

[Snap Judgment intro]

**Glynn:** Hey, Snappers. We know you enjoy your storytelling in the bright light of day, but if you also like your storytelling crafted in the dark of night, this is for you. Because right now, we're hiring two freelance stories scouts for our incredible sister show, Spooked. In our efforts to bring you more supernatural stories from around the globe, Spooked is searching for someone who has lived in or has deep cultural knowledge of the Caribbean or the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the American South, Southeast Asia, or West Africa. This amazing story scout will find and pitch original first-person stories, and work closely with the Spooked team and work closely with me. Is this person you? Do you know someone who might be interested? For more information, go to [snapjudgment.org/careers](http://snapjudgment.org/careers).

[music]

**Glynn:** Okay, so I tell my mama, "Mama, I'm dropping out of high school." My mom was like, "What!? Lord! Jesus! Savior! Pastor! Deacon!" But she doesn't need to worry. My buddy stumbled on the foolproof plan.

See, you can get a list from the government for free of people, individuals, corporations, organizations that government owes money to. Most of the time, people don't even know they have cash coming in. You take that list, find that person, call them, and tell them, "Hey, I've got a proposition for you. Free money. No strings attached. I'll tell you the amount. I'll tell you how to get it. All I ask is 10%."

My buddy says people are owed hundreds of thousands, millions. Make \$1 million deal with one person, and 10% of that million dollars is 100,000 clams, baby. That's a lot of scratch, all yours for five minutes' work. I can't wait to pull up at the East Kentwood High School in my new Porsche 911 and tell the principal to kiss my-- Ah! Anyway. It takes a little while, but I do in fact getting my list of names to call. I'm considering whether to order the interior wood package for my new Porsche. I'm going to start dialing.

[dial tone]

Hello Mr. Johnson? Yes. Well, who I am is not important, sir. But what I can offer you is--

**Mr. Johnson:** I need you people to stop calling me. You think I don't know my own business?

[hangs up]

**Glynn:** Seems like somebody, "I've already called Mr. Johnson. Let me move on to the next one." "Ms. Starr, let me cut right to the chase. Now this may sound unbelievable, but I'm thrilled to let you know that--" Click [dial tone] click. "Hello, do you want some money? I know where you can get some money--" click.

It turns out that perhaps a few 100,000 people have gotten my list before I've gotten my list. Catastrophe. After all my hopes and dreams and whatever I may have mentioned to the cheerleaders, I'll have to drag myself to high school Porscheless.

[music]

**Glynn:** Today, on Snap Judgment, The Golden Lure. One man's quest for the big score. My name is Glynn Washington. I'm still waiting to upgrade the wood trim in that Porsche I do not have. You're listening to Snap Judgment.

[music]

**Glynn:** We begin, with a request, be careful what you wish for, Snappers, because our storyteller, Joe, he's about to rediscover that old piece of wisdom, the hard way. Snap Judgment.

**Joe:** He's seen it his whole life, he goes, "Gold makes people crazy. They get gold fever." And just looking at it, it just changes people. There's a lot of people out there that have this gold fever really bad and you have to really worry about that. And he said for me to be extremely careful, "Don't let anyone know anything. You're going to have to protect your family."

[music]

**Nikka:** Joe Pennisi family started fishing in the San Francisco Bay in 1906. His grandfather came from Sicily. And he taught Joe's dad to be a fisherman, just like him. To them, if you were a Pennisi, you were a fisherman.

**Joe:** I never ever wanted to be a fisherman. Never. I was the only kid in my family that got so seasick. I mean, a deathly sick.

**Nikka:** But Joe's dad didn't think it mattered. He just told him to suck it up.

**Joe:** When my dad was fishing with my grandfather, my dad got seasick, too. My dad would throw his guts up, and my grandfather wouldn't put a bucket right next to the wheel until, "You want to be a fisherman? There's your bucket." But then, when he got older, he got over it.

**Nikka:** Joe didn't want to get over it. He didn't want to be a fisherman. He hated everything about it.

**Joe:** The worst day is for me to start the trip off like 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning. We row up to the *Diana*, it was an 83-foot big wood boat. It was about as wide as two sidewalks, and it had these real fat guardrails on it. We get the skiff tied up, and then we have to climb over the guardrail, but the guardrails are full of bird poop, because the birds walk up and down the guardrails and poop constantly. So, in the middle of the night, when everything gets soft and wet, and then you put your leg over the guardrail,

you instantly get bird crap all over your butt, your legs and stinks so bad. That's how you start your fishing trip, with bird crap all over [chuckles] you.

[music]

**Nikka:** With the boys on board, Joe's dad would go down into the belly of the ship and get the engines going.

**Joe:** Then, once you would get upstairs, you get into the galley, and then he would dip a newspaper into the diesel and get the stove going, which stunk like hell and make you want to throw up. He had to get his coffee going. That was the one thing that was a constant on the boat, there was always a coffee pot going.

**Nikka:** This one night, Joe was 12 years old, and it wasn't just the bird crap or the smelly diesel stuff that was getting to him. It was the terrifying weather and where they were headed.

**Joe:** You only have this little sandy spot that weaves in between these big walls of rocks on each side of you. This is called the Gate.

**Nikka:** Which is short for Gates of Hell. In fact, in [unintelligible 00:07:28] numbers, a kind of outdated fishermen's GPS, the last three digits for the Gates are 666. That fishing lane was a beast. A lot of other trawlers had lost their nets after they got caught in the reefs below. Some even say they were dragged down with them.

**Joe:** You've got to imagine, being on a boat and it's rolling back and forth. Now, that's a natural position for a boat. But when you have a net on the sea floor and you're towing along the sea floor, if your net hangs up on something, all of a sudden, now you are attached to the bottom of the ocean. It's no different than doing a nosedive. If we were towing to the Gates and we hung up and we rolled over, you'd be dead. There would be no way of even getting a radio call out.

**Nikka:** But Joe's dad didn't seem to care, because the Gates were teeming with fish that morning. Joe and his two brothers had just pulled up a huge haul in their net.

**Joe:** My dad made a short tow because the weather was so bad, he could not turn the boat to try to follow the contour of the bottom and he had like 5000 pounds of fish.

**Nikka:** The boys are struggling to get this massive catch down and into the fish hold.

**Joe:** These waves are crashing over the boat. We're trying to put the fish down inside the fish hole. And then, my dad came down onto the deck, and he was looking at the fish. And then, one of the things he did was, he goes, "You know what? You see these fish right here? You see the slime on them right here? When you see that slime, that means that there's a lot of fish around." That's when he told us this

was a good tow, but this next tow is going to be much bigger. At that point, I was nervous because this weather has picked up to a point where it's frightening.

**Nikka:** Joe wanted to go home, but he couldn't say anything.

**Joe:** My father had this diesel smell. It permeated in his skin and he wasn't really super tall. But, man, did he have a set of shoulders on him. I still remember as a young kid, watching my dad grabbed crowbars to move things on the boat and actually bending the crowbars like they were nothing. He was a type of guy where he was very easily excited. He was like a powder keg, always ready to go off. For that moment, all he kept thinking about was the 5000 pounds we just caught, and he was just into this fishing mode. The boat is just flying down into these big vast crevices and waves are breaking over the bow.

Whenever I would look up at the stack, all I could see was this big white ring from all the spray that had been hitting the exhaust that was sizzling and the salt right in front of your eyes. The net comes up like a giant whale, and it just clears the water, and then just comes down in this tremendous splash. It was like somebody throwing a ship into the water.

[big splash]

**Joe:** It was maybe 30 tons of fish that was in the net. I hadn't even seen that much fish in my life. That's when I realized that this was what drove my father. I could see that one special moment, it's all it took, was just that moment. That's what you live for. It's such an adrenaline rush. It's a perfect symphony between a man and his craft, and it solidifies everything that you are. It brings you and it makes you whole in that one moment. At that point, I started understanding my dad.

**Nikka:** But now, the real challenge was about to begin, because they would have to bring these 30 tons of fish aboard, while they were being pummeled, wave after wave.

**Joe:** Every time he tried to lift the net, it makes the boat lean over further. So, you're standing in water up to your waist and you see your fish boxes, everything just floating right off the deck and into the sea. As this is all happening, my dad is right there in the middle of it.

**Nikka:** He stood at the center like Poseidon, unmoving, yelling over the wind and the waves, telling his boys to get the fish down into the fish hold, faster and faster.

**Joe:** The waves are just smashing the net up against the side of the boat. And the fish, they all have these big bones, rockfish and things like that, and are all stabbing each other and bruising each other with their hard heads.

**Nikka:** It got so bad that the waves started turning purple from a mixture of water and fish blood.

**Joe:** I'm looking at the whole picture going, "What are we accomplishing? Everything's getting destroyed and washed over the side." It's just so dangerous, especially when you're just there with your other two younger brothers. We were little kids pretty much.

**Nikka:** No, they were little kids, 11, 12 and 13. And they'd already been up since 1:00 in the morning, and it was pushing past 8:00 in the evening. With fatigue setting in, Joe finally spoke up.

**Joe:** I said, "Dad, these fish are all beat up. I don't know if we could save these things." At that moment, he just looked at me and he said, "They're all going to be fileted. You're not going to know the difference. Just put them aboard."

**Nikka:** Somehow after four grueling hours, they got it done.

**Joe:** The greatest feeling in the world, especially after going through an event like this, is to actually turn the net reel, with this big giant spool in the back of the boat, and finally reel the last little bit of fish and net up aboard. Now, the whole net is back in the boat. You dump out that last little bit of fish, and now, you're done. Me and my brothers, we were so exhausted. We finally got back onto the cabin, and we opened the cabin door, took one step in and we all just fell, boom, boom, boom, laid right on the floor. We were sopping wet.

**Nikka:** That's when Joe's dad came down into the cabin and told them what a great job they had done. He told them to get some rest because they were about to go out and do it all again.

**Joe:** At that moment, I truly thought my dad was insane. I truly thought, "This man is not right." I was never going to go on a boat with him again. I was done. You keep gambling with your life, eventually you're going to lose, especially with the ocean.

**Nikka:** Before heading back to the Gates, Joe's dad went to make one more pot of coffee. He turned on the water faucet, but it was dry.

**Joe:** And he throws a coffeepot into the sink, and then he goes, "Well, if something happens and we need to put water in the engine, we don't have any." He goes, "We're going in."

**Nikka:** Apparently, the boat couldn't take it either. Rather than risking his engine, Joe's dad headed for home.

**Joe:** You just get happier and happier and happier, and then pretty soon you've got the waves on the back of the boat, they're pushing you right into the bay. We came in and we tied up next to the dock. I just wanted to hug the pilings on the pier. [laughs]

**Nikka:** As they unloaded their haul, the fishmongers from the market couldn't believe how many of the fish were completely mangled.

**Joe:** Clearly everything we did was for nothing. All these fish were beat up and we lost more than half of them. Then, the rest of the fish they would send to cat food. I think cats got more out of it than people did, for sure. [laughs]

**Nikka:** Year after year, Joe just bided his time on his dad's fishing boat.

**Joe:** My senior year, I told myself, "Okay, I don't know if I'm stupid or not, but I'm going to try a little bit in school," because I was really hoping that there would have been something else I could do besides fishing. You see your friends, everybody's separating there. It's like the Blue Angels, when they all go in different directions. My direction was not the direction that I really wanted it to go.

**Nikka:** For the first time, between shoveling fish, removing their scales, and every other job he had to do, Joe tried to squeeze in some homework.

**Joe:** We were getting ready for dinner. And then my mom opens up the mail, and she sees a letter from the school. Those were never usually a good thing, because it was always like, "You're in trouble." "You're going to have detention." She takes it over to my father, and he grabbed the letter, he barely read it, and then he flicked it under the table. I didn't even know till after my mom goes, "Honey, you need to read this."

**Nikka:** It was a letter from his high school counselor, saying that Joe made a huge turnaround in his grades, and he might even have a shot at college.

**Joe:** It was just this encouraging letter, like, "Hey, this kid's got potential. But what are you guys doing to him? [laughs] Let him go to school." It gave me this overwhelming sense of confidence that, "Hey, maybe I can actually get an education and do something else." I liked a lot of different things. I liked electronics. I liked fixing things. Every time something broke in my house, my brothers would bring it to me, like clock radios or any bicycles. So, I always had this little knack for fixing things. I really would have liked to become a professional person and not have to live this harsh life. I wanted to have a life of some normalcy, but my dad would never have it because my dad would call us his Marines. So, every time there was a disaster, we got to get thrown in the disaster.

**Nikka:** So, Joe and his brothers packed up the things and they moved out. They got their own house. No more dad, no more 1:00 AM fishing, and no more storms.

**Joe:** "I'm never going to go fishing, I'm never going to be like you, I'm not going to do this." That echoed in my mind my whole life. It was a six-bedroom house. We didn't know how to remodel it or anything. It was in shambles, and we're living there with sheetrock and 2x4s sticking out. We're like, "Well, what are we going to do?" I spent my entire youth telling myself that this is only temporary, and then I'm looking around at how expensive everything is, and I'm looking at how people are getting by with the jobs they're having. At that point, I really had to come to grips with the fact that the only skill level I really had that could actually, financially keep me in a building and pay my bills, and actually possibly one day

allow me to feed some children and have a wife and all that was the fishing, because that's the only thing that I was really good and the only thing that I really knew that well.

**Nikka:** There you have it, Joe was a Pennisi, and that man, he was a fisherman. He and his brothers got a big steel boat and started fishing up in the Bering Sea off Alaska, making more money in a few months than they had in their whole life.

**Joe:** Then finally, we flew home. We had been sending our checks to our bank account. The bank manager when he saw me and my brother, John, outside the door the bank, he came running from his desk to go over the door for a kid, 18-, 19-year-old kid [laughs] because we had a \$350,000 check to put in the bank.

**Nikka:** As his business grew, so did his family. He got married. He had more than a half a dozen kids just like his father. He came back to fish off the coast of California, and now where he used to see nothing but harshness and struggle in the fishing life, he saw its beauty.

**Joe:** When I was a kid, I would have run and won every Olympic trial there was, not to go fishing. And now that I'm older, there's just something that lures you back to the sea.

I could be fishing and it could be pitch black dark, and I'll walk out on the upper deck, leaning over the rail. I'll see the phosphorus coming up under the boat, looks like it's on fire. Sometimes, you'll see dolphins swimming alongside you or the wind. And that salt air, I have to say that salt air is something that I don't think I can live without, I really don't, because the minute I start smelling the ocean, I'm like a whole different person. That's really hard to get out of somebody's soul, I guess, because I haven't been able to get it out of mine.

**Nikka:** There was also something else that drove him, that came from when he was just a kid fishing through the Gates of Hell.

**Joe:** To this day, that is the one memory that I have when I'm fishing. It's like when that net comes blowing out of the water like a giant whale, it's a one thing you can never get out of your mind and it drives you the rest of your life. Like a racecar driver and they see that checkered flag, that is the checkered flag for an American fisherman.

**Nikka:** But as the government enacted more environmental regulations to protect the oceans, the checkered flag was getting pushed further and further away, especially for trawling. Gone were the days where Joe could pull up 30 ton of fish like his father, much less like his grandfather. So, he was on the ropes. And then, the 2008 financial collapse and a risky investment knocked him clear out of the ring.

**Joe:** I was going to have a heart attack, because I didn't even have \$10 left to put gas in my truck. My house, I was three house payments behind. I was getting letters from the banks, and they're going to take my home. Looking at my kids, feeling I couldn't even have any pride anymore. I felt I truly had

destroyed my family and wrecked everything. Then, that's when I call my wife. I told her, "I'm going to fix this. I'm going to fix it somehow. I don't know how, but I'm going to fix it."

**Nikka:** He scrambled to keep his family afloat. But eventually, he had to file for bankruptcy.

**Joe:** Also, I had no working capital. There is no way I could have launched my boat to do anything, because I could not go to a fuel dock and write a bad check, I could wind up in jail, because everybody knew I was flat broke. I wanted just to run away from everyone.

**Nikka:** He escaped to the one place that it was free of everyone, his boat. Sure, he couldn't go fishing, but he could still work on it.

**Joe:** My boat actually helped me a lot because I would work on my boat on the weekends in the evenings. That was my therapy. I would go there and I'd wire things and fix things.

**Nikka:** Then, this one day, while he was replacing the hydraulic lines, he had this crazy idea.

**Joe:** I was thinking to myself, "If we could make like a hydrofoil that we could actually see the fish going into the front of the net--"

**Nikka:** He wanted to hook an underwater camera onto his giant fishing.

**Joe:** Then, we can actually start learning how our nets work because I was trying to get rid of the small juvenile fish. I was trying to let them go through the net and just keep the larger fish. It was such a problem. Not only that, but who wants by-catch? These are all the worst evils that trawlers are always blamed for is, destroying the sea floor and killing baby fish.

**Nikka:** The cameras on his nets can help increase his profits while lowering his environmental impact, because trawlers are seen as the most destructive form of fishing, which is a big reason why there's so much government oversight. As sophisticated as fishing had become over the years with GPS and sonar detection systems, Joe is pretty much doing the same thing his grandfather did, dragging a massive net along the ocean floor without really watching how it works down there.

**Joe:** That's always a big challenge, is that every fisherman that's ever trawled A net has actually never seen one work. All you see is the results. I was thinking about it, and I was thinking if I was able to make a hydrofoil with a camera and a light, then I could put it in the net, and it could swim inside the net, and in pan and videotaped that way. And then I could learn a lot more about how my gear works.

**Nikka:** Joe went home and got his 10-year-old daughter, Nina, to help him build it.

**Joe:** We took these round rings and we put them together and then we made a little bracket on the inside to hold the camera and the light. Then, afterwards, I took one of my work shirts and we made a



tail like you would put on a kite. We just dangled a work shirt at the very back of it. That's how we invented this camera that actually dangles inside the net.

**Nikka:** His daughter named it the Fisheye, and it looks like if you recycle the head of *WALL-E* from the Pixar movie and put a couple of 20-inch rings around it, like hula hoops. And then, Joe scraped up a little gas money to take the boat out. He fired up the camera and lowered his nets. The first video was shadowy. The second time, they lower the Fisheye even further.

**Joe:** That second video just blew everyone's minds. To see the seafloor for the first time and see the fish actually swimming in front of the net, going into the net and all the different colors, it was just shocking.

**Nikka:** It wasn't just beautiful. It was informative, and it immediately started changing the way that Joe had fished his entire life.

**Joe:** Here now, we got the Fisheye and we're able to start modifying our net because a lot of these fish have different shapes.

**Nikka:** The camera actually helped him make more money fishing, because he was becoming an expert at bunching and changing his net to capture certain fish while leaving other fish alone. But he also learned something about the seafloor.

**Joe:** The more I looked at the videos, the more I started realizing that these fish, they don't need to be scraped up off the sea floor. They don't need that. In fact, all that mud is a big negative thing. Plus, you're burning more fuel. We don't need to tear the sea floor up to catch these fish, and we started bringing in the nicest fish we ever caught. I'm the only trawler probably on the entire continent that keeps every single fish we catch, because my net is so good at sorting the fish. The cameras all did this for us.

**Nikka:** Joe was hooked. He was watching Fish TV all the time. Unfortunately, so was everyone else.

**Joe:** In the mornings, even whenever I'm making breakfast for my kids, I would tell them, "Okay, guys, you can't have breakfast without a movie." I'd always stick my laptop up on the counter, and it would always be a fish video. All my kids were sitting on the barstools, they're like, "Oh, Dad, are we going to watch another fish video?" Everywhere I go, I bring my laptop and I show all my friends, "Hey, you want to see some fish video?" I'd be at a softball game up on the bleachers and rooting for my kids' teams, and then there would be a bunch of little kids on the bleachers. I'd ask their parents, "Hey, is it all right if they see a fish video?" I've shown fish videos to so many people.

That night, it was about probably 1 o'clock in the morning. By this time now, my wife would totally fall asleep, so she was out. So, I didn't have to worry about the light bothering her. I put the laptop on my chest. I had this one video I had not seen yet from my fishing trip from the day before. I stick this video in, and I'm watching it. I started seeing these flashes. I had never seen these flashes before because all

the videos I've seen, I didn't see anything left reflecting back from the light. I start thinking that there's something different about this video, but I didn't know what it was. As the video is rolling, I see something go by and it looked like a hand. I'm like, "Well, that's weird." Then, I see some more flashes, and then pretty soon I see a gold bar go by. [chuckles]

As soon as it went by-- by that time it was like 2 o'clock in the morning. I didn't even second guess what it was, and I just jumped up by the bed. I'm like, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" Of course, now my wife is pissed off because night after night whenever I'm home, I'm watching these stupid fish videos. That's driving her crazy. Now, I'm running around the bed and I go around and I'm like, "Graz, get up. Graz, get up. You've got to see this." I go, "There's a gold bar. There's a gold bar underwater. Look at this thing." I play the video back for her and she's half asleep, and she always kills me because she always will make comments like, "Is it going to make our life better?" "Is it going to put money in our bank?" "Are we going to be rich?" These kinds of things over a lot of my crazy ideas, and most of the time I have to answer her by saying, "No." but wakes up anyway and look at it. She looks at the computer and she's watching the gold bar go by and she goes, "Does that mean we're going to be rich?" That's what she tells me. I said, "Well, I don't know."

[music]

**Glynn:** Don't go anywhere, Snappers. We've got plenty more Fish TV for you, and Joe's hunt for the gold bars. Stay tuned.

[music]

**Glynn:** From Snap Judgment's ever-changing lair, welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Golden Lure episode. The last we left Joe, he'd been in bed with his wife watching his very own Fish TV, and he saw some gold bars go by. Snap Judgment.

[music]

**Joe:** She looks at the computer and she's watching the gold bar go by, and she goes, "Does that mean we're going to be rich?" That's what she tells me. I said, "Well, I don't know." I get up, it was like 5 o'clock or 6 o'clock, and I go down, and I started making pancakes for my kids. And then, my son, Dominic, was the first one to come up, and he comes in the kitchen. And he's like, "Dad, oh, thanks for making breakfast." I was like, "Oh, Dominic, hey, you want to see something cool?" And then, my daughters come in and like, "Oh, Dad. Do we have to watch your fish videos again?" My oldest daughter, Nina. I'm like, "Nina, look. There's a gold bar in this video. Look." Anyway, they all got a little excited and then they started going, "Does that mean we're going to be rich?" Then, what they started doing was, "Oh, I'm making a Christmas list." So, they all started putting them on the refrigerator. It was so funny. The girls instantly went to that. My daughter, Sophie, started it. They wanted a new car. The first thing they all put was they wanted a new house. [laughs] They did not like our cramped little house, and that was okay, but the lists were quite long.

**Nikka:** On the one hand, Joe wanted to figure out a way to start pulling up the gold bars. But on the other hand, he wasn't totally sure they actually were gold.

**Joe:** I was questioning my own sanity. I'm thinking to myself, "Okay, maybe it's not a gold bar." I go down to Moss Landing that morning, and there's a big cable drum that's on its side. There's all these chairs around there, and all the old fishermen sit there and have coffee for hours in the morning. They all tell basically lies to each other, because none of the stuff they say is true.

I go over there and I started asking, I went to the old guys. I said, "Hey, look at my phone. My friend sent me this picture. What do you guys think this is?" And it was so funny because every one of these old fisherman guys, they looked at it in two seconds, like, "Oh, that's a gold bar. That's a gold bar. Who sent that to you?" I didn't say anything. I was just cracking up like, "Yeah, so I thought too. I thought it looked like a gold bar." Whenever I left the docks over there, at that point, I was like, "Oh, my shit!" I was just blown away. I'm like, "How could this happen? We're going to be famous. We're going to be rich. We're going to have this huge, amazing story." You start seeing videos of Jacques Cousteau going down and the guys come up with jewels and big giant gold bars, and this is going to get nuts.

**Nikka:** Joe began drafting up ideas for how to get the treasure, but there were some pretty steep challenges. First, Joe only had a rough idea of where the video was taken. But he needs so much more than that.

**Joe:** I think the challenge starts with actually even being able to find it, because when you're on a boat way up here on the top of the surface, and have to do some work thousand feet down, it's no longer that you can even keep a boat right over the top of that pinpointed area because the boat's moving all over the place.

**Nikka:** At that depth, the challenges just become greater and greater.

**Joe:** Like I was saying, it's about 57 atmospheres, 14.7 pounds per square inch at 33 feet of depth.

**Nikka:** It's a lot of pressure.

**Joe:** The thing too is that the gold is so heavy, 1.7 times or so heavier than lead.

**Nikka:** If a diver can even get to that point, to move, even a single gold bar at that depth would require the power of Hercules. A rover could do the job, but it was illegal in the marine area. He could, however, build a rig to fish it out, to dig it out. No problem. But even after that, he'd have one more hurdle, which is that every time he takes his boat out fishing, he has to bring a federal observer with him.

**Joe:** You have somebody standing over your shoulder watching every little thing you do, so when you bring the nets aboard and you release the fish onto the trawl deck, you have somebody standing there watching. Even if we catch a rock, they make us throw it over the side. So, if there is a gold bar in there,

I can guarantee you, you're not going to be able to keep it quiet at all. In fact, they would most likely make you throw it back over the side.

**Nikka:** It's not like they're just the mall patrol.

**Joe:** I call them cops but they're observers, but they do the same job. All they've got to do is pick up a phone when you get in and you can go right to jail for any little thing that they say. So, they have tremendous power.

**Nikka:** Joe wasn't cleared for treasure trawling. He actually had no idea how to feasibly, legally get the gold off the ocean floor. So, he assembled a team of treasure hunters. He showed them his footage.

**Joe:** So, they darken the room, closing all these blinds, and they turn on this big screen TV and we started rolling the film. When Dan saw the first gold bar go by--

**Nikka:** Dan was a diving expert.

**Joe:** --all of a sudden, he just stood up, and he turned around, and he looked at me, he goes, "That's a damn good day when you see something like that on a film." [laughs] That's what he told me. From that point on, he was a whole different person. He had been diving his whole life. He goes, "Nothing grows on gold. I'm telling you right now. I've been pulling gold out of the ocean for a lot of years, especially working on the East Coast. It's just as shiny when it goes in as and when it comes out, and that's what you have right there." He was in shock.

**Nikka:** But he also told him something else, something that actually scared him.

**Joe:** He said, "Gold makes people crazy." He's seen it his whole life. He goes, "They get gold fever." Just looking at it, it just changes people. He said that, "There's a lot of people out there that have this gold fever really bad, and you have to really worry about that." He said for me to be extremely careful, don't let anyone know anything. And he said, "You're going to have to protect your family." I was thinking to myself, maybe I should be just destroying the card, because it was almost a curse in a way because I used to be very wealthy. I mean I was a pretty wealthy guy. And then all of a sudden, you go through these horrible lawsuits and your life changes, and you lose all your properties and your kids are going, "Dad, they're taking your tractor." They're coming home from school and the bus is there, like, "I was hoping open they were going to come get it before you guys get out of school." But you take these spirals down, and I was thinking, "Well, maybe this is a way of regaining some of my dignity."

**Nikka:** Joe went home and talked to his wife.

**Joe:** My wife was really concerned. Especially with all that we had been through, she was just very scared. She was like, "If this is real, we might be jeopardizing our family over this." At that point, she was just scared, and I agreed with her.

**Nikka:** But Joe wasn't quite satisfied with that answer. He went to his friend, Joleen, the first mate on his ship, and she told him the same thing.

**Joe:** She was like if people really found out, especially around the waterfront, there's a lot of guys down there that, for a few bucks, they would do bad things. We got our share of guys that have had hard lives and they could definitely hurt you for a small amount of money.

**Nikka:** It just seemed too good of an opportunity. So, still looking for the answer he wanted, he decided he'd go talk to his father's old attorney.

**Joe:** He's a very large man. He used to be basically like a professional basketball player. He's an attorney and he's such an alpha male, I can't even tell you. He's like my dad, very much in control at all times. I gingerly start with the subject. I wasn't trying to be overly optimistic here. I was just trying to say, "Hey, Dave. There was some stuff I found on the seafloor, and I wanted to show you and get your advice." But he was very into, like, "Exactly what is it? Tell me in detail, what are we talking about?" And then, I'm like, "Well, what I believe here is that we're dealing with some gold bars on the sea floor." [chuckles] It was like a moment of silence. And then all of a sudden, it was like a meteor hitting the planet [makes an explosion sound] He was like, "What!? Hold everything, hold all my calls. I want to see this video. Get the big TV." Oh, my God. I mean he puts them to test, "Call this guy, call that guy, email." All of a sudden, he's barking orders and this thing just takes on a whole new life. Although I'm happy because this is what I wanted, but at the same time, it's like, "Whoa, man, we just went to 1000 miles an hour."

**Nikka:** The lawyer called in a group of archaeologists. They told Joe that the bars in the shipwreck were smelting gold, possibly from the mint in San Francisco.

**Joe:** They are so excited, and they're telling us, "Look, you know what? You have a large gold cargo here. This is a cargo. It's not just one bar. There's never one bar." And then, they start telling me, "Look, this could be a discovery of a century. This could be something huge, you don't even know, this could be billions of dollars laying there in the sand."

**Nikka:** Joe doubled down and instead of saving, he started spending more money, on airplane tickets, hotel rooms, and consultants.

**Joe:** I had the fish markets calling me, asking me why I wasn't fishing. So, I was getting behind on my bills.

**Nikka:** But he was on the hunt for the biggest catch of his life. With this footage and the expert testimony from the archaeologists, he and his lawyer headed into a meeting with the federal government to request a permit for exploration.

**Joe:** They told me that they have no knowledge of any precious cargo like this outside 300 feet. When they said that and clearly, they have no knowledge of this wreck at all. They tried to keep a history of all these wrecks and locations. So, this is clearly something nobody knows about.

**Nikka:** At that moment, he felt his hopes rise.

**Joe:** My hopes were that no one then would know what's down there. Also, we could do this together, we could get permits, and this could become a fun project, everybody working together, but that was not how it went. This conversation went dark right away. These guys are saying, "Look, you touch anything on that seafloor, you're going to lose all your fishing rights and permits and you're going to go to jail for a very long time."

**Nikka:** He felt crushed, but his lawyer told him he still had one last shot.

[music]

**Glynn:** It's not over, Snappers. When we return, hear exactly what Joe's lawyer has in mind for how to get around the feds. Stay tuned.

[music]

**Glynn:** Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The Golden Lure episode. My name is Glynn Washington. When we last we left Joe, he just had a meeting with the feds about a permit to recover the gold, and the meeting was not going well.

[music]

**Joe:** These guys are saying, "Look, you touch anything on that seafloor, you're going to lose all your fishing rights and permits, and you're going to go to jail for a very long time."

**Nikka:** He felt crushed, but his lawyer told him he still had one last shot. Joe is going to have to go out and get two things. The exact coordinates of the treasure and footage of the sunken ship. If the gold bars were really part of a shipwreck, then he could file what's called an Admiralty Arrest. It's a treasure hunters' loophole that would allow him to stake a claim to the gold in court.

**Joe:** This was difficult. This was extremely difficult. Even trying to engineer all these different changes and trying to make this work so that I can get out there and try to get this footage, and I had to do it before anyone knows about this area. Every day I was worried about the federal government spying on us because we have a VMS that sends signals to satellites.

**Nikka:** It's not just the electronic surveillance. It's the fish cop standing 20 feet away from them, watching their every move the whole time they're out on the boat.

**Joe:** They track us everywhere we go. I was stressed out. So, that night, I remember before we left, I was so nervous because we weren't really breaking the law. But at the same time, we were right in the gray area. Had that federal observer known what we were doing, obviously, they would be able to know the location of the area where we're working, and that was to be kept a secret.

**Nikka:** The next day, he and Joleen went out as if they were fishing. They turned on the new camera system, and then lowered the nets.

**Joe:** These weren't like the other cameras, these cameras actually had a tether that went from the net all the way up to the boat, and we had real-time video. So, we left Moss Landing, but I'm not really doing a fishing trip though. So, this was difficult.

**Nikka:** To avoid tipping off the observer, he'd start further away from the site, and then slowly make his way over. But Joe was also on the clock. The cameras could only record 12 hours of footage, so he'd have to be glued to the monitor the whole way and hope he got the images in time.

**Joe:** We get up to the area where the gold bars are and stuff and where I had hung up, and I'm trying to do it so that nobody really sees me. We start towing back and forth and back and forth. And we're videotaping, and we have these cameras rolling. So now in the wheelhouse, I'm actually able to see everything that's going on under the boat, which was the first time because I had not had real-time video before. At first, we didn't really see anything.

We're going along and all of a sudden, we see what looked to be three gold bars, one after another in the sand. They were very symmetrical, they looked like bricks, and there was three of them in a row. And there was a little bit of sand over them. We're just like, "Oh, my God!" They're manmade objects. They look like bricks. You could see the corners and the edges of them. This is amazing. The fact that they were laid perfectly in line, one, two, three, and they were even straight, we were speechless. Joleen was just like, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! I can't believe this!" We're watching the screen. And then we go a little bit further, and then we see a single. And then, we go a little bit further, and then we see another single bar.

**Nikka:** They check their GPS and wrote down the exact coordinates of the gold bars. But they still need footage of the shipwreck.

**Joe:** I started turning the boat, turning the boat. All of a sudden, Joleen and I were staring up-- we have this large screen TV in the wheelhouse. All of a sudden, we're staring at this big, fat tube that's coming out of the sea floor about a 30-degree angle. It's full of growth, it almost looked like hair were growing on it. All I could think of was, we were so speechless. We're stunned. All of a sudden, there's this thing. It looks like a cannon. We've never seen this before. Obviously, this was starting to make sense that, "Okay, well, if this is a wreck, then that's more likely a cannon because it looks like a cannon sticking out of the mud."

Right after we saw this, Joleen and I were jumping up and down the wheelhouse. We're like, "Oh, my God! We finally got something," because now nobody can deny that this is a cannon. This has to be a cannon.

**Nikka:** Now, they had the location of the gold bars and footage of the shipwreck with clues that could allow Joe to lay claim to the treasure.

**Joe:** At that very second, I looked over at the recorder, and I see we had run out of space on our hard drive, and it was off. My heart sank, because now to try to do this again, we had to get the net hauled back, and we were running out of time, and the weather was picking up.

**Nikka:** Joe thought about replacing the memory cards and setting up the net again. But it would look suspicious, and he knew it'd tip off the observer.

**Joe:** One of the things about fishing is you don't keep towing in the same areas, and that's kind of a sure sign to anybody that something's going on there.

**Nikka:** Joe was so close. The gold was right there beneath the surface, but getting the extra footage could actually put him in jail. So, he weighed his options. Take the risk and try to become a millionaire. Or, just be a fisherman who goes home to his family at the end of the day. And then, he thought about his dad.

**Joe:** If my father would have seen that video, and he would have realized that, "Hey, there's much gold underneath need this boat," I can guarantee you that he would have aggressively pursued this like very few people could have ever imagined. He was the type of man where he would risk everything.

I want to say I did end up like my father. I noticed in this one picture that I have, I'm standing next to my dad. We're each holding up a fish and I'm holding my son, Pino, in my arms. Until I saw this picture the other day, I did not realize how much like my dad I really was. I will not be like my dad. I will not go and put my family into any more danger than I already have.

The one thing that I always wanted was a big family. I realized that instead of me focusing on taking care of my family now, I'm chasing this dream, I don't think it's ever going to come to reality. I don't think there's anything good that's going to come out of it. I'm like, "I'm old enough, I'm wise enough to know that even though I know I can get that gold, but my gold is my wife and my kids."

**Nikka:** He called his wife and he told her, "It's too risky. I'm coming home." And then, he pulled up his empty nets, and left the site. But the gold is still sitting there at the bottom of the ocean, and hardly a day goes by where he doesn't think about it.

**Joe:** Actually, you will hear something really, really funny, is that I carry part of it in my wallet. Sometimes, I'll show people this little piece of paper. I have it right here. I show people this little piece of paper and I'll say, "You need three things to know where this is." Without all three things, you can't tell,



but it's here in my wallet. See how beat up it is? These are coordinates here on this piece of paper. [chuckles] This is it right here. You can probably almost hardly see it, but you need three things to know where it's at.

I always think to myself too, there is no safer place of putting anything in the Pacific Ocean or any ocean really, because once you put it under water and it's miles and miles offshore, I mean really to find it, even if you have a camera, you're looking through a straw. If you had a light at the end of a straw and you're looking all around the bottom of the ocean, that's all you get. You only get this little tiny view, and the ocean is so big. That's one thing that this whole thing taught me a lot about, was here I used to think that, okay, even lining up landmarks or GPS and all this stuff, but none of it means anything. None of it, because you could be 10 feet from it and not know where it's at. It's that easy. You could spend your whole life being 10 feet from it, but not know where it's at. [laughs]

[music]

**Glynn:** A very big thank you to Joe Pennisi for sharing your story with Snap. This story would not have been possible, if not for the amazing, gumshoe, on-the-ground reporting work of Tara Duggan, Jason Fagone, and Santiago Mejia who first told this story for the San Francisco Chronicle. Check out a link to their story for so much more, including the fish videos themselves. That's right, Snappers, click the [snapjudgment.org](http://snapjudgment.org) to see the gold with your own two eyes. The original score for this story was by Renzo Gorrio. It was produced by Nikka Singh.

[music]

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[music]