



DRAWING BY PAULINE PIUKKULA AURSLAND

water and beat against the overturned hull. Only a smaller boat could dash in and out of the wreck without fouling itself. I looked for the boat that had taken Kamiju off, saw it circling outside the gillnetter. Kamiju stood in the bow, braced against the bucking and rolling, leaning forward as if he was ready to reach out a hand and pull me off my tiny island. I wondered what I looked like from that distance, probably not very stoic, I decided, shuffling my fanny closer to the prow each inch that went underwater. I glanced back over my shoulder and saw that the house had almost disappeared, then at my left arm. The brace was wet and shiny and the sodden Ace bandage had unraveled enough to become a flapping pennant.

The small boat raced straight toward me. I got ready to jump and hoped that I would make the deck and not fall short into the water. I could hear Kamiju shout for me to hang on, curious about where the clown imagined I would go if I chose not to. I realized then that it would be close. The bow was about to go under with my last patch of dry wood and I worried that suction would take me to the bottom of the river with the Falling Star. But I was not frightened. I was calm with the certainty that there was nothing I could do but wait for whichever occurred first, my rescue or possible drowning. "Hey taxi!" I shouted and waved at Kamiju. I laughed at an absurd image of standing atop the bow, slowly going down, water lapping at my chest and neck, waving goodbye with the Ace bandage flowing in the wind:

I jumped. Kamiju's arms reached out to catch me as I landed on deck and lurched off balance. The gillnetter fell in behind the small boat and together we circled the wreck. Only the final inch of the bow was above water and part of the mast. The red buoys continued to surround the Falling Star and marked its death. I saw a shining white boat coming toward us and thought it might be a Coast Guard rescue vessel from the Cape Disappointment station.

My eyes barely caught the last of the Falling Star. A large swell washed over its final tip of bow. When it passed the boat was gone. A swirl of bubbles rose to the surface for a few minutes, then ceased. Loose boards that floated amidst the ring of buoys were all that was left.

The gillnetter pulled alongside the Coast Guard boat and the skipper and Ben jumped aboard. Next was our turn. Kamiju clambored across while I held the boats together. I thanked the man who rescued us. He smiled around a pipe in his mouth and touched a finger to his yachting cap. I leaped into the Coast Guard boat. After salvaging some loose boards and picking around the water where the Falling Star sank, the helmsman turned toward the Washington shore. The gillnetter and the boat that saved me were by then anonymous among the crowded shipping in the main channel. The brown tuna boat was also out of sight.

I asked the skipper if he might someday forgive me for not allowing him to be the last man off his boat. He glared at me, then wiped his mouth with the hand that had only one finger and a thumb. "Why do you think I should?" he asked.

"The guy said he could take two," I said. "You were the closest."

"Know how I lost my fingers?" he asked and shoved the mangled hand toward my face. I shook my head. "I thought I knew what I was doing," he said.

Before I could ask what he meant he went into the wheelhouse and stood next to the helmsman.

The skipper's father, who had been a merchant seaman as well as a fisherman, picked us up at the Coast Guard station and drove us across the four mile long bridge to the Oregon side of the river. He spared none of us his contempt at the loss of the Falling Star but reserved special abuse for his son the captain. Two days later an insurance company accused the skipper of purposely sinking the boat. That night he got

drunk and started a fight in a bar, lost, and spent most of a day in jail until Kamiju and I raised bail. Other fishermen, some he had known for most of his life, criticized him for losing his boat and treated him like a Jonah. He took it pretty hard. "I feel like I'm going crazy," he said one afternoon while we sat at the bar of the Mermaid Tavern and watched boats and ships bobble past a confused network of old piers and charred pilings that held up canneries and saloons before the waterfront burned in a big fire. Three albacore boats were tied up at a fuel dock. A rabble of shrieking gulls whirled around them. "I've been thinking of killing myself," the skipper said. He brushed his one-fingered hand across his forehead then tangled it in his unkempt beard. "One thing I'll tell you for sure," the skipper said and held aloft a half empty glass of beer. "This is the only schooner I'm ever taking across a bar again."

I saw my former girlfriend in Portland a few days later. We were civil and civilized with each other and drank coffee together in a small downtown cafe. People were starting to leave work and poured onto the sidewalks. She told me about herself and her boyfriend. I told her about the Falling Star. Her eyes went cold. An unfriendly smile dimpled her face. "First you lost me," she said. "Now you've lost your precious boat."

I met her hard stare. "I'll find another," I said.

Alice Ann Petrie is a teacher and artist and lives in Newport. David Ewin used to live in Portland. Egil Unander has forsaken Astoria, which he called "The Paris of the Columbia River," for Tunisia. He lives in Carthage, a suburb of Tunis. And Pauline Piukkula Aursland was born and has spent most of her life in Astoria. She is a registered nurse and a brand new mother.



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