

Get us to Lil'Hampton

Ten years back, crops being in, John Bartlett walked into Hastings and found the *Atlantic Lass*. His mother's cousin, Gerry Hounslow, took one look and roared with laughter. '*Can you fly?*'

John could not. '*What'll you do when the wind takes you?*' At fifteen with feet too close together, he'd no answer but a shrug. Gulls wheeled. Gerry laughed.

A decade of cod later John would know Gerry's laughter. He'd grow a matching smile, as Walt snorted and Ned chuckled. *Laughing crew* they'd be called.

When the whale attacked though, laughter was too far to the wind.

A thunderous crack—not the distant thuds of the Great War—up close, by your ear. Hit the *Lass's* hull so she shifted on the water. And the clatter and the crash of everything that was knocked abeam came like an aftershock. Brine belched aboard, sweeping with it the stifling reek of diesel. Eighty miles off Finnesterre.

John, hugging the windlass, watched and knew the awful certainty of death. Ned, God save him, was more ignorant. He'd canvas from the sail locker and, unfurling it, threw himself over the starboard rail. They went to him like gulls to scraps. Engines cold, no steerage but they'd a grip on the canvass and Walt

worked the lines to lash it in place as Gerry hauled it close over the hole. They pulled Ned aboard half-drowned.

Three hours they worked, running loops to double the fix under the hull; another four bailing and it was the dead of night with a freshening south-westerly when they were ready to move.

In the bridge, taking tea for warmth, with Ned wrapped in blankets as the *Lass* rolled to every point on the compass, Gerry laughed.

"What a whale!"

They stared back. No snort, smile, chuckle.

"We'll make for Lil'hampton."

Walt howled.

"What of Plymouth? Lyme? Christchurch?"

Gerry had his fists on his hips. The *Lass* was his, her holds were full and Littlehampton was near home. They'd beach her. He'd laugh on the shingle.

John was despatched from the bridge into the dark rigging to set the remaining sails. Wet canvas flailed in his bleeding hands like a bird furious to escape. For two days and nights they fought the sea and wind. Gales twisted every trick to bear the sails away, waves punched at their repairs, bucking and kicking them constantly. Bereft of food and sleep, John dreamed of Littlehampton.

Children's Paradise his mother told him. Dazzling fairground lights and the Oyster Pond still as sand. A memory so old it seemed a dream to be prayed for. As their strength ebbed, the hold slowly filled. John prayed.

It was in the dark swell of the second dawn they next heard Gerry's laughter. When the *Lass* rose again, sluggish, John caught distant lights through the spray. *Littlehampton*.

Now their feet are rattling wet stones. John smiles and shakes his weary head. Walt snorts. Ned chuckles. Gerry laughs on the shingle.