

ALASKA

I'll never forget my first sight of the snow-covered peaks surrounding the sprawling city of Anchorage as I stepped off a jet at Anchorage International Airport in 1985. A lady tried to direct me into the terminal as I stood glued to the bottom of the stairs of the plane, staring at the giant mountains in total awe. A man behind me mumbled something about the damn tourists arriving earlier every year. I snapped out of my daze and stumbled towards the open terminal door, only to find my little sister laughing at me.

J.B. was well into her second semester at Alaska Pacific University and just from looking at her I could tell living in Alaska agreed with her. She was always petite and pretty, but now she looked different. She radiated a sense of style that can only be described as Alaskan, in the best sense of the word.

As we walked to the baggage claim area she told me she had lined up a bunch of her fishing friends to meet me. That was great since I had no plan whatsoever. At the ripe age of twenty-two, my hope was to find a job fishing. I retrieved my two sea bags filled with fishing clothes and foul weather gear. My other possessions had been stuffed into my parents' garage in western Massachusetts when I announced I was heading to Alaska, much to their astonishment.

J.B. went to get her car and drove up in what seemed to me a very new Saab 900 Turbo. I couldn't believe it. How could a college gal afford a vehicle like that? She hopped out laughing and gave me a slap on the back that nearly took me off my feet. She told me she picked it up from a doctor who was leaving the state for only \$5,000. Still, five grand is five grand. When she told me she was making over \$200 a day working as a waitress at Simon and Seafort's restaurant in downtown Anchorage, I began to briefly wonder about other unexplored employment opportunities.

On the way to her apartment near the college she drove like a maniac, telling me she had to get it out of her system before the tourists arrived. All I could think about as I tried to hold on was she had to be a hooker or something. No one makes \$200 a day as a waitress.

Well, she did make that kind of money on an average shift. In 1985 Anchorage was booming with oil and fishing money and the economy was strong. Simon and Seafort's was and remains today one of the finest restaurants in the state.

That evening I met several of J.B.'s friends who fished different areas in the state. One was even a woman—something I had never encountered back East, where fishing was largely a male-dominated profession. I couldn't even grasp the idea of a woman on a boat. We sat around in a tiny apartment and drank beers as I listened to stories about Alaska and commercial fishing. I asked a million questions and was thrilled by it all. There was one guy who spent summers in Kodiak, and that island seemed to have a special draw. There was a halibut opening there the following week, which is where I decided to go.

I spent the next two days with J.B. driving around Anchorage. She took me to a little resort town thirty-five miles south called Girdwood, with the state's largest downhill ski area. Being an avid skier, I fell in love with this quaint little community nestled in a valley surrounded by huge mountains. It was mid-April and I had never seen so much snow. Little did I realize at the time, I would later put down roots and make Girdwood my home throughout the 1990s.

Soon it was time to catch a plane to Kodiak and look for work. J.B. dropped me off at the airport with my sea bags, \$500 in cash, and a one-way airplane ticket to Kodiak Island. Oh shit was I scared.

KODIAK, ALASKA

Bears, Boats, and Opportunity

The very first thing I remember about Kodiak Island was the giant stuffed Kodiak brown bear at the airport. I couldn't believe it was real and figured it had to be some kind of joke. Bears do not get that big. I stood in front of that bear for a long time until a man came up to me and said, "Someone took a brownie 'bout that size out near Kalsin Bay. Guess it was after a rancher's cattle."

I turned to him and said, "You mean that's a real bear?" The guy just looked at me for a minute, shook his head, and started to walk away. I chased him down. I needed to know where the hell Kalsin Bay was, because that was one place I wanted to avoid. Once again I must have had tourist stamped all over my forehead.

I collected my bags and ventured outside the small airport terminal six miles from town and looked for a cab. I asked the driver to take me to the cheapest place to stay that was close to the boat harbor, all the while keeping a sharp eye out for those damn big bears on the way into town. I was expecting to see one charge the taxi any minute and even asked the guy driving why he didn't have a gun.

I think he must have thought I was on drugs because he never said a word to me and just kept looking at me in his rearview mirror before dropping me off at the Star Motel. I secured a room for three nights and went for a walk on the fishing docks.

The first boat I noticed was the *Royal Baron*, an old 85-foot wooden trawler. It was the only dragger I could find. Later I learned all the draggers were in the Bering Sea participating in Joint Venture fishing with foreign boats for various kinds of bottomfish.

It seemed like all the other boats—longliners, seiners, and crabbers—were gearing up for a halibut opening in three days. I didn't talk to anyone that night but just walked up each finger dock, taking it all in. I went down to cannery row and ended up at the All Alaskan fish processing plant. The plant was built in an old Liberty ship hull and was the strangest thing I had ever seen. This was truly a fishing town and I was in my element.

I had a beer at the Mecca, a downtown bar, and then went over to the Kodiak Cafe for a sandwich before calling J.B. to tell her about the bears, boats, and that I'd start looking for a job first thing in the morning. By 8 p.m. I was back in my room for a good night's sleep.

My entire life since the age of six had built up to this moment. My career in fishing began early, as a young boy working for tips on sport fishing boats off the coast of Maine. By my twenties I was hooked permanently and had worked a number of different fisheries. The only way I had ever earned money was by fishing; mostly out of Ogunquit, Maine. A promising college career while playing hockey became history as I was pulled in a different direction. The sea calls to some and when it does, its grip is not to be underestimated. Once you experience the power, wonder, and mystery of the ocean, it becomes a giant magnet.

In Maine I spent checks as fast as I could make them, living from trip to trip. Something had to change. The stories from my little sister about bountiful fishing in Alaska had beckoned, and now here I was. I would not step back in Maine for more than ten years until April 1996, when my wife and nine-month-old daughter accompanied me on a trip to see my parents.

THE EARLY YEARS

Maine

My dad bought my first fishing pole when I was just out of diapers. We fished for yellow perch and pumpkin seeds (a type of pan fish) on a lake at Camp Howe, a summer camp in western Massachusetts. My dad said I was so fish crazed, bonkers, and nuts, that from the very first day I longed to go fishing all the time, with whatever staff member I could round up to take me. If I wasn't fishing, I kept busy by scaring the camp staff with snakes. Usually somebody found the time to take me fishing.

I remember the first time my dad took me deep sea fishing at the age of five. The excitement I felt was like Christmas morning. I woke my mom and dad up at 5 a.m., even though we weren't due to meet the lobsterman who was taking us out until 8. My dad and I met the lobsterman at a small dock in Wells, Maine, where our family spent the summers. We met another father and son who were also going. Dad was seasick before we were outside the breakwater, but I was all over that boat. I had my head in every lobster pot, enchanted at the treasures. We caught pollock and cod all day and I completely forgot my poor, sick dad. I even went as far as peeing over his head while he laid in the forepeak resting near the toilet.

"Dad, hurry up, I gotta pee," I said, as I stepped on his hand and relieved myself.

That day became my fondest childhood memory. On the way home I looked my dad in the eye and proudly told him I was going to be a fisherman, a sea captain. Being a high school teacher, and a seasick one at that, I'm not quite sure what he thought. But from that day forward I knew in my heart where I was going. During family walks at Wells Beach I would often hang behind and daydream of the day I would be at sea on my own boat.

The next summer our family was back living in Wells and I became a morning fixture at the docks of Perkins Cove. I finally convinced an old man named Al Voorhis to take me party fishing on his charter boat and agreed to work for tips as a deckhand. This was a great arrangement for both of us that lasted the next four summers. I got to spend my summers on the water and Al had free help.

Those early years were great. I learned knots, a little bit about how to read a compass and paper machine echo sounder, and met some great people who truly cared about me and made the days special. As a young boy, this gave me a special confidence not found in your normal playgrounds.

My early morning chores onboard the 46-foot *Marion*, an old wooden mine sweeper, included getting the rods, reels, and bait ready for the customers. The bait consisted of deep sea clams from frozen gallon tins that were thawed and cut. After handing out bait to groups of people around the boat, I explained how to work the reels so they didn't backlash the spools and told people about the fish they could expect to catch.

Once we arrived at the fishing grounds, I'd help bait the women's hooks (and sometimes the men's), gaff the fish caught, and bring the fish aboard. We'd assign marks to each person and cut Roman numerals on top of the fish heads, which I thought was cool, so that person could claim their fish at the end of the day.

I'd also fillet the catch for tips, which is where I made most of my money. I became very good at it and as a young boy began to build up a pretty good bank account, making \$10–20 in tips each day. Then I'd fillet the leftover fish no one wanted, put them in a big cooler, and peddle them to tourists. I even knocked on doors in the trailer park where we had our summer home, selling fish for a dollar a fillet. I sold everything as haddock, regardless of what species it really was, and worked seven days a week from June to the end of August. I loved every minute of it and never once considered it a job. I just thought I was the luckiest kid in the world. Even though my parents had virtually no interest in fishing or any sort of ocean-going life, they never tried to talk me out of this. They knew I was extremely happy and were 100 percent supportive.

What I remember the most of those early days working for Al Voorhis is getting busted stealing a ham sandwich. Actually, it was three sandwiches.

My mother would pack lunch each day for both Al and me. On those rare days when my mom would have an off day, we wouldn't have enough food to sustain us so I would go out and pillage and plunder for sandwiches and other cooler goodies. I always fantasized I was a pirate back then. Sometimes I still do.

I can close my eyes and remember this like it just happened. It became one of the few times I've ever panicked. I was really hungry and Al was even more so.

"Go round up some sandwiches, Corky," he said. "What happened, did your mom sleep in this morning? I think you might have to start waking her up earlier."

Off I went in search of lunch. I looked in a couple of coolers brought by guests that were tucked away out of anyone's sight. There was nothing really interesting until I found a large bag full of great big ham sandwiches. I grabbed two and started to close the bag when I became greedy and reached back in for a third, breaking Al's rule of grab and split.

I unwrapped that third sandwich and sat right down to eat it when the owner of the bag came into the old galley and caught me. He got really mad and I freaked out. I wanted to bolt and run, but you can't run far on a boat.

I'm dead, I thought to myself.

I immediately confessed, but told the man I stole his food because the captain made me. I said if I didn't bring him a sandwich he'd, he'd—well, I didn't know what, but it would be real bad. This sounded perfect to my eight-year-old ears, but it must have sounded ridiculous to the man because he took me right to Al.

I vividly remember Al being scared and white as a sheet. He denied it all and I couldn't believe what he was telling this man. He said he didn't even know who I was and that I must be a stowaway or something.

"Where's your father young man? You should be ashamed," he said to me. "Sorry sir, but I gotta move the boat. Not enough fish," he said to the man. "Everyone up," he yelled at the top of his lungs, dismissing me to this really mad man.

At the end of this whole nightmare I remember asking the man if I could have the rest of that sandwich. He threw it overboard. In turn, I filleted his fish for free.

My summer earnings went into buying my own school clothes, which I took great pride in, and it also kept me in motorcycles. But by the end of the school year I'd have spent all the previous summer's savings. At an early age the bad habit of spending money as fast as I made it had started—something fishermen are famous for.

As I reflect back on these first four years, I realize I learned a lot from the old man, although not necessarily good things. One lesson that has had a profound effect on me my whole adult life has been dishonesty. He'd tell a tourist the damnest things. In the afternoon and early evenings Al and I would lean up against his shiny black Caddie that had a homemade sign cut out to look like a cod. *Deep Sea Fishing Onboard the Marion* it would beckon. We'd talk to tourists, make reservations for the following day, and lie.

"How was the fishing today?" Joe tourist would ask.

"It really sucked," I'd start to say, as Al's vice-like grip squeezed into my thin shoulders like a lobster clamping down on an unexpected finger.

"Unbelievable. We loaded the boat," Al told the man, when we had actually caught around eight fish for thirty people. "You and the missus want to come tomorrow? We got room."

"Tell them what they want to hear, what's the matter with you?" he'd reprimand me afterwards, before asking, "Got anything to eat?"

These early years shaped me and started the turn down a slippery gangway that I've struggled

with my whole life. I don't believe in a lot of things, but I do believe that we choose our own path in life, with events and certain people playing a role in guiding us along the way. I was raised better, yet I chose to walk down this path. I knew what I was doing even at nine years old as I sold a cusk fillet as haddock to a sixty-year-old woman. I was headed down a dishonest road and, frankly, didn't care. I accepted it as the way of life as a fisherman. It would take me another thirty years to finally figure out that dishonesty has a way of eventually catching up with you.

At the age of twelve and the beginning of my fifth summer in Maine, I asked Al Voorhis to pay me. When he gave me an emphatic "nope," I jumped ship and went to work for the competition, Jack Miller, on his charter boat the *Seabawk*. Jack paid me \$20 a week, and in truth I made way more in tips with Al. It was a respect issue. I felt I was worth a weekly paycheck and receiving one made a difference.

Each day while I cleaned up and put away the *Seabawk*, my buddies working on the tuna boats would land at the bait dock and hoist giant bluefin tuna off their decks. Their stories of days spent chasing giant bluefins around Jeffreys Ledge drew me in like a starving labrador to a rare sirloin steak. What could be cooler than throwing poles at an 800-pound fish? Even though I stayed with Jack three years, the lure of fishing for bluefin tuna consumed my thoughts. I yearned to become a part of tuna fever.