DIARY OF AN ECO-OUTLAW

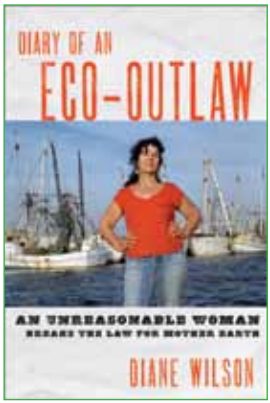
AN UNREASONABLE WOMAN
BREAKS THE LAW FOR MOTHER EARTH

DIANE WILSON

Diary of an Eco-Outlaw

An Unreasonable Woman Breaks the Law for Mother Earth

Diane Wilson



- **Pub Date May 2011**
- $17.95 US, $19.95 CAN
- Paperback
- ISBN 9781603582155
- 6 x 9 • 256 pages
- Memoir, Environment
- World Rights

Photo: Kate McCormico-The Texas Observer

How did a quiet shrimper and mother of five go from eking out a living on a Texas bay to being an internationally renowned activist, heralded writer, and all-around hell-raiser? What made her take on corporate polluters and corrupt politicians? And why has she been jailed more than fifty times in the process? In this masterful sequel to *An Unreasonable Woman: The True Story of Shrimpers, Politicos, Polluters, and the Fight for Seadrift, Texas*, Diane Wilson recounts the wild ride launched by her fight to save her own bay—a ride that led her into a world of whistleblowers and monkeywrenchers, brought her around the globe (even while on the lam), and into a lifelong battle for environmental justice, human rights, and peace.

George Bernard Shaw once said "all progress depends on the unreasonable man." Well, in Wilson's case it's an unreasonable woman. Praised for her sass, her literary prowess, and her uniquely silver-tongued storytelling, the eminently untamed Wilson holds court in the *The Diary of an Eco-Outlaw* as never before. Readers will laugh and cry at this no-holds-barred account of how one woman, living in a trailer on the edge of a rattlesnake patch, dukes it out with the big guys and comes out winning, one way or another, again and again.

Former shrimp boat captain **Diane Wilson** is the author of *An Unreasonable Woman: A True Story of Shrimpers, Politicos, Polluters, and the Fight for Seadrift, Texas* and *Holy Roller: Growing Up in the Church of Knock-Down, Drag Out; or, How I Quit Loving a Blue-Eyed Jesus*. She is a cofounder of Code Pink, the women's antiwar group based in Washington, D.C., and of the Texas Jail Project, an advocacy group that fights for the rights of inmates in Texas county jails. She was featured in the award-winning documentary *Texas Gold* and in *Americans Who Tell the Truth*. Wilson speaks frequently at environmental and social-change conferences, and has won numerous awards for her environmental work. She lives in Seadrift, Texas.

Media Inquiries contact:
Brianne Goodspeed at: bgoodspeed@chelseagreen.com or (802) 295-6300 ext. 107

For more information go to:
http://media.chelseagreen.com/diary-of-an-eco-outlaw/

Praise for Diane Wilson:

"Diane Wilson is a true hero. An outlaw in the Robin Hood tradition, she defies laws that serve modern feudal corporate barons in order to protect the rest of us. Her *Diary* is the fast-paced story of a most reasonable woman, a true-life odyssey that should be read by everyone who wants to live—and pass on to our children—a sane, sustainable, just, and genuinely thriving world."

—John Perkins, New York Times bestselling author of *Hoodwinked, Confessions of an Economic Hit Man,* and *The Secret History of the American Empire*

Praise for Diane Wilson's *An Unreasonable Woman*

"I have never read a book quite like this one, and worry already that I might not yet again. . . . In a cynical age, amidst such rampant loss and destruction, it's easy to regard Diane Wilson's book as simply a masterpiece and to let it go at that. But we owe it more. This book inspires in us the courage to believe—to remember—we can still change the world."

—Rick Bass, award-winning author of *Nashville Chrome, The Hermit's Story,* and *Colter*

"I don't often gush, but this book had me fascinated from the first page and whomper-jawed half the time. . . .[T]o write this well is a stunning achievement."

—Molly Ivins, the late nationally syndicated political columnist; author of W*ho Let the Dogs In?*

"Texas is famous for its tall tales, but they pale in comparison to the true tale of Diane Wilson. Hers is a mind-bending story of corporate intrigue, government shenanigans, and all-around political dirty tricks."

—Jim Hightower, author of *Let's Stop Beating Around the Bush*

"Nothing can really prepare you for the nervy, scary, riotous, enraging tale of Diane Wilson's education as an environmental activist—or its ultimately inspiring resolution. Essential reading."

—Joan Dye Gussow, author of *This Organic Life* and *Growing, Older*

Praise for *Holy Roller*

"Holy Roller is a book so good I have to make myself put it down so I won't finish it too soon."

—Garrison Keillor, host of *A Prairie Home Companion*

". . . Wilson's prose is breathtaking in its dexterity and blunt poetry. . . . "

***—Library Journal*, starred review**

DIARY OF AN ECO-OUTLAW

DIARY OF AN ECO-OUTLAW

AN UNREASONABLE WOMAN BREAKS THE LAW FOR MOTHER EARTH

DIANE WILSON

Chelsea Green Publishing
White River Junction, Vermont

Project Manager: Patricia Stone
Editorial Contact: Joni Praded
Developmental Editor: Joni Praded
Copy Editor: Laura Jorstad
Proofreader: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Indexer: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Designer: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Printed in XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
First printing XXXX, 2011
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 11 12 13 14 15

Our Commitment to Green Publishing

Chelsea Green sees publishing as a tool for cultural change and ecological stewardship. We strive to align our book manufacturing practices with our editorial mission and to reduce the impact of our business enterprise in the environment. We print our books and catalogs on chlorine-free recycled paper, using vegetable-based inks whenever possible. This book may cost slightly more because we use recycled paper, and we hope you'll agree that it's worth it. Chelsea Green is a member of the Green Press Initiative (www.greenpressinitiative.org), a nonprofit coalition of publishers, manufacturers, and authors working to protect the world's endangered forests and conserve natural resources. *Diary of an Eco-Outlaw* was printed on _____, a __-percent postconsumer recycled paper supplied by _____.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chelsea Green Publishing
Post Office Box 428
White River Junction, VT 05001
(802) 295-6300
www.chelseagreen.com

For Heck, Dale, Ronnie, and Cat
And the 22,000 who have died from the Bhopal tragedy

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

TK

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful to my publisher Margo Baldwin who has had faith in my writing since the start and has encouraged me write, even as I've sat in jail. This is my third book and I couldn't have done it without the invaluable advice of Margo, my publisher, and Joni Praded, my editor, who is very understanding, patient, and a great writer, herself. Also, I am indebted to the staff of Chelsea Green who have guided me through the editing and publishing process and even though this is the third time around, I still have a lot to learn from them. My experience with Chelsea Green Publishing has been very enriching and even though the publishing headquarters is in White River Junction, Vermont, I have always felt at home and treated like family. To all of the Chelsea Green folks, I give my profound thanks.

Many people gave me help and support during the time that it took to write this book to completion. I am especially grateful to the Dobie Paisano Fellowship Program, sponsored by the Graduate School at The University of Texas at Austin and the Texas Institute of Letters, that gave me solitude and time at the Frank Dobie ranch—and also a stipend to write without financial worries—for three whole months! Michael Adams, director of the program, thank you for being there during the hurricane and other sundry crisis.

I am also indebted to the Gulf Coast Fund for Community Renewal and Ecological Health for their support and help while writing this book.

To those who supported, posted bond, wrote letters, and otherwise gave savvy legal advice while I was either going to or in jail already, I am most grateful. I especially want to thank Diana Claitor and Krinshanveni Gundi (Kinnu), who posted the letters I wrote in jail and eventually helped found Texas Jail Project. Without Kinnu, I would

have spent an extra month in county jail. Without Diana, there would not be a Texas Jail Project. I also want to thank Ann Wright for meeting the sheriff and giving him a good talking-to. I sincerely believe I was treated better after she had that talk with him. And to the lawyers who worked their bag of tricks! Many thanks to Greg Gladden, American Civil Liberties Union lawyer who the Calhoun County courthouse folks hated (but I thought was wonderful); Mike Papantonio and Jim Hightower, who were working for me unbeknownst to most everyone on the BP fiasco; and lastly, Lisbeth Sapirstein, my court-appointed lawyer, who got me off in Washington, DC, because she insisted I wasn't going to jail for pouring oil on myself in the Senate hearings on the BP spill.

To the most unreasonable women in the world—CodePink—I give my thanks, love, and undying gratitude for being there with me on the ride of my life.

And finally, to Wayne Lore and my kids, Ramona, Sarah, Goldie, David "Crockett," and Santanna. Without them, I might be living in Taiwan or India. Or Louisiana on a houseboat. They are the ties that bind me to Texas—and home.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

MADE IN TEXAS: AN ACCIDENTAL ACTIVIST

I have kin above and below dirt in Tennessee, Okalahoma, Arkansas, and Texas, but Texas was the worst idea my wanderlusting grandpa ever had. After Grandpa gave into his everlasting notion to move, again—leaving all his banknotes to a brother in Oklahoma who got rich on them after Grandpa took his ten kids and went to Texas—hell started looking good.

Grandpa, Momma's daddy, landed in Texas on mostly waterfront "this-and-that" vacated by the magnificent, often seven-foot-tall Karankawa Indians who had been soundly massacred on a mudflat not far away and then run off to Mexico. A ten-mile stretch of muddy bay bottom, plus the aforementioned bloody mudflat, hid stingrays with serrated, knife-like barbs that could easily slice into and haul off two-hundred-pound fishermen (and I imagined not a few Karankawa) and that fact alone explained why the first piece of information Grandpa received on stepping in his new hometown of Seadrift was how to make a poultice for stingray wounds from wild ditch onions, seaweed, and sea salt.

Grandpa was into farming big time so he bought the highest dirt spot he could find in Seadrift (only holding water in the worst hurricane conditions, he was told) and paid for it with the old Dodge car he came in on, minus the ten kids. Then he promptly put down roots on ten sandy acres of rattlesnake-infested dewberry vines with one pitchfork, one plow, one donkey, two cows, fifteen rangy chickens, and a hoot and a holler from his good ol' Bible. Momma's folks were newcomers

like most everybody else in the town (the original Karankawa residents were run off, gone, kaput) so they didn't realize that the trade-off for Oklahoma's dry gulches was Texas' drooping, needle-pointed marsh grass was the variety and viciousness of snakes—rattlesnakes and copperheads, mostly, and these forever looking for an ankle to whack. Fortunately Grandpa was a full gospel preacher, self-taught, self-ordained, and called by God Almighty himself, so he and his wife Rosa Belle prayed through the various snakebites, little and big, but they couldn't pray through the lightning bolt from heaven, pneumonia, or gunshot to the chest so by the time Momma was fifteen, three of her family members were permanently visiting in the graveyard.

Then it got worse. At least that's the way Momma tells the tale.

Momma married a fisherman.

In the beginning, she said that she just loved the idea of fishing boats and the wonderful stories of the handsome pirate Lafitte who supposedly got lost up the nearby Lavaca River and supposedly buried cannons loaded down with gold in the muddy river bottom. And wasn't Daddy just wild and handsome as all get-out in his rubber boots and looking a whole lot like pirate Lafitte and sometimes letting her hold the wheel of his fishing boat just so he could put his arms around her and show her how it was really done? In hindsight, Momma said she was way too young to know what she was fixing to get herself into. And besides, don't you just love what you've never had?

Anyhow, the courting came and went, then the marriage, then the babies, and along about the tenth year of their togetherness the reality of fishing *plus* marriage *plus* kids kicked in. That's when Momma started hating the bay with a medical-textbook something or other. I don't know the disease. Anyhow, she hated the bay so much that she couldn't see straight and that's why she lost one eye out by the clothesline when she was hanging out wash. She got that mad. She hated frying fish and shrimp every night. She hated that she was the sole cooker, cleaner, washerwoman, and caretaker of seven wild kids while Daddy was off having a lollygagging good ol' time on the bay. She had long since given up riding on Daddy's boat for pleasure because she

had *waaay* too much wash to do at home and besides seven kids—count, seven kids!—on a boat would drive any woman stark raving crazy and, Lord knows, if she wasn't watching them every minute, how many kids would fall over and drown and then get plopped down alongside the other three lying out in the graveyard? Now, wouldn't *that* be just a barrel of laughs. Some days were worse than others for Momma and on those days she went out in the yard with her hoe, pointed at some weeds on the ground, and said, "That's your daddy." Then she whacked the living daylights out of the weeds.

I don't think Momma really wanted to kill Daddy. Her big deal was: When would Billy Bones (the pirate name she'd long ago given Daddy when dreams of Lafitte still swirled in her head) get a real job? Something besides the bay! Well, Daddy wasn't getting a real job. And he wasn't getting off the bay. He was a fisherman through and through and, matter of fact and usually, the days that Momma blew up and told Daddy to get a real job were the days he went out in the yard and started building another new boat. And Daddy didn't go to the backyard to build his boats. He went straight to the front yard with new marine plywood. And he had seven boats.

If Daddy having a fun ol' time on the bay wasn't enough to drive Momma crazy, the fact that three of my brothers got boats, too, and went fishing was. Those four boats cemented forever whatever quirk Momma had about the bay so heaven help us, Lord, if any of us girls went to the bay after that. It was somewhere in the Bible about girls not being allowed on the bay, Momma said. So she did her best to drive the bay from us as relentlessly as the moon drove the tide, and somewhere in her head it was gonna be okay. Things were gonna get better. Maybe we'd all grow up to be nurses.

I was eight years old when our financial straits sent Momma's no-no tumbling on its ear. It all began with winter and boats sinking and good-for-nothing deckhands not knowing where the wrecks were and gradually the idea came to Daddy that maybe it'd be cheaper if one of the little girls decked. For a summer, anyhow. If there had been a feminist in our fishing town, she would have had a heyday and

would have likely shouted the news from the top of Seadrift's rusty water tower. A girl on the bay! Hallelujah! But nope, there wasn't a feminist in our town or anybody that remotely looked like one—not even close—so mainly that small victory went unnoticed. But it didn't hurt at all—in fact it helped—that I was about as attention-getting as an oyster shell, and jellyfish floating in the bay had better personalities, so Daddy hardly knew I was on the boat and nary a hair stirred on my Momma's head. I could be that invisible.

Next base in my budding fishing career required getting one over on the fishermen because never think for a second that "Free. Come and go as you please" meant free for *little girls.* Heck nope. Free meant free for men! And those fishermen were as bad as Momma about women on the bay and they weren't stupid. They looked slow, all right, but they were quick, quick on the bay. They could calculate ice and fuel costs and the amount of fish and shrimp caught in a sixteen-hour day to the exact pound. They could remember where the fish went, how the reefs ran, where the roseate spoonbills (the pink birds!) flew up from the marsh in waves of pink clouds, and where every dang wreck in the bay was. But their cantankerous beliefs about women were set in the sixteenth century or thereabouts and they weren't in any mood to learn different so they rousted out all things female on the bay as if we were plague-carrying rats.

I heard a million stories. A million! Women generated storms. Women were eternal curses on the bay. The fishermen said they had seen it happen time and time again. They were eyewitnesses to the horror! One fisherman told me about a captain's wife who had came aboard and, stupid-like, turned over a boat's hatch cover in the early-morning hours before they set out. Well, oh, my gosh, the misfortune that befell those poor unlucky men. They were lucky they escaped with their lives.

One fisherman just loved to frighten me with stories so he'd count off on his callused fingers what all could happen if I was *sooo stupid* as to get on a shrimp boat. "What if you're the captain and you lose someone overboard, missy? Whatcha gonna do? That's it. He's gone.

Then a boom can break or you can sink and drown at sea. Then what about that winter when that butane bottle exploded on Homer's shrimp boat? And the boat blew up? Lost the shrimp nets and the boat! Then the weather! Oh my gosh! You get caught out in a hurricane and whatcha gonna do, little missy? Had one guy cut his finger *clean off* during a storm and almost bled to death before he got back to the dock. Then a waterspout can hit your boat and sometimes you get a deckhand that just loses it. Loses his head and goes wild crazy, he's so scared. One guy I knew went out on this trip to Spirit Center Bay and a waterspout hit the boat and he jumped overboard. We picked up his body in the net. *Two days later!* Then there are engine breakdowns. Then how about getting an infected foot by stepping on a hard head? Rot your foot off! Then shrimp juice eating the skin off your fingers!" Finally, the fisherman wound himself into a frenzy and went into the most disgusting items of all: What happened if a woman was on the downwind side when a captain spit out his chewy tobacco? Or when he had to pee?

If there wasn't that eternal drift line of sticks out in the water to otherwise hypnotize them, fishermen would talk on the radio all day long about women and the bad luck they brought aboard. It didn't even need to be a real woman; not just two arms, two legs, something in front and something in back and a hank of hair. *Anything* female-looking would do it. One story that made the radio rounds for a solid week on the bay was about a hen. This hen! This hen! Anyhow, this hen rode to the bay on the fender of a shrimper's truck and while the shrimper was busy unloading all his gear and readying up the boat, this hen climbed aboard and went to sea with the fisherman. Well, oh my gosh and oh my gosh. The trouble that hen caused. Made shrimp run ahead of the boat. Made the shrimper's net twist like a tornado hit it. Dang female chicken!

But given the nature of decking and temperamental captains and the hours they demanded for little or no pay, deckhands were real hard to find at four in the morning when a captain was looking for one so they guessed they could stand a girl if she wasn't too hard to find. And

I wasn't hard to find at all. I was dang easy. I was lying in bed with my head against the window screen, sleeping with my two sisters. I was a boat captain's dream deckhand. Easy to raise, quick to guess an order before the order was given, and I kept my mouth shut tighter than the high white shining oysters at low tide. It didn't hurt, neither, that I was in love with the sea. No explaining. No reasoning. It was what it was. Love was love like dirt was dirt. I had zero experience beyond fish houses, boats, and the sea and I didn't want any. My sisters thought I was a total loser. Why didn't I learn to do something with my hair? Or check out my personality in that bathroom mirror? But nope, I could be two inches, two feet, or ten miles from the bay and I'd slide into the water like it was my second skin. I was gone, baby, gone—kin by right of the salt in my blood.

On weekend trips to the bay—just double-dip the salt effect. My skin got so salty that I could scrape it off with a knife and eat it with a spoon then have plenty left over to doctor the fried shrimp and fried potatoes we ate for dinner. Then at night and after supper and after more fried shrimp and more fried potatoes, we'd throw anchor nearly on top of the tiny sea horses with transparent wings that hid under the thick sea grass and nearby the pink seabirds, leisurely dining on oysters, would rise up in protest. I'd climb on the wheelhouse and sprawl out with a blanket up to my nose. I had salt between my fingers, in both corners of both eyes, and I could feel it working its way north up my nose. It was like going to bed with a hunk of seaweed and deck load of shrimp and fish and crabs. And I didn't need a sleeping pill. The smell knocked me out.

I learned a thing or two about the bay. How do you spot shrimp from a mile away? (Look for the seagulls.) What does a watermelon smell on the bay mean? (Some trout just threw up.) Is that squall gonna sink my boat or lay down as harmless as a kitten? (It's anybody's guess.) But the best lesson I took home to roost was that boundaries were lies. There was no separation on the sea. No barbwire fence divided San Antonio Bay from Spirit Center Bay. Nothing kept the sun from the water or the wind from the waves. It was only flow and

continuity of water and moon and dolphins and ratty ol' captains in ratty ol' shrimp boats hauling boogie across the bay to find those most elusive of creatures: the shrimp.

All mixed up in that mystical stew that swarmed my earliest years on the bay was another hot potato: my holy-rolling upbringing. Every Sunday and Wednesday night service I'd be dragged to hear a screaming Pentecostal preacher with an unabashed love for fishermen who would drive himself hoarse beseeching the Holy Ghost down from the stars. "Please dear heavenly ghost, heavenly Father, blessed Jesus," he'd holler, "send us down a hundred deck loads of shrimp! A monster pile!" Then while the pale undisturbed moon in the left corner of the eye of Jesus watched over him, he'd scream, *"AAAmeeen!"* That preacher in the rotting-at-the-seams tent was very fond of saying that there were eyes of the flesh, eyes of the mind, and eyes of the spirit. And, oooh sinners that they were, he told his brothers and sisters in Jesus, they most certainly had eyes of the flesh. Oooh yes! But they, *also,* had spirit eyes in the back of their heads if they'd just quit fiddling so much with the flesh and look back there ever' once in a while.

Interesting enough, my Cherokee grandpa (on my daddy's side) said the very same thing. Meaning, of course, that even though folks were worlds apart—day and night actually—on their beliefs, some things remained true however you dressed them. I freely admit that I had spirit eyes. That's why I dissolved like a bucket of acid was dumped on me when I was out on the bay. And that's why I could see the bay as an old grandmother with long gray hair and a dress made of matted foaming seaweed flowing out with the tide. I imagined that black drum nibbled on her dress like they nibbled on the oyster spawn caught in the oyster reefs.

This grandmother was pretty particular. She didn't like name-calling or measuring tools of any sort. For instance, a compass or loran readings or a GPS or a measuring tape couldn't locate the position of her left foot or how far her hair trailed out to sea. All I had to do was bend the right corner of my mind and there she was clear as rain on new tin. Certainly as real as my other physical-as-a door-

knob grandma, Rosa Belle, who took me to the bay with her to head shrimp. Only I wasn't heading shrimp and making a dollar for Jesus like Grandma was doing. Oh no. While the other old women stood around a big wooden table and pinched the heads off shrimp the live-long day, I'd look through the cracks in the wharf and watch for the water lady. I knew this water woman. I knew where she lived. I could taste her briny bones on my tongue and when a storm or a hurricane approached the town, the front-row seat in our Church of Jesus Loves You couldn't beat her for pure, unadulterated, unmitigated razzmatazz.

Without a doubt, love of the water drew me to my first boat when I was twenty-four, but it was love of silence that made me work a boat alone. I loved the quiet too completely to ruin it with a cheeky, talkoholic, twenty-something-year-old deckhand whose genius idea for early morning on an empty bay was to fill it with idle chitchat about what this shrimper was doing or what that shrimper was doing or where we ought to be going ourselves. Nope, no deckhand for me. Every morning I steered alone into a steely gray-green or muddy-as-heck world where there were no border fences, no citizenship papers, no flags, and no pledge of allegiance except for the eighty dollars and my signature on a slip of paper that said I'd abide by the laws of the state of Texas if they'd give me a shrimping license. The silence on the bay was sometimes so intense that if it had been the sun instead, I'd have had one god-awful sunburn. I believed the entire enchilada was the water and the back deck of a boat. What more could exist? I didn't know much about what was outside Seadrift's city limit sign and I couldn't care less if I never ate a dairy treat at the Dairy Queen in the next town. (Seadrift didn't have fast-food *nothing*!) And who the heck knew—or cared—where those cars that drifted into town and stopped at the fish house to buy two pounds of shrimp came from. I stared at those strangers like they were aliens from the planet Mars.

I was fine as a fiddle where I was: anchored on a boat in the middle of a very salty sea where there was intuition to the exclusion of rationality, dreams to the exclusion of language, and mysteries to the exclu-

sion of a clanking, cranky town. I was a borderline mystic, seriously unsociable, and happy as a clam.

Then that grubby world outside the bay reached out and grabbed me by the hair and that was that. The grubby world wouldn't leave me alone. Oh, I could ignore it, but it sure wouldn't ignore me. And I'm not just including myself. It ain't just me special as the dickens. I wasn't the only one deaf and blind to a world we left every morning we stepped on board a shrimp boat and put our faces into the wind. The whole fleet of fishermen was as bad and, what's worse, we thought our untouchable, surreal life would go on forever. Well, at least until the seas dried up, the sun failed to rise in the east, and, most certainly, long after we were dead and rotting in our graves. Save the end of times for our great-great-grandchildren!

We could've (should've) wised up during the hard times, but we didn't. Shrimp started arriving late and oyster reefs were shut down for a winter here and there. But that was to be expected, we reckoned, because life on the water was nothing if not a gamble and therein lay half its charm. So a bad throw of the dice today was cured by a better throw tomorrow and if that didn't work, well, then fishermen improvised with a little friendly magic that didn't harm nobody. One shrimper having some hard times on the bay slapped paint over the boat's name and changed it from *Red Witch* to *Jesus Saves.* A couple of months later, he repainted the boat the same green color as a dollar bill. "Whatever works," he said. And it did for a while.

Seadrift's fishermen were the home-team favorites in a knockout series—*and only one team played*. What a deal! We had been out there on the water for so long, we forgot that there was the possibility of another team playing. And as my momma always said, "Who in the Sam Hill cares about that bay?" *So who cared but the fishermen?* Beside, fishermen were so involved in the day-to-day getting on the boat with the right net at the right time and the right amount of chain dragging that we had no idea we were getting a lot of turns at the bat and ground balls were sure getting us all the way to home plate and we sure were throwing a lot of soft balls to ourselves—wholly for entertainment, you

know. And we didn't mind at all that our cheering section was whatever channel our CB radio happened to be switched on for that day.

Then, and far too early it seemed, a hard curveball came from out of the blue and knocked the stuffing out of us. Next, somebody took a baseball bat to our heads and if there was an umpire, well, he was certainly a dang cheat and nobody we knew. Trust me, third base can be an unsettling place when you don't understand the nature of the other team.

To tell you the truth, I didn't know there was another team playing even though they arrived about the time I was born. Yep, I was dumb as a hammer but I wasn't the only one. Barely a hair had lifted on a fisherman's head when the chemical giant Union Carbide and the Alcoa aluminum company (serious players every one) had moved next to our bays because the only sound we heard was the slurping noise that pipes make when they invade mud. It was a queer sort of sound. Nothing fishermen had ever heard before. It wasn't black drum beating under your skiff. It wasn't marsh birds (those pink birds, again) trilling or lightning rumbling in the west bay and fixing to take our mast poles off. It certainly wasn't a wet rope slapping the back deck.

I'll admit right up front that I'm soft and foolish about the fishermen so I imagine now that our inability to see our own end back then was like that first Indian who saw the first Spanish ship. At first, he couldn't see the ship. There was nothing in his life or the land where he lived that allowed him to imagine—let alone *see*—a Spanish galleon. But he could tell that the water moved different. So he did something that, probably, his granddaddy or daddy taught him. Or maybe it was his momma that taught him to watch the water carefully. So he saw how the water swirled and how the light hit the water with a charcoal blackness that he only saw at night. But it wasn't night. It was broad daylight. Then he saw the ship! It probably took two days for that Indian to see the heavy bobbing ship that was fixing to change his life forever. Fishermen aren't nearly as quick so it took us forty years to see the pipes and cement and metal towers and tanks and flares and fences and chemicals of every description that were coloring the very

air we breathed. And, I say with every ounce of kindness that I possess because I love the fishermen, we were fools.

So, twelve years ago, with my shrimp boat tied with two different ropes (stern and bow) to a run-down dock, I sat in an equally run-down fish house not realizing we had so little time left. There's no crime in being surprised by time that you no longer have, because if there were then every deathbed would have an arresting officer at the scene. But having time sneak up on you wasn't the worst part. The worst part was not seeing the repo guy in the front yard with the keys to your favorite truck. Okay, so it wasn't my newly acquired Sears van—with the hundred thousand miles on its speedometer being the reason Sears got rid of it in the first place at an auction with only one bid (which was mine)—that was fixing to get repossessed. And it wasn't my hundred-year-old house, in ten different levels of disrepair and sitting on ten acres of marshland, that was getting repossessed. And it wasn't my five kids: four girls and one boy who was autistic and most probably would remain with me the rest of his life. None of that.

It was the bay fixing to get repo'd by some pretty deft characters and the story went like this.

It was ten hours into the morning of my almost fortieth birthday and I was sitting in the fish house and I was bored. If I had to take a guess at why, I'd say no shrimp and two boats that went out for reasons other than shrimp. The business of a fish house is to sell the catch that fishermen bring to shore and in Seadrift that catch is shrimp, so no shrimp and no boats out shrimping is bad news. Donna Sue was there. She was the only woman in town who had the guts to work with me in the previously man-only fish house and she was helping me babysit it and a dwindling list of shrimpers. And she was doing exactly what I was doing: She had her white sea boots propped on the office desk and was staring out the window. Only difference was that Donna Sue had a mason jar of sweet tea resting on her belly and I had a cold cup of coffee resting on mine. Then Bill Bailey arrived and the shortest way around this story is to say that this shrimper pitched a newspaper at me and I learned what Bill Bailey had learned two hours earlier.

The newspaper was a local one and was generally ignored by me but it can't get ignored if it's sitting in your lap so I picked up the newspaper and read where Bill Bailey kept thumping his finger. The article said our tiny county (Calhoun County) was number one in the nation for toxic disposal and we had the distinct honor of containing half the hazardous waste that Texas generated. That story explained a lot about what other less pissed-off people would call "a sign of the times." Killer algae; three-hundred-pound dolphins and brown pelicans washing up dead on the shores. Shrimp crops suddenly gone, moved out, or dead. Who the heck really knew the whereabouts of the shrimp or why Donna Sue and I were sitting in a fish house bordering on bankruptcy. The fish house doors were nearly slammed shut, old fishermen were sitting in their trucks with no place to go, and the only guys hanging around our docks were older fishermen than the ones sitting in the trucks and they would yammer at anyone (and drink all our salty coffee) to energize their uninteresting and retired lives.

That day is good as any at explaining why my life turned 360 degrees from reclusive fisherwoman with five kids to controversial hell-raiser with five kids. As for how that happened, the beginning step was simple enough. After I kicked Bill Bailey out of the fish house and Donna Sue went home to mop her floor, I made a phone call from my ramshackle fish house and set up a meeting in town. My first. Well, that did it. Things were set in motion and I know people sometimes expect more, but usually the simplest things start a hell storm. Sometimes the dumbest people, too. A month later the grubby world beyond my bay stomped me into something I had to look up in the dictionary to find out what it was. An environmentalist.

To be precise, an environmental activist. That's what the dictionary said I was and that's what a reporter said, but lots of local folks thought different. I wasn't the activist type and not only wasn't I the type, but fishermen, in general, didn't have the street savvy and sharp sensibilities (IQ) to pull off that environmental-activist-type thing. Too many meetings, they decided, too much plotting on spreadsheets and driving around in cars for them. They knew fishermen. Fishermen would

rather be on the water with the sun burning like a branding iron into their feeble brains.

Well, apparently I was an environmental activist, but I knew next to nothing. I didn't know the names of the chemical plants five miles down the road. I didn't know the name of the state environmental agency or what region of the Environmental Protection Agency Texas was located in. I didn't know the names of my home-county politicians. I didn't know the mayor, the bank president, or what the hell the chamber of commerce was. What was their job? I was a wooden ducky in the carnival's plastic pond fixing to get shot by a plastic bullet. And I did, soon enough. The chamber of commerce, economic development groups, politicians, and businessmen said, "Somebody put her up to this activist thing. She is being paid by somebody. Maybe it's the state of Louisiana? Maybe the governor hired her to be a spy to derail industry in Texas so it could be sent to Louisiana? Maybe some fancy lawyer in Houston hired her to do something or other?"

The rumors flew like confetti in a war parade and nothing was too heavy that it didn't float.

As environmental activists go, I was pretty dumb. I think I could have skipped some of the dumber steps if someone like Howard Zinn lived in Texas and took the trouble of visiting me in the country and wising me up some. But Howard Zinn wasn't anywhere in Texas; he wasn't even close. So being innocent as a lamb two months before slaughter, I actually believed that the politicians (local, state, and federal) and the agencies (local, state, and federal) that had been elected, appointed, or hired to serve the people, tell the truth, and do the right thing did exactly that. Oh, yes, I was that stupid. But then, I was from the South, a far corner of it, anyhow, and I'd done that "best little girl" routine for a mighty long time. First, at home, then at school, then at church where I was a meek little mouse believing every single word I heard. Then at the fish house. With the shrimpers, it wasn't hard. After all, shrimpers were the underdogs, low on the heap, and with half a million nails already in their coffins. They weren't long for this sad cruel world. I had reams of sympathy for those ragamuffins

and was usually nice as pie to them, fixing their nets when they didn't have money or their wives had lost their checkbooks somewhere or other or when it was so dark outside that I had to turn on the headlights of the truck to find and patch the holes. Sometimes I even spent my own money to buy webbing to put in their torn-up nets and then never saw a dime from it, nor did I ever ask for one.

Well, those good-girl, everyone-does-honorable-right-thing illusions died hard from a gunshot to the gut and probably so because there had been no indication, whatsoever, from elementary school on up to high school that it might be a damn lie. Why didn't teachers tell you those kinda things?

Anyhow, I didn't have time to give that piece of fluff a decent burial because I was too busy stomping out fires that started right under my nose with the arsonists (think chamber of commerce, economic development, politicians, and industry) getting away scot-free. It was news to me if I was making any headway at all with my newfangled "environmental activism" because the "environmental activist" vehicle under me was sputtering, recoiling (two miles back for every mile forward), and refusing any shift other than low gear. And those illusions were funny things, too. They lay down quiet in the ground like they were dead but as the dirt filled up slow and steady on their graves, a chance light flickered off their bones and there I went again, believing the impossible, believing good intentions were alive and that a governmental agency was gonna save the day.

I was amazed at how fast I learned to distrust myself and how willing I was to toss aside what had taken such good care of me when I was out on a boat and in the bay—namely, knowing how to be fourth-dimensional in a three-dimensional fishing town which was really just a fancy way of saying that I took a mystical approach to things. My Cherokee grandpa would have agreed that it took spirit to move beyond the ordinary, and would have said that I was a natural. But I didn't fully come to know that following my gut instincts would get results until I put it to something besides catching shrimp.