

waving

The twenty-third of March was the Spring equinox bringing a full moon and big tides.

Willie Bremner knew there was bad weather coming. The shipping forecast had indicated low pressure out in the Atlantic so there was an urgency to get the creels picked up and taken in. There would be no time to set them further out in deep water.

At five in the morning Willie hammered on Michael and Geordie's door. 'Wu'll need tae be away at slack water and let the tide tae tak us along the face,' Willie yelled striding off along the dark street to get the boat's engine going. Geordie was surly with a hangover and Michael as usual got him out of bed, the two of them following Willie to the pier in the pre-dawn cold. Willie was business-like knowing they needed all their time while the weather held and the 'Sula' left the pier with a great pink glow firing up above the hills. *Red sky in the morning...* 'If we get ahead noo wu'll be in afore three.' It was calm still, but the tightness of the isobars meant the wind would definitely whip in fast. 'Wu'll head fur the Craig then go right along the beach.'

They did the usual things, got the kettle on the stove, cleared the deck ready to take aboard all the creels. The plan was to pick them all up and take them in on the boat till the storm moved away. To leave them out in the gale would mean destruction on the rocks. In the shallow jagged places where the lobsters crept they would soon be battered, twisted and useless. *The sea is not bath water, it is lumps of weight like concrete...*

The swell under the Craig was bad because you never got a true wave. The Atlantic came in hitting the cliffs with all the power of an entire Ocean then rebounded. It was all over the place like drunken dancing bears. The boat juggled and lurched but they got the first rope in and stowed. Ten creels aboard, they never even opened them up. Willie calculated it all and he knew they'd be well laden by the time they got the lot

on board. The boat would be heavy. She would be at her limits. If they stayed too long under the cliff they would lose the high tide and then risk going aground picking up the inshore creels. *Time and Tide...*

White water started to break on the sandbar and Willie felt the frenetic frills of the wind flapping its menacing petticoat on its way with a big blow. They steamed away to the next rope of creels and the next. Michael deftly hooked the marker buoy each time and set the rope in the hauler. Geordie heaved the creels into a stack at the stern knowing the urgency. Willie yelled instructions from the wheel-house, lurching out of the door to work the hauler which screeched with the weight of the heavy tang laden creels. Now the wind slapped with rain and spray and the deck was covered in thick brown seaweed dragged up on the creels. Michael heaved the tangles over the side slipping and falling as he did so.

Willie's eyes flicked from sea to creels to sky. The boat began to heave, and the top-most creels fell from the stack. Geordie cursed and went to sling them back up on the pile. At last they got the final rope in, and Willie wasting no time swung the boat round to head out of the shallow water and home. But there was way too much loaded onto the boat. She was low in the water and the wash swilled through the gunnels.

Willie tried to steer out of the swell but he couldn't put on any speed. The motion picked the boat up and carried her and he just had to try and keep her steady. He said nothing.

Then quietly like a soft conspiracy, the deck was full with sea. Seconds and they knew they were in big trouble. This was new. How to sort this, how to salvage things. What to do. There was no practise for this one. Everything was a jumble of creels and rope and baskets. They were twenty yards from the shore and shouting, Willie tried to cut loose the life-raft.

‘She’ll go’

Their words lost in the wind and the noise.

Hope tae fuck that thing releases.

Buoys were floating. Geordie was swearing and panicking, Michael caught his fear in a glance. An avalanche of water and wood slammed down on their heads. The boat tipped grotesquely. The men tumbled and slid on the incline. In seconds the stern was under. Willie scrambled towards the life-raft set on the wheel-house as it tipped. The familiar perspective of the boat went crazy.

Has he tied the fucking thing? and Michael felt for his knife.

They were all in the water gasping and grabbing for the bottom boards that were floating around them. Baskets half submerged bobbing and sinking. Ropes that could pull you under or save you. There was no knowing what anything was attached to. Suddenly the life-raft sprang up, the release mechanism worked.

Thankchrist It was there, inflating, drifting from the boat, momentarily stopped by a clutter of rope in the sea. When the wind caught it no one would be able to catch it. Willie swam heavily towards it. But as he flailed through the ice-cold water, a fish box released from its wedged position in the hull of the sinking boat, catapulted upwards through the sea.