fishing industry late. His deck boss is nearly ten years his junior. The majority of the crew is comprised of twentysomethings. The Captain of the ship is barely forty.

I ask, "If you were in your mid-twenties and know what you know now about commercial fishing, would you have started working on the boat at an earlier age? Maybe work five years and make $150,000."

"Yes!" Larry replies, emphatically. "And then I would have invested in a bar or club. A resort, maybe. My own resort." Back in New York, he owns two homes. He also co- owns an apartment building in Brooklyn. He travels several times a year to Prague. He drives a Porsche. Yet, these rewards aren't without their dues. He busts his ass for his money. "My tenants always say, 'You're so rich. Please don't kick us out because we can't pay our rent.' They see me drive up in my Porsche. I want to say to them, 'Fuck you! I work my butt off up here! You just sit on your ass all day and watch television! Get a job!'"

He also relates stories of woe from his friends back in New York. "When I go home and hear people complain about how their asses hurt from sitting in front of a computer all day, I can't empathize. This is hard work up here. Let's see them come up here and work this hard."

Working as a deckhand is both a blessing and a curse. During the course of Larry's contract, he will make more than $18,000 in seventy-five days. Yet, he'll also get sick and pop antibiotics. I'll offer him Echinacea pills and medicinal tea for a cold and swollen throat he cannot seem to kick. "There are five other guys on this boat who want my job," he'll tell me, stressing how he must continue to work and not voice a complaint. "I have to keep my job."

ONCE THE BOAT'S freezer hulls are full and there is no more room to store and properly freeze cases of fish, our crew returns to Dutch Harbor. It takes an average of twelve days at sea to catch the boat's fill. By the time I complete my contract, our boat will have made six twelve-day trips out to sea.

After spending nearly two weeks at a time in the middle of the Bering Sea, a return to Dutch Harbor is a welcome reprieve for the crew. Phone calls are made to family and friends back home. Mail is picked up.

Our boat steams into Captain's Bay just inside an inlet of Unalaska Island. It is there that a Japanese "tramper" (a large boat with vast hulls for storage) awaits our vessel. We tie up to the tramper and begin offloading our catch. The next thirty-two hours are spent in our ship's freezer hulls. We stack frozen cases onto pallets that are then lifted out of the hulls by a crane and transported over to the tramper. The cases are then removed from the pallet and stacked in the tramper's freezer hull.

Offload today is long and cold. There is rainfall when we start working and, less than three hours into my shift, the rain has turned to snow. I am wearing two pair of sweat pants, three sweatshirts, a flannel shirt, wool mittens beneath two cotton liners for my hands, three pair of socks, and boots. The sweat on my head and face freezes instantly, making my hair brittle and cold. My beard is covered with tiny icicles of snot and sweat.

There are six other crewmates in the hull. We tirelessly work, clutching two cases at a time and slamming them down onto a pallet. Once we build a solid stack of ninety cases, someone yells, "Hook," and the crane is lowered and the pallet is fitted with ropes. The ropes are tied to the crane's hook, and the pallet is lifted out of the ship's hull.

"Up," a crewmate yells, followed by, "Stand back!" The crane jolts the pallet up: it's not uncommon for a case or two to fall off the stack. A thirty-five pound frozen case dropped from twenty feet is enough to crush someone's skull. We scurry away from the opening in the hull and wait for another empty pallet to be dropped down. Another stack is built. There are 16,000 cases per offload and the crane will make more than 300 "lifts" from our boat to the tramper.

The floors of the freezer hulls are made of plywood planks and are glazed with a thin layer of ice. Each crewmate carries two cases at a time---seventy pounds total---across a surface as slick as an ice skating rink and stacks them onto the pallet. Several times during the course of my contract I fall and bruise my thighs and stomach. The weight of the cases knocks the wind out of me and, for a moment, I stagger to my feet, recollect myself, then continue working. A foreman may ask if I'm OK, but falling in the freezer is so common that, for the most part, most instances pass without inquiry about injury.

After offload we clamor out of the freezers and thaw ourselves in the warm galley. We sip hot coffee and eat soup and warm bread. Many of the crewmates have clandestinely bartered with the workers on the Japanese trampers. David scored a bottle of Sake in exchange for a carton of cigarettes. Another crewmate traded a few rap cassettes for a bottle of Sapporo.

Our boat is untied from the tramper and we steam across Captain's Bay to dock where we fuel up for the next trip out to sea. Our captain has rented a pick-up truck and a couple of crewmates are headed into town to pick up supplies. My shift is over so I ask if I can tag along for the ride.

"Sure," Vito says. Vito is the ship's deckboss. A huge, burly Samoan with long black hair and a scratchy voice, he and his brother (Nick, a factory foreman) having been commercial fishing together for years. "We'll meet you out at the truck."

I SNEAK BACK inside my stateroom, grab a flannel jacket, and head out the door. Our boat is tied up next to an unoccupied crabbing boat that is in turn tied to a pier. Dozens of Pollack and crab boats sit vacant and crew-less along a several-hundred- yard an-n of land that reaches out into Captain's Bay. I scramble over an obstacle course of crab pots and step onto the pier. Vito and Hobbs are already in the truck, engine idling. I climb inside and we ride into town.

Dutch Harbor is situated on Unalaska Island, part of the 124 islands that make up what is called the Aleutian Islands (or, alternately, the Aleutian "chain"). The Aleutian Islands span more than 1,000 miles and, in a seemingly geographic sleight of hand, represent both the farthest west extension of the North American Continent and the farthest east, too, because part of the chain crosses 180-degrees into east longitude. The Aleutian Trench, seated on the Pacific Ocean floor about 100 miles south of the Aleutian Islands, is an area where the Pacific plate dives beneath the North American Continental plate; as a result, the Aleutian Islands are home to the largest network of active volcanoes in North America.

We ride away from the pier and the cluster of boats. We pass a smaller boat that is sitting a few yards out in the bay. A man is pissing off the side of the boat; his pants are around his boots, and he's smoking a cigarette. Vito makes a point to honk the horn and wave. "Yep," Vito says, "just another happy fisherman." We continue along dirt roads lined with crab pots and factory processing plants. Occasionally we pass a couple of fishermen walking along the side of the road. A car may pass in the opposite direction. For the most part, though, Dutch Harbor feels deserted. The sky is gray and soot-colored, and Dutch Harbor is eerily quiet.

The history of the Aleutian Islands is rich with conflict. During World War 11, Japan bombed Dutch Harbor in an attempt to gain control of the Aleutian Islands. The Japanese also set up camp on Attu---the westernmost island in the Aleutian chain. The next year, 16,000 American soldiers stormed the island of Attu in an effort to recapture it from the Japanese. The Battle of Attu was a real bloodbath, with more than 3500 American casualties. Japanese Banzai fighters, facing defeat, committed mass suicide. A monument was built in Dutch Harbor honoring the lives lost, an echo of a fifty-year-old war.

During World War II, the Aleut natives were treated with little respect. If they weren't captured by the Japanese and imprisoned, the Aleut natives were evacuated from their homes by the United States government and forced to live in abandoned canneries in southeastern Alaska. It was at these makeshift refugee camps that the Aleuts were poorly fed and forced into overcrowded living conditions in housing with no plumbing or insulation. When the war was over, the United States government failed to help return the Aleuts to their homes. Furthermore, the government refused to reopen Aleut schools and halted mailboat service to the Aleutian Islands. Later, the Atomic Energy Commission tested nuclear bombs on Amchitka Island in the Aleutian chain. What is amazing about the Aleut peoples and their mistreatment during World War 11 is the fact that the Aleuts were legally United States citizens---hardly refugees.

We ride past the airport. The runway is empty, and there are only two flights per day into and out of Dutch Harbor. It is late in the day now, and the last flight back to Anchorage has left hours ago. We turn right and head down a loose gravel road and onto paved surfaces. Near the airport, there is a small shopping center, hotel, gas station, post office, and a Burger King. It is hardly a bustling inner-city, but it is about the only thing on the island that remotely resembles the strip malls and fast-food franchises so commonly found in the mainland United States. We drive past a bowling alley and out toward the UniSea plant---the largest land-based processing plant in Dutch Harbor. UniSea is sprawling, with several aluminum-sided factory plants occupying large plots of land. Adjacent to these plants is dorm- like housing. A few workers stand outside, smoking cigarettes and staring at our truck as we ride past.

There are 4300 residents in the city of Unalaska. About half the people work in the commercial fishing industry, and over 90% of the jobs---whether they are taxi drivers, restaurants, or fueling companies---rely on commercial fishing in some way.

We drive past the UniSea plant, travelling for several miles, before crossing the Illiuliak River Bridge. "See that river," Vito says. We pull over to the side of the road. A small river, calm and as sleepy as the island of Unalaska, flows between steep banks off the side of the road. "In the summer, that river is packed with salmon. There are so many salmon jumping out of the water that the river looks like it's boiling. The kids, they come down and catch the fish with their bare hands."

An Aleut passes our idled truck and nods.

We continue driving, past small clapboard houses weathered from rain and fog. The housing is dilapidated and run-down. The place looks remote and sort of Third World. Yet, in the center of all these houses are recently built structures such as a courthouse, clinic, fire station, and community center. They stand out amid a camp of small, aged houses made of warped and weathered wood.

"What's that place?" I ask, pointing at a small wooden building painted bright purple.

"That's the Elbow Room," Vito says. I've heard of the Elbow Room. It is the most popular bar in Unalaska. "Back in the 1980s, when everyone was making a lot of money, that place was always packed. That's why they call it the Elbow Room. There was no place to move around. There used to be a line of cocaine from one end of the bar to the other end."

A large red-and-white church sits just up ahead, and is our last stop before driving back to the boat. It is the oldest Russian Orthodox church in North America and was built in 1825. The Aleuts are presently raising money to complete a $2 million restoration of the church. The church is flanked by scaffolding and shows evidence of being in mid-restoration. It is an amazing sight, especially its enormous red onion dome that stands out against the dark gray sky.

During the ride back to the boat, I can't help but imagine what it would be like to live year-round up here. How does one raise a family in a ghost town?

"I can't imagine it," Vito says, when I ask him the same question. Despite fishing in Dutch Harbor for most of his life, to the native Aleuts on Unalaska Island Vito is just another passing fisherman making money in the largest fishing port in the nation. Roots are not made in Unalaska. The fishermen and - women working in Dutch Harbor are counting their days (and money) until their contracts are finished and they return home. Even among my own crewmates, with whom I spent nearly three months living and working, long-term friendships were not made. The fact that Unalaska Island is home to the nation's largest fishing port is a testament to the fact that the bulk of this island's population is constantly arriving and departing.

Further up the road I notice something that catches my attention. "That's the Magone," Vito says, pointing at a massive, illumined barge tied up to port. The barge looks ominous and evil, bearing enormous, wall-sized shards of rusted scrap metal. Just riding past it in the truck makes me pine for a tetanus shot. "That's where the boats go to get pieces of scrap metal for repairs."

The Magone reminds me of the Boo Radley house in To Kill A Mockingbird. According to Vito, people actually live year-round on the Magone. "It's disgusting in there," he says. "There are staterooms below and all people do is drink and smoke pot. There's vomit in the hallwavs and the place is filthy."

We arrive back at the boat and Vito parks the truck. I phone a couple people back home in Seattle. It's late---shortly before midnight---and I wake the people I call. When I'm finished, I climb back aboard our boat, looking out over Captain's Bay at the small dots of light from the processing plants on land. Ballyhoo Hill is hidden in the dark. Thick low clouds linger, and the moon's glow smears the sky like a giant cataract.

I retreat inside the boat, reporting a few minutes early for my shift.

IN 1996, GREENPEACE published a report entitled Sinking Fast: How Factory Trawlers Are Destroying U.S. Fisheries And Marine Ecosystems. Their report called for the banning of factory trawlers in U.S. waters and highlighted a three-step plan based on the "Greenpeace Principles."

First, Greenpeace officials called for an immediate ban on the entry into U.S. fisheries by foreign trawlers. Presently no foreign trawlers risk such entry, and this step would simply serve as a safeguard against future threats to marine ecosystems.

Second, they cited the ban of additional U.S. trawlers in U.S. fisheries, stopping the expansion of the current fleet of trawlers and "setting the stage" for their final step...

Banning factory trawlers altogether by the year 2001.

The Greenpeace plan is ambitious, to say the least. Commercial fishing generates jobs for I 0,000 Washington State residents and accounts for $400 million of the Seattle economy. Approximately sixty trawlers operate out of Seattle. In 1994, commercial fishermen and -women brought nearly 700 billion pounds of fish, worth $224 million, to the port of Dutch Harbor. Put succinctly, if there were no commercial fishing in Unalaska, the city's economy would desist.

These figures of thriving production are exactly why Greenpeace is so concerned. The current rate of production in the Bering Sea/Dutch Harbor region is seen by some experts as a precursor to what has happened in New England, where mismanagement and over-fishing have resulted in a fishing industry collapse.

The current "open access" system of fishing created most of the major fisheries. Open access means that any ship with a valid fishing permit may actively fish; this has yielded a surplus of vessels rapidly draining the ocean of its resources. Attempts to limit over-fishing were proposed in the form of Individual Transferable Quotas (ITQs). The ITQ system would dole out shares of the annual fishery quota-shares based on the catch history of each boat. However, the ITQ solution ignores over-fishing; the same number of fish would be caught, the only difference being an established "catch hierarchy" between larger and smaller vessels.

Greenpeace points out that other problems with ITQs include the high cost of mismanagement (almost three times the present cost) and turning the oceans and their resources into private property owned by large corporations.

In the battle between Greenpeace vs. Commercial Fishing, Greenpeace has chalked up an indirect victory of sorts in the form of the reauthorization of the Magnuson Fishery Conservation & Management Act (Magnuson Act). On October 11, 1996, President Clinton signed into law legislation to reauthorize the Magnuson Act. It was passed unanimously by the Senate on September 19, 1996, and the House of Representatives gave final approval a week later.

The Magnuson Act was originally enacted by Congress in 1976 and created eight regional Fishery Management Councils that would advise the National Marine Fisheries Services (NMFS) and the Secretary of Commerce on how the nation's fisheries were being managed and resources conserved. It also set up a 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone and gave authority to the U.S. government to control commercial fishing within this zone, hence forcing out foreign boats and replacing them with American boats.

The Magnuson Act of 1976 differs from last year's reauthorization of the Magnuson Act, and this is Greenpeace's strongest footing. The new law directs the Fishery Management Councils to rebuild depleted fish stocks, eliminate over-fishing, reduce bycatch, and provide habitat protection.

It is a step, but hardly a large one in Greenpeace's perspective.

According to Greenpeace the Magnuson Act ignores conservation issues and helps to promote a rapid growth in the U.S. fishing fleet. Greenpeace representative Fred Munson was quoted in a Seattle newspaper as saying, "There is no scenario under which these boats will ever fit into ecologically sound fisheries."

Are commercial fishermen and -women wrecking the planet? Or, rather, are they simply feeding their families by working in an industry that serves a global market? It is hard for me to choose a side in the current battle between commercial fishing and Greenpeace. Fifteen tons of dead marine ecosystems were pulled onboard the deck of our boat every two-and-a-half hours.

This was enough to -wreak havoc on my conscience. Yet I would also work side-by-side with my homeless crewmate, Jeff, and it would be a reminder that this job would quite literally change his life. No one on board was excited about destroying the Bering Sea. The thought never crossed our minds. We simply worked, day in and day out, in an effort to make a living and support ourselves in the world.

MY CONTRACT IS up, and I can't wait to go home. When I left for the Aleutian Islands, my life in Seattle seemed dull and boring. I had grown tired of the city and was looking forward to getting away from the traffic and metal and noise of urban life. Now, I can't wait to hear the sounds of the city and return to Seattle. I can't wait to sleep in my own bed and shoot pool with friends. And the thought of never having to gut another fish for the rest of my life is enough to make me sob with joy.

Shortly after I finish my last shift, I am sitting in the galley with George. We are eating Jambalaya and rice and drinking sodas.

"I can't believe we're going home," I say.

"You're going home," George replies in his trademark half- whisper.

"What do you mean? We started our contract at the same time. Our ten weeks are finished."

"I'm staying for another trip," George says.

"Why?"

"They're gonna make me a Combi," George mumbles. "If I stay past my contract, I can work as a deckhand next season."

Commercial fishing is George's career. Spending another ten days at sea is nothing when you've spent the last seven years at sea. As a deckhand, George will make close to $70,000 a year--- not a bad salary for someone under the age of twenty-five, without a college education.

There is a flip-side to a career in commercial fishing. Sure, one can make a lot of money in a short period of time. But the industry is top-heavy with young people; there is a definite "shelf-life" for the average commercial fisherman and -woman. Very few of my crewmates were over the age of thirty; at least a third were under the age of twenty-five. And those who were in their thirties or older were showing signs of wear-and-tear: a history of back surgery, an increased propensity for injury, etc. Not to mention that the older crewmembers had families who were left behind; kids and wives who have seen their fathers and husbands only a few months out of the year.

I made more money in the two months I spent commercial fishing than two months working at any other single job in the past. Yet, after doing the math, I really hadn't made a financial killing at all. I was paid a percentage of what the boat made. If I worked sixteen hours and the boat made no money, I made exactly $0.00 per hour. This happened quite often, particularly when the boat was tied up in port and fueling up for the next trip out. I was always on the 12:00a.m.-to-4:00p.m. shift, regardless of whether we were actively fishing or merely steaming back to Dutch Harbor, to offload our catch. Sometimes I would clean the bathrooms or work in the galley, wiping cigarette tar off the ceiling and, if we were not actively fishing at the time, I made no hourly wage. Other times I would work sixteen hours and make nearly two-hundred dollars.

During my contract with the fishing company, I worked sixteen hours per day for seventy-three consecutive days and made seventy-two hundred dollars. Seventy-three days multiplied by sixteen hours per day equals 1168 hours. Divide $7200 by 1168 hours and I discover that I earned $6.16 per hour.

With no overtime.

And no benefits.

And no weekends.

And no paid holidays.

"Do you think you'll come back for another contract?" George asks.

"No," I reply politely. "This job's not for me."