

'THE NORTH EAST WIND'

The North East wind is raw at four o'clock in the morning.

I pull my jerkin close about my throat as Betty and I slip down onto the Ferry Path towards Blackshore, the dark marshes at our side. In front of us the round, pointed fish market on the dock, and behind the lighthouse begin to loom out of the lighty-blue darkness. Wisps of brackish air drift pass by us, laden with dew.

The ebbing tide slaps against the smacks in the river. The men, clumsy in waders and sou-westers, shuffle past the nets, boxes and pots to stow this morning's gear in the boats. They work swiftly and silently, exchanging only the occasional quip about the brutal storm a few days past. This morning a thick layer of fog covers the river, a sign of calm.

"What d'you reckon, Binks?" says Brushy. The names you hear are like that! These fishing men are Suffolk through and through, with their passed down names, and centuries of salt in their bones! Sam Jarvis scans the horizon, stars still visible above the faint reddish glow. "Looks o'right to me." The others are getting the feel of the wind. "I don't think she shift before night Brushy." says Joey Palmer. Joey climbs down to his deck and grabs a wrench. A choking lurch, and the engine thuds into life . . . that's the future around here! The fisherman slips on his oilskins and boots, with one ear tuned to the weather talk. Binks, the weather prophet, takes another look at the streaky sky.

"I think she's a good day ah'ter all. I'll be off," he barks. No boat's been able to get to sea since the young Herrington boys were swept from the harbour pier last week in that terrible storm. Disappeared to the sea and no-one sawn them again. There was much talk in The Reading Room these last few days, just how that happened, and how Sam May couldn't launch The Corry, at least with little idea where to look for the poor blighters. Every family dreads a drowning. Every fisherman dreads the grey, limpen body weighing down the nets. Never look at the face they say, as it will burn your eyes forever!

One boat casts off . . . others follow, sculling into the fog to catch the rapid stream, skippers peering at their topsails for the wind. She's a North-Easterly alright. She's a

cutting, chilling old foe . . . but I'm glad of her, as she'll blow us into harbour tonight. I kiss my lovely Betty good-bye. Boy Jarvis, who is moored outside me nudges his girl goodbye. She's bitterly cold, but her fella isn't noticing; some o' these East Coast men would rather lose a day's catch than be seen showing affection.

I am the last to haul my gaff and head out towards the early day. I feel the usual dead weight in my stomach as we put to sea. I always say a short prayer as we pass the old Chain Ferry, and I'll say another for the blessed boys when we pass beyond the pier. We're not likely to forget 'em either . . . the North Easterly's blustering spray will always remind us as it chills us to the bone . . . where the Blyth's fast running stream collides with the swell of Sole Bay.

I see Betty walking back towards the fish market. She glances at the boat but maybe she can't pick me out in the fog. My stomach may ache but my heart is full. Right now I'd rather be ashore with my Betty. I'd rather be warm and dry in The Reading Room . . . with a hand of Cribbage, with my forbears and all their wisdom.

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