

A mythic Picture . Sushma Joshi

When I first met Larry, he was taking a fishhook out of a halibut's mouth. But I did not know that this is what he was doing when I walked down the docks. I was deep in thought, considering the many aspects of composition. The edges of rafters, the curve of a road, the square edges of a stop sign had suddenly gained prime importance as I framed my photographs. I was thinking of shadows, contours, the hard edges of a straight line. The bay with its gently rocking boats glowed in the grey, drab glory of the summer rain, the misty mountains framing them in the background. I wanted a view that was not just magnificent, but mythic, if I could help it. I wasn't going to let on to any of those East Coasters that Alaska wasn't all that it was hyped up to be. Why, they would ask me, had I chosen to leave a summer in The City to go and be miserable with some rednecks down in the boonies?

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The blackness and the whiteness of the boats occupied me. I barely noticed the figure squatting on the docks, with a little boy moving around him. To my eye, peering through the lenses, they were pure silhouettes. They would make a picturesque element to add to my photo of the quaintly bobbing boats. I snapped the photograph, and was vaguely aware of the little boy pointing to me. I could hear him saying: "Grandpa! Look!! Not, not here. Over there!" The urgency of the "over there!" was suddenly pointing at me. I looked up from my viewfinder. The little boy had run excitedly in front of the old man, and was trying to shield him from this camera-wielding, intrusive surveiller. Suddenly feeling self-conscious, I walked by them without looking, almost as if my avoidance would erase the violence that my sight had just done to them a few minutes ago.

I walked past, noticing out of the corner of my eye that the old man had braids down his back, and a pipe clenched between his teeth. I took a few more photographs. The triangular prow of The Patriot, the perfect alignment of three whalers, the people walking like early eighteenth century movie characters in the docks. I catch them all in my little canister of film.

People walk by me, none smiling, with barely a flicker of their eyes to acknowledge my presence. I suddenly feel like I am one of those tourists who I had watched all the time growing up in Kathmandu. A tourist who had come all the way from across the world, only to see the people as pictures, or landscapes. Images of beauty, nothing more. The benign disconnection between us and them had been palpable. And now here I was, suddenly, on the other side of the camera, doing the same thing. Framing people, capturing them, like they were so many fishes in the net.

People look at me with the jaded look of folks used to strangers invading their private space. This is how I must have looked at the tourists, I think, absorbing the malignant,

shuttered looks which they send my way. People in Nepal have become used to tourists. They treat them like a seasonal occurrence, a strange migration of biology that they have become used to ignoring while they go on with their daily life. The people here do the same. I am, to all practical purposes, invisible. I walk back, slowly, absorbing the smells of the roasting fish, the frayed edges of rope, the windtorn sails. The radios blare as families gather on their boats to eat their evening meal. I walk back, and see that the old man is still there. I hesitate. Then I know I have to talk to him.

"What kind of fish is that?" I ask him as I pass.

"It's a baby halibut." He tells me easily. "I am trying to get the hook out of it because I ain't going to kill no baby halibut." The fish lay spread-eagled on the dock, struggling only slightly, its fins spread out like a fan in the floor of the dock. A thin line went through his stomach, the remnants of another fish that he had eaten only a few minutes ago. And now it looked like this old man was going to eat him.

"Is this dinner?" I ask.

"Oh, no. I don't fish commercially." He says.

"What are you going to do with it, then?" I ask.

"I will let it go if this hook comes out of his mouth." the old man says. I cannot comprehend what kind of man would throw back his precious catch.

"You're going to throw it back?" I ask again.

"I am, as soon as the hook come out of him, which it better do within the next minute." the old man says conversantly. "We should have brought some pliers, Joey. We should have carried some pliers.."

"You're bringing up his gut." The boy yells. The old man struggles for a while, his fingers stuck halfway down the fish's throat.

"Ah, I know what I have." He says finally. He digs into his pocket, and comes up with a small red Swiss Army knife. "I don't have pliers, but I do have some scissors." Poised, his fingers enter the depths of the fish's mouth again, and he snips in there for a few seconds. Finally, he pulls out the three curved prongs of the fish-hook, still entangled in the bait. He goes by the edge, and lets the fish go. It darts away in a lightning quick arc as if half its guts have not been manhandled only a few seconds ago.

"I don't like killing things I can't use." He says. "No use killing if it can't be used."

"So how long have you been fishing?" I ask him.

"Thirteen years." he answers. "I used to live up in Oregon, and then in California. And then I came up here. But I don't fish commercially. I work for the Park Service." He hastens to add.

I put my hand in my pocket, and feel the round shapes of M and M candy. I pull out the packet and offer the boy a

handful. The boy, his face alight in his yellow raincoat, says: "Yes."

"Only two, Joey. Only two." The grandfather answers on the little one's behalf. „Dinner's in half an hour." So I put two colored pellets in the little hand, and then, to be fair, I ask the old man if he wants some candy. "Sure, I'll take some." He answers, and I give him two too, just to be fair.

"See, I'm taking two, just like you." The old man says. He hands his rod to his grandson. The boy, lost in his world, pulls the rod off too high and hits his grandpa in his head with his line. "Look out." Says the old man. A few seconds later, the boy does it again. The old man gives him a whack in the head. "Didn't I tell you to look behind you before doing that?" he says. "You don't remember anything?"

The little boy starts to sniffle. I feel bad for him. The old man looks like a tough old man, with a belief towards discipline.

"Are you grandfather and grandson?"

"Yes, we live in that green canvas boat over there, right by the A. This here is my grandson. He's visiting for the summer."

"I smelt people roasting their fish down in the boats. It smells wonderful." I say.

"I never fish around here." Says the old man. "The fish processing plant is right there, see that?" He points towards the big ship that I had taken to be a cruiseliner lying farther out to sea. "So all the fish come to feed there. And then they are feeding on the human sewage around here, from all these boats. Anything at the bottom, I would not use. If I needed fish now, I would go out in the ocean, beyond the breakers."

"Was that a tug, Joey?" the old man asks. He helps the boy to reel it in. It is a funny looking fish, all grey and brown, with a big white belly and a huge mouth. "See, we call these an Irish Lord." He says. "Sometimes we just call them doubly-uglies."

"Because they are from Dublin?" I joke.

"No, because they are so ugly. Doubly ugly." He replies.

A man passes by at the moment, and looks back and says: "That's a dogfish!"

The old man struggles with the hook, which has just delicately attached to the fish's upper lip. Soon, its free, except for the pestering finger of the old man. He offers me a look, and I peer inside the big mouth. It looks bright and airy, with small plates moving aside like slats, and a nice, round

bottom that swirls into a small sinkhole.

"See those hairs?" the old man says, pointing to two long strands of orange colored hair poking out of the white throat. "That's a shrimp that he must have eaten. These ones can eat a lot. Look at their big belly."

I touch the belly. "See that, that's his teeth." Says the old man. The teeth lay around his mouth, like white velcro. "Touch it." says the old man. So I do. They are sharp, drawing over my fingers like tiny hooks. "See, they are all turned back, so that everything they swallow goes in and can't come out."

I touch the dogfish, which is pretty slimy. I touch his tail, which is even slimier. "That's slimy." I say, and then I look down and see that there's blood in my hands. "And bloody too. I guess you should let it go." I say. I have understood by now that the old man does not eat the fish here, he is simply training his grandson to fish.

"Blood?" the old man looks down. "I guess its coming from my hand." he says, looking at his own bandaged thumb. "Here, wipe it on my jeans." He says, offering me a knee. "It's going to the laundry anyway." So I wipe the slime and the blood on his worn jeans.

"What's your name?" I ask him.

"Larry." He says, proffering his rough hand.

"Nice to meet you, Larry. I'm Sushma," I say. "Can I take a photo of you holding the fish?"

"Certainly, you may." He replies. He stands there, without a great deal of haste. His posture is not ostensibly posed, but there is something in his causal slouch that signals the beginnings of a mythic picture. I snap the shutter, and then as he is starting to move, I ask the grandson: "And you too." The boy enters the picture, grinning.

"Thank you." I say when its done.

The old man turns back to the dogfish in his hand. The fish looks none too happy, trying to snap its mouth shut over the old man's probing fingers. "He doesn't like to have a finger shoved down his throat, like all of us, I guess." He says, recognizing the fish's resistance to having the shrimp yanked out of its belly. "I guess I better let it go."

The dogfish sinks into the water, slower than the halibut, but just as gladly.

The way back is cold with rain, pissing down from a foggy sky. A young man yells out "hello, there" to me as I pass by. I say: "Hello" back as I walk slowly back up the slope towards Auke Lake.