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To Be a Viscera Technician

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To be a Viscera Technician

I waited in the oilskin room before my first shift, suited in spotless raingear. I wore brown steel-toed rubbers. My legs, arms, and torso were protected by neon orange coveralls and matching rain-slicker. On my hands: rubber gloves half a centimeter thick, and insulated with wool liners. A hairnet around my head kept my long hair out of my face.

Around me, other fishermen slipped into their own rubbers and raingear. Some popped pills, swishing them down with slugs of coffee. Others took long drags from their cigarettes. I balled up my hands into rubber fists and pounded them together, knuckle to knuckle. On the opposite side of the room my coworkers began to filter through the door to the factory. I was excited to see just how technical the position of viscera technician was going to be. My previous jobs had required little to no brainpower and being a technician, of any kind, conveyed a meaning of importance to me.

At the bottom of the stairs I paused letting crewmembers pass. Machines and conveyor belts roared, pumped, squeaked, belched, and squished in unison forming a menagerie of mechanical pandemonium. I had been in the factory countless times since boarding the Northern Jaeger but had never seen it fully operational. The usual reek of rancid fish and burnt gear oil was gone. In its place: the salty, fresh smell of the sea.

The narrow catwalk along the portside was congested with two lines of fishermen running opposite directions. One line for those who were fresh and clean, heading to their first shift, the other for those who looked tired, dirty, heading to the

warmth of the oilskin room. I made my way through the steam billowing from the plate freezer area and followed the inbound fishermen.

Past the surimi turbines, past the roe-grading station, I saw my post, the viscera table – a long, wide, crotch height conveyor belt. Six people stood around it, three on one side, three on the other. It was easy to spot the man I was supposed to replace. His raingear was wet and covered in fish slop.

Juanito looked up from the conveyor belt and rushed towards me, a sullen look on his face. I knew his name was Juanito because, like everyone else, he had scrawled onto his raingear to prevent thievery. He was short with a shaggy moustache and a lazy eye. I raised my hand for a high-five. He slapped it hard.

Without a word, Juanito hurried from his post. On the viscera table, the white vinyl conveyor belt was free of fish. Across from me was Eileen. Her name written in bold blocky letters down her left arm. Pudgy with sharp eyes and a squat nose, she smiled at me. I smiled back and asked, “Do you know what we’re suppo...”

Just then, another machine fired to life in a clash of metal-on-metal. The steel grating began to shimmy and shake, convulsing under the pressure of the fully functioning factory.

From my toes, to my hips, to the fillings in my teeth, my whole body began spasm because of the many rumbling machines. I looked from my hands, rapidly, uncontrollably knocking against the edge of the conveyor belt, to the head of the viscera table.

A gate lifted up and out spewed piles of fish intestines, enough guts to fill the entire width of the two-foot wide conveyor about three inches deep. I watched as

loads of fish organs slimed and slurped their way down the viscera table. It dawned on me that being a viscera technician was not going to be as technical as I had envisioned.

Before boarding the Northern Jaeger I had no idea what fishing in Alaska entailed. In my head I had had a romanticized Jack London-esque version of what it involved. That, coupled with my small vocabulary, and I thought being a viscera technician had to involve something technical. Little did I know that it was just a fancy name tacked onto a shit job.

I quickly imitated those around me, and got the hang of it. Our job was simple. Tear the roe - the scrotum-shaped egg sacks of the female fish - from the rest of the fish's innards. Pull the innards into a trough on the side of the conveyor belt, and leave the roe sacks on the viscera table to continue to be processed throughout the factory.

The guts were cold and slippery. Before long my mind went blank. Focused on tearing roe from intestines, I hunched over the viscera table like a DJ ready to mix a sloppy set, and plowed my hands wrist deep into the entrails. I moved my hands in opposing circles, adapting the wax-on/wax-off motion made famous by Ralph Macchio in *The Karate Kid*. After a few minutes I was covered with fish guts. My neon orange raingear dripped with intestinal juice. Small bits had sloshed up from the conveyor belt and clung to my cheeks, nose, and forehead. It didn't smell like stalls at Pike Place Market, or the freshwater lake fish I had caught and cleaned in the past. This was a hideous stink. Acidic. Bitter. It stung my nostrils and made my throat raw.

I began to question the wisdom of my decision to go fishing in Alaska, when a fist hammered down onto the passing guts, launching intestinal juice into the air, a few drips splashed onto my locked lips. It took all my willpower not to puke in response.

“What the hell do you think you’re all doing?”

I looked up to see the shaved head and piercing blue eyes of Erin, one of the ship’s quality control experts, glaring back.

“We’re getting a lot of guts on the roe grading table and not enough clean roe,” she shouted at each of us around the viscera table. “Party time is over! All of you move your asses as fast as greased fucking lightning. If I have to come back over here, I swear to Christ I’m knocking skulls!”

I moved my hands fast, and faster still. The JELL-O-like temperature and texture of the roe, the earsplitting roar and rumble of the machines at work, the devilish smells of the horde of guts in front me, all fell silent. My thoughts became static on a television screen. There was no future. There was no present. There was only white noise. I was in a zone where there was just me and the roe that needed to be freed.

Finally, after six hours our replacements started to dribble in one at a time. As I continued to work, I felt a tap-tap-tap on my right arm. Juanito, my replacement: the last to show up. He gave me a thumb’s up and a smile. His good eye looked me in the face. I wanted to return the smile but couldn’t, afraid intestinal juice would get in my mouth. Instead I gave him a nod of acknowledgement and hobbled out of the

factory to the oilskin room, my body beaten, my mind preparing itself for the
countless days yet to come.