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Good News:

Kevin Roberts has a new Book - ready for a Summer Launch.

Flashers & Hoochies

In the 70's version of BC, a poet with long hair and a tough attitude decides to enter the Commercial Salmon Fishery & encounters some 'real' fishermen who assure him that his boat will sink the first time out.

And that's only the start.

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....As a thank you for checking out our site, and as a preview of the world of "Flashers & Hoochies," our press and Kevin Roberts now make one of his short stories from the same world available for free.

Enjoy it, and once you've sunk your line in this water, do drop back & consider purchasing his wonderful new book . Remember, at *Pilot Hill Press* all focus goes to the authors.

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Here's our URL so you may rediscover Kevin Roberts. <http://www.pilothillpress.org>

TROLLER

by

Kevin Roberts

The sea burst against the bow where Bill lay on the starboard bunk, and the boat timbers shivered and trembled the full thirty-six foot length of the *Pacific Maid*. Mel, the skipper, had been sick for three days now and so had his son, Bert, and the fishboat was barely under control. Bill lay there in his floater jacket, the rubber tailpiece drawn up between his thighs and hooked to the front. Bert had made a number of cracks about that, but as soon as the wind hit the boat, when they passed the moaning fog horn of Tofino harbour, Bill'd put the jacket on and left it on. This was his first trip as a deckhand on the outside and the sheer size of the Pacific disturbed him deeply. Two bad seasons on the inside coast, no sockeye run, no pinks worth a damn, and his small fishboat had been claimed by the Royal Bank. He'd had no choice but to find a job, start again at the bottom, as a deckhand on a large Pacific troller. And he was lucky to get on with Mel, he knew. But he didn't want to be here.

He had been stunned on that first day out when Mel had confessed that he was always seasick for the first couple of days, and sometimes for longer in bad weather. It seemed crazy, even dangerous, to put yourself into a job where you suffered so much, where control over your body was in such jeopardy. But, Mel had added, seasickness

was a lot more common than most fishermen admitted. Greed and pride kept them at it; that, and the strange attraction the sea had for some men. That was the hardest to believe.

Above him, outside in the dark, the wind thrummed on the wires of the poles like a mad guitarist. Beside him on the other bunk, Bert moaned, and above and behind him, Mel lay suffering in the wheelhouse bunk. The gale rose and fell in wild bursts and he was glad he could not see the swells, topped with flying white lace, that rolled ominously and endlessly from the heart of the dark Pacific.

Four days ago, they'd smashed and rolled their way fifty miles out from Tofino, the weather channel voice predicting falling winds and sea. They'd fished that first morning, their thighs braced hard against the sides of the fish-well in the stern, slapping the gurdies in on only half the lines because the yawing, pitching boat could not be held straight, even on the Wagner autopilot. It was a monstrously unstable world, where the sky swung like a mad chandelier, and at the bottom of a swell, the boat seemed totally enveloped in the seething grey sea. He had not realized how totally enveloped in the pitching bowl of the Pacific they were, until they encountered another fishboat, the *Ocean Rambler*, about the same size, and its toy-like struggle to lift up from the weight of the sea smashing endlessly on its bow, caused him to fear that this other frail cockle of wood, a quarter of a mile away, could not, would not rise this time, or the next, out of the green mass that rolled again and again and again, pushing the whole boat down and down, until, when both boats were on the bottom of the swell, the *Ocean Rambler* would disappear completely from sight. It was then, too, that he realized that the *Pacific Maid*, his own boat, must also look a frail shell waiting for one great wave to take it under.

They had caught fish that first day, coho and a few medium Springs, but the big

fish broke the lines or ran amok with ease about the barely controllable boat. He had brought one big Spring alongside, thirty pounds, maybe more, and swung the gaff down and into its head, but, instantly, the boat yawed and the gaff and fish pulled

beyond his strength and he let go before he too was tipped into the maelstrom. The skipper's curses were torn from his lips by the wind as he came aft in a running crouch. He shouldered Bill aside, and with huge hands, criss-crossed with the white scars from nylon fish-line, manhandled the flapping Spring with the gaff still in its head into the checkers, and expertly killed it with a single blow behind the head.

Though he could not hear Bert's jibes from the other side of the boat, he was embarrassed, but not for long. The skipper, with a sudden lurch, pushed by him again, green-faced, and vomited into the spume. Bert soon followed his father and both of them leaned over the side and vomited time and time again.

It was then that he'd taken charge, scuttled to the wheelhouse to adjust the Wagner, crouched and run back to run the lines, pulled the salmon, ran out the lines again, cleaned the fish and stocked them in the checkers. But the wind and sea grew and the main line and the deep line on the starboard side crossed and tangled and for half an hour he struggled to bring both of them in and clear the gear. The skipper watched, red-eyed, and finally told him to pull all the lines in and lash them down.

Incredibly, though the skipper stopped regularly to retch overboard, Mel worked with him until all the gear was on board and the lines and lead cannonballs lashed down with cutty hunk. Together they pulled the prostrate Bert into the wheelhouse and down into the bunk. Bill went out again to the stern, staggered back with armful after armful of salmon, crawled deep down into the hold of the boat, stuffed handfuls of

ice into the cleaned bellies of the fish and stacked them into the waiting ice.

"Sea-anchor, Bill," mumbled Mel pointing to the bow. "I'll run the boat up, you drop it." Bill looked through the window. The weighted parachute with the red Scotchman buoy was lashed to the foredeck. It had to be eased overboard so it sank and opened deep beneath the sea. A long rope, coiled now on the bow, then ran from the capstan on the bow down to the chute flowering under the sea. With this down, the boat rode easily, moving with the tide a mile or so in and out, on the ballooned tension of the underwater anchor. But it was dangerous to put out in a high wind. If the chute snapped open in the gale the rope would whip out like a snake striking. If the boat was not held tight against the smashing swell, the rope jerked about and the feet and body of the man, already threatened by the great wash of water pounding against it, could be washed overboard instantly. The very idea of walking out there, out to where the grey sea bounded onto the bow, was almost too much for him, except for the haggard look of the skipper, white-faced and red-eyed. He knew then that he had to do it, not just for them on the boat, but for himself, because the sea was building relentlessly and it was doubtful if they could turn and run safely before it back to Tofino. The danger of broaching, or of the stern going under in the massive rolling seas was such that he looked an instant at Mel, and saw in his watering eyes that there was only one choice.

And he had shuffled grimly out along the deck, gripping the handrail tightly with both hands, past the wheelhouse and out onto the bow. There, the first burst of swell knocked him soaking and breathless to his knees. Worse, the suck of the sea off the deck rushing about him had loosened his footing. In the second or two before the next wave burst upon him, he worked with one hand on the lashed parachute. He timed his work so that in the brief dip of the bow, before the next swell deluged him, the parachute and its chain and rope were freed. He hooked one foot about a stanchion,

braced the other, and in the same two-second dip, let the parachute and rope slip through his left hand over the side. Despite his efforts the rope kicked and jumped and burnt his wrist and hand.

It was not classic seamanship. There were many men of the West Coast fishing fleet for whom this act was daily bread, but for him, the final "tung" of the rope tight against the capstan, the red Scotchman floating before the boat now easing back, was a gong of triumph. He sat, hanging onto the rail, his knees braced against the stanchion, totally exhausted, wet through, and not at all jubilant. His hands were scored and torn by the rope. He thought of the poached salmon steaks he'd seen once for an exorbitant price, served in silver chafers in a restaurant on Sloane Square in London and the enormity of the callous economics of it made him burst out with laughter. Eventually, he crawled back on his knees, gripping the rail, and got into the wheelhouse.

He told himself through clenched teeth that this was it, that never again would he risk the plunge and certain death in that cold and bitter sea. It was over. He'd get a shore job, pumping gas, unloading fish, anything to avoid this pulse and roll and madness of the sea.

The skipper sat with his head down on the wheel, and Bill crawled past him and down into the bunk next to Bert. The boat now rode more easily, tossing like a massive child whose fever has broken and, even though the sea still smashed and burst against the hull, he fell quickly asleep. He dreamed he was in a strange moving bed with a beautiful green woman who undulated under and away from him every time he tried to possess her.

A rumbling sound growing nearer brought him to wakefulness. He got up unsteadily, his limbs rigid with cold, and stepped up into the wheelhouse. Mel lay asleep on the wheelhouse couch, his white face garish every second or two from the

flash of the strobe light on the mast top. The sea was unabated. Green frills ran constantly up and down the wheelhouse window, obscuring the bow light. On the port bow half a mile and closing, at the tops of the massive swells, he could see a row of lights in the whirling darkness. He fervently hoped the radar operator on the freighter out there was awake and that the many blips of the fishing fleet tossing at anchor were clear in the stormy night. The freighter passed quickly, unperturbed it seemed by the muscular walls of water in which it moved. He wished then, as many fishermen have, for a boat so big the sea could not threaten it. He thought, too, of the wreaths rotting on the Anglican Church wharf at Bamfield, and the inscription, "O Lord your sea is so strong, and our boat is so frail."

He looked about him at the unutterable darkness, the wild wind and crashing sea, and felt a great loneliness, until, in the distance, the quick flash of a tiny strobe appeared, another fishboat, anchored too in this hissing vortex, and another flash, and another, and suddenly all about, at the top of the swells, the flick, flick, sometimes miles away, sometimes closer, magical in the storm.

Bill felt strangely and utterly comforted by the pattern their lights made, flickering, miles away from home and warmth and safety. Again he looked at his hands, throbbing now with the red lines of the chafe marks. He knew it was a mark, along with the lights, of a community; the boats of the West Coast fishing fleet, held by the flowers of their sea anchors, a pattern of faith one with the other in this arduous endeavour upon the encircling sea.