

Kristin Vantrease: script

I don't remember my father ever asking me if commercial fishing was something that I enjoyed doing, it was just something we did. I inherited a place in an exhausting, male dominated industry, without ever realizing that I had a choice in the matter. Fishing was passed down to me like a Christmas tradition, or my grandmother's jewelry; similar to those objects, there's no way to calculate the exact value of such an inheritance, or the subsequent impact on my life.

My grandfather fished double ender sailboats in Bristol Bay. Some people caught gold-fever, but my grandfather was gripped by a different sort of fever, one that held on with relentless tenacity. He pursued his dream of being a fisherman from the dustbowl of Oklahoma to the mudflats of Naknek. Apparently the fever was contagious, and my father caught it, too. I couldn't help feeling that it wasn't just an option to enjoy fishing, but it was my obligation to love it. However, as an 11 year old girl, I wasn't quite sold.

Not only do fishermen keep odd hours, (often staying up in 24 hour fishing periods), but the work is physically demanding: there were times when I truly didn't feel like I could wake up to keep working the next day. With a gillnet, each salmon must be individually un-strangled from the net. On our good days we pull in over 20,000 pounds of salmon. You can do the math - that's a lot of salmon to move around. In the morning, I test-flex my tired, swollen fingers, only to stuff them back in their rubber-gloved prisons to pick another net full of salmon. 32 feet of living and work space takes on a new level of intimacy when you have to share it with three other people for six weeks.

I didn't love fishing all at once; it was a slow fall of accumulated moments. A collection of smiles from my father, laughter from my siblings, and shared meals at the end of a long day. I fell into the tidal rhythms; working our nets and searching for the lithe bodies of salmon in the water. I let the sunsets and sunrises that nobody but the fishermen in Alaska see, be my reward for hard labor. I lost myself in the daylight and broad expanse of clouds on an uninterrupted horizon, and learned to accept the storms that keep the sky dark for days and chop the water into a seething frenzy. Slowly I discovered that I wanted to see fishing from my father's perspective; how he knew where the salmon ventured, which size of mesh to use in the nets, the undercurrents of the fishery.

I now see the beauty in fishing, as well as my ability to take part in a family tradition - not just as an obligation, but something that I enjoy doing. Throughout the years, taking on more responsibilities has also meant making more mistakes. I know that growth occurs in the spaces of those mistakes, and the times of absolute frustration and exhaustion. Like the salmon, I return to the fishing grounds every year; I, too, am pulled by the tides and born on a current I don't fully comprehend, but I yield to the draw and enjoy the journey.