

# At the Line's End

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

We leave the little fishing port while the sea and sky are still dark. Once past the tricky coral shoals that flank the harbor's entrance we turn westward into the gentle rolling swell. Just as the eastern horizon grows light, we reach a line of black-flagged buoys marking a submarine escarpment far below us. Mr. Uehara puts the engine into idle and begins to prepare his lures—white bowling-pin shaped things with a bouquet of sharp hooks at one end. He clips them on the heavy monofilament and then attaches a small blinking light that will illuminate each lure in the dark water 800 meters down. At last all is prepared: He lowers the lures into the water and then slowly pays out the line with the help of a small power winch. Then we sit down to wait, sharing a thermos of hot green tea. The half-hidden sun slowly crawls into the sky.

Mr. Uehara is an *uminchu*, a "seaperson." It signifies a fisherman who goes out alone in a small boat, much like the protagonist of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea*. Once this was commonplace in these small islands of Japan's Okinawa Prefecture, but modern technology has vastly increased the scale of the industry, and the attractions of easier and less dangerous ways of making a living draw away the islands' young men. The average age of the 16 *uminchu* on this island of Tonaki is 58.

Mr. Uehara stands. His waiting is done. "We may have something," he says, and begins to slowly reel one of the lines with his winch. He carefully watches the spot where the line passes into the water. The winch hums a low mechanical tune. He fingers the line. At last he turns and says, "There is one, and possibly two. I think they are heavy." They are *sei-ika*, large deep-sea squid often weighing well over 10 kilograms.

In the twilight several hundred meters below, the squid fights and twists and turns, but it cannot tear itself loose from the hooks that hold it fast. The winch pulls with a slow robotic monotony. When there is about 50 meters of line still in the water, Mr. Uehara carefully begins to take it in by hand.

I slip quietly over the side. The blue is infinite. I float motionless on the surface, watching. There is a small motion far below. It is the *sei-ika*; I can see the struggle. As the line grows shorter, there is another movement deeper down: one more squid is on the second lure. Holding my breath, I jackknife down and approach the nearer of the two. It is a perfect bullet shape, elegantly colored red on top and gold underneath. Its huge triangular fins pulse in frantic rhythm. From its golf-ball-sized eyes comes a baleful glare, and as I curve alongside for the short time my lungful of air allows, the eye on the side nearest me clearly follows my motion. The squid is not looking *at* me, but *into* me with an analytic intensity. The two alien life forms examine each other for a few seconds, until the intruder must return to the surface.

As Mr. Uehara gaffs and hauls the first squid into his narrow boat, I dive down to the second. Shuttling up for air and then back down again, I follow the squid until it is just below the surface, where it spits a cloud of viscous green-black ink into the water as arms and fins flail in a final panic. Then it is time: like a falling bolt of lightning, the gaff comes from above. The struggle is finished. In a few seconds, the bubbles and ripples are gone and I am alone in the sea.

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