

Author's note:

The name of the purse seiner I worked on was not Assunta Rose. I changed the name of the boat and the crew because I don't want to hear from any of them about disagreements over what I wrote. I may be wrong, but I wrote it exactly as I remember it, fifty years ago.

Into the Water

Eventually most of the net was stacked on deck and the crew used ropes to pull a bunch of it over the rail in a process they called sacking up to create a pocket of fish next to the boat on the port side. The skiff came around and took position on the outside of the pocket so that the net with a few remaining dolphins and what the crew hoped were many tuna remained between the skiff and *Assunta Rose*. Carlos hung a ladder over the side and ordered Sean, Marco, Jaco, Alvaro, and me into the water.

I thought he was joking but the four of them began climbing down the ladder into the water, which was now churning into a chaotic mass of dolphins and tuna fighting for their lives. I thought to myself, "This is fucking crazy," but then I understood what the boots were for.

Reluctantly, I got into the water with my boots on. I had to swim across to the side of the pocket nearest the skiff where the others were. I was swimming in a tightly packed bunch of very large tuna, thrashing their tails against my body and cutting my legs with their sharp teeth as they ran into me with their mouths wide open, desperate to wash more water over their gills to stay alive. I had unfortunately taken my clothing cue from Sean, who usually wore gym

shorts and a tee shirt, and I regretted not wearing long trousers like the others. There was plenty of blood already in the water so the blood trickling from my legs was not making any difference to the sharks gathering around outside of the net.

Our job was to push the dolphins that remained in the net over the cork line to free them. One by one, Sean started passing dolphins to me and I passed them along to Jaco who passed them to Marco and Alvaro who together held the floats down and pushed them out. I held one of the live dolphins in my arms for a moment, waiting to pass it along. Dolphins have excellent eyesight both in and out of the water and it looked at me directly in the eye as if to ask me, "Why?"

A few that had been trapped below the fish unable to breathe had drowned. We pushed the dead ones over the floats to the waiting sharks. Sharks that don't bother live dolphins were happy to eat the dead ones we handed to them. Other dolphins were alive but badly cut and a few had bloody "noses" (technically known as the rostrum) from fruitlessly trying to swim through the net.

Soon the sharks began to emerge. The net "pocket" was like a seafood lasagna with the air-breathing dolphins struggling to stay on the surface, powerful tuna in the middle, and the sharks pushed to the bottom. A shark tail popped up here and there and Sean started pulling the sharks to the surface and passed them to me to be tossed out just like the dolphins were. When he passed me the first shark, he gave me a crooked smile and shouted, "Hang on tight

and don't let it go." When I wasn't holding a shark, I tread water with my knees pulled up as close to my chest as possible.

The sharks varied in size but some were much larger than me. They were brown colored with lighter bellies. Their rough skin made them easy to hang on to unlike the dolphins and tuna that slipped through my hands like a wet bar of soap. One shark had a big tuna clutched tightly in its mouth, which was something of a relief. I don't think the others appreciated that it was eating the catch as much as I did. I learned quickly to hold each shark by its pectoral fins with its top side closest to my chest, mouth side away. In this way we passed the sharks from one to another and out of the net without letting them swim around.

All the sharks were alive and happy to be freed. They were, under the circumstances, not that interested in us. Sharks must keep moving to breathe and these sharks were stuck in a confined net under a bunch of tuna so they were pretty drowsy. That didn't make me feel any better about what I was doing though. Had I known that a few years later a twenty-two-year-old named Jerry Correia would bleed to death on another purse seiner after being slashed by a shark while doing exactly what I was doing, I would have given strong consideration to getting out of the water. His father, the captain of the boat, had to watch his son die.