

The Thousand Pound Day

by J.R. Allison

When it's a calm sea and mild temperatures, you couldn't ask for a better job than mine. Postcard scenery, sunshine and fresh salt air. But most days ain't like that. Soon as I opened my eyes this morning, I knew today sure as hell wouldn't be. I'm Skeet Mullins and I work stern on *Lyon's Pride*. Roger Lyons is the captain. All them pretty lobster boats you see off'n the Maine coast, I'm the guy busting his ass on the afterdeck while Cap drives the boat around. Well, no...that ain't fair. Cap busts ass, too.

4:00 am and already snowin' like somebody ripped a hole in the sky and the stuffing's fallin' out. It's coming straight down, which means there's no wind. The upshot being that it's cold enough to snow but the sea's not up, so we'll be goin' like it or not. That gives me about forty-five minutes before I got to meet Roger down at the dock. NOAA calls for a pretty stiff breeze today—18-20 knots or better—but Roger don't trust NOAA, so the day off I thought I might get today ain't gonna happen. Cap says if it's not blowin' a gale right this minute we can get through some gear. It's Cap's boat, Cap calls the shots.

Jenny's awake, too, just barely. She looks at the clock.

"Aw, Skeet. You have to go today?"

"'Fraid so, hon. That wind never come up."

She yawns. "Want breakfast?"

"I got it. You stay under them blankets."

"'Kay. Have a good day. Be safe." She rolls over. I give her a little pat on the butt and go to piss and start the coffee.

Thirty minutes later I'm dressed in all my layers and tryin' to get that rust-bucket sonofawhore Dodge to turn over in the dark and cold. Prob'ly should oughta get a new truck one of these days but that's a bigger proposition than it sounds. There's no car ferry out here to Ram's Head so I'd have to hire one special and they don't come cheap. Me and Jenny, we ain't really New Truck kind of folks anyway. Been islanders all our lives and that generally means gettin' by with what you've got. This old Dodge is held together with duct tape and baling wire but she keeps pluggin' away somehow, just like she's been doin' since 1964. Front bumper fell halfway off last year so I rigged it up with a length of potwarp and a granny-knot. Good as new.

Roger's got him a new truck. New meanin' less than ten years old. Bein' the captain, he can afford that. As a sternman I get 20% of the take, he gets the other 80. But he's also payin' for all the bait and fuel, 800 traps, miles of potwarp and buoys and repair and maintenance on the boat. Not to mention boat payments and insurance. I ain't gonna get rich workin' stern but all I got to do is show up with my dinner-pail every day and I make pretty near enough in a seven-month season to

tide us over the whole year. 'Course Jenny brings in some by working down to the store in the summertime. Not that she has to, just that she wants to. And I pick up some tree work after all the lobster gear's back on shore. The long and short of it is we get by just fine without workin' like galley slaves. I figure life's too short for that.

The Dodge finally cranks over and I'm feeling better about the day ahead of me. It's mid-December and the lobsters are moving down the bay to deep water. We'll chase 'em out to the three-mile line but after that it's federal waters and Roger don't have a fed permit. We been railin' 'em out on the winter grounds and our last few hauls have been the best of the season. Yesterday we sold 850 pounds at the co-op and that's twice what we were getting in August and September. The co-op price has been hoverin' around \$5.00 a pound so you can do the math. It's enough to keep the wolf from the door, anyway.

Driving down to the town dock—it ain't but a mile from home—the road's already greasy from the snow. Roger's already on the pier, standing in the one floodlight and lookin' like he's on a stage about to deliver his lines. *Hamlet* recited by a guy in a Patriots cap with a thermos under his arm. To be or not to be. Ayuh, I s'pose that's prob'ly the question.

"Mornin' Skeet." He dusts the snow off his shoulders. "You all excited about it?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, Cap." I try to sound enthusiastic but it's none too convincing. I been

right straight out for damn near two months, what with the finish work on the house me and Jenny just built, plus haulin' on the days when the weather allows it, which is most of 'em. I'm about as beat as a head-strong mule.

I've gone with more captains over the years than I can even remember. Started when I wasn't but 13. Earlier than that if'n you count the years I went with my Dad. Some captains are good to work for, and some ain't so good. Roger's somewhere in the middle. It's my fourth season working with him. He's got a wicked short temper and usually finds at least one thing to blow a gasket about each day, but it goes as quick as it comes on. It's still nerve rackin' when a guy six-foot-five and 250 pounds goes ballistic, 'specially when you're a scrawny little fuck like me, stuck on a boat with him in the middle of nowheres. So that's the downside. Like I said, he'll also go on foul weather days when I'd just as soon keep 'er on the mooring, but that ain't really a negative. Some days I need prodding—I'm the first to admit it, and Cap does that—but I'm real careful not to let him know it. I try to act as gung-ho as he is. See, there's a kind of unspoken code that sternmen go by—the good ones, anyway—and part of it is you never complain to the captain about nothin'. No matter how hard the work, how long the day, how slow the fishin' or how shitty the weather, you keep your head down and put the warps to 'em. Period, end of story.

For the most part I can count on Roger not to take us out into any real danger. He may not trust NOAA but when they call for a big sea he keeps a weather eye out. There's been a time or two I met

him at the dock and we seen there was heavy rollers thrashin' out on the point so we went to Plan B, also known as Operation: Fuck That. But I can't recall a day when we cut it short due to weather once we was already out there.

I worked one season for a guy who was straitjacket-crazy and he'd take us out into a six or eight foot sea without battin' an eye. That prob'ly don't sound like much but when you look up and you can't see the horizon, just a huge wall of water on your port side and the same to the starboard, well—it's a little worrisome. I ain't a pussy, but I got no particular interest in dyin' anywhere besides home in bed. Hopefully sometime after my 90th birthday.

I had a good friend, Jim Rigby, worked on a scallop dragger out of New Bedford. Days-at-sea limits forced them guys to go when they shouldn't. The drag hung up on a ledge and a big sea rolled her right over. There weren't but two survivors and my buddy Jim wasn't one of 'em. They never should've gone. I still hear from Jim's widow and his two kids now and then—they're holdin' up ok.

So that's the make-or-break for me: You want to jeopardize my well-bein' for the sake of a few extra dollars, well, sorry, but we ain't doin' that. I'll finish out the season but soon as the last of the gear's taken up, I'm gone like sea-smoke. Goodbye, good luck and kiss my rosy red ass. That extra haul might be the difference between an easy winter and a lean one, but it sure as hell ain't worth dyin' for.

I bail out Roger's leaky wooden skiff and row us over to *Lyon's Pride*, sitting halfway across the harbor. Pretty boat. Duffy 36, grey over white. My back and shoulders been achin' for a solid month but it still feels good pulling at the oars. Generates some body-heat. Me and Cap are pretty quiet rowing out to the mooring. First, because I ain't much for small talk and neither is he, and second, because us jabberin' away would be like an insult to the quiet. I ain't a God-fearin' man, and this is about as close as I'll ever get to anything I'd call sacred. Roger's about to shatter the silence when he fires up the big diesel, but right now it's just a little chatter-and-squeak from the oar-locks and the splash of blades dippin' in the still water. Nice.

Once we're on board I put on a bright orange rain jacket and oil pants. Now it feels like I'm wearin' 40 pounds of clothes—that's why everything feels so goddamn heavy in the wintertime. The bright orange is so you'll be easy to spot when you fall overboard, like you'd have even half a prayer if you was to go overboard in December. You ever try swimmin' in oil pants? Shit, you'll be lucky to last eight seconds 'fore the hypothermia gets you.

Cap warms up the motor—250 Deere, she ain't gonna win the lobster boat races but she's dependable as mud season—and the electronics while I shovel off the deck and rails. Looks to be five inches and no sign of stopping.

Apart from the heavy snow, it starts off just like any other day. But I got a bad feelin' about this one. Can't seem to shake it.

We're underway in ten minutes, steaming out to where the first string's set in about 40 fathom on a blue clay bottom. Leaving the harbor I look over to Archie Fontineau's boat, *Aces and Eights*, sitting dark and quiet as the grave. Archie ain't goin' today. If he was he'd be here by now.

Archie's a pretty good egg. I've thought of working with him before but the chance never come up. Can't help but think if I worked for Archie I'd be home in bed right now, spoonin' Jenny 'stead of freezin' my nuts off in this fuckin' blizzard. Ah, well. It's no good thinkin' like that. I wiggle my toes to keep the blood movin', then put on my blue gloves to load bait bags with herring and pogies. One good thing about this cold weather—it keeps the bait reek down some.

Roger sets his gear in pairs, that is, two pots to each buoy, five buoys to a string. We're lookin' to haul 180-200 pots today so long as we don't hit too many snarls. Fishin' long warps on the winter grounds you get tangled in other guys' gear now and then; ain't no gettin' around that. The more snarls you hit, the more time you lose. A real mare's-nest can cost you upwards of twenty minutes. Hit more than two or three in a row and Roger goes off like a powder keg, pretty much guaranteed.

By the time we get to our first string the sky's gettin' light and there's a breeze pickin' up. The sea's got a long slow roll on but she ain't breakin'. Yet. I gaff up the first buoy and run the rope over the block, then hand it off to Roger. He lays it over the hauler plates and jams the handle and up they come. Takes upwards of a

full minute for 'em to break the surface so I fill more bait bags while we're waiting. Stayin' busy passes the time and helps you keep warm. Like Cap always says, if you get cold, you ain't workin' hard enough.

Cap generally tries to have the catch sold by 3:30-3:45 and be back on the mooring just before nightfall, which is 4:15-4:30 this time of year. That way we're not comin' back across the bay after dark, which ain't recommended for safety's sake. It can be done, but there's a lot of obstacles.

That trip back out to Ram's Head is the best time of the day: Bone-tired but the work's done and the boat's scrubbed down. All that's left is to get out of these damned oil-clothes, relax and enjoy the ride. I'll tell ya though, at this ungodly hour that all feels about as distant as the fuckin' Marquesas.

When the first trap comes up I know it's good without even looking—I hear lobster tails slappin' like thick-sliced baloney on a stripper's ass. Cap grabs the becket and heaves 'er up to the washboard, I grab aholt of it and slide 'er down the rails, then pick the bugs out two at a time. After tossin' out all the bitch crabs and shorts—undersize lobsters—I put on fresh bait and latch the door, then get on banding claws and tossing the keepers in the live-well. Cuff 'em and stuff 'em. Roger does the other trap then looks over to me with a question on his face.

"Nine counters, Cap." My grin's got a hole in it where I lost a tooth years ago, catchin' a buoy

with my face. Shit happens.

"That's 16 for the pair," says Cap. "They keep comin' up like this and we'll spend the winter on the beach in Florida."

"Aye, Cap." I nod, too busy banding claws to make a lot of chit-chat.

Through most of the morning, the traps keep comin' up right full of counters. The legal ones have a back shell 3½ to 5 inches long. I check with the gauge if it looks close, and anything too big or too small gets thrown back. Sometimes you get a big ol' ten-twelve pounder parked in the bedroom with his claws up like he wants to fight. If'n you could sell him he'd bring \$50-60 bucks but that ain't legal in Maine. Marine Patrol catches you holding an oversize one like that, they'll numb ya for it. Might even lose your license, and then you're about as fucked as the homecoming queen after the big dance.

By 10:00 the live-well's better'n half full. The wind's picked up to 15 knots and the temp's dropped into the mid-20s. Snow's still comin'. There's whitecaps now and I catch some spray in the face. Believe me, that'll wake you right up. But the mood's good, and me and Roger are thinkin' we could break a thousand pounds today.

It's about midday when we break for a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee. A blast of static comes from the VHF and we hear Skipper Gordon, captain of the *Becky Lee*, comin' over the radio.

"*Lyon's Pride*, you got your set on, Roger?"

Me and Cap trade a glance. Skipper's from Gray's Harbor on the main and he ain't real welcome out here by the islands. He pushes the boundaries some, and his gear's just barely tolerated by most of us. He's been cut before, but not lately and not by me and Roger. In fact, the only time I recall Roger talking to him by radio was a few years back, when Skipper hailed us and others to accuse us of cuttin' his gear around Tamarack Island. That little chat weren't exactly full of warm fuzzies. But Skipper Gordon had it wrong. I never seen Roger cut anyone's gear. Maybe throw a couple of half-hitches on their spindle to warn 'em, but he don't cut gear. Simple as that.

Cap looks out the wheelhouse window and sees *Becky Lee*'s profile way off to the east, rollin' on the swells. He picks up the mike. "Yeah, Skip, go ahead. What's going on today?"

"I'm over here to the east'rd of you and my water pump just give up on me. I'm not in distress or nothing but I can't run more than a minute or two before she overheats."

"Ok, Skip, we'll give you a tow to the yard. Sit tight, we'll be right over."

"Yup, thanks a bunch, Rog. See you in a bit."

I'm thinking this might bring on Roger's daily anger-management issue but it don't. He heads 'er east at three-quarters throttle and I real quick wash down the afterdeck and rails, then jump in the wheelhouse to warm up. By now the swells are actin' like they mean business and we've got

white-water over the bow. That ain't nothin' special; it's the green-water you got to worry about. Green-water means you're goin' through the waves, not over 'em.

So here we are, miles out from Ram's Head having one of the best days of the whole season and now we're gonna burn an hour of daylight renderin' aid to the last guy on earth we'd actually want to help. There ain't no question but that we've got to—that's another part of the unspoken code. Pretty sure that's a written one, too.

But now I'm wondering what Cap's got in mind for the rest of the day. It's early yet, but Skip's old glass-on-wood 42-footer is gonna tow like a garbage scow, low and slow. This little project might eat up more time than we can spare. Once we drop off Skipper at the yard, the co-op's just a half-mile up the shore and we might just as well hop over there, sell the catch—looks to be 700 pounds in the tank—and call it a day. We'd be knockin' off maybe an hour early, tops. There's still another 60 pots to haul but the winter grounds are 30 minutes out and 30 back, and that don't leave much time to get through six more strings. It won't hurt nothin' to leave 'em for next time. Plus this weather's bound to get worse 'fore it gets any better. Roger could go either way on this but it's his call and he'll make it when he's damn good and ready. He likely won't even tell me the plan but just go right to it and expect me to keep up. Like I said, Roger's ok to work for but he's about as skilled at communication as a moon snail is at interpretive dance. 'Course I can't come out and ask him what the plan is 'cause that'd tell him I've got some

tiny notion about a short day, and I won't have Cap thinking nothing of the kind. He'd start in with the 'slacker' and 'layabout' jokes and there'd be no end to it.

It ends up takin' way too long to haul *Becky Lee* from the winter grounds to the yard. We drop Skipper off and Cap heads 'er, but I ain't sure if he's makin' for the co-op or back down the bay. Rather than stand there like an idiot with my thumb up my ass, I start baiting up like there's no question what we're doing, all the while hopin' Cap'll tell me to knock off and scrub 'er down instead. Nope. He opens up the throttle.

"Just six strings to go, Skeet. Don't get too far ahead on bait."

"Aye, Cap." And just like that my hopes of a short day vanish quicker than a mouse-fart in a nor'easter.

Them last 60 go pretty smooth, 'cept when Roger blows his stack and calls down flaming damnation on every lobsterman whose warps are tangled up in ours. The pots still come up heavy and by now the weather plainly and simply sucks. Snow lets up just a taste but it turns wicked cold and some of the lobsters shoot their claws. They do that when they hit air that's too cold. It puts 'em right into a panic and poof, their claws just start droppin' off. It's a good thing it don't work that way with people. Like every time there's a thunderclap, one of your arms falls off.

The clock on the chartplotter says 3:15 and we're on our last string, a good 45 minutes behind

schedule. The live-well's brimmin over when I finally stow the leftover bait and start scrubbin' 'er down. Cap puts the throttle in the corner. There's a big sea makin' up but we're hammerin' through it like a ruttin' bull moose. We still got to sell the catch and take on fresh bait and fuel. We're cuttin' it awful close. If we're done quick enough we might barely make it back out to Ram's Head with the last daylight. Crossing after dark ain't wise since you got to pick your way through all the gear out there. Believe it or not, a 8 x 15 Spongex buoy can wreck your prop if'n you hit it wrong, and that's a good three grand or better out of Cap's pocket. Worse, you can get a big knot of potwarp and floats all spun up between the prop and shaft and rudder and then you ain't goin' nowhere. Dependin' where you are when it happens, you might get run aground and swamped and then you're in a real mess. Maybe the kind you don't come back from.

Roger just got him a new spotlight, roof-mounted but you can point it from inside. But even with a light there's a lot that can go wrong, 'specially in a rough sea.

It's five-of-four when we pull up to the co-op to find two boats berthed and two more waiting. Mainland guys. They don't have to cross the bay to get home so they ain't in no hurry. We'll be here 'til full-on dark and no two ways about it. Never should've gone back for them last six strings.

It takes a half-hour for the boats ahead of us to settle up, and we ease up to the wharf just shy of 4:30. The co-op's got their floodlights on when I start crating up the lobsters and Cap fills the

tank with red diesel. The boys on the dock take one crate after another from me and throw 'em on the scale. Once all the bugs are weighed up they hand me a ticket with the total: 1,013 pounds.

"Thousand pound day, Cap! I guess we ain't gonna starve after all."

Roger grins and nods. "Prob'ly get another good haul or two 'fore they dry up."

We take six bushels of fresh bait—four herring and two pogies—then cast off. Roger heads 'er due east and we're goin' home. Jenny's smile sneaks into the back of my mind. I make one last check of the afterdeck, see it's squared away, then duck back in the wheelhouse out of the freezing spray. Time to get out of these smelly oil clothes, relax and enjoy the ride. I'm feelin' pretty good until we get out near the breakwater and the sea looks like somebody kicked a hornet's nest and started World War Three. It's tossin' us like driftwood already, and we're still on the lee side. Roger flips on that new spotlight but there's no gear to spot this close to shore.

We come up on the narrows between Wright's Point and the Southern Ear and Cap's lookin' for the red nav marker somewheres off'n our port bow, lost in the waves. The spotlight's bright as the Fourth of July, but the handle won't turn when Cap goes to aim it. He tries again but it's seized up tight as a Tahitian bride. And here comes Cap's final blow-up of the day, right on cue.

"Goddamn cock-suckin' son of a whore!" He bangs on the handle with his free hand—the other's on the

helm—but that don't do any good either. So he reaches across the dash for the 24-inch Stillson wrench we keep there for a fish-billy in halibut season. Here's where I make a big mistake: I tell Cap to calm the fuck down. Not just down, *the fuck* down. He looks at me like I just cut up his firstborn for bait.

"I don't see you doin' nothin' about it!" I hate it when he turns that shit on me. I genuinely do all I can to avoid it. Now he's got that wrench up on his shoulder, like Yaz holdin' a Louisville Slugger. I don't know which is more troublin'—that he's about to swing for the bleachers, or that his hands are off the wheel. You do not want to turn beam-to in a sea like this. No time to think about it; wham, that Stillson connects with the spotlight handle. It ricochets off'n the wall next to my head and falls to the deck, snapped clean off. Goddamn thing could've blinded me.

"There. Fixed that." He throws the wrench back up on the dash and damn near breaks the side window, too. I know better than to open my yap again. I pick up the broken handle and put it on the dash with the wrench. I look out the window to see is the spotlight still on but I can't see nothin' but water breaking over us. The windshield wiper's on Roger's side, but he can't see much either. We've got green-water over the bow. They say the sea will scare you to death 'fore it actually kills you and I hate to admit it but right now I'm shittin' full-blown masonry projects. This is a hell of a lot more sea than we have any right to be in. I feel Roger lookin' at me so I look up.

"Well, you know what to do." He don't seem mad anymore, just ice-cold. The first thing to pop in my head is 'I do?' Then I ken to what he's askin' me. I'm tempted to request that he kindly go fuck himself, but there's that goddamn code.

"Aye, Cap." Last thing on God's green earth I feel like doin' right now is to put them oil clothes back on. But they're all I've got to keep at least some of the Atlantic off of me. I take one shot at Roger as I leave the cabin. "Been nice knowin' ya, Cap." I slam the door before he can say anything.

'Fore I can even get my bearings a wave breaks over the starboard rail and knocks me right on my ass. I look to the stern and see the scuppers are clear. The water sluices off the deck pretty quick, so maybe we ain't goin' straight to the bottom after all. I get aholt of the wheelhouse roof and step up onto the gunwale. There's a grab-rail along the roof but it's covered with ice. I get the best grip I can and sidle my way up to the trunkhouse, and from there up onto the roof. Waves breakin' over me the whole time and now I'm about as dry as a stateroom on the fuckin' Titanic.

The problem with the spotlight is obvious: it's iced up from stem to stern. The sea water's got it about half melted but it's still stuck fast. I throw a bear-hug on it and wrench it free so's it'll turn. Waves keep breaking over the roof and tryin' to wash me off. I got a good grip on the spotlight, but I don't trust it since Roger went Yaz on it and busted off the handle. The nearest thing to latch onto is the Loran antenna and I can't say as I trust that much neither. I clamp onto it like a Jonah crab on a cracked mussel—them

crabs might be slow, but they're geared down—and aim the spotlight with the other hand. Not that I can spot much; it's a fuckin' tempest out here, about as bad as I've seen it.

I'm thinkin' each wave might be the one to throw me off and drown me, but I'm more pissed than worried. Pissed at the sea for tryin' to kill me, at Cap for them last few strings and for sending me up here, at myself for not arguing the point. This ain't the perfect fuckin' storm and I ain't gonna die a hero, just a knucklehead sternman who didn't have the good sense to say Hell no when Cap told him to go commit suicide. Yeah, I know—there's that code. But I'm thinkin' about Jenny, too; how she'll get by if I don't come home tonight. I'm half-tempted to bail out but makin' it back to the wheelhouse seems even riskier, so I stay put and grit my teeth, hopin' for the best. Fuckin' weather.

By now I can see lights way up ahead, off the port bow. That'll be Ram's Head but it seems awful far. There's a pair of nav buoys at the harbor entrance and until I can see 'em we ain't in the clear. Off to the starboard I can just make out the profile of Kimbrough's Island, pitch black against the dark horizon. A wall of green-water rears up out of nowhere and hits me dead-on. Shoots right through everything I'm wearin', and my Muck boots fill up with ice water. The spotlight comes free of its socket and I lose my grip on it. Now it's just hangin' on by red and black wires. I still got hold of the Loran but the bracket cuts right through my glove into my fingers. The grab rails are still iced up, so this is all I've got to keep

from washin' overboard. I'll worry about stitches later.

After a minute or two I get the light back in hand and the first thing I pick out is the green nav buoy at Ram's Head harbor. Cap heads 'er for the lee of Kimbrough's and I can feel the sea easin' off. We're gonna make it. Once Roger gets the mooring in his sights I drop the busted spotlight and find my way back inside.

"Didja get wet?"

"Yeah, Cap. I got wet."

And that's all we had to say about it. Not a word as to how I damn near got killed out there.

I'm rowing us back to the dock, salt stingin' my cut fingers and blood on the left oar handle, but Roger don't see it. I'm mostly tryin' not to let him hear my teeth chatterin'. All I got in mind now is Jenny waitin' on me, prob'ly worried sick, a hot meal, and the wood stove to take this deathly chill off. Seems Roger's rage has wore off and he's back to himself again. "Now that weren't too bad a day, was it? Thousand pounds anyway."

"Ay, Cap. And it's always a good day if you make it back alive, right?"

We walk up the dock to the parking lot and get into our trucks. A little persuasion and the Dodge cranks over; I get out to scrape a clear path on the windshield. Tomorrow's gonna be that day off I been lookin' for and I can almost feel the warm blankets already. A grilled-cheese and tomato soup

day. Prob'ly take the whole day just to get my core temperature back.

Roger pulls up and cranks down his window. He lights a Marlboro and blows smoke from his nose. "We'll do 'er again tomorrow, Skeet. Might be a tad choppy out but we'll manage."

"Aye Cap. See you at five." I don't even try to put on a smile. I wait 'til Roger drives off, then I pull up to the parking lot exit. A mile to the left is Jenny, a hot shower and a hot meal. I take a deep breath and hang a right to where I can see Archie Fontineau's place with lights blazin' and a curl of smoke from the chimney. Now, like I said, I'd never quit on a captain 'til all the gear's back onshore—that's in the code, too—but there's always next season. I'm just wonderin' if Archie pays sternmen 20% off the top. Can't be no harm in askin'.

Thanks for reading; more at www.jrallison.com