

BEACHES

It was a sad day for Josh. The sea reflected his mood. It heaved disconsolately below a grey sky. The beach was deserted. A seagull wheeled silently overhead.

“Come on Josh, cheer up. You should be pleased. It’s time these boys had a rest.”

Billy slapped the huge horse nearest to him on the shoulder. “What d’you think, Henry? No more charging across the beach, eh?” Moving over to the second horse, he fondled its ears and checked his nosebag.

“Looks to me as tho’ he’s nearly done here, Josh. D’you want a hand taking them up?”

Finally jolted from his reverie, the older man took his pipe from between his lips and using it to punctuate his every word said, “In twenty-one years, I’ve never needed any ‘elp wi’ me ‘orses.” With that, Josh jammed his pipe back between his teeth and went into the lifeboat house.

Most of the crew had already gone. Being volunteers, they all went back to work after a practice. The Coxswain was pulling his boots off as Josh entered.

“Don’t take on so, Josh. We’re all sorry to see the horses go but we’ve got to move with the times. Billy’s right. They deserve a rest now.” Pulling off his waterproofs, Josh nodded.

“Aye, I know. But I can’t bring meself to trust *that* thing.” He was pointing his pipe at a small tractor, parked in front of the lifeboat.

“But it’s always ready, Josh. No having to fetch the horses, no harnessing up before we’re moving.”

Josh sighed. He went over to the gleaming tractor and considered it. Of course he’d known they wouldn’t use horses forever but looking at this small machine, it was hard to imagine that it had the power of his boys, and more. A loud neigh echoed around the boathouse. Determined to

have the last word, Josh looked up and retorted, “What about down the coast, then? I ‘eard they ‘ad to rescue the bloomin’ inspector!”

The Cox smiled. “Daft buggers! Went out so far to float the boat, they got submerged by the incoming tide!”

“Aye, well. You’ll never convince me that it’s better than the ‘orses”.

Shutting his locker, Josh slung his boots over his shoulder and went back outside. The horse’s nosebags were off and Billy was rubbing them down. The smell of their sweat filled Josh’s nostrils. They stood impassively, shoulder to shoulder, as they had done for the last twenty-one years after every launch. So patient they no longer even needed tethering. He inhaled deeply, overwhelmed by their sheer size, strength and power. Josh felt his heart lurch with pride as he looked at the magnificent beasts.

“Are you coming up with us then, Billy?”

Billy’s face lit up at Josh’s change of heart.

“Aye, I will.”

Grabbing Henry’s head collar, he urged him round and began to walk towards the path that led to the top fields. Smiling, Josh clicked his tongue and Sampson, Nelson, George, Monty and Winston followed on without any further encouragement.

It was a quaint picture. The six massive horses walking side by side, and the two old sea dogs walking beside them, one with his hand on a collar, the other holding his boots and clenching his pipe tightly between his teeth.

Leaning on the gate, Billy regarded the horses with affection. “Reckon they know that’s it then?”

“I don’t suppose they do, Billy. Watch now. They’ll ‘ave a bit of a skip around once they’ve settled.”

As if on cue, Sampson threw his head up into the breeze. It had begun to drizzle and, pausing for a second, he kicked out his back legs and galloped off to the top of the field. The other horses followed suit and shot off up the hill to stand by the top wall.

“Aye. They’re grand lads, for sure,” sighed Josh, “They’ll be missed.”

A week later, the weather was closing in. Gales were forecast and the rain had already begun. The sea was unusually still. As the wind picked up, the rain moved in curtains across the bay, allowing only fleeting glimpses of the beach and ocean beyond. Josh and Billy were just leaving the lifeboat house.

“Everything shipshape lads?” The Coxswain emerged from the gloom. “Thought I’d just check. To be sure.” Billy and Josh looked at each other and smiled before replying in unison, “Aye, aye cap’n!” Then, heads bent against the now driving rain, they made their way to the pub.

They had all developed their own little ways when the weather was bad, land crew and boatmen, alike. The Cox would always pop in to check all the equipment and others would have their thick socks, boots and pullovers by the door.

The evening wore on and by the time Billy and Josh went home, a force ten gale buffeted the coast. The sea had woken from its petulant slumber and was now being whipped into a frenzy by the storm. Huge white horses thrashed around the bay and every lifeboat crew member said a prayer for those on the sea as they turned in.

It was 5.30 the following morning when the maroons went up. Three huge bangs, loud enough to wake the dead. In twelve houses, twelve men stumbled from their beds, grateful for

the clothing already laid out. Anxious wives hugged their husbands and reluctant to return to bed, prepared to sit up and wait. By 5.45, the whole crew had mustered,

“Rudderless yacht being driven onto the Head. Someone saw her flare.” Shouted the Cox.

“Let’s pray her luck holds, eh?”

Josh positioned himself by the doors and at the signal from the Cox, he heaved them open. The gale tore into the building, lifting the rafters with its strength. Josh saw Billy cross himself as the tractor coughed into life and began to roll them out into the maelstrom, across the beach, towards the raging sea.

It was strange for Josh not to be running across the beach with the horses and as he stood bearing the full force of the wind, he even thought he could hear the sound of their hooves pounding across the sand.

The wind howled around him and as he turned back towards the lifeboat house, Sampson’s huge head reared up at him out of the darkness. He was wild-eyed and frantic. White froth was ripped from his lips by the wind and he had a bleeding wound on his shoulder. Henry, Nelson, George and the others were all there – all equally wild and upset. Josh immediately tried to calm the huge horses but as he raised his hand to touch Sampson, he tossed his head away. Josh had never feared any of the horses but he knew to draw back. The wind wrenched any words of comfort from his lips.

Suddenly, the horses wheeled round and disappeared into the gloom, adding sand to the rain that pelted Josh’s face. They seemed to be heading towards the sea. He ran back into the lifeboat house and called for help.

“Come on, lads! The ‘orses have answered the maroons. They’re as wild as the night. Come on!”

Grabbing the harnesses, the men ran out into the night towards the sea. Suddenly, something loomed out of the darkness directly in front of them. It was the boat. Then the Cox emerged from behind it, beckoning wildly. Running to him, Josh had to put his ear directly against his mouth to stop the wind stealing his words.

“It’s the tractor. It’s stalled. We can’t get it going! How did you know to fetch the horses?”

“I didn’t. They just came!”

Going to the front of the boat, he found the crew frantically manhandling the boat away from the stricken tractor. The horses stood alongside, no longer in a frenzy but impassive, calm amidst the storm. Josh approached Sampson. He did not shy away this time and allowed him to gently touch the cut on his shoulder. Josh patted his neck.

The horses remained still as the harnesses went on. Josh took off his waterproof jacket and padded Sampson’s shoulder straps to protect his injury. Then, as they had done for the last twenty-one years, man and beasts moved forward in unison, completing the boat’s journey into the sea.

The waves crashed against the horses as they waded in but they were no match for their strength. The crew had the boat launched within minutes. As Josh halted the horses in the shallows, he paused to glance over his shoulder and saw the boat struggle up the face of a huge wave, before falling out of sight down the other side.

“God bless you, lads!”

As the morning light seeped through the storm’s darkness, the tractor could be seen, stranded on the beach.

“What’ll we do about that, then?” asked one of the men left on the shore. “Leave it to bloody sink!” said Josh. “Go and get the nosebags, son.”

