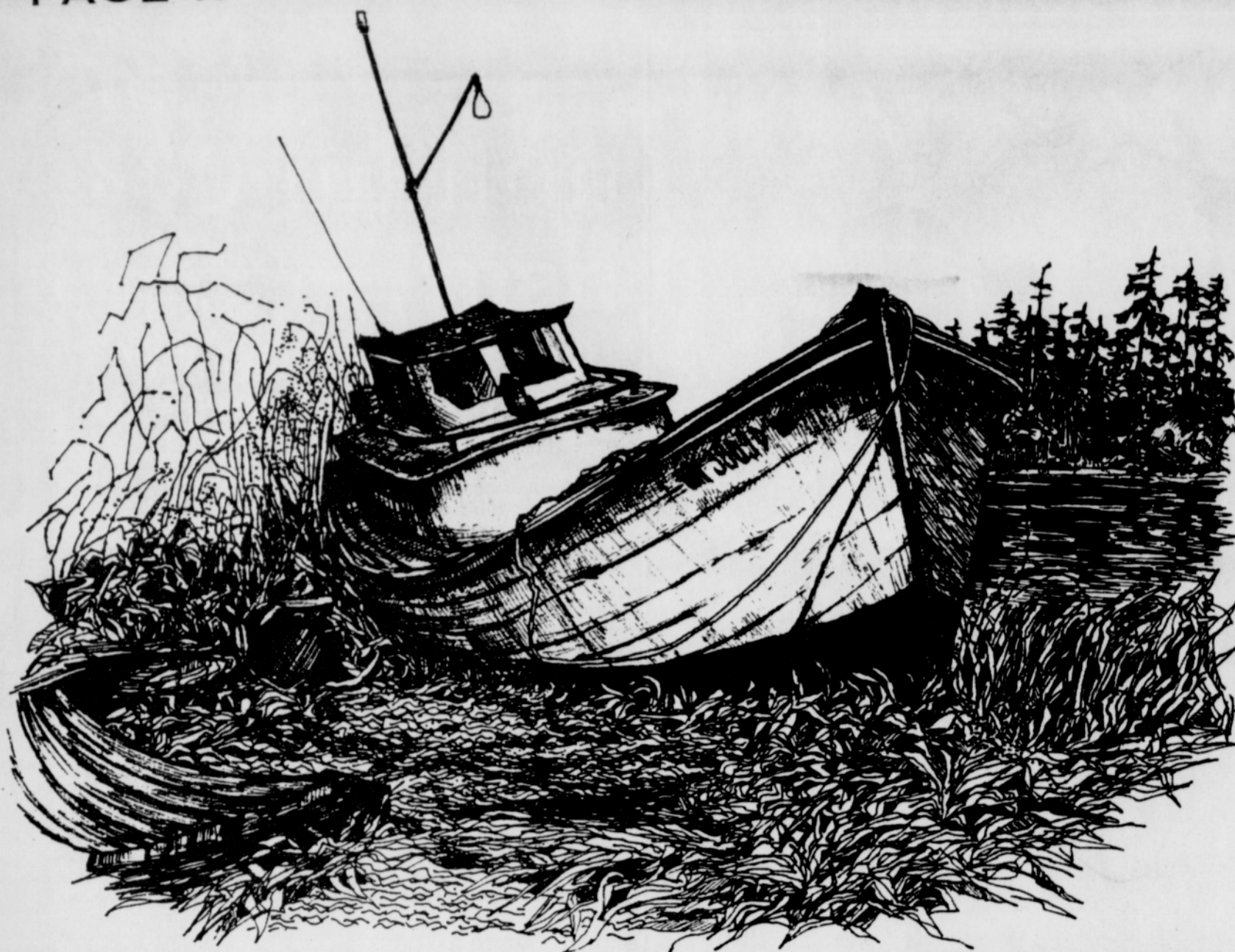




DRAWINGS BY PAULINE PIUKKULA AURSLAND

FROM PAGE 9

The morning was a seaman's prayer, scrubbed clean and fresh by the night's storm. The sun caught fire to rolling swells that heaved us gently in their troughs as we recrossed the bar. We dropped the tuna poles beyond the Columbia lightship and ran west. We reached our destination when the sun was there with us. Seabirds trailed into its final fire, gliding with the wind over gelatinous lumps. Only one hungry albacore grabbed for a hook and it fought desperately while I struggled to pull it aboard. The fingers of my left hand were without the assistance of a thumb and kept slipping on the taut, wet line. Finally I bent over the stern and speared the tuna's gills with a gaff hook and jerked it aboard. Minnows and blood spewed onto the deck from its mouth and gills, and its large body, shocked by its sudden extraction from the water, heaved and pitched in a frenzy for oxygen. Far away in the last light in the west a long drumroll of gold and purple clouds took the shapes of jungled islands for an instant, then the light faded to a smear of rust. The darkness chilled me while I waited for the fish to die before I dropped its blue and silver corpse into the hold.

We hunted the albacore a few hundred miles offshore in the warm currents from Japan for two weeks. We trolled back and forth with and against the swell, plowing the water with our hooks like farmers. The skipper worked the wheel in the house while Kamiju and I shared the cockpit in the stern. Kamiju pulled sixlines that trailed aft from the tuna poles on the portside and I pulled sixlines on the starboard side. Whenever an albacore took a line the skipper swung the Falling Star into a circle to encompass the fish it traveled with, and we raced for seabirds when we saw great flocks of them dive for living islands of plankton in the hope that tuna were feeding from below.

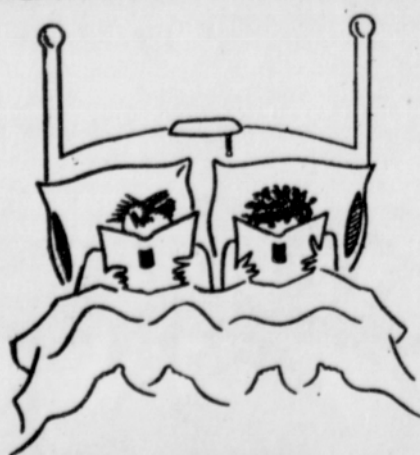
One evening after sunset we started rolling up the lines and were about to shut down the motor for the night when we were struck by a school of albacore. In an instant all lines had fish on them, including one that I had been coiling which was jerked out of my hands. Kamiju pulled at a wire attached to a bell inside the house. The skipper appeared in the doorway. How many? he shouted over the motor and the evening wind. All of them, I yelled back. He disappeared into the house and switched the wheel onto automatic pilot so that the Falling Star would make wide sweeping circles. He crossed the deck and wedged himself into the cockpit between Kamiju and me. The deck quickly filled with frantically dying albacore, and they kept coming at us, following us around our orbit through the ocean. No sooner was a line cleared of a fish and tossed back into the water when another fish grabbed at it. We pulled them aboard for more than three hours. By the first hour I was exhausted, my healing arm protested with pain, and I spent the rest of the time praying for the fish to stop. Kamiju the clown laughed and kept up a running stream of erotic wit. The skipper was silent. I heard his hoarse breathing and smelled the rancid sweat that steamed from underneath his slicks. All three of us lurched against the pitching deck as Falling Star rolled and tumbled through its rotations around the ocean. We stumbled into each other and hiteach other with fish. Lines tangled, hooks got caught on clothing or on things in the cockpit. A gaff was lost overboard. My hands were slimy with fish scales and guts and they stung from dozens of hook punctures mixed with salt water. Above the chaotic sounds of wind and water and the straining of the boat motor I heard the death drums of hundreds of albacore all over the deck. The entire stern and walkways on either side of the house were piled with dying fish. Some of them fell into the cockpit and flopped around our feet. I also felt about to die — When they quit as suddenly as they struck. We stood for awhile and waited for a line to stiffen but none did. Behind us the last dying fish beat their bodies into the bloody deckboards. The skipper shook his head like he was emerging from a dream and climbed out of the cockpit. He lurched and slipped over the fish until he reached the house. He swung the boat in a reckless turn that threw Kamiju and me into each other and threatened to broach the boat. When he got the prow pointed downhill the skipper leaned out of the house and shouted for us to stack the corpses in bins down in the hold. It took almost the rest of the night and filled half of the hold. We covered the dead fish with blankets of ice, layer by layer like one would frost a cake.

None of the other nights were as eventful. We killed the motor after each sunset and drifted with the current, smoking up our supply of marijuana and awakening long before dawn each morning. The boat was usually surrounded by blue sharks and birds were asleep on deck or clinging to the mast when one or another of us stepped out on deck for the day's first piss before the coffee was ready. Each morning the sharks scampered away in terror and the birds flew off shrieking when the skipper started the motor and the screw took a bite out of the ocean. Kamiju and I climbed into the pit astern and carefully eased out the lines on each side to prevent them from tangling. From sunup to sundown we plowed through a gentle blue lump and pulled aboard albacore that gulped our hooks.

The weather changed, preceded one twilight by a sheet of clouds that swiftly rolled over the sky and the wind blew cold and nasty in the darkness before dawn. Daylight was gray, filled with sleet and flying spray. The old boat shuddered, almost epileptic in the wild ocean. We skittered through its trough all that day, running for shore. We were thrown around crazily, tossed halfway up the spumy sky on the breaking crest of a mountainous swell one instant, then fell sickeningly down its back, repeated incessantly as if a furious mother had grasped a child by the shoulders and shook it. For the first time I felt a little seasick and Kamiju laughed at me.

In the late afternoon we came abreast of the abandoned lighthouse on Tillamook Rock a mile offshore from Cannon Beach and turned north against the wind and current and beat ourselves senseless against unceasingly oncoming swells. Tons of water crashed into the bow and washed across the deck to the stern. We were beat around so roughly that it was almost impossible to stand even when we clung to supports. We sat at a table in the house whenever it was not our turn at the wheel and stared wordlessly out at the seas that roared past after punching Falling Star in the nose or watched whoever wrestled the wheel. The skipper had come down from the topside bridge when it got too nasty to remain up there. His face and beard were a blur of windlashed rainwater and his slicks dripped large puddles at his feet when he took over the wheel inside the house. We took turns at the helm and peered out the wet and fogged windows while fighting to stay on our feet. We watched anxiously for deadheads which were partially submerged logs that had got away from timber rafts in the Columbia River, so called because of their capacity to put holes in the sides of wood boats like the Falling Star and sink them. We looked also for other boats running for home like we were but did not see any. I was relieved after an hour at the wheel by the skipper just before dark. I dropped down into the dingy dim foc'sle and crawled into my cramped bunk which stank of ancient fish, dirty clothes and countless seasons of unwashed deckhands. I could not sleep. I lay awake in the darkness and stared up through a small hole at the skipper's black rubber boots as he fought the wheel and I listened to the water pounding against the hull next to my head. Sometimes on gentler nights the water against the hull sounded like the voices of children calling out my name.

We stumbled gracelessly across the bar after midnight. Huge black swells grappled to crush us or roll us over but we escaped and limped into the main channel and quieter waters. The lights of Astoria climbed its hills as if they were on Christmas trees, and the beams and tailights of automobiles and trucks on the high arch of the bridge that crossed the river shone like gems. We tied up behind a rotting abandoned cannery building and carefully walked along a collapsing dock. We were cold, wet and exhausted and stumbled across Marine Drive on tottering sealegs. Traffic hardly noticed we three who had battled Davy Jones. If any saw us at all in the darkness they probably thought we



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