

Peter dropped the line overboard, the reel spinning with its heavy lead weight. When the line went slack, Peter reeled it in a bit and tried to steady himself against the increasing pitch of the boat. He had been rehearsing some words of concern he hoped would penetrate his dad's dark mood without igniting a tantrum that would further embarrass him in front of Jimmy. He could tell Jimmy was getting seasick, and the storm, moving in their direction, looked like a bad one.

Before he could find the guts to suggest heading back to shore, Peter felt a strong tug on his line, waited a moment, then pulled back instinctively on the rod and started reeling. But after a few turns of the reel the line went taut, the rod bending under the sudden pressure.

"Jesus almighty," he cried out. "I've either got the bottom, or that's one damn big fish!"

"I'll circle about so we don't lose 'im," Peter's dad yelled, slowly turning the boat in a counter-clockwise direction. "Just don't give him too much slack or he'll get loose for sure."

Peter slowly dipped the pole toward the water, reeling in a few feet of line with each downward movement. But whatever he had hooked was bigger than any fish Peter had ever brought to the boat and he was fighting the creeping fear that he was not up to the task of hauling in such a huge catch.

After what seemed like an eternity, Peter cried out.

"I can't hold on!"

His arms were screaming with pain. By now the waves had begun to rock the boat with such ferocity that he could barely keep on his feet, let alone reel in the monster on his line.

Peter's dad yelled to Jimmy to come forward and take the wheel while he took over the job of reeling in the fish.

"Keep a firm hand on it."

Jimmy fought off a wave of panic. His total boating experience was a skiff and small outboard on a calm lake. Now he was being asked to maneuver a 40-foot boat in a storm while the feisty, beer-drinking captain tried to haul in some whale of a fish.

Peter was forced to look on from the stern, trying not to cry in front of his father and Jimmy, who, with a white-knuckled grip on the wheel, had no idea how to counter the erratic shifting of the boat's course in the roiling waters.

This chaotic maelstrom of activity continued. Peter's dad called out, "It's a goliath for damn sure!" He could now see the outline of the enormous grouper a few feet beneath the surface. Peter looked down at the grouper whose enormous body appeared like an apparition. The creature looked clown-like with its dotted face, its tiny eye spooked him. Long after this moment, which felt as if a dream, he could close his eyes and see the afterimage of the grouper's eye.

"Quick, Peter, we'll need the gaff to haul him to the boat. Let me get a grip on the rod before you let go."

His father's voice, uncharacteristically panic-stricken, broke the brief spell the grouper had held on him. Peter and his dad rocked together like a drunk couple dancing. They were covered with salt spray and sweat, and it took their combined strength not to lose their hold on the rod during the pass off. In their tight embrace, Peter inhaled the rank smell of perspiration, beer breath.

"Move for Christ's sake! He must be a couple of hundred pounds!"

Peter inched his way up the starboard side of the pitching boat and was unclasping the secured gaff when a large swell pounded the boat, water cresting over the side. Peter lost his footing in the sloshing water and slid forward, kicking over a tackle box and falling on the contents. In an effort to lift himself off the slippery deck, he put his hand down on a treble hook,

which sank into his middle finger and into the median nerve, the excruciating pain causing Peter to let loose with a blood-curdling scream.

The horrible pitch of Peter's voice caused his dad to momentarily lose his grip on the pole, the arc of which seemed to have reached a breaking point. Regaining his grip, he glanced at Jimmy struggling to keep the boat heading into the oncoming swells, and unable to see his son on the opposite side of the center console, stared briefly at the heavens for guidance, and hope of divine intervention. But the gods were silent and Peter was not, letting go with a second, even more terrifying cry. Perhaps sensing some slackening of the line, the fish propelled itself downward against the motion of the boat, which pitched in the opposite direction, wrenching the pole from Mr. LeBlanc's hands, so that hook, line, rod and the great goliath together disappeared, the giant fish a momentary apparition before the next swell swept the image away.

Peter's dad turned his burning eyes from the sea in the direction of his son and made his way around the stern until he reached Peter and flinched at the sight of the hook protruding through the bloody, twitching finger. Peter held the wounded hand with his other and continued to scream at the top of his lungs.

Struggling to keep his balance, Mr. LeBlanc lifted his son up and using the console for support, inched his way past the nearly catatonic Jimmy until he reached the bait well and wrestling Peter's hand to the cover, drew a razor- sharp fillet knife from its sheath. Jimmy, hearing Peter's scream, wrenched his head painfully to his left and made contact with Peter's pleading eyes.

Mr. LeBlanc's first instinct was to make a small surgical cut on Peter's finger close to the fishhook, but the moment he released the pressure on his son's arm to reach for the knife, Peter, responding to another jolt of electrifying pain from the injured nerve, managed to wrench his hand free from his dad's grip. Peter grabbed the abandoned gaff with his uninjured hand and swinging it at his dad until it met his father's cheek, tracing a crimson arc from nose to jaw.