
THE
TROUBLE WITH
ENGINES
Lumen's Wonderland · Book 17
Chip Cook

The Trouble with Engines

Book Seventeen

Lumen

with Chip Cook

A season on Monhegan begins with a fleet that waits.

By its end, a friend will need everyone to bring her home.

Illustrated manuscript · November 2026

Contents

1. Six O'Clock 4

2. The Missing Part 7

3. People Returning 11

4. Things That Carry 15

5. The Bake 18

6. The Last Haul 22

7. Above and Behind 27

8. The Other Side of the Boat 32

9. Nobody Left Behind 36

10. An Afternoon Kept 39

About This Adventure 44

CHAPTER 1

Six O’Clock

At five minutes to six on the first morning of the year, the Professor discovered that a community breakfast was not an invitation to sit down.

He had been given a kettle, six mugs, and directions which assumed he knew where everything was.

“You look useful,” Lumen said.

“A misunderstanding. I came for breakfast.”

Outside the Fish House, the harbor was still dark. The loaded lobster boats waited on their moorings, their deck lights picking out wire traps, wet ropes, and men moving carefully between them. Somewhere an engine started, settled into a steady beat, and stopped again.

Ben came through the door with his cap in his hand.

“Nell’s got trouble.”

The conversation changed at once. Nobody asked which Nell. There were not enough people on the island for that to be necessary.

Nell had spent years working toward a boat of her own. The boat was old, the engine older than she had hoped, and the loan entirely new. Yesterday she had walked around her loaded deck checking every fastening. Then she had gone around again.

Now a failed cooling-water pump had stopped her before she had set a single trap.

“Can you mend it?” asked someone beside the stove.

“With the right part,” Ben said. “She hasn’t got it. Neither have I.”

There was a brief consultation involving three men, a telephone, and a woman who knew which mainland mechanic would answer it on New Year’s morning.

The Professor glanced at the clock.

“What happens at six?” he asked.

An older fisherman reached for his coat.

“Breakfast gets cold.”

“I meant the start.”

“Noon, if we can get her ready.”

Lumen looked through the doorway. Nell was coming up from the beach, shoulders squared as if she intended to apologize without allowing herself to sound defeated.

“You don’t have to wait for me,” she said.

The older man held out a mug.

“You know how Trap Day works.”

She took the coffee. For a moment she could not quite look at him.

Ben had already put his cap back on.

“I’ll go for the part.”

“Eat something first,” Nell told him.

He took a piece of toast from the Professor’s plate.

“Community breakfast,” he explained.

CHAPTER 2

The Missing Part

The repair took possession of the morning.

Nell worked at the open engine hatch while two fishermen removed the damaged pump. Another found a gasket which almost fitted, examined it in the light, and put it firmly aside. Almost was not going to take anybody home.

Lumen crouched beside the hatch.

“May I help?”

“Hold this light,” Nell said.

Lumen held it. Nobody asked her to improve the engine’s imagination, change its mind, or persuade it to become something more cooperative. She found this rather restful.

The Professor kept the mugs coming. By half past eight he knew who wanted sugar and which apparently empty mug was being used to hold bolts.

He learned the latter just in time.

Out beyond the harbor, Ben's boat was making the run to Port Clyde. A mechanic had agreed to meet him with a replacement assembly. The round trip depended on weather, water, and the sort of arrangements which worked because people trusted one another to turn up.

Mara arrived with bread wrapped in a cloth.

"I thought you might have forgotten to eat."

"We remembered," the Professor said. "Ben helped."

She looked at his empty plate and understood.

Near eleven, someone on a waiting boat called that Ben was coming in. Nell put down her wrench, wiped her hands, and then picked the wrench up again.

"No sense standing about watching him," she said.

But she watched him.

The assembly went in with less drama than its journey had deserved. There were bolts to tighten, hoses to secure, and checks which could not be hurried because a clock was looking at them.

At last Nell climbed to the controls.

The engine turned, caught, and filled the boat with its familiar, imperfect confidence. Everyone watched the cooling-water discharge. Nell checked below again for leaks.

Nobody cheered until she came back smiling.

At noon the fleet left together.

From shore, Lumen could pick out Nell at her wheel and Ben turning toward his own grounds. Their boats separated beyond the harbor, each going to its own work.

“They’ll compete all afternoon,” the Professor said.

“They helped her all morning.”

“Both seem possible.”

Mara gathered the abandoned mugs.

“Would either philosopher like to wash up?”

They would not. They did.



At noon, the fleet left together.

CHAPTER 3

People Returning

Winter gave way slowly to spring. By late May, the island had begun opening doors which the cold months had kept shut. The sea, however, remained as changeable as ever.

There were deliveries to carry, rooms to air, and people returning with luggage larger than their recollections of the hills. Ben divided his days between the end of lobstering and work around the mailboat. Mara began writing lists.

One afternoon she laid a sheet of paper on the Professor's table.

"A bake," she said. "At Fish Beach. Nothing enormous."

"How enormous is nothing?" he asked.

"Twenty people. Perhaps twenty-four."

"That sounds like twenty-eight."

"You can count them when you set the places."

Nell would help cook. Ben would supply lobsters. Clams would come from a mainland supplier with the other provisions. The visitors would pay for their meals, and there would be places for the people doing the work.

“Including people who wash mugs?” the Professor asked.

“Especially those.”

On the next mailboat came a couple carrying binoculars, a woman with a sketchbook, two walkers who had underestimated the wind, and a small elderly lady travelling alone.

The bird-watchers were called Ruth and Oliver. Ruth noticed things. Oliver wrote them down, sometimes after Ruth had noticed that he had written them down incorrectly.

“We’ve come for the birds,” he told Ben.

“They’re here,” Ben said, lifting a suitcase.

Ruth laughed. Oliver looked briefly uncertain whether this counted as local information.

The elderly lady waited until the others had gone before asking where to find her lodging. Lumen offered to walk with her.

Her name was Mrs. Bell. She had visited the island with her husband for thirty-one years. This was the first time she had returned without him.

“I nearly cancelled,” she said as they climbed.

Lumen adjusted her pace to Mrs. Bell’s.

“Would you like to come to supper on Saturday?”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude.”

“It’s a bake. Intruding is how we’ll know we’ve put out enough chairs.”

Mrs. Bell smiled, though she still looked tired.

That evening Lumen asked Mara to add one more place.

The Professor examined the list.

“Twenty-five.”

“You haven’t counted yourself,” Mara said.

He looked offended by the arithmetic.



Some visitors came for the birds. Others were finding their way back.

Things That Carry

On Friday, Ben found the Professor attempting to carry a picnic bench alone.

It had not moved. The Professor, however, had acquired a strong opinion of it.

“Other end,” Ben said.

Together they carried it down to Fish Beach.

The little cove was busy without appearing to hurry. Skiffs rested above the water. The shingled fish houses stood close to the shore, with ropes, buoys, and useful objects occupying places which would have seemed accidental to a visitor.

Mara marked out space for the tables without blocking the fishermen’s access. Nell inspected the cooking equipment. The bake would be steamed in trays over a contained fire, under layers of rockweed and a heavy covering. Nobody intended to excavate the working beach merely because visitors expected a picturesque hole.

Ben checked his boat between errands. The last trips of the season were still ahead of him.

Inside the wheelhouse, the Professor noticed a long shaft secured beside other old gear.

“A harpoon?”

“My grandfather’s tuna gear. Mostly it gets moved when I’m looking for something else.”

“A considerable family tradition.”

Ben smiled. “Hand me that coil, would you?”

Outside, Lumen was helping Nell sort tableware. A gull descended, seized a loose paper bag, and discovered that it contained nothing worth stealing.

Lumen made a brief, low sound.

The gull changed direction with an indignant cry.

The Professor looked up from the boat.

Later, when they were walking home, he asked what she had done.

“Warned it off.”

“In gull?”

“Not exactly.”

She hesitated, choosing the words.

“We have a voice for speaking. Another for calling through water. And one you use when something is coming to eat you.”

He stopped.

“I hope you have had little occasion to practise that.”

“You learn it young. Turning to face the danger is the difficult part.”

“Why must you face it?”

“Because the sound must reach it. And you must keep it away long enough to escape.”

They walked on. After a while she nudged his arm.

“You needn’t look so worried. Tomorrow I’m only carrying plates.”

“I have seen your relationship with plates.”

“One plate.”

“A memorable plate.”

CHAPTER 5

The Bake

Saturday smelled of woodsmoke before it smelled of supper.

The wind had decided to help with the tablecloths. Mara declined its assistance and weighted the corners. Oliver began identifying birds. Ruth began identifying the ones he had missed.

Ben arrived with the lobsters just as three people needed him in different places.

“I thought you were bringing supper,” the Professor said.

“Apparently I’m bringing the tables closer, carrying that tray, and finding somebody’s hat.”

“I’ve found the hat.”

“Whose?”

“That remains the difficulty.”

Nell and her helpers built the bake in layers. Rockweed, shellfish, potatoes, onions; the trays disappeared beneath their covering. Soon little white threads of steam escaped at the edges.

A visitor asked when it would be ready.

“When Nell says,” Ben told him.

Nell nodded without looking up. The visitor accepted this as the most dependable information he had received all day.

Lumen found Mrs. Bell standing near a skiff, studying the tables.

“There’s a place beside me.”

“You needn’t look after me all evening.”

“Good. You can look after the Professor. He has already offered someone a serving spoon as a chair.”

Mrs. Bell laughed and took the place.

When the covering came off the bake, steam rose in a great white cloud, briefly hiding the cooks. The waiting people leaned forward together.

“There,” Oliver said, lifting his binoculars.

The Professor followed his gaze.

A gull landed behind them, took a piece of bread, and departed.

Ruth lowered Oliver’s elbow.

“You might observe your supper.”

The meal required butter, napkins, instruction, and a willingness to make a mess. At the end of one table a visitor tried to approach a lobster with the delicacy of someone repairing a watch. Nell showed him where to begin.

Mrs. Bell told Lumen about the summer her husband had fallen asleep while sketching a boat. The tide had turned the boat around, and he had blamed its owner for ruining the perspective.

Soon she was telling the story to everyone within reach.

Ben sat down at last. Mara put a plate before him.

“Eat.”

“Are we all right for—”

“Yes.”

“I only meant—”

She placed a napkin in his hand.

He ate.

Across the harbor the light softened. Nobody had to make a speech. There was enough to do passing things along.



When the covering came off, everyone leaned forward.

The Last Haul

After the visitors had gone, Ben and Mara stayed to clear the tables.

The Professor was taking Mrs. Bell home. Lumen carried the last dishes uphill, having accepted a firm prohibition against carrying all of them at once.

Ben watched Mara fold a tablecloth.

“You made that look easy.”

“I have a list which would disagree.”

“Did you enjoy any of it?”

She looked toward the place where Mrs. Bell had sat.

“Quite a lot.”

He took the other end of the cloth. For a moment they stood holding it between them, neither finding an urgent reason to finish.

“When you’ve got the last traps in,” Mara said, “will you have a whole afternoon?”

“I should.”

“I’m going to write that down.”

“Not another list.”

“One item.”



One afternoon, with no work on the list.

On the last day of May, Ben went out for the remaining gear. His sternman had hurt his wrist, so Nell offered to join him. Ben had only a short run of traps left and told her to finish her own work. They agreed to keep in touch by radio.

By early afternoon, traps stood secured on his deck. He was turning for home when a loose length of drifting rope caught his propeller.

The engine laboured. Ben shut it down immediately.

He looked over the stern. Below the surface, rope wound tight around the shaft and blades. The boat settled beam-on to the swell.

Ben put out his anchor, checked what room he had, and called Nell.

“I’m stopped. Fouled prop. Engine’s off.”

She answered at once. She would come to him, but she was some distance away.

On shore, Ruth was watching through her binoculars. Oliver had written down a bird she had not yet agreed to.

“That boat hasn’t moved,” she said.

“They do stop.”

“Not like that.”

She found Mara, who found the Professor. A fisherman ashore listened to the working channel and told them Ben was safe for the moment, with help coming.

Lumen stood beside them, watching the small shape beyond the harbor.

“I can reach him,” she said quietly to the Professor.

He looked at the sea, then at her.

“Tell him before you go beneath his boat. Make certain the engine stays off.”

She nodded, left her shoes with him, and went down out of sight between the rocks.



Ruth noticed the boat had stopped.

CHAPTER 7

Above and Behind

Cold water closed around Lumen's shoulders. Her legs changed, her tail caught the water, and the shore fell behind her.

She kept beneath the surface, following the light on the underside of Ben's boat. There would be time to rise beside him, time to explain only what he needed to know, and then the rope.

She was thinking about the rope.

Above and behind her, to the left, a broad grey shape changed course.

The shark came down fast.

Lumen did not see it.



Above and behind her, the shark changed course.

Something altered in the water against her back: a pressure, a disturbance larger than the small movements around her. She glanced over her shoulder.

There was no time to swim away.

She threw her weight sideways and rolled onto her back. Her tail struck hard. The shark's jaws opened above her before she had finished turning.

The sound came out of her in a single violent burst.

The animal veered. Its body passed close enough to wrench her sideways in its wake. Its flank struck her arm and spun her down toward the rocks.

For a moment she knew only bubbles.

Then the seabed came up beneath her. She caught herself against stone, scraping her palm, and looked for the light.

The shark was turning.

Lumen pushed away from the bottom. She must face it. She knew that. She had known it since she was small enough to hide in places she could no longer enter.

Knowing did not make her less afraid.

Its tail moved once, then again.

She rolled back, lifted her face, and sent the next cry straight into its approach.

The water trembled through her chest. Her throat hurt. Suspended sand shivered between them as the shark swerved past.

She could not keep doing this.

Above her, the boat rocked in the light. It seemed impossibly far away for something which had been so close.

She started toward it, then stopped herself from turning her back completely.

The shark had not gone. Her cry startled it away from each approach, but the sound faded quickly through the water; it could not hold the animal at a distance.

She moved upward in short, awkward bursts, watching the grey body circle beyond the reach of the brighter water. Every movement of its tail made her want to bolt.

She wanted the Professor’s voice. She wanted a kitchen chair. She wanted something so ordinary that wanting it hurt.

Instead she watched the shark.



She had to face it before she could fight.

CHAPTER 8

The Other Side of the Boat

Ben heard a sound through the hull which he could not place.

It came again, lower than a cry, felt as much as heard. He put down the line he was preparing for Nell's tow and went to the stern.

Auburn hair broke the surface.

"Lumen?"

She caught at the boarding ladder he had lowered while checking the fouling. Her fingers slipped.

"Don't start it."

"It's off."

"Keep it off."

Then something pale and green moved beneath her, where her legs should have been.

Ben stared for one useless second.

"Take the ladder," he said.

She tried. The swell lifted the stern, pulling the lower rung away. She looked over her shoulder with a terror that ended his questions.

“What is it?”

The grey back appeared beyond her.

Ben seized the old harpoon from its clips.

Lumen saw him straighten above her. Then she saw the shark turn back toward the stern.

She let go of the ladder and rolled, putting herself between its approach and the boat. The cry she forced out was weaker this time. It broke painfully at the end.

The shark checked, turned, and came on.

Ben stood braced against the inside of the gunwale, the harpoon raised, watching for a clear opening away from Lumen.

“Under the ladder!” he shouted.

She swept her tail, moved right, and the grey shape rose toward the place she had left.

Ben struck downward.

The point met resistance. The shaft kicked hard in his hands. Water burst against the stern, and he let the gear go rather than be dragged across the rail.

The shark twisted away into the darker water.

Ben did not wait to see where it went. He dropped to his knees, reached for Lumen’s wrists, and caught her. The stern lifted on a swell, wrenching her almost out of his grasp. He braced a boot against the rail and held on.

“Now. With the swell.”

She drove upward with what strength remained. He pulled her across the low stern opening and onto the deck, then dragged her clear of the edge.

For several seconds neither could speak.

Ben reached the radio.

“Nell. I’ve got someone hurt aboard. Shark in the water. Come alongside carefully.”

His voice was steady until he released the button.

Lumen lay beside his boots, shaking.

He took off his coat and covered her.

“You’re in,” he said. “Stay here. You’re in.”



Ben waited for a clear opening.

Nobody Left Behind

Nell came alongside with another fisherman on deck. He took the lines while she looked at Lumen, then at Ben.

“How bad?”

“Her arm. She’s exhausted. She’s been in the water.”

Nell called ahead for medical help to meet them ashore and arranged further care if needed. The other fisherman secured the boats. Nobody suggested restarting Ben’s engine with someone still near the fouled stern.

Lumen closed her eyes. When she opened them, her tail was gone beneath Ben’s coat. Her bare feet looked astonishingly small on the working deck.

Nell fetched another covering without comment.

Ben sat close while the tow was made ready. He held a clean dressing against Lumen’s scraped arm. She tried to sit up.

“The propeller.”

“Leave it.”

“I came to—”

“I know.”

Her mouth trembled. She looked out toward the water.

“It wouldn’t go away.”

Ben pulled the coat more securely around her shoulders.

“You don’t have to go back.”

On shore the Professor saw the boats returning together. At first that was all he could see. He walked toward the landing so quickly that Mara caught his sleeve at the uneven stones.

“Careful.”

“Yes.”

He slowed for three steps, then forgot again.

They waited while the boats were secured and the people helping Lumen did their work. Waiting felt intolerable. The Professor did it anyway.

When she finally saw him, she tried to smile.

“I didn’t mend it.”

He bent close enough that she would not have to raise her voice.

“I am not interested in the engine.”

Her eyes filled. He stayed beside her.

Nell and the other fisherman dealt with the boat. Ben answered questions, repeated what had happened, and discovered that his hands would not stop shaking when he had nothing for them to do.

Mara gave him a coil to hold. Then she put her own hand over his.

“She’s here,” she said.

He nodded.

Beyond them, the harbor went on with its afternoon: ropes tightened, a skiff bumped wood, someone called for a fender.

It was the same place they had left that morning.

None of them felt quite the same in it.

An Afternoon Kept

By evening, Lumen had been examined, her wounds cleaned and dressed, and her friends given instructions about rest and anything that would require further help. She was allowed home to the cottage. Her scraped arm ached whenever she moved it, and her throat was raw. She could speak only softly.

Mara settled her on the sofa. Ben made tea. The Professor sat beside her and held the hand without the bandage.

For a long time that was sufficient conversation.

At last Ben put his cup down.

“There’s something I saw.”

Lumen watched him.

“I thought so.”

“A tail.”

Mara looked from one to the other. The Professor waited.

“Yes,” Lumen said.

Ben nodded slowly, as if accepting directions to somewhere he had not known existed.

“All right.”

“All right?”

“You were still you.”

Mara moved the blanket over Lumen’s feet.

“We can ask questions when you’re less tired.”

Lumen had been preparing an explanation. She let it rest.

Later Nell came to the door. Ben’s remaining gear was ashore; the rope would be cleared and the propeller checked before the boat ran again. Mrs. Bell had asked after Lumen and sent her warm wishes. Nell had brought supper, enough for people who might not remember to feed themselves.

Ben thanked her.

“You fetched my pump,” she said.

“That was January.”

“I’ve got a calendar.”

She put the food in the kitchen and quietly left them to it.

When Ben and Mara eventually stood to go, the light was still on the harbor. He paused beside Lumen.

“Next time, wait for the other boat.”

“I thought I could help.”

“You can. You don’t have to be the only one.”

She looked at the bandage, then at his hands. There were small rope burns across his fingers.

“Thank you for catching me.”

He bent and kissed the top of her head, awkwardly, as if he had not planned it.

“Try to make it less exciting.”

Outside, Mara took his arm.

“About that afternoon.”

“Still on your list?”

“Tomorrow. No work.”

He looked back once at the cottage window.

“Tomorrow,” he agreed.

Inside, the Professor drew his chair closer.

Lumen leaned against his shoulder. He did not tell her how frightened he had been. She could feel it in the way he held her hand.

“The trouble with engines,” she whispered, “is that people go to help them.”

“People go to help people.”

She thought about Nell’s boat leaving at noon, the passing plates at Fish Beach, and Ben reaching down through the broken water.

“Yes,” she said.

From the kitchen came a small, decisive click.

“TEA FIRST,” said the toaster. “PHILOSOPHY TOMORROW.”

The Professor reached for the pot.

For once, nobody argued with the appliance.



For a long time, being together was sufficient conversation.

About This Adventure

The Trouble with Engines is a work of fantasy. Monhegan's tradition of beginning Trap Day together is documented; the delayed engine repair, Nell, the bake, and the rescue are fictional. They are not presented as an account of Zoe Zanidakis or another real captain. The story draws on the island's older January opening and uses the last day of May as its fictional final hauling day. Actual season dates have changed over time.

Fish Beach and its working waterfront provide the setting for the small May bake. Photographs of Fish Beach and traditional Maine lobster bakes informed the illustrations; the town dock is a separate location. Lumen's mermaid physiology and sonic defenses belong to Wonderland. The shark encounter is an exceptional fictional event, not a portrayal of typical shark behavior or an assertion about a particular species' presence on that date. Illustrations were created with AI assistance.

Historical background: Philip Conkling, Trap Day on Monhegan, Yankee, August 19, 2009; Stop In for an Old-Time Maine Mug-Up, The Christian Science Monitor, March 10, 1995. Visual references: Fish Beach, Monhegan, Monhegan Commons; traditional lobster-bake gallery, Stone Cove Catering.