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Writing 324
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Assignment #5

Fish Cooler

The boat smells like stale saltwater, dried up oil, and diesel fumes. Pots and pans bang on the wall, and a teapot slides around on the stove. The sheets of the bed are grimy from all of the skippers and deckhands who have driven my dad's boat for the last six months. The sheets stink too, like dirty sweaty fat men. I don't want to be here. I'm scared.

There are two big Volvo engines in the engine room below me, but only one is working. The starboard engine quit just a few minutes ago. We have been battling twenty-foot seas since ten, it's nearly two in the morning now and the weather has been getting worse. Running on one engine won't make it any easier. Each time we come over the top of a wave, the boat slams down against the water, and the whole thing rattles like it is going to fall apart. Water sprays up over the bow, and blasts the windows of the cabin. There are a couple of leaks in the roof, and one corner of the bed is wet. My dad is puking into a stainless steel bowl next to the steering wheel. He looks kind of afraid, but says everything will be fine. It has been my job to empty his puke bowl into the ocean every ten minutes or so. The last time I went out the fish cooler on the back deck was gone, washed away by the waves. I told my dad, but he said not to worry about it.

Matt, the current deckhand and long time friend of the family, crawls up out of the engine room. "It's a blown head gasket, I can't fix it."

“God damn it!” My dad says as he shakes his head. “Look under the bed there,” He points at a wire frame milk crate. “I think there is some gasket material there. I need that fucking engine.”

Matt pulls out the crate and digs through it briefly. The boat slams over another wave. “There’s nothing big enough.” Matt says.

My dad pukes in the bowl again. “Shit, alright, just... I don’t know.” He says as he wipes his chin with his sleeve. “Nick, get me a water bottle. I’ve got to piss.” I jump out of bed and grab a bottle off the table.

“Here you go.” I say. He holds the bottle for a minute as the boat crashes over another wave. Then he tells me to hold the wheel as he quickly unzips and pisses while we slide down the back of the wave. I take the bottle when he is done and pour it onto the back deck which is being washed continually by the pouring rain and waves.

“Dad, I’m getting tired. Is it ok if I go to bed for a while?”

“Everything will be fine. Just lay down and go to sleep, and in the morning it’ll all be over.”

“Ok. If there is anything you need wake me up, ok?”

“Just lay down. Everything will be fine.” He isn’t looking at me when he says this. He is focused on the waves ahead, and is frantically turning the wheel one way then the other, and pushing the throttles back and forth. I don’t want to wake up until morning. I want to do like my dad said, and go to sleep and wake up in the morning and have everything be ok. I’m tired; I’m afraid; I’m tired of being afraid.

I lay back down on the stinky grimy sheets, but they don’t bother me. The boat slams over another wave, and water sprays against the windows. Matt is messing with

something in the engine room. I look up at my dad. He looks worn out, sick and scared. It worries me. I wish I could do something to help, but I can't. Lying there looking up at him, a sudden panic comes over me when I realize that my father, the strongest person I know, is as mortal as I am.

He throws up again, and asks Matt to empty the bowl. As my eyes finally close and I feel myself drifting off to sleep, I hear Matt say that the fish cooler is back.

I wake up, and my dad is asleep beside me. Matt is on the top bunk. Through the door I can see the sun shining on the cooler on the back deck. The water is flat calm. I get up and go pee off the side of the boat. Looking around, I see that we are anchored in a small bay that I haven't been in before. When I come back in, my dad opens his eyes and smiles weakly. He gets up, and starts the port motor, and we drive out of the bay. He points us for home, and tells me to pick out a point on the horizon and keep the boat headed that way. He crawls back into bed. I just sit and steer for the next few hours. Every now and then, he cracks an eye to look at the radar and make sure we are still headed the right way. I've never driven a boat before, but it seems easy enough to me. It makes me feel important. Tomorrow is my birthday, I'll be eleven.