

Deep Sea Stories

By **STEVE SABATKA**
For the *TODAY*

*(Written under the influence of Wagner's "Gottedammerung,"
a wet November wind, and 400 milligrams of Advil PM)
"And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns."
— Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1798*

My friend and fellow teacher, Justin, tells a lot of stories — strange stories, amazing stories — about what he saw and did as a commercial fisherman, actually one of those “Deadliest Catch” guys, hauling halibut and tuna and crab up from the Pacific Deeps and risking his neck so the rest of us can have fish and chips, and crab Louie. Twenty-some years out on the water. Close calls and brushes with death. Blisters and busted knuckles. Ropes and blades and heavy things, moving way too fast.

Juan, one of our students, and a movie fan who often speaks in movie review language, using phrases like “visually stunning!” and “tour de force!” insists that Justin looks like Gene Hackman, in that actor’s younger, “French Connection” days. I can see it. Sorta. Justin is well-read and well-traveled, so he can quote “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” and tell you that the actual “Mona Lisa,” hanging in Paris, is surprisingly smaller than you might think. Justin is a good friend, the kind of friend that will appear in your doorway, point at you, snap his fingers, and say, “I left your gumbo in the truck. Be right back!” Justin is also a loving dad to two fine sons. He’s enthusiastic about almost everything. And he says “awesome!” more than anybody I’ve ever known.

But back to the strange and amazing. In his many years as a professional fisherman, Justin saw towering waves as big as office buildings, and felt — in the tendons and muscles of his feet and legs — the dwarfing, humbling, terrifying forces of tide and current. He has heard Aleutian ghost stories, curling up to the yellow moon on campfire smoke, as well as the haunting death songs of noble, barnacle-whiskered whales. (Justin tells a chill-inducing, Monkey’s Paw-type story about the severed foot of a bald eagle, but won’t let me repeat it here.) And he has hooked and netted and reeled-in creatures you don’t ever see swimming behind thick glass at the aquarium, or staring out at you with glistening, accusing eyes from the other side of the sushi bar.

*“Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.”*

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