



KRILL AMERICA

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Chapter 1: Slow, Shallow, Breaths
About 6473 words

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Dedicated to:

Heather Christine Howard
Daniel William & Kinley Makale Forehand
And a new generation

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Chapter 1: Slow, Shallow Breaths

It was a stupefying surprise to all in earshot when Noah gave the abrupt order to, “Come about!” We’d seen calm seas and good weather for weeks until visibility dropped into deep fog about an hour prior to this now infamous command. Things really couldn’t have been better for the past month under the circumstances we were all facing—financially, socially, politically, and emotionally.

“Noah,” Captain J.T. Noack had been piloting the S.S. Krill America from the deep-water Port of Galveston, Texas for some twenty-three years. He’d led the vessel through four refits, dozens of technical upgrades, and lately, numerous lethal financial downgrades. So now, as she was near her “end-of-life,” we all explicitly trusted Noah’s expertise. There was not a single doubt that his patriarchal care for each and every individual on the crew would guide the Krill America home in a couple of weeks, for one final arrival. We all expected to soon return to the Port of Galveston hosting a victorious welcome and a grand finale party celebrating Noah’s impending and well-deserved retirement, and the ultimate end of the Krill America project.

I stirred from a deep stupor to the rustlings in the hallway as all hands were awakened by the alarm. As Chief Engineer of our little-known research and harvest vessel, it was my job to oversee maintenance of the engines, all of the cryogenics, and most of the peripheral equipment on board. I clamored to my feet just in time to hear the then imminent next surprise over the

intercom. “All hands, all hands, report immediately to your work stations. This is not a drill! All hands report!”

“What the hell...” were the first words from Will as he and I calmly brushed by each other in the dimly-lit corridor. He, pulling a shirt over his head, me, zipping my pants, we scrambled toward our respective decks, him the helm, me the dungeon. The Krill America is a one-hundred-ninety-foot vessel like none other. It consists of a messing of several components, and looks something like an old-school shrimp trawler bolted to four freight-train-rail-car-sized food-grade stainless-steel refrigeration tanks, all welded to a full-blown “MIT” science lab. Old, but reliable, she was on a routine krill harvest, and exploratory oil run. She was only about half laden, so we were still fairly light in the water and capable of reasonably quick maneuvers, if you maneuver like a tugboat pushing a barge up a flooded Mississippi River.

That said, I never expected the bulkhead between Will’s bunk and mine, and some of the research quarters to suddenly shift... But they did, by what seemed to be eighteen inches inward from the starboard side, and then immediately jerk right back into place. Of course, nothing is routine in the Antarctic. Abruptly, and sounding like a train wreck in fast motion, the wall lurched and air and steam rushed in filling our nostrils as all the lights blinked twice and then died.

I heard Kat scream at the end of the hall, “Oh my God!” and in a final glance back over my shoulder I spotted Will as he was violently tossed

portside, and then sharply pinned between the fire extinguisher and some of the galley plumbing. He winced in pain four paces behind me when the final flicker of light was absorbed by the darkness amid shrieks from various other crewmen, and distant short quick metal-on-metal crashes, and belches of waves from the sea.

I grasped the overhead railing in time to maintain my balance, and my mind raced instantly to attention. Startled into awareness from the deep sleep we were all so deserved of, I surmised that whatever was happening... this contingency... was clearly not routine. I stifled my own fear out of instinct. “Will, are you OK?” I knew I had to find my place in the engine room as I shouted over the calamity.

“Fuck no!” he said. That was the only answer from him as I inched toward the stairwell.

“I have to go...” I mouthed tentatively... “Kat, can you help him? Are you okay? Katy?”

Katy, Kat, Katherine Weston wasn't even a part of the regular ship's crew. She was a bit of an elitist; petite, or can I say boney, but still pretty; and an extremely “pampered, perra bitch,” but “who am I to judge.” Kate is sort of nice, but always letting it be known that she's an heir to the Weston Oil crown jewels.

You know of Weston: English “Weston Olive Oil, Weston Corn Oil, Weston Vegetable Oil.” Weston, Weston, Weston. Over the course of my

career, I must have heard the word Weston way too many times to be unprejudiced, but in my mind, Katy, Kat, Kate was quite arrogant, and sheepish in the face of anything outside of her self-entitled little box. Kat always seemed to have her own “perfectly dressed and accessorized” personal agenda.

“Kat, can you help him, damn it?” Katherine was aboard as a research tech “genius” doing part of her MBA work on a grant from a Chinese fuel oil company. She was hoping to develop corporate diversification and enhance her personal portfolio with new ventures that now included Antarctic crude oil reserves. Fuel oil found in this frigid, God forsaken region of the globe burned like any other gas at the pump, and she knew it. She considered oil from: krill, omega three, veggies, animal fat, crude oil, and any oil— to be something invincible. She had big eyes for oil. Her interests were, to say the least, “esoterically charmed, and very much egocentric.”

As I saw it, Kat was happily aristocratic, and she presumably had all the literal clout to look down on virtually everyone else. After all, her vegetable-oil-rich family was worth billions, and was among the first to invest in krill research. Her family had actually built the Krill America around the time she was born; and they basically have “solely funded” the entire Krill America project since around the time Katherine entered college.

I was “so” beneath her, but I barked again, “Kat? Kat?”

“I can’t see anything!” She was always short with me.

I muttered under my breath, “Well, that’s your shallow life flashing before your eyes.”

And then, just before I could insist again she snapped-to enough to say, “Go ... I’ll do something.”

I blindly scrambled upward, out of the ship’s bowels, and toward the light of a small fire and the sparks of electrical wiring snapping on the deck above. “Shit! What the fuck is going on?” was the last I could hear of Kat over the drone of metal grinding on metal and emergency alarm systems yelping. I could only hope she was up to the moment, but it occurred to me that she was actually asking a reasonable question for once. What the fuck was going on?

Look, I know “The Krill” better than anyone. “Krill America” was a good idea in the late eighties, and even well into the nineties. This boat has seen some good times! I knew what she could take, and what she was never expected to try. Moving up the stairs, I was confident in the ship, but still apprehensive about the present circumstance.

I knew Noah was at the helm and that everything in the log was accurate and current. I figured I could get the next available guy I find upstairs to put out that little fire, and I’d continue moving toward the source of whatever the next problem might be. Unfortunately, I don’t remember much after that. Without warning, I took a ton of water in my face for what seemed like an eternity. In that endless moment all of our lives changed dramatically; and my simple, scattered life flashed before my eyes.

It's literally impossible for the human mind to comprehend how cold the sea water is out here. When we're here over the summer months in the southern hemisphere, much of what is normally frozen; thaws or becomes liquid at just above minus one-point-eight degrees Celsius, or at about twenty-eight degrees Fahrenheit. It doesn't freeze at that temperature because of the high salt content, but your body freezes instantly when subjected to any direct contact with ocean water. You even learn to avoid the occasional light spray. If you are drenched in water, paralysis occurs almost instantaneously and your ability to navigate and move your extremities are only slightly less demanding than your ability to think.

That's what strikes you the most is your inability to manage rational thought. One second you're cognizant and cool and the next your mind is Jell-O in an ice cube. My mind wanted to continue up the stairs, and then aft toward the rear of the ship, and then down two more flights to the engines; but my thoughts were so suddenly shocked into submission that I couldn't even do a simple analysis of the direction that I was now facing.

Comprehending the difference between up and down, or fore and aft seemed painfully far-removed and well beyond my mental processing ability.

The sting on your skin is only momentary, and then everything in your body goes numb. Oddly, I thought I could hear my heart lurching above all the uproar. My heart raced, and then went abruptly silent along with the entire calamity around me... Bam... stone silence... nothing more than the voice in

my head. In that split-second I thought I was for sure dead and gone!

My life has been nothing exceptional. In an instant, I flashed back through it like pages in a comic book. I envisioned my cabin on West Beach, Galveston. It was like I was there: The warm Texas air whipped through my hair, and the seagulls floated just inches from my face, snatching Cheetos from the tips of my orange fingers. I could feel, see, and taste everything. Taste was suddenly an absurdly enhanced sense that I can still clearly recall. Mardi Gras beers, Dickens on the Strand toddies; everything in my past became strikingly vivid, especially the flavors. I became infatuated with the fact that it was more like watching an edited movie of life with aromas and tastes in it, rather than actually living life. None the less, all the sights, sounds, tastes, even the smells of home came rushing back into my physical fiber and very soul.

I was overwhelmed by the number of feelings. Emotions rose in my chest with the grace of a dolphin, but still with the utter impact of a ram piston. It all seemed surreal and strange to me, and I was further shocked by the thought that I was finding the experience to be way too satisfying. The salt air, the carnival-like atmosphere, the music reverberation, the sense of tasting fresh bay oysters; it all felt enticingly good. I actually absorbed the experience and fed from it. It seemed quite nurturing, and gratifying.

In a retrospective moment, I missed my Sharalee. Her hair smelled so fresh and real to me now in this daze. I had lost Shara some twenty years ago

to a bad cancer before I took this job. I couldn't help but wonder if she had died this way, "remembering her passions for being alive." I supposed perhaps I would see her again down this path, just around this next corner. I actually felt like maybe I would touch her hand and face again, and soon. I truly thought that I was a "long goner".

I had expected dying to be such a bombastic, brutal fight between myself and the unknown, a great gnashing of teeth; or even to be something as simple as a muffled whimper of resignation and then silence. However, at this particular moment I was surprisingly relieved. Amidst all the crashing chaos and with the calming relaxation of a young child under a benevolent father's gentle guard; I quietly drifted-off into a peace and serenity that is still beyond my ability to describe. I happily took my assorted memories, hopes and dreams; and casually, tranquilly, drifted off to sleep.

I'm not a particularly religious man, but I did think about God. I did repent a little. I know I'm not a perfect man. Undoubtedly, I'm no hero because I thought of absolutely nothing more that night of the Krill America, of Noah, or anything else. I had risen to the occasion of this grave catastrophe with all the determination of a feeble old man on an all-night bender. I just didn't seem to care about much of anything anymore, although Will did briefly cross my mind.

Will's personal story of perseverance was especially settling for me. I found a calming peace of mind from thinking of Will, whom I'd come to love

as a son. I hoped that he was fine and that he had immediately snatched himself up to help-out with this strange, surprising crisis we were in. Will's father had died when Will was twelve... and so William Thomas had pretty much raised himself. He had graduated on a shoe string after the family's limited money had long run out... but he managed somehow to pay his way through college on his own. Stephen F. Austin State University Forestry School in "Naco-Nowhere," otherwise known as the oldest town in Texas, Nacogdoches was a good school, but forestry?

Will had spent a lot of time dreaming and living and not so much time thinking of how to make a living, or how to get ahead in life with a dream. Why he'd jumped from the Piney Woods onto this ship was just a fluke of destiny that had been dictated by the "luck of the draw."

College for Will had ended with very few promises of any career path, but his love for the sea had always followed him from childhood. Much like his dad, Will had spent many summers in Galveston on a fishing boat or two. Will had also raised a few indigenous ocean-side garden plants from cuttings and seedlings—small things like succulents and grasses—something he picked-up in forestry college, enough to make ends meet, and get him a local reputation as a green-thumb enthusiast guy, a naturalist, an economic nurseryman of sorts.

Will was mild natured and friendly, cynical and silly, boisterous only occasionally, and honest to a fault. You know the type Will was someone who

would, without hesitation, suffer his own great personal loss to help another individual survive what he called, “this bitter bitch of a life.” He had a good heart; he wanted to feed the world five years ago when he came aboard Krill America. At that time, it still seemed like an ongoing krill harvest was a good option for an honest way to save the planet; even though right now that all seemed especially trivial. To tell you the truth, I have never figured out why Will left the sea for forestry, and then went so completely back from the forest to the sea, and to this desolate, seemingly plantless life on the southern oceans. We all have our demons.

Right now, for all of us, all of our demons suddenly appear to be attacking us.

I really had no way of knowing if Will was helplessly headed toward the same tunnel of light that I was seeing in my own mind’s eye, or if he was panicked, gasping for air in this awful glacial sea. I wondered if he would be saved from what now looked to be a tragic, catastrophic, eternal end for all of us. I wondered, and my mind wandered.

And then, like a toggle switch being flicked, the battery backup lighting snapped to attention and the hallway was dimly illuminated with a dingy yellow aura. My, my head hurt. My stomach rippled with a lurching spasm and I convulsed-up a gallon of salt water and steam from the bitter cold, frothy murk in my gut. I naturally assumed that I was still alive because of the icy chill in my bones and the fact that my puke stank like sour whiskey. The

reality of feeling alive again was actually very daunting. I wasn't at all too certain that I was pleased with anything about it, though. For a moment I almost wished that my life had actually all really been over. I whispered to myself a "Hail Mary" and made the sign of the cross.

My name is Maximiliano Villanueva... Max to the team. Funny, I remembered that as if I'd been struggling with a test question for hours and then boom, the answer suddenly popped into my head. You know how you get brain freeze when you eat ice cream, or drink something too cold, too fast? I had body freeze "and" brain freeze. It was extremely difficult to move, and I wasn't yet sure if all my parts were in proper working order. My mind seemed to be functioning, but if I was still fully intact was the next question. I hesitated to move. I thought it could be that my appendages were just simply handy, but might not be fully operational. I began to take inventory. My first sane thought was to try to gather my bearings and ascertain some of what had just happened. I knew we were upright in the sea. I could feel the motion of the ocean. Oh, that was a relief. I could tell up from down! What I didn't know was that we had just rolled one hundred degrees to port and then back to upright. I also had no idea that much of the boat above our current deck was missing. We wouldn't find out until much later that a sharp, completely unpredictable underwater earthquake and resulting tsunami had been generated just a dozen miles from us. The massive tidal wave had bashed us into the jagged face of a glacier-covered rocky outcropping on a tiny

uncharted Antarctic island. Moreover, I couldn't have imagined that the faithful Krill America was dead in the water.

Three days ago we had altered course, "by just a little," but today it was "by pretty much" ... actually, "by quite a bit." The primary mission of The Krill America was to harvest krill; a small shrimp-like crustacean that thrives on phytoplankton, rich algae, and zooplankton. The creatures swarm in the vast seas around earth's southernmost continent, Antarctica, in the Southern Ocean. Individually, the animals are less than two inches in length, but when they come together in a swarm the mass can be miles across and produce a phosphorescent glow that can be seen on the surface of the ocean and from satellite cameras out in space. That glow was what had made us change our course a few days ago. Data from our onboard instruments had indicated a much better harvest just off to our west, so we changed location by about fifty miles. Not too much in the beginning, but after following the swarm for three full nights, and with the swift currents, we were now about six hundred miles from where we were supposed to be, compared to our originally-planned track. The bad thing about that is that we had not reported the change in course to our communication relay base on Grytviken, South Georgia in the South Sandwich Islands.

Our harvest season was ending after this final run so we were anxious to get back home to Texas. Providence on the other hand had dictated an early-season blizzard that had shut down Grytviken Station electrical power earlier

in the week. That happens sometimes, and, historically, we've altered course more often than not. So it wasn't considered an extremely urgent communication that we were diverting. Right now, Grytviken was about five days away at a clear weather top-speed of about ten knots, or just over ten miles per hour.

Our schedule and time-line was something we normally reported daily, but the late March snowstorm, at the end of summer in this half of the world, now seemed an ominous forecast of the days ahead for us. The Southern Ocean is a place where everything freezes most of the year. Antarctic summer is the only season that we can sail and catch a harvest in this vast sea and sky. Unfortunately, out here six hundred miles can be a genuine void, and that was something that we hadn't counted on.

As I was coming-to, I realized that time perception in a situation like this is non-existent, but I must have been out for a pretty long while. I was coughing and sputtering phlegm onto my sleeve and found myself lying on the floor in a pool of filth like "a soggy pretzel after the booze got spilled." I think I crapped myself, but who would have ever even known, the place was a literal ship wreck! With my body twisted and soaked, my ear drums finally thawed enough to faintly hear, "Max!" "Max, are you dead yet?" I was almost dismayed to hear that it was Kat talking to me. Someone, maybe a contractor... a crewman, I don't know, someone wedged past me dragging another unidentifiable someone through the cabin litter. By all appearances

the person being dragged was lifeless, other than the persistent dripping of blood from his now concaved face. This was all beginning to be a little too real. “Will?”

“He’s in the infirmary.” Kat knelt next to me and her fine, long hair brushed my face. “Can you move?”

“Is he Ok?” I stretched my neck from side-to-side and grimaced to an ache in my leg.

“We don’t know yet, but more importantly, can you walk?” She nodded to my left thigh, and her hair brushed my week old beard and scraggly moustache. I caught a glimpse of blood smeared in her hair, and on her dainty, slender, latex-covered hands. When Kat came aboard her hair was down to her waist. It was something all men notice. I think all men like long hair; Sharalee had long hair. Kat had cut hers to the cleavage as soon as she got out here in the wind. I really thought at the time that she needed to hide those “little taters” of hers more and keep it longer, but she seemed to thrive on something new and different, on a regular basis. “You’ve got a lot of problems to take care of, old man! Can you sober up? Can you get up?”

Just then I could finally focus on it, “Shit!” There was a three-inch shard from a whiskey bottle sticking up through my jeans. “God damn it! Somebody get that out o’ me!”

I never expected Kat, the frail prima donna to become so assertive. Snatch! The glass was gone in one breath. With that I screamed like a banshee,

“you...Mutha, shit, damn, puta, suck, piss, crap, tits, and HELL!” In the next breath Kat had my shirt off and was using it to put pressure on the wound in my leg.

Simultaneously, above us, the pipes gurgled with a dominant bang, boom, “Get the fuck Ouuut!” Crash; and it didn’t take me long to jump up and scramble for a way out of there. I’m pretty sure that it was Katy that nudged me up toward the stairs. These were the same stairs that I had originally tried to ascend just a short time before, to no avail. The instant we broke out onto the level above us I was more shocked by what I saw and, ultimately, didn’t see, than I had been stunned by the wall of water that had knocked me back on my ass during my first ascent.

What used to be the infirmary and much of the laboratory was a scattered, mangled pile of debris and steel. The ceiling was torn open exposing the sky where the conning tower was supposed to be. I stood speechless, astonished. The radar, sonar, radio equipment rooms, the bridge, the whole damned bridge; all of it was not there. “Oh, my,” I slumped. I wasn’t at all sure of my sight. Was I just hallucinating? “Noah?” I could feel a mass in my throat as the realization began to set in.

Noah and half the crew had been in that conning tower, the tower that was now not there. There is nothing left! It was like a giant buzz-cut barber-shop razor had just whacked the whole damned thing off; and the remnants of hair had been discarded to the floor, or as it would be, out to sea. I still wasn’t to

the point of certainty or understanding. How could any of this, in any circumstance be at all possible? I struggled upward onto the deck.

An iceberg-like overhanging island ledge loomed menacingly over the remaining hull. If you knew how the Krill America was built you might be able to imagine how the menacing outcropping had savagely scalped our ship and given us the tremendous tossing we had taken. An enormous glacial ax had just so smoothly, completely severed the con decks like a steak knife through steaming hot tortillas. The Krill had been blindsided by the oncoming tidal wave, forcing the starboard side fully ashore and upward into the island outcropping, sheering off the entire top; and then the receding waters had gently rolled us back into the frosty deep. The Krill America had basically been decapitated and was now lifeless in the sea.

I was very distant for a moment. I reflected on my short-lived, fleeting life and death experience, and realized that an actual final life and death experience may still be imminent for all of us. I wondered how many people were still left aboard. How many souls had just seen their fate abruptly and brutally trashed? How many could have survived this massive impact and still be alive?

“Noah’s gone.” was all one of the med students could say, “...Along with eight others, crew and geeks.”

My mouth stood agape and my lip quivered slightly as the cold made smoke from my breath, and frosted on my raw moustache and eyelashes. I

suddenly felt more alone than I've ever experienced. Man, I do NOT want to be here, "Chinga"!

My mind scattered wildly. It didn't seem so very long ago that I had first joined Noah and his, "pack of animals." I didn't deserve a friend like Noah. He had taken me under his wing and kept me busy after Sharalee had passed on. He'd kept me dreaming of a better world and working toward something with a meaning in life. For all the past twenty years Noah had so unselfishly put-up with my sullen ignorance, curmudgeonly bitterness, and overall disdain for anything outside of a bourbon bottle. My God, he was a great man. How could he be gone?

Noah tried to feed the world with this whole damned krill deal. Hell, he had practically singlehandedly raised every person on this ship from illiterate childhood infancy. Noah had more than anyone else profoundly made the whole Krill America mission possible. He had affected each and every life of everyone he touched through his weary, but sincere, simple, compassionate smile. And he did it all by wielding only a soft-spoken twinkle in his eye, and the gray-bearded twitch of a stiff upper lip. How the hell were we supposed to do anything without Noah? "How the hell are we gonna get out of here?" And with that question on my lips, I was completely spent. I uncontrollably, fearfully cringed, and then passed out yet again.

It was Will whose voice brought me back to reality, "Max." I could see that he was weak, his eyes were just slits; and he lay on the floor alongside

several other people who were all covered with blankets.

“Will, you’re here? How are you, Hombre?”

“I’m tired... I think I broke some ribs or something.” I could see the worry between those slits of his and I could tell that he was taut with apprehension, but already coming to his senses. “How many are left?” he evenly questioned the room, nonchalantly, as if taking inventory in a hometown shrimp market.

A med student intern, who had only come aboard for just this one trip with my favorite passenger Kat was the first to respond. “Seven alive... but two of those may not make it to see the morning.”

“You mean seven out of sixteen?” I snap present. I didn’t even know the med student’s name, and, though I hated her message right now, she looked like an angel from heaven in the breaking light, and so I took a mental pause to listen.

“Will, we need some surgical equipment, blood, oxygen, electricity. We can’t operate or safely handle infection. Battery power is almost down to none. The doctor is out, too! ...Permanently!” I stare blankly into her eyes. “Yup, literally... Dr. Monfort was in the conning tower break room getting coffee when we hit.” She smirked with an awkward chuckle trying and failing to make light of the situation, “Ha, break room! It has a whole new meaning now, doesn’t it?”

Just then, and administratively, Kevin bounded into the room from the upper deck. Kev is one of my hands. He’s a welder, artist, rigger, sashimi

butcher in the kitchen, and all-around go-to guy for me. Kev is often somewhat temperamental and unpredictable, but always extremely capable. “I’ve got news, and I’ve got bad news,” he retorts.

“The only good news is that the bow and most of our fishing gear is intact. The bad news is that the outer hull is buckled at the bulkhead and the fridge is taking-on water.” Those of us in the room know that the “fridge” includes the largest part of the vessel. The fridge makes-up our refrigerated krill holding tanks and beneath those are the compressors, generators, cryogenics, pumps, and ballasts; as well as the fuel tanks, and engine room. Kevin jumps to the harsh conclusion that, “We’re fucked, bitches! This whole damned thing is going down!”

“Hold it, Kev. Calm down, man. Settle, man! The fridge is flooding?” With a glance Will acknowledges Kev’s nod. “How bad is it, where’s the break exactly?”

“We have three inches of ocean over the cat walk.” Like all of us who know the ship well, Kevin knows that the catwalk is one foot above the engines and main power systems. “That pretty much makes us a sitting duck...No POW-WA,” he hesitates. “The water seems to be spilling from between the second level holding tanks onto the lower levels. I can’t see the split without some help and better light. I don’t know if it can be arched... I don’t know if it’s getting bigger... I don’t know if it’s the only hole... I don’t even know if I can get *to* the welder yet. Shit man, I don’t know SHIT, but I do

know that I ain't never seen ANYTHING THIS Fucked-UP before.”

Will drills, “Comm...? Do we have any kind of communication? Did the beacon deploy?”

“Dude, really? Take a look. The whole fuckin’ tower is gone. It’s NOT THERE!”

“Settle, Kev!” Will is still thinking, “We got nothing out? What about the sat-phones?”

“Will, if we got any kind of communication out, we’ll probably never know, ‘cause this shit is drowning and the radio room, recorders, backups, all the radar, sonar systems, the EPIRB, the whole FUCKING ROOOOOM...,” gesturing “...is NOT THERE! The three sat-phones are nowhere to be found, and oh, I forgot! Starboard outriggers are gone, and we now have one life raft left, and it’s damaged; and, oh yah, nobody here has had any shut-eye for three days.” Kevin buttons his statement with a gestured ass wipe. “SIR”!

Will is besmirched and snarls. “What the hell...,” he coughs, “can we possibly do, Max?” Again, coughing and barking in pain, “Ahhee.” He grabs at his chest and spits, spattering a little blood from his busted lip to the floor, which promptly begins to freeze. I slump with stupefaction and again peer through the hole in the ceiling, out into the icy Antarctic sky. Once again in my life I find myself wondering if there is, or if there ever was a God up there. “This is some kind of nightmare, chiste cruel. Pesadilla, cruel.”

“Take slow, shallow breaths.” is the angel’s advice to Will.

Will pulls himself together and begins to belt-out, “All right, everyone snap-to... sound-off!”

It seemed like something from a war film, and I was staggered when the entire group in the room actually, instinctively, followed the command. In my mind, this bunch was not prepared at all for any of these bananas. There was a long pause before anyone else in the room spoke.

“Kevin.” Kevin looked like he had just eaten fresh kaka, but he was the first to answer, “Kevin here.” I think that said a lot about what he thought of his own leadership ability more than it did about Will’s directive. Kevin knew the time was not right for him to make a scene, and that someone had to take control, so he went with the order; but I could tell that he had second thoughts about it.

Will paused, allowing the others to get a chance to ring-in.

No one seemed ready to show their grit. That damned Kat sure couldn’t, I thought.

“Max here!” I chimed-in just like at roll-call... still half in the bag, and purely out of natural everyday routine.

“Tiny.” Tim was an engine room machinist and as big as a house. I often referred to Tiny Tim as “Big Horse” or “Caballo Grande.” He was generally a placid, gentle giant with a lot of heart.

“Joe.” Joe Junior, Rabbit Ears, we have nicknames for everyone and everything; Joe coughs following his report. He’s in his first-year on Krill

America, a radio operator, and brandishes bandages covered in blood that are hiding most of his right arm and shoulder.

“Bingham.” Bing, Batta-Bing, or Bottom-Bing is one of our diver’s.

After another pausing Mr. Will questions, “Kat?” Will is indignant, “Kaaat? Katy?”

From the pharmaceuticals storage room I can make out her distracted response, “Here.”

I didn’t say anything at the time, but the thought crossed my mind that Kat was rifling through all the good drugs for her own personal use. I hoped that I was wrong.

It was right for Will to take charge. After all he was a natural. He’d been the captain of the small shrimp trawler that was incorporated into the bow of Krill America on the ships last refit four years ago. We called the trawler “The Minnow.” Her nets had been modified for the gathering of live krill into the funnel that Will had himself invented.

Now that most of the crew was gone, Will knew that he had to step-up. He also was able to perceive that, for right now, I was in absolutely no shape at all to step-up. I started fading back into a drunken, broken state, and again, began thinking to myself that maybe the words “I couldn’t” were becoming more of a permanent portrayal of my life than otherwise.

William T. continued to wrangle-on, “Bingham, Kevin... Get your asses on that leak and shit on it ‘till you plug that hole! Got it?”

Nodding, “I got it,” and without question, both men scrambled up and out.

“Kat... See what you can do for Joe and that one. The rest of you... Get some rest... Sleep could be something becoming more and more in short supply and you’re gonna need all you can get.”

The med student who looked like an angel then said something like, “*That one is Jess*, and she needs a lot. She’s comatose... something metal is sticking out of her abdomen....”

I wonder what the angel’s name is. I don’t recall actually meeting her before now.

Everything after that was just mumbling and gibberish to me. I was completely exhausted like the cigarette I wanted to suck from end-to-end. Dazed and confused, I grumbled, “Hey, who took my cigarettes? Shara, where’s my shirt?” I’m pretty sure that I started singing, “Beso, beso mi culo, baby.” Once again my mind moseyed-off into delirium. Maybe I was merely delusional. “Hey doc, what about that?” I imagined everyone in the room beginning to rhythmically, chantingly breathe—breathing themselves into a deep, deep, in unison, “respire - sleep, poco profundo - shallow, brevemente - short, descanso - rest”... I started to remember how Mama and I had practiced Inglés, when I was just a little Niño. Perhaps this really was just a drunken nightmare? As I faded, I muttered to myself like I had done so many nights before over the past few years, “Tomorrow has got to get better!”

“Krill America,” as an idea, had been dying for some time now. We

probably needed to be slapped in the face. After all, it was with stern veracity that the Feds and the Louisiana and Texas state governments were withdrawing our last available scientific funding. Crap, Norway and the Swedish groups had given up on us last year, and just this year, the Arabs laughed when we showed them our latest reports on krill production costs. Profits were just not in the numbers, and new science was becoming unimpressive. We were pretty much all tapped out.

On top of all of that, in this past week everyone you see out here for some twelve hundred miles, every one of us who is still alive has been on “swarm duty” and awake for at least seventy-two hours. We’d been working our tails off right up to the point that the krill swarm ducked under the permanent continental pack-ice or fast-ice.

Krill like to eat the green slime on the underside of the sea-ice and when they go beneath it we have to stop trying to harvest them. Will was surely right; it is going to be a long night tonight. The real question is: Is there ever going to be any other night? I just couldn’t take it any longer, I was woozy, and light headed. I scratched my festering elbow, and for the third and last time that first night, I passed out, half snorting, half gasping, “Dios, God”.