

SALT IN OUR BLOOD

THE MEMOIR OF A FISHERMAN'S WIFE

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MICHELE LONGO EDER



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FIRST EDITION

“I really don’t know why it is that all of us are so committed to the sea... All of us have, in our veins, the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, in our sweat, in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea, whether it is to sail or to watch it, we are going back from whence we came.”

President John F. Kennedy
Newport, Rhode Island
September 14, 1962

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FOR BOB, BEN, AND DYLAN



INTRODUCTION

“Go, go, go!” the deep voice shouted, right near my ear. Bob’s calloused hand, which had just been caressing my thigh, grabbed the source of the sound: a black, hand-held VHF radio, located on the rickety nightstand next to the bed in the hotel room where we lay. The digital clock, lit with red numbers, showed 2 a.m.

“I’m coming,” Bob said, having flipped the radio into transmission mode. He jumped out of bed and grabbed his blue jeans, pulling them on.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “I just got here!”

“Time for me to go, honey. That was Spelbrink on the radio. He’s been watching the wave heights. The bar is safe to cross.” Bob leaned down, kissed me, and left me sitting upright in bed. Taking a long, last look, he said, “Have a safe drive home,” and closed the door tight behind him.

That was December 1987. I was at the Best Western Motel in Crescent City, California. Bob was a commercial fisherman, owner and skipper of the 40-foot aluminum Fishing Vessel (*F/V Nesika*), and it was the start of the fishing season for Dungeness crab. Although Bob was home-based in Newport, a town of 8,000 people on the central Oregon Coast, he, and his running buddy Bob Spelbrink, thought that the season’s crab would be found in Northern California. They moved their vessels, crew and gear southward 250 miles.

Bob had called me earlier that day at my law office in Lincoln City, Oregon, about 25 miles north of Newport. “Drive on down and see me,” he cajoled. The weather’s bad here. We’re stuck in port and not going to get out across the bar for a while.”

“How far a drive is it?” I asked.

“Four hours, maybe five,” Bob said. “On the way down, stop and grab something to eat at the Blue Heron Café in Coos Bay. You’ll like that place—it’s good.”

“You’ll be in port for a few days?” I asked.

“Oh, well, I don’t know about that, but we’re in town right now and probably tonight, too. Come on, honey. I could really

use your company,” he said.

I’ll bet, I thought. But my trial for the next day had settled out of court, and so I had some unexpected time on my hands. Oh, what the hell, I thought. I’ll go. Dating this man, a fisherman, sure was different. “I’ve got to wrap up a few things, then I’ll be down,” I told him. I could hear him smile over the phone.

Hanging up, I told my secretary what I was about to do.

“He must really be something,” she said, and shook her head, grinning.

As I went out, I looked back at her and said, “This fishing life is crazy. No matter what I do or say, don’t ever let me marry this guy.”

Six months later, we were husband and wife.

I am a fisherman’s wife. As a feminist, it is hard for me to believe that I define myself as an appendage to another person, particularly a man. But he isn’t just any man. He is a commercial fisherman, and he is my husband.

Bob Eder, the middle son of three boys, was raised in Los Angeles. A body-surfing beach habitué, no one thought he’d grow up to be a fisherman. Hebrew-schooled and bar-mitzvahed, Bob had been accepted and was on his way back East to Phillips Exeter Academy when his father, Benjamin Eder, a warm, optimistic and energetic man, was diagnosed with brain cancer. Bob was 14 years old.

It took five years for Benjamin Eder to die. Edie, Benjamin’s wife, emerged from their suburban Jewish enclave, “the neighborhood,” and went to work to support her three sons. Bob never made it to prep school. While enrolled at Venice High School, he helped care for his dying father and smoked a lot of dope. He read, wrote poems, played guitar, surfed, and then went to the University of California at Santa Cruz, where he read, wrote some more poems, played guitar, surfed and smoked a lot more dope. He graduated from college in 1973 with a major in “Aesthetic Studies” and a minor in Art History, and then wound

his way up the coast to the town of Port Orford, a Wild West fishing port on the southern Oregon coast. He was a prolific and talented poet, but needing to feed himself, he found a job as a crewman on the back deck of a salmon troller.

Despite never having seen a diesel engine or wielded a wrench, Bob learned basic mechanics and taught himself to fish. He saved every dime he made. After working as a deck hand on a boat for a year and driving a school bus, he bought his first boat, the *If and I*, in 1975. Looking now at yellowed photos, it appeared to be a wooden disaster waiting to happen, but he patched the boat and rigged it to fish for Dungeness crab and salmon, and bought the necessary gear. For crew, he found teenagers who, as students, had ridden the school bus he drove, or he pressed old friends like Steve Ganz, and his younger brother, Alan Eder, into service. In the early days, it's been said that Bob wasn't a lot of fun to work with on the boat. But every dime Bob had was tied up in the venture. He had no safety net. Bob's diet consisted of eating fish he caught and a lot of beans and potatoes.

Within a year, Bob sold that boat and bought another, the *F/V Spirit*. By 1979, he'd earned enough money to commission the building of an aluminum vessel he named the *Nesika*, a word that means "ours" in the language of the Siletz Indians. The boat, a Nils Lucander design, was 40 feet in length, the maximum size the port hoist could handle. The Port of Orford was an unprotected cove; boats were literally hoisted 50 feet into the air, water streaming from the gunnels, and then set down on trailers on the land each time they returned from the sea. Like a king salmon, the *Nesika* was shiny: silver, fast, and responsive.

Bob launched the *Nesika* in 1979, christening it with the words "May the life of this boat be bountiful and safe." With him was his wife Anita, pregnant with their son-to-be Benjamin Alan Eder, born the following spring.

Bob and Anita separated in 1982 when Ben was two and Anita was pregnant with Dylan. When they finally divorced, Bob, found by the judge to be the far more sound parent, received

custody of 3½-year-old Ben and their 9-month old son, Dylan. With the help of his mother, his brothers Harvey and Alan, assorted nannies and friends, Bob raised the boys.

Broke again after his divorce, but rich in the assets that mattered, his children, Bob relentlessly re-established himself financially. With his family relatively stable, he was ready to look further afield. Bob decided to move his fishing operation and family from Port Orford to Newport, a small town on the central Oregon coast, the county seat in which I practiced law. It was here, in the spring of 1987, that I met him.

Upstate New York is where I am from, born in the capital, Albany. The city is abloom in tulips in the spring, awash with humidity in the summer, rich with color in the fall, and blanketed with snow in the winter.

I grew up in the suburbs of the city, born of second-generation Italian, French-Canadian, Polish and English parents. My parents were the first in their families to complete high school, and my dad, by the grace of the GI bill, graduated from Syracuse University. He was a war hero but didn't call himself one; as a bombardier he'd flown over 70 missions in Europe in World War II and held the Distinguished Flying Cross. My mother neither worked outside the home nor drove a car, but the home she commanded was well run and rich with tradition. Coming home from school on any given afternoon, I never knew whether I'd be greeted with the smell of cabbage rolls from the Polish side of the family or ziti from the Italians.

After graduating from high school, I went to The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, earning a bachelor's degree and good enough grades to get into law school. Most of my free time in Baltimore was spent with friends, watching lacrosse, eating raw oysters and bushels of Maryland blue crabs steamed in beer and layered with rock salt and Old Bay seasoning.

At the beginning of my senior year in college, I read *Sometimes a Great Notion*, and became convinced Oregon was my Mecca. I

opened a law school catalog, looked at the Northwestern School of Law of the Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, and said out loud, “Hey—I can get in there!”

My parents, who had traveled around the world, loved the Northwest, both for its people and its natural beauty. They were reluctant to have me leave the Northeast, recognizing then, as I did not, that it was probably a permanent move. But ethnic families have a very tight hold on their children and I knew if I didn’t get further away, I’d be sucked back into attending law school in Albany, a fate, which at 21, seemed worse than death. I moved to Portland, Oregon in the summer of 1976, and settled in Lake Oswego, a small community just a few minutes away from the school.

In the summer after my second year in law school, I rented a house in Newport, Oregon, a small fishing and tourist town on the coast and clerked in the District Attorney’s office, prosecuting misdemeanor crimes. Then, before graduating and passing the bar exam in the summer of 1979, I was offered a job as an associate in a small law firm in Lincoln City, a town 25 miles north of Newport.

Moving to Lincoln County after graduation, I did criminal defense trial work and loved it. I made a living and saved enough to open my own practice in Lincoln City, and in 1987, bought a piece of property for myself with two buildings on it, one that I used as a home; the other as an office.

When I first met Bob, early in 1987, in addition to meeting his beautiful sons, then 7 and 5 years old, he insisted I had to see this boat of his, the *Nesika*. I put him off about the children, for I doubted I could resist them, having met their soft spoken, thoughtful, literate and handsome father. I did not wish to involve myself in the boys’ lives if I wasn’t going to be a permanent fixture. But I did agree to check out his boat. An ignorant landlubber, it was a struggle for me to be dutifully impressed, though I thought its silver aluminum hull was prettier than many of the old steel boats that lined the commercial docks, badly in need of paint. I remember how Bob quietly told me that

in the previous year he'd landed more crab from his 40-foot boat than any other boat owner in the local fleet. A newcomer to Newport, he'd already made his mark as a producer.

Only later did I understand how out of character it was for Bob to talk about how much fish and crab he had caught, and by implication, how much money he earned. But he was romancing me, and he thought he had to tell me how good he was at what he did, or I would lose interest. He also knew I was dating a Porsche-driving, sailboat-racing lawyer in Portland, that I owned my own law practice and property, and tried cases for a living. What he didn't know was that I was broke, lonely, miserable, and dying to have a family.



Ben and Dylan, Spring 1988

And then I met the boys. Ben, 7, had warm brown skin, dark blonde hair and deep rich dark eyes that were old beyond his years. Ben was protective of little Dylan, who was only 5. Dylan had an open face, a nose splattered with freckles, white-blond hair, an unmanageable cowlick, and was utterly fearless. He had the sunniest disposition and was the happiest child I had ever met. Ben, the first day we met, asked, "Can I call you 'Mom?'" I

replied, “Let’s wait until your Dad and I get married, honey.”
And on May 7, 1988, with Ben and Dylan as our ring bearers, we
became a family.



Wedding Day, May 7, 1988. Bob, Michele, Ben and Dylan

For the next 13 years, I interwove my life as a fisherman’s wife and mother of two boys, with being a practicing attorney. In 1992, I joined a law firm in Newport, in a position known as “of counsel.” It meant I was neither partner nor employee with the firm, but, instead, was able to pick and choose my cases and manage the flow and demands of my legal work.

Bob’s fishing business continued to flourish. He participated in sustainable, healthy commercial fisheries: Dungeness crab, and

sablefish, a deepwater groundfish caught with baited traps. This method of fishing was “species specific,” meaning no unwanted fish were caught or wasted at sea. These were Bob’s ethical choices.

Working together as a family, in 1989 we bought another boat, the *F/V Argos*, and with continued success, in 1996, lengthened and widened the *Argos* into the 66-foot *F/V Michele Ann*. Bob’s renaming of the vessel after me was an enormous honor, a gift I will always cherish.

Beginning with the opening of the Dungeness crab season in Oregon in December 2000, I began to keep a journal of our lives as a commercial fishing family. As my husband, our sons, and our crew worked throughout the year in a variety of fisheries on our two boats, I wrote about the challenges they faced and the roles I played as a working partner: wife, mother, bookkeeper, gofer, cook, and legal advisor.

In November 2001, I began to edit my manuscript, planning to query agents and publishers. As December 2001 approached, and the start of another year’s crab season, Bob and his crew prepared the *F/V Michele Ann* and its gear for opening day. Our other vessel, the *F/V Nesika*, was now owned by our sons, managed by my husband, and skippered by long-time local fisherman Rob Thompson.

Bob and his crew left port early the morning of December 11, 2001 on the *F/V Michele Ann*, heading south of Newport. The *F/V Nesika* left the dock a couple of hours later, at about 8 a.m., and headed north. Our oldest son, Ben, then 21, was home from college and joined the crew of the *F/V Nesika* as an “extra man” to help set gear.

Sometime between 9:20 a.m. and 10:45 a.m., while Bob was setting crab gear and I was at work at my law office, the *F/V Nesika* capsized. The accident occurred just off shore, within sight, and in front of, our oceanfront home. The vessel was discovered upside down in the water by the skipper of another boat. Despite an intensive Coast Guard search by lifeboats and helicopter, and local crab boats that rushed to help, all four men,

including our son, Ben, died at sea.

Rather than abandon the journal I had begun, I decided to continue to write. By obtaining Coast Guard reports, and assembling other's recollections of the tragedy through taped interviews, I have reconstructed the events of that day. This book chronicles not only our unusual lives before the accident, but the aftermath of December 11, 2001; the challenge of grieving and honoring our son and our men, at the same time dealing with insurance company investigators and lawyers, and financial claims from surviving heirs.

I have also written of how we confronted ourselves, questioning the fundamental nature of our lives, our sea-going culture, and whether we can, or even wish to, remain a part of the commercial fishing community.

DECEMBER 2000



F/V Michele Ann in Yaquina Bay

Monday
December 11, 2000

Four-thirty a.m. I'm awake. The *F/V Michele Ann* is being loaded with the last of its crab pots, ready to leave Newport and head north to Astoria, a port on the Columbia River. Tomorrow at 8 a.m., hundreds of boats will go to sea loaded with crab gear stacked on their decks and then dump those pots into the ocean. Each pot will be dropped to the ocean floor, and marked with a colorful buoy, specific to the owner of the pot. The pots are baited one by one, with the individual crabber's secret recipe stuffed into plastic jars that have holes drilled into them, so the scent of the bait attracts the crabs. "Hanging bait," or fresh fish carcasses, are also attached to the pot.

After the gear is laid, the boats will then start retrieving their pots, hopefully full of crab. The pots are hydraulically hauled on board the vessels and emptied. Only male crabs of a certain size are kept for sale, and all females are returned to the sea to protect future stock. The pots are then rebaited and reset, pushed off the side of the vessel, line and buoys trailing, so they can be found and retrieved again.

However, we have been getting calls from fishermen at the Columbia River, and further north that the crabs aren't "ready," meaning they might not yet be full and heavy with crab meat. Worse yet, an agreement with the buyers about the price has not yet been settled. Cynically, Bob and I wonder if that means they are trying to discourage the Newport boats from coming north to fish.

We both roll out of bed, Bob to the shower and then to the computer to check the NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) website for weather conditions; me to dress then load cardboard boxes into the back of his pickup truck. The boxes contain frozen dinners I made: chicken enchiladas, pork loin with sour cream noodles, pot stickers, scalloped potatoes and ham, chili, goulash, turkey with dressing and gravy. I double-check the list I assembled for him yesterday:

reading glasses, fishing permits, cash, checkbook, prescriptions. I put empty duffle bags in front of the stacks of his work clothes I'd washed, folded and laid out on the loveseat in our bedroom. Bob left first for the boat, and I followed in the Explorer, pulling into the loading dock at the fish plant. His crew untied the boat from the port dock and drove to the fish plant to load pots, bait and the food I brought.

When I left the house at 6 a.m., the boys were still asleep. I am nervous about their day. Dylan, a high school senior, is skipping school. He and Ben, home from college, are taking Bob's white and blue Ford pickup and driving to Astoria. They're hauling a trailer loaded with the "shelter deck," a 10-foot by 10-foot two-sided aluminum shelter that will be bolted onto the deck of the boat for the guys to work under during bad weather. It had been taken off the *Michele Ann* to maximize room to stack crab pots on the deck, but would be re-attached to the vessel once the gear was laid and fishing underway.

I thought it wouldn't be cold enough for the roads to be icy, but Highway 101 north to Astoria traverses mountains in the Coast Range and goes through a tunnel. It isn't easy driving that route in a car at the best of times, let alone a truck hauling a trailer loaded with thousands of pounds of equipment on slick pavement.

Dear God, please let them be safe. I often lurch from prayer to prayer, from husband to sons to crew. *Dear God, just please let them all be safe.*

People often ask if I worry. I blithely assure them I don't. For if you really thought about the dangers involved in commercial fishing, you'd be paralyzed. Frozen with worry.

Tuesday
December 12, 2000

Bob, somewhere on the ocean heading north to Astoria, called me yesterday from the boat. “We may not lay our gear,” he said. “The crabs aren’t ready. Processors will pay only \$1.25.” That amount was far less than what the crabs are worth. Would there be a strike?

Later in the afternoon, Bob called again. “The gear isn’t going in the water, honey,” he said.

Oh, brother, I thought. Meanwhile, Bob said that Ben and Dylan had arrived in Astoria in fine shape, with the truck and trailer of equipment intact. The boys were going to the crabbers’ meeting near Astoria, to keep Bob in touch with what was going on with the local fishermen. It was a matter of timing. Bob did not want to cross the Columbia River bar to “lay up” with the guys on strike, and then suddenly see crab boats loaded with gear headed down the river toward him. If the strike was going to settle soon, he’d stay on the ocean waiting, and not set any gear until the strike broke. Bob sent Ben and Dylan to the crab meeting so they could relay the latest information to him to help decide what to do.

“What the hell?” I said. “For Christ’s sake, Bob, tell those boys to come home. Jesus, the roads are freezing; there’s black ice all over. Some of the roads are closed, Dylan’s got school...”

“Okay, okay,” Bob said. “I’ll get them out of here. Take it easy, they’re fine.”

The phone rang at dinner time. The boys? I thought. Are they okay? Bob? Is he okay? I live with this litany running through my head every fishing season. But it was Russell Smotherman on the phone, a crabber at the Columbia River. “What’s up, Russell?” I asked.

“No gear’s going in the water. We aren’t fishing,” said Russell.

Russell was shouting against loud background noise. I suspected this conversation was not just for my benefit, but for

the Astoria crabbers sitting in the bar that served as the meeting room.

“What’s the news?” I asked.

“Nobody’s gear goes in the water, everyone’s holding,” Russell said.

“I’ll tell Bob, Russell. You can call him on his cell phone, but I will tell him, too. That’s no problem,” I reassured. “Bob’s with you.” These crabbers at Astoria were panicking that Bob and the other fishermen from Newport would lay their crab pots and start fishing before they did.

I called Bob and gave him the information from Russell, which, as it turned out, Bob already knew.

“Ben called me,” Bob said. “I told Ben it was important for me to know what was going on, but for him to just listen.”

I thought, Oh, for God’s sake. There are my two kids, in a bar somewhere, with a bunch of uptight fishermen. The Astoria crabbers all knew Bob was coming north, along with Todd Whaley, on the *Miss Sarah*, the largest crab vessel on the coast, and Justin Yager, another very talented fisherman.

“I told Ben that if the subject came up, to tell the men we were on our way to the river, and that we will do whatever the fishermen at the river do,” Bob said.

It is hard to describe the energy of these fishermen just before a season starts; they’re like thoroughbred racehorses in the starting gate. The men are extremely keyed up and ready to bolt. Many at the meeting were there only to make sure no one else left the dock early to go fishing. They were distrustful of one another, and did not want anyone to get the jump on them. One of the fishermen in the Astoria meeting announced that Bob was on his way north. As instructed by Bob, Ben stayed silent. But then Al Gann, a very productive fisherman himself, said “I wouldn’t trust Bob Eder any further than I could throw him.” It was then that Ben stood up.

“I know what Bob Eder’s going to do,” Ben said.

Al Gann jumped up, physically confronted Ben and said,

“Who the fuck are you?”

Ben looked at Al Gann straight on and said, “My name is Ben Eder and Bob Eder is my dad. And he told me to tell you he’ll do whatever you guys decide—set gear or sit and wait for a better price.”

Ben is so brave. I’ve been in rooms full of angry, uptight fishermen and it isn’t an easy place to be—not even for me—a grown woman lawyer. I couldn’t imagine what it was like for Ben to hear someone talk about his father in a disrespectful manner. I am enormously proud that he stood up in that group of men and defended his father. Not one of those men did Ben know, except for crazy Dennis Sturgell, a talented crabber of ill repute. Sturgell later told Bob that he needed a wheelbarrow to carry Ben’s balls out of the room that day.

“After the meeting, Sturgell laid \$2,000 bucks on the bar and bought drinks for everybody,” Ben told me that evening, wide-eyed.

“Yeah, and I had to stay outside the whole time,” Dylan complained.

“I knew you’d kill me, Mom, if I’d taken Dylan into the bar,” Ben said with a grin.

So last night, after Bob tied up the boat at the dock in Astoria, the devastated crew took the bait off the boat, put it in the freezer at the fish plant, found a slip in a very crowded harbor, and returned to Newport. Ben, home for the holidays from Reed College, had planned to finance the next six months traveling in South America with crab money, but he hadn’t earned a dime yet. And here was Bob, suddenly back home, who yesterday I kissed goodbye, thinking he wouldn’t be sleeping in our bed for the next couple of months.