



CHARLOTTE BRUHN

# SCHOONERS

FROM PAGE 13

pick up crab pots the next morning. The crab season, which had been extended, was ending. He thought we could take it easy and pick up 50 pots or so a day. Get our guts back, was how he expressed it.

A man who was staying at the house — my friends were generous with sleeping space — asked if he could go with us. He was a blubbery man with a pumpkin face. His eyes, surrounded by dark rings of loose skin, seemed to watch our faces from the bottoms of holes. He called himself Ben, said he was raised in Utah and had never seen the ocean. He also swore he had never been aboard a boat. The Skipper looked at Kamiju and me. We shrugged and looked out the window. The Skipper not too happily assented.

"If you get sick, you're going to have to stick it out," the Skipper warned Ben the next morning. It was an hour before dawn and the West Boat Basin was ghostly with wet fog. The four of us were aboard *Falling Star* swallowing a last cup of coffee before starting the motor and throwing off the lines. I shivered in a wet pair of slicks, my chilled hands clasped around a hot cup. A gull landed on the stern. We watched each other. Nothing else was visible in the dark shrouds of mist. The Skipper put down his cup and pulled the hatch cover off the motor. The sputtering and coughing of the diesel frightened the gull and it took off, shrieking at me from overhead when I walked out on the deck and waited for the Skipper's call to throw off lines.

We backed out of the slip, tooting the foghorn, then chugged into the stream past fishboats that nuzzled each other like sleeping lovers and through a gate in a high fence made of logs that surrounded the boat farm like a palisade. The fog was lifting as we went out into the river and the sun rose up over the mountains. We crossed the bar. Ben got sick. He did not vomit. He just did not feel well. The surge was not mean that morning but it was playful just beyond the breakers and yawed us around enough for Ben to get queasy in his stomach. At my advice he stayed outside on deck — I told him that the cramped house with its rancid odors of fish and diesel would cause him to fill a bucket. I was having my own difficulties with my entombed arm. I had learned to coordinate pulling tuna but crabbing beat me. Kamiju and I rotated, working 10 pots each while the Skipper handled the hydraulic block and emptied the pots. Instead of dropping them back into the ocean we stacked the pots on deck. Ben just watched, a sodden pasty lump of nausea. Halfway through my second 10 pots, after a painful breathcatching break inbetween, my arm throbbled and it was apparent I could not work fast enough. Instead of getting mad the Skipper had a suggestion. "Sit back and enjoy the ride," he said. "When we get these pots to the shed you can scrape the lines and buoys and wash all the shit out of the pots."

We had forgotten to take the big crab box down from the topside bridge before starting out that morning. The box was lashed to the mast and to a cleat on the upper starboard rail, out of the way when we were fishing for albacore, and stuffed with extra lines, buoys and feathered albacore hooks. Without the box the Skipper was forced to throw the keeper crabs onto the deck. It soon became my job to keep them in a more or less solid mass, which was virtually impossible as they had a penchant for scuttling around the deck in search of anything to clamp with their pincers. The lurching of the boat contributed, sliding crabs everywhere.

We stacked the first dozen pots on the stern, wrestling them atop each other in two piles. The wire mesh inevitably snagged on practically everything, which included other pots, and forced us to push, grunt and curse while attempting to maintain some sort of balance on the rolling deck. Kamiju and I sometimes tumbled into the stacks of pots, and I fell on the deck once with a pot on top of me. We coiled the wet sloppy lines and piled them with the red buoys on each pot. At least it was something I could do with my crippled arm besides herd crabs with the boathook, which a few managed to crawl onto. The deck was soon covered with pots and crabs, which left little room for the four of us. Two stacks of pots were up against the house, with a narrow hole for us to get in and out. Two more stacks were on top of the hatch that covered the hold, and the stern was jammed with them. We had to quit with about 60 pots aboard and some 200 freewheeling crabs. "Tomorrow we're just going to have to stack a bunch down in the hold," the Skipper said. He looked around the deck and told me to keep the crabs from taking over the boat. He disengaged the hydraulic block and outside steering gear and squeezed into the house. Within moments we were bubbling toward home.

Ben pointed across the starboard beam toward the beach as we stood on deck amidst the stacks of pots and wandering crabs. His seasickness was distracted a moment by curiosity. He wanted to know about a steel skeleton that was being whipped by surf. I told him the old cowbone was the remnant of *Peter Iredale* which had run up the beach looking for the Columbia River bar and remained stuck like an extinct beast in a tarpit. "People've told me stories about the bar," Ben said.

We lay outside the bar an hour later. A wind sprang up from the northwest and pushed huge ocean waves into the river. Some of the swells ricocheted off the rocks below Cape Disappointment on the north shore and rolled across the river to the south jetty where they bounced back on each other in great leaping crashes of spray. The four of us were in the wheelhouse, peering intently out the front and side windows. "What do you think?" the Skipper asked.

I shrugged. "Doesn't look as bad as it did the other night," I said.

"We might as well give it a try," Kamiju said.

The Skipper nodded and said he thought the main channel was too crowded and that we ought to try crossing by the south jetty. Our eyes shifted. Rush hour on the river, Kamiju said. Big ships, little party boats, fish boats, sailing boats and tugboats hauling barges (including a big tug that had in tow a stripped-down Navy hull that was going upriver to be torn apart at a Portland shipwrecking yard) packed the channel, which was marked with red and black buoys. Neither course seemed appreciably better than the other and I would have preferred to lay outside the bar until slack tide and a softer wind. But Kamiju and the Skipper were impatient to go in. Both looked at me. I shrugged again and decided my reluctance might only be the prospect of scraping lines and washing pots. "Sure, why not? Might as well try it," I muttered.

Ben was not asked for an opinion.

Passage along the south jetty was turbulent. We lost a stack of pots when a large wave shoved us heavily to starboard. I noticed a few crabs escaping as *Falling Star* shuddered and hung hard over to the water before ponderously rolling back on its keel. A few crabs that had almost made it over the gunwale were dumped back on deck. I grabbed the boathook and muttered to myself that the crabs might get another chance to escape as the Skipper brought the boat around, sluggishly abroil in splashing swells. It took us more than a half hour to get all the pots back on board. *Falling Star* fought the Skipper's control the entire time and threatened to either roll over or smash against the jetty. This time I lashed the pots down, tying one stack to the mast, others to cleats along the rails and stern. I looked at the crawling and sliding mass of crabs. You'll get your chance, I said.

The Skipper ran for the main channel, realizing it had been a mistake to attempt the south jetty. Ben finally got sick enough to vomit on deck, and though his stomach might have eased somewhat the fear in his eyes remained. Kamiju and I exchanged glances and simultaneously shrugged. It was out of our hands and we knew it. He went back into the house with the

## SEALKILL

There has recently been a move to destroy seals and sealions because they are eating salmon that fishermen wish to catch. Appeals to the government to sanction such a genocide have been met with a response that proof is essential that seals are eating the fish. An expensive study is unnecessary. Seals and sealions eat fish. They have filled their plates with salmon for hundreds of thousands of years.

Underlying the desire to legally obliterate seals and sealions is our refusal as a species to consider sharing anything on this earth, which we claim in its totality as our own global manifest destiny. There are few salmon left, not because of the appetites of seals and sealions but because we humans have wiped out the large runs of wild salmon with our dams, our nuclear power plants, our papermills, clearcutting, irrigation and overfishing. Now we wish to obliterate the seal and sealion whose food supply we have virtually eliminated. But then we cannot even abide competition among ourselves. Commercial fishermen haggle with sports anglers and Indians for the right to kill the last fish.

Not so long ago a Washington governor admitted that the decision to build upriver dams for hydroelectric power was made with awareness the fishing industry in the lower Columbia River would be crippled, might vanish altogether, which meant of course that the great migrations of salmon from the Pacific Ocean to spawn in Northwest rivers and streams were sacrificed for cheap electricity. If the fishermen wish for the salmon to return they should tear down the dams, dismantle the nuclear plants and replant the forests instead of vexing their helpless fury on seals and sealions which eat only a fraction of the few remaining salmon.

If anyone remembers, our predecessors came here to kill seals and sealions for their pelts and nearly made them extinct. The renewed slaughter of seals and sealions as a ritual sacrifice will not bring back the salmon.

—MICHAEL McCUSKER



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