

Prawns

by Chris Underwood

The white Styrofoam box sits on the prep station. It was delivered a few hours earlier. Half awake, I don a black apron and grab a large cutting board. To keep it from slipping, I put the cutting board on a damp towel laid across the stainless steel tabletop.

Removing the top of the Styrofoam box, I see three hundred live, squirming prawns, their beady little black eyes staring back at me.

Grabbing one, I place it belly down on the cutting board, holding the base of its body with my left hand and puncturing the base of its head with my knife. Pulling back the blade, I make a slight incision in its upper back, followed by a swift outward cut, and remove the shell. Using my fingers, I carefully take out a strip of brown unappetizing mucous and gently place the cleaned carcass on a sheet of wax paper laid across an oven tray.

I repeat this process over and over, until all the prawns are cleaned and stowed on layers of waxed paper. It takes me two hours.

A little after nine, Bill arrives from Northwest Fishery with a second Styrofoam box.

"Morning boss, how's it going?" Bill asks as he always does, setting the box on the prep table.

"Doing just fine Bill, yourself?"

"Oh you know, same as always."

It's always the same exchange, and then Bill hands me the clipboard with the delivery receipt. I sign his copy and hand it back, pocketing my own.

"They're all there, damn nice ones too," he says with a chuckle.

I pop the lid of the new Styrofoam box and peak inside. Thirty live lobsters stare right back at me. I put my knife back in its bag and grab a large black cauldron, fill it with water and place it on the stove on high heat.

“Poor suckers,” I say to myself while the water comes to a boil.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out a pair of headphones and put them on with the music playing. I hate the loud hissing lobsters make when they hit the boiling water. Prawns are easier. They don't make a sound. You know they don't feel a damn thing. But with the lobsters and their damn hissing, I just don't know.

