

Rosemary McGuire

From *Creatures from the Absolute Bottom of the Sea*

The Lost Boys Longline Co.

Four boys walked in single file down the steel ramp into the harbor. Corey followed Billy, followed Bob who followed Jack past the stand with last year's newspaper still unchanged, the sheds of longline gear and someone's gill net lying ice-caked and covered in yellow snow, to the *Alrenice* where she lay on the farthest float.

"What do people eat?" Corey asked. He was the cook because he was the least experienced, and because he seemed no use for anything else. Corey'd drifted into Thompsen's Bay a season before, but so far no one felt inclined to think of him as part of the town.

"I dunno. Oreos?" Billy said. "I like 'em."

"I'll give you a grocery list," Jack said absently. He was twenty, the oldest, and skipper of the boat. "Hamburger. More hamburger. Onions and stuff. I'll write it down."

"Thanks," Corey said. He smiled up at Jack, hoping too obviously to be liked.

"We'll need more oil, too. Oil rags. Steering fluid. Fuel filters." Jack recited more important things, half to himself. The vein on his forehead throbbed, swollen. His thoughts strayed with nervousness. This was his first season running a boat for longlining, and he was afraid. Longline derbies were a crazy fishery. Twenty-four hours in the Gulf of Alaska to fish as hard as you could, and that was all you got. When the derby began, people had to fish no matter what the weather was like, and that was what made it dangerous. That, and the hurry and the tiredness from so many hours working without a break. And his crew was so damn young.

Alongside him, Billy and Bob wrestled like puppies, trying to trip each other into the water that slapped brackish against the creosote dock. The sun came out, half overcast, and lit up the harbor like a memory, briefly gilding the fishing boats. Jack glanced up at its position. Almost five o'clock.

"When we get down there, I'm going to do a couple things in the engine room before we take off," Jack said, deepening his voice. "I want you two to clean out the fish hold. Get the bin boards set up so we can go get ice. Corey, get the galley squared away. It looks like a goddamn lair in there. And scrub the stove. We don't want any botulism on board."

Corey looked at him, trusting him, and nodded. He didn't know that cleaning the galley was a low-status job, or that he was expected to bitch about it. Well, that was fine. When Jack went in the galley later to scrub oil off his hands, the stove was clean enough, and Corey was reading a cookbook he'd gotten at the library. One of the fund-raising kind with recipes by locals.

"Deckhand's Delight," Corey read out loud. "Quick 'n' Easy Hash 'n' Eggs. You want that for dinner, Jack?"

"Whatever," Jack said. "You can start cooking once we get under way." He sat down and double-checked the weather and tide. Twelve feet of water moving on the ebb. That would carry them swiftly out as far as Hinchinbrook at least, and save on fuel. Winds variable ten tonight, with patchy fog. Tomorrow a low was moving in, but it didn't sound bad.

He looked up again to check the time, then went down in the engine room and started the boat. Let her warm up a little. When the crew got back, they would take off.

Dusk fell as they headed out, the quick dusk of early spring. Light had left the water, though it held the snow-piled peaks of higher ground. Overhead, the pale sky was streaked with the clouds people called mare's tails. The sea, darkening, held its perennial gravitas. It drew them out south and to the west, into gathering cloud. On their bow, a group of porpoises rode the wake, white sides flashing as they rolled and turned. Playing. Jack watched them as he steered. Trying not to think about the crew. Corey'd drifted off up the dock, again, just as they were ready to untie. It took half an hour to find him, get him back. But Jack couldn't bring himself to bitch him out.

In the galley now, Corey chopped an onion clumsily but with determination, his thin shoulders hunched inside his sweatshirt. His mild blue eyes shied up at Jack, full of their infuriating hopefulness. "This OK?" he said.

He knew he was in trouble, but he couldn't help it. Behind him, a pot of noodles simmered on the stove. When the food was ready, he set it on the table with a serving spoon and a stack of paper plates. It wasn't good, but it was hot and belly-filling. The boys ate fast, faces down over their plates. When they finished, Jack told them to hit the rack.

"We'll be working early," he said.

"Want me to take a wheel watch?" Billy offered.

"No," Jack said. They crawled into their bunks in the forepeak, leaving him alone. Soon, he heard a double rhythm of snores, broken by the sound of the gathering swell,

and the wakes of other boats cutting over it. Most of the fleet had left on the same tide. One by one, the ships' captains passed him. Some waved. Others did not. His buddy George came too close on purpose, to make his wake smack into them and make them roll. Plates and cards slid on the table, almost fell. The guys shouldn't've left them there.

"Goddamn it!"

He could see George through the cabin window, grinning hard.

"Get a real boat," George's deckhand yelled. Jack flipped him off. The *Alrenice* was a fine boat, just a little old. He'd had a hard time finding anything to lease. A lot of guys were running boats by the time they were his age, and if their dads were good fishermen, they did well. They had the gear and experience, and they had access to a kind of unspoken system of fishermen helping one another—giving them tips for their dads' sakes, lending them a wrench or a hand when they needed it. But Jack's dad, Ronnie, was a worthless drunk, who couldn't even get his boat out to the grounds half the time. People joked that they crossed the street when they saw Ron coming, but it wasn't a joke. When Jack had leased the *Alrenice* last season, people said he'd sink it for sure. But he'd done all right seining in the sound, and in the fall John Ross at the cannery even said, "You're not much like your old man."

Maybe he was lucky, he thought. His dad never had been. Luck was a thing that adhered to a person, regardless of virtue; and though it could not be attracted, it could be driven off. Yes, he'd been lucky so far. He stroked the steering wheel of his boat, his own boat. By himself, he'd installed her new hydraulics when the old ones went. He'd been there when they put this engine in. She was his, though he only leased her.

Hopefulness. The hopefulness and love. Darkness fell now. Ahead, the moon rose over the starboard bow, and higher up, the long bright arc of the Big Dipper. He'd write a poem about it if he knew the words.

Below him, Corey stirred. "Everything all right?" he asked, leaning out of his bunk, helpful and strangely helpless at the same time. The other two still snored.

"Yeah. You lay down. I'll get you up if I need you," Jack said. He was filled with a kind of warm feeling. He wanted to share it; and at the same time, he wanted to be alone. "You did good today," he told Corey expansively. The boy smiled. It wasn't his fault he was a klutz.

Silence and darkness crept in once more.

Past Hinchinbrook, they got into ocean swell and the pure, deep waters of the Gulf. The tide began to turn, and the boat slowed. At three a.m., Jack got Billy up.

“Just keep her as she is,” he told him. “We’re heading pretty much straight south, now.” Before he crawled in his bunk, he went out on deck for a last look around. The land had fallen far behind them, now. All he could see was a faint, dark mass somewhere on the horizon, against the clear, black depth of the sky. Stars swung high overhead. Northern lights, maybe the last of the year. Standing there, he felt exhilaration as cold and deep as water. It seemed to drive into him out of the night. He was he. He was alive. This was his boat. His crew, and he was young. How strange the sea was. Like a god, but he himself was like a god. His thoughts fumbled, exalted, and his body shook with a physical fear and heat.

When he woke again, they were within ten miles of the fishing grounds. A light wind had come up with the dawn. It was overcast. Outside, steel gray water surged and tumbled, stretching out to the horizon in a monotonous wasteland. There was the taste of metal in his mouth. He got the boys up and made a pot of coffee. Billy put a box of Snickers between them on the table.

“Breakfast,” he said. They were still half awake, their eyes sleep-fogged. Hair tousled upright on their heads, their faces red and crumpled with the weight of dreams. Billy had the mark of a zipper imprinted on his forehead like a scar. He’d used his jacket for a pillow.

“All right,” Jack said. “Let’s get the deck set up.” He knew it was early yet. But he wanted the guys to look at it, to stand on deck for a while as if they could absorb the knowledge that would make them a decent crew by simple proximity to water and gear. Billy, he knew, had crewed in a longline derby before. Bob had not, but he had experience on boats, and he’d pick it up quickly. They’d handle the deck. Corey would help out where he could, and he himself would run the boat from the steering station on top of the house.

“A’ight,” Bob said, drawling to be funny. They were fired up, now. Excited. Energy crackled from them. They dragged their gear on and went out. Jack followed them, pushing open a hatch so that he could see the instruments from overhead. He climbed the ladder onto the top of the house, and took control at the steering station there. A light drizzle began to fall, cutting visibility. Three boats waited to the south of them. There’d be many others in the fog.

Billy hooked a line anchor to the first tub of gear. Behind him, more tubs waited, the long ground lines coiled and ready, baited hooks arranged along the rim. Along the cabin, Bob hung the gaffs, to be ready when they brought the lines back in.

Jack glanced down and checked the time again. Seven fifty-five. One of the other boats had crowded in. On deck, he could see the crew at work, their bright orange raingear glowing through the drizzling mist. “Fuckers,” he said, quietly, nervously. They idled past. Downwind, the other two boats drifted as they waited.

Seven fifty-nine. “Get ready,” he called, and watched as the second hand steadily traced the blurred face of the clock.

“All right,” he called as it touched the twelve. Eight o’clock. He threw the *Alrenice* in gear. Billy heaved the line anchor overboard. The line peeled out over the stern, hooks flying, each tied on a gangion and baited with herring. When the line ran out, Billy whipped another tub in place. They kept on setting. Off to his side, the other boat was setting—too close to him, he thought, as if it was a challenge. “Fuck,” he said. His world had narrowed to the deck below, the hooks flashing overboard and the course before him. The other boat was a threat, nothing more; competition for the fish that lay below. Neck and neck they raced, and the hooks flew out to settle down into the cold depth of the water. Two thousand feet here.

“All right, that’s good,” Jack called. He’d set the next string in a different depth. The boys let the line whip out, buoyed it, and stood, motion arrested, waiting for the next set. He ran a few moments, watching the sounder.

“Let ’er rip,” he called. Again Billy chucked the anchor and the line went out. They finished setting and ran south again to lay the next string.

Halfway through the morning, the wind began coming up. Jack watched it, worrying. It might take a long time for them to pick up if it started to blow. But it was hard to quit. An hour passed before he turned north again, back to where they’d started laying out.

“Fuck,” he said again. He’d forgotten to write down the loran coordinates for the first string. He ran now, searching for it in the fog. When he saw it, he yelled.

“Corey. In the hold. You’re packing the fish in ice. Bob—you gut ’em. Billy gaffs.” Billy hooked the buoy and brought aboard. The line came in over the power block and spooled messily into the tubs. Bait chunks still clung to it, water-sodden. Billy gaffed each fish as it broke the surface, yanked it aboard and threw it to Bob at the cutting table. Bob gutted it and threw it down to Corey in the hold, to be packed in ice. The fishing was fair. Too many green eyes and trash fish, though, not enough of the lovely black cod that brought such high dollar prices from the Japanese. But the wind was still coming up. It was hard to work on the pitching deck.

As the dark came down, Jack saw his crew moving wearily. He kicked the deck lights on, illuminating them with a hard, stark light. Cranked the music louder. Black Sabbath. The bass-line beat under the deck vibrated, and his chest began to choke up and pound

with the music. “Generals gather in their masses,” Corey sang from the hold in a scratchy voice. “Just like witches at black masses...” His voice broke on the last note. The music drugged them, driving back their weariness.

It had begun to blow in earnest now. Wind whipped the water into chop, and the chop built into larger waves that surged past them, their white crests moving through the dark. The *Alrenice* settled into them, riding the trough. As each crest came, the wind struck her with redoubled force. Overhead the stars had disappeared. Rain came spitting down. Jack pulled his hood up, then pushed it back. He needed to be able to see, to keep her with her stern into the seas. His hands were icy. Down on deck the guys worked like machines. Gaff. Toss. Gut. Toss. Pack. Pack. Once Bob lost his balance and fell to the deck, sidestepping Corey, who was in the wrong place again and out of the hold for no good reason. Jack felt the familiar baffled mixture of frustration and protectiveness rise in his throat. How could the kid be so dumb? But Bob was too numb even to be angry. He was up again and gutting before anyone could react, and Bill thrust Corey back toward the hold, no harder than he needed to.

They finished that string. “All right,” Jack called. He looked down at his scrawled list, taped to the wall under the partial shelter of the console, for the next coordinates. East northeast of here. He turned the boat. Billy left the deck and came to stand beside him. “What’s the forecast, Skip?” he said, trying to grin.

“Shitty. I listened to the update ’bout an hour ago. It’s supposed to blow sixty, but not before tomorrow night. We should be back in town by then.”

Billy bit his lip and looked out at the water. “Think it’s coming early? Seems like it’s picking up pretty damn quick.”

“Yeah. I dunno. Maybe.” Jack turned slightly, to indicate he didn’t want to talk. “We’re coming up on her now,” he said. Billy went back down on deck. Jack peered into the dark. Where in the fuck was that bloody buoy? You couldn’t even see it in the dark, much less in the troughs of the waves. “What I’d give for a radar.” For forty minutes, he combed the area before giving up. Maybe the buoy’d broken loose. It happened. He looked down, memorized the next coordinates, and turned again. Fuck, that was a lot of money to lose. He’d’a paid for the radar right there, with that lost string. But the trouble with that kind of thinking was you couldn’t get the money in advance. And all that they might catch today was already spent on payments and gasoline and bait.

“Bloody hell,” he yelled suddenly into the wind.

“You call?” Bob shouted.

“No,” he said. This wind was like an enemy. It tumbled them, playing the way a cat might play a mouse. And they would lose in the end. No one had ever outlived the water; and the water had never cared about anybody, and never would. It didn’t even

know. That was the thing. There was no one to know. The sea just was. It wasn't anybody.

He looked back at the deck. The guys had hunched down out of the wind. He looked forward again, and there was his buoy, marked in lavender stripes, the only color not in use when he bought his pots.

"Comin' up on her," he yelled. Billy jumped up, obedient, to hook the buoy.

By one a.m., it was gusting sixty knots. They finished picking up the last string and went back to search again for the one they'd lost. He combed the water for an hour but never found it. Most of the boats were already heading in, running from the weather. The fishing wasn't good enough to risk lives. He looked out at the darkness and shivered.

"A'ight," he called. "We're heading in." Corey crawled out of the hold. The boys secured the deck and crowded into the cabin. When he saw the last of them off deck, he ran to follow and grabbed the steering wheel inside the house. The weather seemed a little better from in here. The *Alrenice* could handle seas like these. It was the cold that had gotten to him, and the black water behind him, below the edge of the boat.

"Fuck," he said. "Was getting a little nasty out there."

"Hell, yeah," Bob said. "How well d'you think we did?"

"Maybe two thousand pounds." He shrugged. They wouldn't really know until they got back to town and heard how much the other boats had caught. That was what mattered, more than anything. But if the price was good, two thousand pounds was a fair bit of money. He could see his crew furrow their brows as they tried to work out what their shares would be. He'd never known a deckhand so dumb that he couldn't work percentages and calculate his pay accurately.

"Not bad," Bob said, through a mouthful of grub. He had a can of chili in one hand and a box of Toll House cookies in the other. "Jesus," he said. "My hands smell so bad; I can't hardly eat with 'em. Smell like bait," he said. He held them up, still seamed and red with cold, and tried to flex his fingers. "Son of a bitch, I can't make a fist. Skipper, skipper, I want disability," he said.

"Disability my ass," Jack said. "You can't make a fist because you're weak. I should dock your pay." He spoke half absently, joshing him out of habit without looking around.

"You guys want to hit the rack, you can," he said. "I'm going to steer at least until we get in behind the islands. If I start to fall asleep, I'll get one of you up to talk to me."

“Kay,” Bob said. He stood, kicked off his boots, and crawled, still in his jacket, into his bunk. The others followed. Reaching up, Jack set the watch alarm for thirty seconds and sat punching it repetitively to keep awake. If his eyes closed, if he quit hitting that button, the alarm would sound and wake him before they fell off course.

Jesus, it was a long way home. He couldn’t even see another boat. Maybe they were still fishing. Or maybe they were all ahead of him, in behind the islands, safe. The VHF emitted a soft drone of static, broken now and then by the sound of someone speaking, too far off to be picked up. But they were only an hour from Hinchinbrook. Back there, he could rest a while.

His head began to bow over the wheel, while his raised arm kept punching the button of the watch alarm. He steered almost in a dream. It seemed to him someone was warning him—of what he did not know. Ahead, the waves rolled steadily on. He kept the course, kept his swollen eyes on the water, as his mind began to sink from him. Someone was warning him. Of what? There were green fields. And suddenly, he felt a kind of peace, as if the worst was already over, and passed or not, he’d never face that test again.

He wakened from his half sleep to the sound of the bilge alarm. It sounded once, went off, and sounded again. Already, he was on his feet.

“Get up, guys,” he shouted. They stumbled out of their bunks, pale faces sleepy and alarmed. “Bill, you steer. I’m going to check the engine room. Bob, you come with me, make sure I don’t fall overboard. Corey, stand by.” He grabbed a flashlight and pushed the door open. The boat was rolling so hard the scuppers were awash. He could see nothing but blackness. On the back deck, he and Bob kicked open the freeman hatch to the engine room and yanked it up. Nothing.

Thoughts went through his mind in hurried, random order. He stood up.

“Hatch back,” he shouted at Bob over the sound of the wind. They heaved it back and clamped it down. He ran for the stern and clawed at the hatch to the lazarette, tearing his knuckles open as he lifted it back. Below them, he saw two feet of water in the hold, sliding murderously with the motion of the boat. “Son of a bitch,” he whispered.

Maybe it was just her seams working in the weather. Or maybe some of the packing had slipped out, and in that case they might be fucked. “Bob. There’s a spare pump under the portside bench in the galley. Get that. Coil of wire in the bottom drawer. Get that, too. Run.” He jumped into the lazarette, groped in cold water for the bilge pump, hauled it out, and checked for a loose connection. It seemed to work. He dropped it back in again, jumped out, and snatched the spare from Bob’s hand as he hustled over the deck. Grabbing the coil of wire, he ran back into the cabin, hooked it to the batteries,

and spooled it out through the cabin door, all the way across the deck to the lazarette. He clamped on the spare pump and threw it in the laz.

“Where’s the bloody hand pump?” he shouted. Bob ran for it. Jack grabbed it from his hands, thrust it into the lazarette. “Get down in there, and do what you can with that.” Bob scrambled in, gasping as the cold water struck him, and began to pump.

There wasn’t much room in the laz. Jack squeezed past him under the deck, looking for the leak with a flashlight. Water was seeping in from many seams, but he could not find a major source. There must be one. It must already be underwater, he thought. How the fuck do you find a leak underwater?

“Faster,” he yelled at Bob. “Fucking faster.” Bob hunched over, his arm pistoning in the shadows cast by the flashlight. The water crept higher up his legs. Jack scrambled under water for the pumps and checked them both. Still working. “Fuck!”

Corey’s face bent over the lazarette. Jack yelled, “Get some bedding. Sweatshirts. Anything!”

“What?”

“I said, get your fucking bedding.” Corey’s face disappeared, a look of incomprehension pasted across it. Jack knelt down in the water, now waist deep, and felt the seams of his boat with his hand. If he could just find where she was leaking. If he could get something in it, plug it with clothes. He was working now by instinct. It seemed to him he ought to be able to feel in his own body where his boat was damaged, as he would feel a breach of the barrier of his skin and an outpouring of his blood. He reacted as one reacts in fistfight, looking for an opening and not falling, even though the fight was all but done.

Corey’s face reappeared above the hatch, his arms laden with sleeping bags. “This what you want?”

Jack grabbed one from him, and began tamping it into the seam along her keel. It blew out again. He felt the water rushing through his fingers, and slid them up into a wide crack. He tamped the fabric back. But it would not stay. The water was chest deep now. It lapped, cold and salty, against his face as he knelt, slid into his clenched, resisting mouth. He shut his eyes and ducked below the surface, feeling once more for the breach. But it was too late.

“Get your survival suits on and get back out on deck,” he said. “We’re sinking.” Bob dropped the pump and vaulted heavily from the lazarette with the speed of one released from a death trap. Corey beat him to the cabin door and dragged the survival suits from the forepeak. He thrust one at each of the men. They tore them open and struggled into them. Heavy, orange insulating foam, zipped up to the neck. Not all the boats had them,

but they did. Billy's zipper jammed near his throat. He was a heavy kid, and his sweatshirt hood kept him from getting the survival suit over his head. He struggled with it. Corey tried to help.

"Jesus Christ," Jack yelled behind them. "Get out on deck. If this thing rolls..." If it rolled, they would be trapped inside. He grabbed the mike. "Mayday, Mayday," he said. "This is the *Alrenice*." Fumbling with the chart, he gave their latitude and longitude. "We're taking on water. Mayday."

The radio spat static. Dimly he heard the Coast Guard station in Kodiak come back to him, "Vessel *Alrenice*, do you copy?"

"I copy you," he said, but the boat gave a sickening lurch. Slowly, as the water in her shifted, she went over, settling as she went. The lights went dead, and the radio. He dropped the mike and ran for the deck, kicking his legs into his suit as he fled. Outside, the boys were clinging to the house. The *Alrenice* lay half on her side, still partly afloat. The skates of longline gear had broken loose, and the deck was awash with lines and hooks.

"Life...raft..." Jack shouted, scrambling up the side of the house. Billy followed him. They got the life raft out, but as it inflated, the wind caught it and it blew away. It skated lightly over the surface. He felt the water slide again, and the boat move with it, sullenly. He thought she would sink then, but she still lay on her side, sideways to the ocean swell. He ran down onto the deck again, but he did not believe now that he could save his crew. Without the life raft, how could they make it through the night?

He grabbed a length of line and tried to drag it free from the tangle of longline snarled on the deck, thinking he would lash the four of them together. Another crest passed. The boat lurched, and he fell to his knees, gashing his hands and face on the bloody hooks. Or, better yet, he'd swim for the raft with a lifeline. He threw one end of it into Billy's hands.

"Hang on to that."

Behind him, Corey stared out at the bobbing raft. Suddenly he understood. He did not have a quick mind for things like this—the physical details of an event—but he saw his moment. He grabbed Jack by the arm. "I'll swim for it," he yelled. "I'm a stronger swimmer." It was true. It was the one thing he could do.

For a split second, Jack hesitated. Their eyes met. He nodded. Go. He knew it was safer to stay together. There was so little chance of finding a single man adrift in this sea. But they needed the raft. He didn't think they would survive without it. And though he couldn't ever have named the thought, he knew it had to be Corey, not one of his own.

“All right. Here,” he shouted. He lashed the line to Corey’s waist. “Go. I’ll get you back.” Corey stumbled overboard, into water full of floating gear. He swam clumsily, hampered by the suit. The life raft danced before him. On deck, the men saw him briefly, rising up the side of the waves, then sinking away.

The *Alrenice* settled again below them. She moved sluggishly, sideslipped, and sank beneath their feet. Jack grabbed for Corey’s line, but it slipped away, plucked from his grasp by the weight of the boat falling. The line caught somewhere in the dark, where it might hold or free itself, but anyway all too far out of his desperate reach, and all promises were incomplete and done.

Then she was gone, and so was he. His mind went blank as the rush of water sucked him in, crushing him.

He found himself on the surface again, floating on water choked with tangled gear. The other boys were thrashing their way free. He could see their white faces in the dark.

“Keep together,” he shouted. When he reached them, he grabbed Billy’s arm. “Anybody see Corey?” His words rang empty.

Bob shook his head.

Jack clutched his arm to keep him close. With his other hand, he held Billy’s shoulder. The water poured through the gashes in his survival suit. How long was it ’til morning? Four hours? Five?

“Hang on to me,” he said. His limbs were already growing numb. Somehow, Bob managed to hold him tighter, so that he felt the pressure even through cold flesh. “Keep hanging on. Billy, hang on.”

“OK,” Bob said. “Take it easy, Skipper.”

At dawn, they were picked up by the *Emma Ray*. Jack was half comatose by then. The boys still hung onto his arms. They scanned the surface, watching for Corey as Jack would scan it for the rest of his life, wondering still how things would have happened if that night he’d made some different choice, wondering what indeed he should have done. Though four months later, they found Corey’s body, still in its survival suit, washed up on the shores of Kodiak.

So that’s all there was, Jack thought when he heard the news. *A body. Flesh. And I dare you to find a reason for it all.*

He pushed the knowledge back. Tried not to think of all the things that Corey would never now know, the things that are done and undone, good and evil, and the days that cannot be recovered.