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# POLAR STAR



MARTIN  
CRUZ SMITH

AUTHOR OF GORKY PARK

# POLAR STAR

Martin Cruz Smith

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## For Em

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**"Arkady himself is a major creation, even more interesting than he was in *Gorky Park*. . . . The book is full of interesting information and alert and witty social and political observations. . . . There are also exciting events aplenty along the way. . . . The solution of the mystery will keep thousands of readers turning the pages of *Polar Star*."**

***The Boston Globe***

**"A gripping thriller . . . Logical, satisfying . . . It's a tough story, with a striking cast of characters, unusual setting, claustrophobic atmosphere, and bone-chilling sense of intrigue. Smith has, in fishing language, produced the catch of the season."**

***New York Daily News***

**"In the full rush of the case, Smith and Renko still seem irresistible."**

***Time***

**"Intensely dramatic . . . Impossible to stop reading, and absolutely haunting . . . For sheer intelligence, dexterous prose, psychological savvy, and sophisticated storytelling, *Polar Star* ranks with the best of John Le Carré."**

***Cosmopolitan***

*Also by Martin Cruz Smith:*

THE INDIANS WON

GYPSY IN AMBER

CANTO FOR A GYPSY

NIGHTWING

GORKY PARK\*

STALLION GATE\*

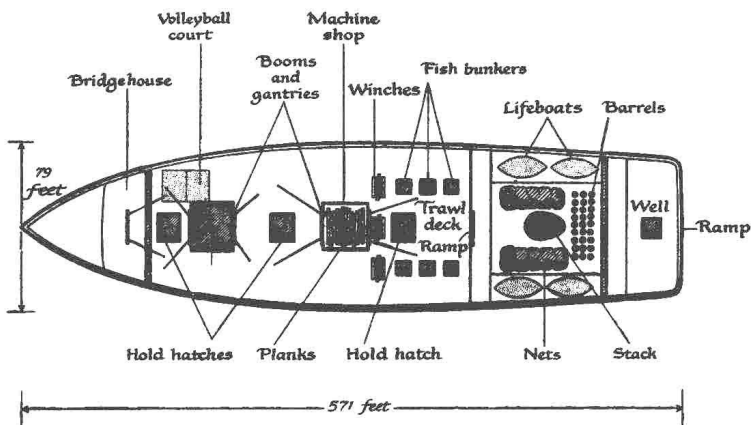
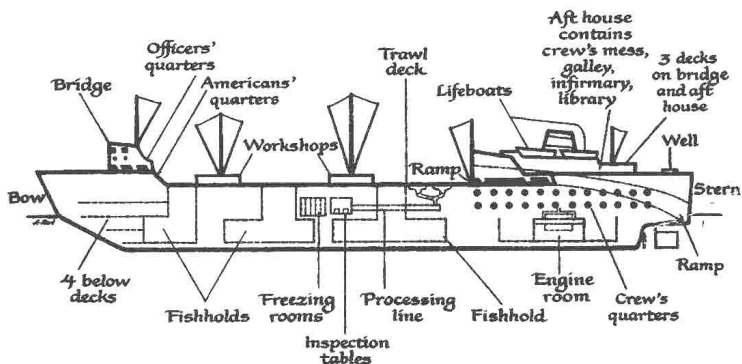
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I thank Captain Boris Nadein and the crew of the *Sulak*; Captain Mike Hastings and the crew of the *Oceanic*; Sharon Gordon, Dennis McLaughlin and William Turner for their hospitality in the Bering Sea. Valuable assistance was also provided by Martin Arnold, Kathy Blumberg, Captain D. J. (Jack) Branning, Knox Burger, Dr. Gerald Freedman, Beatrice Golden, Professor Robert Hughes, Captain James Robinson and Kitty Sprague.

Most of all I owe Alex Levin and Captain Vladil Ly-senko for their patience.

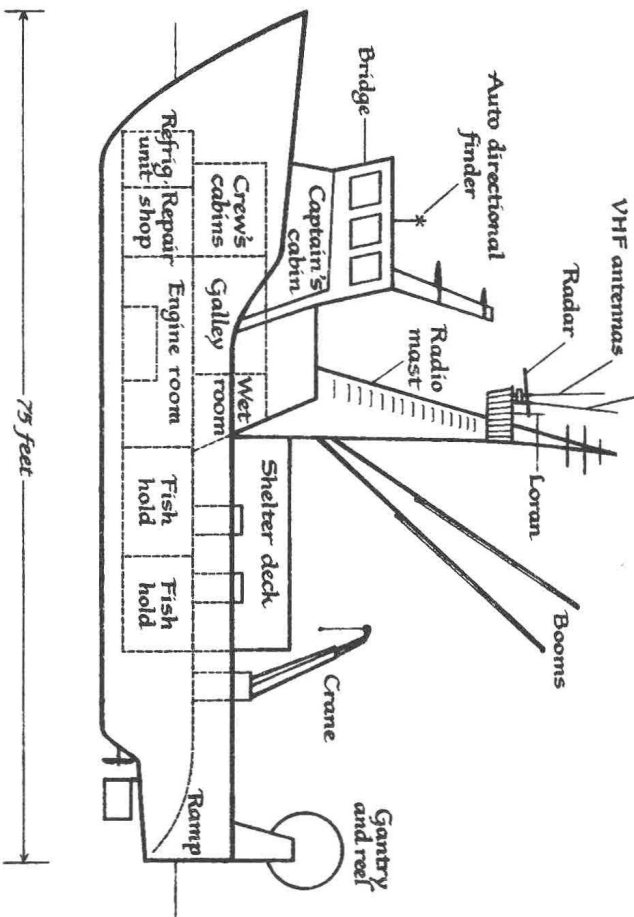
There is a Soviet factory ship named the *Polar Star*. Neither it nor the *Sulak* is the *Polar Star* of this book, which is fiction.

# POLAR STAR



# POLAR STAR

# Single side-band antennas



THE EAGLE



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*WATER*



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**1** Like a beast, the net came steaming up the ramp and into the sodium lamps of the trawl deck. Like a gleaming pelt, mats of red, blue, orange strips covered the mesh: plastic "chafing hair" designed to ease the net's way over the rocks of the sea bottom. Like rank breath, the exhalation of the sea's cold enveloped the hair in a halo of its own colors, brilliant in the weepy night.

Water hissed from the net's plastic hair onto the wooden boards that provided footing on the deck. Smaller fish, smelts and herring, fell free. Starfish dropped like stones. Uprooted crabs, even dead, landed on tiptoe. Overhead, gulls and shearwaters hovered at the outer glow of the lamps. As the wind shifted the birds broke into a swirl of white wings.

Usually the net was tipped and disgorged headfirst into the forward chutes to begin with, then ass-end into the rear. Either end could be opened by releasing the knot of a "zipper," a nylon cord braided through the mesh. Though the men stood by with shovels ready for work, the trawlmaster waved them off and stepped into the water raining from the net's plastic hair and stared straight

up, removing his helmet the better to see. The colored strips dripped like running paint. He reached and spread the hair from the mesh, then looked into the dark to find the other, smaller light riding the ocean swells, but already fog hid the catcher boat the net had come from. From his belt the trawlmaster took a double-edged knife, reached through the dripping plastic hair and sawed the belly of the net down and across. Fish began dropping by ones and twos. He gave the knife a last furious tug and stepped back quickly.

Out of the net and into the light spilled a flood of silver pollack, a whole school that had been caught en masse and dredged up like bright coins. There were thick, bruised-looking bullheads; overlapping waves of flatfish, blood-red on the eyed side, pale on the blind side; sculpin with heads like dragons; cod, some bloated like balloons by their air bladders, some exploded into soft tissue and pink slime; coral crabs as hairy as tarantulas. The bounty of the night sea.

And a girl. She slid loose-limbed like a swimmer as the fish poured from the net. On the deck she rolled lazily, arms awry, against a mound of sole, a bare foot tangled in crabs. A young woman, not a girl. Her hair was short and her blouse and jeans were sodden and twisted, heavy with water and sand, unprepared for any return to the world of air. The trawlmaster lifted a strand of hair that had wrapped itself across her eyes, revealing the open surprise in them, as if the ship's lamplit fog were golden clouds, as if she had risen in a boat sailing toward heaven itself.

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2 Originally when it came down the rails in Gdansk, the *Polar Star*'s four superstructures had been a dazzling white and the gantries and booms a candy-yellow. The decks were clear; silver chains wound round the winches; the facing on the deckhouses was stylishly raked. In fact, the *Polar Star* had looked like a ship.

Twenty years of salt water had repainted it with rust. The top decks had accumulated wooden planks, full barrels of lubricating oil and empty barrels for fish oil, the refuse of piled nets and floats. From the black stack with its red Soviet band drifted the dark smoke of a diesel in poor condition. Now, seen from a distance with a good view of the hull battered by unloading side trawlers in bad weather, the *Polar Star* resembled not so much a factory ship as a combination factory and junkyard cast into the sea and making improbable headway through the waves.

Yet day and night the *Polar Star* efficiently caught fish. Not caught, that was wrong; smaller trawlers caught the

fish and transferred their nets to the factory ship to be processed: headed, gutted, frozen.

For four months now the *Polar Star* had followed American catcher boats in American waters from Siberia to Alaska, from the Bering Strait to the Aleutian Islands. It was a joint venture. Simply put, the Soviets provided processing ships and took the fish, while the Americans provided trawlers and translators and took the money, all of this managed by a Seattle-based company that was half Soviet, half American. The crew of the *Polar Star* had seen the sun perhaps two days in that time, but then the Bering Sea was known as the Gray Zone.

Third Mate Slava Bukovsky walked the processing line while workers sorted the catch: pollack on a conveyor belt to the saws, mackerel and rays into the fish-meal hatch. Some of the fish had literally exploded as their air bladders expanded on the way from the bottom of the sea, and soft bits of them clung like mucus to caps, oil-skin aprons, lashes, lips.

He passed the rotary saws to the "slime line," where workers stood in slots on either side of the belt. Like automatons, the first pair slit fish bellies open to the anus; the second pair sucked out livers and guts with vacuum hoses; the third pair washed slime from the skin, gills and cavities with saltwater jets; the last pair vacuumed the fish a final time and laid the trimmed and dressed result on a belt moving toward the freezers. In the course of an eight-hour watch the gutting and spraying spread a mist of blood and wet pulp over the belt, workers and walkway. They were not the usual Hero Workers, least of all the lean, pale man with dark hair loading the dressed fish at the end of the line.

"Renko!"

Arkady vacuumed pinkish water from one eviscerated belly, slapped the fish on the freezer belt and picked up

the next. Pollack was not firm-fleshed. If it wasn't cleaned and frozen quickly, it would be unfit for human consumption and be fed to minks; if unfit for them, it would go to Africa as foreign aid. His hands were numb from handling fish little warmer than ice, but at least he wasn't working the saw like Kolya. In bad weather when the ship began to roll it took concentration to handle a frozen, slippery pollack around a blade. Arkady had learned to dig the toes of his boots under the table so that he wouldn't slide on the duckboards. At the beginning of the voyage and at the end, the entire factory was hosed down and scrubbed with ammonia, but meanwhile the fish room had a dank organic slickness and smell. Even the clicking of the belt, the whining of the saw, the deep rhythmic moan of the hull were the sounds of a leviathan that was resolutely swallowing the sea.

The belt stopped.

"You're Seaman Renko, aren't you?"

It took Arkady a moment to recognize the third mate, who was not a frequent visitor belowdecks. Izrail, the factory manager, stood at the power switch. He wore layers of sweaters and a black stubble almost to his eyes, which rolled with impatience. Natasha Chaikovskaya, a huge young woman in oilskin armor but with a feminine touch of lipstick, listed discreetly, better to see the third mate's Reeboks and unstained jeans.

"Aren't you?" Slava repeated.

"It's not a secret," Arkady said.

"This is not a dance class of Young Pioneers," Izrail told Slava. "If you want him, take him."

The belt started moving again as Arkady followed Slava aft, stepping over sluices where liquid slime and fish-liver oil ran through bilge holes directly out the side of the ship.

Slava stopped to scrutinize Arkady, as if trying to penetrate a disguise. "You are Renko the investigator?"

"Not anymore."



“But you were,” Slava said. “That’s good enough.”

They climbed the stairs to the main deck. Arkady assumed the third mate was leading him to the political officer or to a search of his cabin, although that could have been done without him. They walked by the galley and the steamy smell of macaroni, turned left at a sign that exhorted INCREASE PRODUCTION IN THE AGRO-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX! STRIVE FOR A DECISIVE UPSWING IN THE SUPPLY OF FISH PROTEIN! and halted at the infirmary door.

The door was guarded by a pair of mechanics wearing the red armbands of Public Order Volunteers. Skiba and Slezko were two informers—“slugs” to the rest of the crew. Even as Arkady and Slava went through the door Skiba pulled out a notebook.

The *Polar Star* had a clinic bigger than most small towns could boast: a doctor’s office, an examining room, an infirmary with three beds, a quarantine room and an operating room, to which Slava led Arkady. Along the walls were white cupboards with glass canisters of instruments in alcohol, a locked red cupboard with cigarettes and drugs, a cart with a green tank of oxygen and a red tank of nitrous oxide, a standing ashtray and a brass spittoon. There were anatomical charts on the wall, an astringent tang to the air. A dentist’s chair sat in one corner. In the middle of the room was a steel operating table covered by a sheet. Soaked through, the cloth clung to the form of a woman underneath. Below the edge of the sheet dangled restraining straps.

The room’s portholes were bright mirrors because it was black outside—0600, another hour’s work to go before dawn. And as usual at this point in his shift Arkady was stupefied by the number of fish in the sea. His eyes felt like those portholes. “What do you want?” he asked.

“Someone has died,” Slava announced.

“I can see that.”

“One of the girls from the galley. She fell overboard.”