

## I stabbed myself in the chest



LEAH NASH FOR THE GUARDIAN

**I** was 22 and hadn't been a commercial fisherman for long when I got a job on a boat in Gloucester, Massachusetts. The weather can get really heavy there, but I was happy that summer's day as we left port. The sky was clear and the water calm. On a previous trip, lobster fishing off Alaska, the waves had been 35ft high, so I thought this would be pretty easy by comparison.

We were fishing for slime eels, horrible creatures you catch in big, heavy barrels. It was my job to stack the barrels, which were baited with herring, and prepare them to be dropped in the water on a long line weighted with cinder blocks. You have to be really careful, because anyone who gets caught on the line or thrown overboard will be pulled down so fast, there's no way anyone could get to you in time. The boat

I was on had lost a lot of men that way; I'd seen a man have all his fingers cut off by a line. That's why all fishermen carry a serrated knife in their belt, in case they need to cut themselves free.

After 18 hours at sea, we'd caught a lot of eel and were preparing to drop the barrels for a second time. I was stacking them when something went wrong. Suddenly, one of the barrels came flying at me and knocked me over on the deck. My vision went black for a second and my nose was bleeding. What I didn't know was that another fishing boat nearby had accidentally picked up the end of our line in the water and was pulling it in the opposite direction. Luckily, the captain realised what had happened and came out of the wheelhouse yelling, "Steve! Cut the line!" I managed to get up and

pull out my knife, but then a second barrel came at me really fast and knocked into my right hand, slamming the blade into the left side of my chest.

I was sitting on the ground completely dazed. The captain cut the line, and he and the crew gathered around me. I looked down and saw about half of the 5in blade embedded in my chest, close to my heart. I'd felt it go in hard, but I was still shocked to see it sticking out like that.

I didn't really feel pain at first; it was just a kind of probing feeling. I felt around under the sweater I had on and was relieved to realise that the blade seemed to be in my pectoral muscle and not my heart. The captain didn't want to pull out the blade, because he wasn't sure how much damage there was. So, with the knife still

sticking out of my chest, we went down to the galley and a deckhand brought me ice to put around the knife blade. Then he made lunch as usual. People don't get fazed by things like that on a fishing boat. Horrible accidents happen all the time.

I just sat on a settee as the captain turned the boat around to take us back to port, which was eight hours away. He seemed most upset about losing half his gear overboard.

The deck hands weren't experienced enough to take the wheel and the captain had been up since 3am, so he went to sleep in his bunk while I sat in the wheelhouse on watch, with an ice pack held around the knife. By now, the pain had really kicked in, and when I moved, I could feel the blade rubbing against bone, which made me shiver. All I could do was take a lot of aspirin and wait. That eight-hour trip to port felt like a lifetime.

Back on land, the captain drove me to the doctor, and on the way we chatted as if everything was normal, and I didn't have a knife sticking out of my chest. I was just desperate to get to a bar for a drink.

The doctor told me that the blade was only two inches from my heart. He injected my chest with local anaesthetic before pulling out the blade, but it still hurt a lot. I had a few stitches and antibiotics, and was fine in a few days.

People were surprised, but it didn't put me off fishing. By the following summer, I was back on a boat in Alaska, this time fishing for salmon. I didn't let the incident affect me - I thought it was kind of cool, just a funny story. But I don't think my mother felt the same way.  
**Steve Grove**

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