

# Ordeal

By Laurie Dawson



Had another challenging experience out of Ketchikan, Alaska in the fall. I flew up to do tax assistance and light labor on a small fishing vessel. There were only two of us on the boat and the skipper had just filled up with 300 gallons of marine diesel. He motored to the very end of Naket Inlet, a complete wilderness, 9 hours out of Ketchikan to fish the last few weeks of the season. On the third night, as darkness fell, the stove started to silently burn up inside the steel stovepipe.

The skipper was at the back of the 36 foot gillnetter and I was outside in bare feet and no coat, looking through the ice chest to prepare dinner. When I walked by the wheelhouse, which was 5 steps down, I noticed the stove pipe was glowing bright red. It was now dark, around 8:30pm. I called out to the skipper to come and look and by the time he walked 10 feet, flames started to shoot out of the top. He deployed a small fire extinguisher which did nothing. The insulation had been burning so fire exploded out of every corner of the roof and came together to engulf it all. He grabbed a bucket and was throwing ocean water on the fire but it was too large. The survival suits, marine radio, cell phones and everything I brought were in the flames. I started to untie the raft. Finally the skipper gave up and ran to untie the other side of the raft. The flames were shooting out of the wheelhouse now and burning us by the time the raft (no oars) went into the water. He got in and I fell off the boat into the freezing water, then crawled onto the raft. We paddled with our arms to "shore" which consisted of rocks, trees and fallen wood and found two logs to use as oars. He insisted on rowing around and around the boat, looking for his cat so we were burned further. He got the cat, hair singed but alive.

I did all the rowing that night, nearly 7 hours in pitch dark sitting in freezing water inside the raft. The skipper had lost his mind. He raved and screamed insults and threats at me (he had lit the stove) for the entire time on the water. He was insane. At one point he dropped the cat off on a small land outcropping in the middle of the inlet. We could see nothing and there was a strong wind and current. He had on boots, a real shirt, jeans, hat and had a lamp mounted on his head. I had one wet torn summer shirt and shorts on. It was freezing. On two occasions the skipper forced the raft onto land outcroppings. got out of the raft, pulled it out of the water and took off over the rocks into the woods with it. He could see to walk due to his head lamp. He was trying to leave me there to die so his insurance company wouldn't have to settle with me. Both times I had to run and crawl over rocks and bushes in order to try and live, begging for my life. On the second outcropping he turned around and pushed me down onto the rocks. Each time I semi-swam out in to the freezing water and forced myself back into the raft, negotiating for my life by telling him that I would keep doing all the rowing.

He ranted about killing me, bashing my head in with his log/oar, throwing my body in the water, etc., etc. It was necessary to use all my clinical counseling skills (thank you Antioch) to stay calm and alive although I was dying of hyperthermia and severe dehydration. After 5.5 hours we saw a tiny light in the distance. It kept disappearing because the waves were so choppy. There was no moonlight, only pitch black. Finally we got to it and it was a one foot tall light on the end of a mile long fishing net. In the far distance we could see the two red lights on the top of a sleeping fishing vessel's mast. The first miracle. His raft was illegally not equipped by a GPS tracking device. Because we were in the middle of nowhere no one could see the inferno that was the sinking boat, so this was absolute salvation. We crawled along the net and finally came upon the boat. I could no longer move and had to be lifted aboard. I was afraid of being shot at that point because the crew was asleep inside their wheelhouse.

When we entered the wheelhouse, the owner, a young friend of the skippers, sat up with a start. Alongside his bed were 7 loaded hunting rifles. He had told us the day before that he and his crewman had already made over 150K each for school and were done fishing. The second miracle was that something turned them around the previous afternoon and they came back up the inlet to lay one more set. No cell phones or marine radios worked that far out. It was warm in the cabin and he gave us water and food and dry clothes. The skipper insisted on waiting until dawn to try and salvage anything off of the boat.

At dawn the young man, whose raft had an outboard on it, took the insane skipper back to his now beached partially submerged boat. They gathered the net, two buoys and a few other metal articles. They went and picked up the cat. My purse, id, shoes, money, passport, clothes and coat were of course gone. That morning another boat arrived and offered to take us down to one of the fishing tenders who travel around daily, buying fish off the boats. Although the skipper immediately borrowed the boat owner's cell phones once they started working, he disallowed me from using them. He even told the cell owners not to lend them to me and they complied. When we reached the fishing tender, they had heard about the fire and another tender, owned by a woman, had clothes and money for both of us. She had also graciously booked us a single room in the only motel in Ketchikan, thinking we were lovers. Other people gave us money.

During that journey the skipper threatened me so badly that I went to one of the young men working on the tender and asked if I could stand by them in the rain while they loaded fish, for protection. It worked. Finally the skipper went to pass out in a bedroom. I told the tender Captain that my life was still in danger and asked to stay on his boat. He just nodded, having known the 'Shelo' skipper for a decade.

We finally got back into Ketchikan and the insane skipper grabbed his cat and screamed from the dock for me to follow. The tender captain screamed back no. I stayed two nights on that tender wondering where I was going to go since I knew no one in Ketchikan, etc. They had to leave the next day so they told me where a thrift store was to buy clothes and left. I had borrowed web enabled cell phones from the men on the tender and posted my dilemma on Facebook. One of my college friends who had dormed next to me in my first year at WWU, posted that he was a Lutheran Pastor in Kansas, and that he was using his network to locate a Pastor in Ketchikan. He did and told me where it was. I had gone to the laundry mat to wash my torn clothes and ran into a man who offered his home for 3 days while the Lutheran Church and Pastor in Ketchikan were located.

He dropped me off at the church where I stayed for nearly a month, recovering and waiting for an emergency visa to arrive there. There are no food banks in Ketchikan and I was warned NOT to go to the co-ed safe house. The two battered women's shelters were full. Without the kindness of this network and the wonderful people who helped me, I would have frozen to death in the raging storms that battered Ketchikan and starved.

The Pastor in Ketchikan told his congregation what happened and they donated enough money for me to either fly back to Seattle or take the Alaska Ferry back. Chose the ferry. I went to the Peace Hope emergency room and got some painkillers for my torn rotator cuff and a sling. The nearest clinic cost \$250 to even walk in the door so I couldn't get any other treatment. On the second day back I ran into the insane Skipper in Safeway (since this is the only real grocery store in Ketchikan, one runs into everyone eventually). He approached me but could not threaten me further, too many witnesses. I lived in fear that he would find out I slept by myself in a huge old building at night. The Pastors assistants gave me keys and started letting me use their computers so I could make a reservation on the ferry, etc...The Alaska Ferry was absolutely marvelous. Sleeping on the couches was totally normal, as the congregation could not afford to get me a state room. I had a blast and saw pod of whales, schools of dolphins and met wonderful people.

When I got back, I contacted the skippers insurance company (had overheard him talking to his mom on the phone, and stating his insurance company). In the mall in Ketchikan, renting a computer for \$6 an hour, I had found a marine attorney. He got me a fast settlement which was necessary to set up a new apartment in Seattle. I received one more threatening email from the Skipper who was raging that his insurance rates were now going up due to the settlement and I blocked him. I heard through the grapevine that he had blown out of Ketchikan to hide out at his dad's place in the Midwest. I had that address so gave it to the marine lawyers. They were thrilled and they served him there, with my suit and other lawsuits against him for non-payment of former crew members. They leined his boat insurance money and everyone got paid. And I got to live!

Other news through the grapevine was that the skipper had a raging substance abuse problem, had gone to bars in Ketchikan before he fled, telling the tale of losing his boat and insisting he was alone on it. Other locals disclosed that his vessel was known as the "Drug Boat" and that he sold cocaine and meth to other fishermen on the water. He had to hire in the lower 48 because all the locals knew what he was and wouldn't work with him. I am curious if he will ever show his face in Ketchikan again...the Coast Guard wants to talk to him.