

## Cleaning Fish

ST Chapman

She sat in the dirt and counted out loud.

“One, two, three...” When she got to 11, she smiled because it was the same number as her age. Pulling the knife from her belt, she leaned forward. Her dirty fingers, crusted with grime and seaweed and other substances from the bay, wielded the sharp, metal blade with precision. And just like reciting the alphabet or counting to 100, she didn’t need to remember the lesson. She just liked to.

“Cut the fins off first,” he had said. “Lots of folks skip this step, but it makes things easier.” He told her this when she was only five. When she could barely hold the knife.

“Now, scale the thing. Then rinse it in the bucket.” He would show her, then sit back and watch, patiently.

“Next, tilt him and cut.” She cut herself once. That was all it took to never cut herself again.

“Now, gut him. Just like I showed you. I know it’s a little gross, but if you wanna eat, you gotta gut.” She threw up that first time. But he didn’t laugh. He simply smiled at her and moved the fish to a cleaner spot where she could try again.

“And there you have it. A bucket full of clean fish.”

Clean, she thought, running the blade in the dirt before putting it back in her belt and picking up the bucket. Eleven clean fish. As she walked home, she tried to remember the last time *he* was clean. And could not.