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The Weather Watchers

Calmwater was a small village on the coast, although the name seemed something of a mystery because the sea was rarely calm; which posed the question why anyone had wanted to settle there in the first place. But they did; and maybe the river had a lot to do with it. The water that flowed down it from the nearby hills was fresh and sweet, ideal for drinking and using on the fields for growing all sorts of vegetables and fruit. When someone discovered that the sea off the coast had plenty of fish, this was an even better reason to stay. Although the weather never improved much, there was plenty of shelter in the river mouth; and here was where the fishing boats could moor in safety. So the people of Calmwater lived happily, and the fishermen put up with the rough seas and storms to catch and bring in loads of fish.

Josiah Weames, who was both a farmer and the owner of a number of fishing boats, was telling a gathering of village folk of an idea he'd had: "We grow and catch far more than we need ourselves," he said. "If we put the extra in some of my ships, we could sail to Buckpool and sell it there. The money we make would pay for new buildings and other things. Maybe we could have a factory or two just like the bigger towns."

Most, especially the farmers, thought the idea a good one; but some of the sailors had their doubts. "We might have a problem, Josiah," one of them had said. "Fishing near to shore is hard enough; but Buckpool is at least three day's sailing; and you know how bad the weather can be at times."

"Yes, I agree," Josiah had to admit, "But I think it's worth a try. And remember: we do have Erik and Helga. They always seem able to tell us what the weather is likely to be, so we can pick the best days to set sail."

Some said Erik and Helga Frump had arrived one night many years ago; and the Captain of the ship in which they were passengers had a strange tale to tell. The journey had been a long one and not without problems. The weather had been stormy for days, the seas rough, and even the sailors were finding it hard to cope. Erik and Helga certainly didn't like it and the Captain overheard them talking: "We really need some better weather," said Erik. "I think it's time you did something about it, Helga."

"I do believe you're right, Erik," she agreed. Returning to their cabin, Helga appeared moments later holding her parasol, which was a kind of brightly coloured umbrella that ladies used to shelter from the sun. The Captain was puzzled because there was no sun; but as Helga stood there smiling up into the dark clouds in the sky above, they began to clear. In no time at all the sun was shining through and the clouds had moved away into the distance where they remained for the rest of the voyage. Even though he couldn't truly imagine the old couple had anything to do with it, the Captain was happy with the change in weather and he thanked them anyway.

The Frumps decided to stay in Calmwater and now lived in an old fisherman's cottage on the edge of the river close to the landing jetties. This was thanks to Josiah Weames. He owned the cottage, along with other properties; and, of course, his fleet of ships, so he was quite rich. When the new arrivals asked how much he would charge them to rent the little house, Josiah replied: "I want no money; but I hear you have a knack for telling what the weather is going to be; so all I ask is that you keep us in the know, so to speak."

The old couple was only too pleased to accept the deal. As the years passed by, Erik and Helga continued to provide the service that only they could. It became a regular thing, with the sailors coming to find out what the weather was going to be like before they put to sea. Standing in front of the cottage, they would wait patiently for one of the Frumps to appear. Sometimes it would be Helga, and when she came out onto the porch holding her parasol it was a sign of fine, sunny weather; and that was a day for the trade ships to set sail for Buckpool. Should Erik appear at the door, however, the waiting sailors would be concerned because his message was often not so good. Much depended on what he was wearing.

On a particular day, Helga had such a thought and said: "Put on your waterproof suit, Erik. It's about time for a little rough weather. That way it will seem more normal; then maybe people will stop thinking that we actually make the weather happen, and go back to believing we just guess what it's going to be."

Erik sighed. "Yes, I suppose you're right, Helga; but it would be nice once in a while if, like you, I could enjoy the sunshine instead of getting rained on all the time."

"You know that's not possible, Erik," Helga reminded him, "We are what we are."

"I suppose so," said Erik glumly. "I might take my umbrella and wear rubber boots to bring on some really stormy weather for a couple of days. The sailors have been working extra hard lately and they could do with some time off; and the river needs a bit of rain."

While they were discussing this, they heard Josiah talking to his son outside: "What are you doing still here, Orky? You should be setting sail. That load of fruit needs taking to Buckpool as soon as possible."

"It'll be okay," Orky assured his father. "I'll be leaving tomorrow."

Josiah frowned. "The weather's fine now; but it might not be tomorrow. Why wait?"

"Um... because," Orky began cagily, "I can't go until he, er... a certain person gets here."

His father was completely baffled. "I don't think I like the sound of this. You're behaving very suspiciously, son. Which person are you talking about; and why do you have to wait for him?"

Orky took a deep breath and said quietly: "I know you're going to get angry, but hear me out first." He paused; Josiah waited. "It's like this," Orky began again. "We, um..., we owe money,"

Josiah was puzzled. "You might owe money, but I don't!"

"Well, actually it's the business that owes the money." It was obvious Josiah was starting to get annoyed, so Orky tried to defend himself: "You did put me in charge," he reminded his father, "Only, I happened to make one or two decisions along the way that didn't go so well." Josiah's face was beginning to redden. Orky hurried on: "But I found a way to put things right. This is a bet I can't possibly lose..."

"A BET!" Josiah exploded. "How many times have I warned you about gambling?"

"I know, I know," muttered Orky, patting the air with his hands to calm his father down. "But this time I'm bound to win. Our ships are much faster than his..." Orky dried up when he realised he was only digging himself into deeper trouble.

Josiah scowled and brooded silently for a moment, then commented: "*His* ships, you said. Who is *he*?" Before his son could answer, he added: "No, don't tell me. I have a horrible feeling you're talking about Slygo Raggs." He watched his son's eyes lowering and his head nodding

apologetically. "Heavens above!" he gasped, "I can't believe you'd have anything to do with that man – he's a scoundrel and a cheat! He'll find some way to beat you. What is this, anyway – a race of some kind?"

"The first fleet to reach Buckpool from Calmwater wins," explained his son. "Slygo's ships should be arriving here soon and he has the rest of the day to load up. The race starts on the tide tomorrow – three ships each with a full cargo." Orky sighed deeply and waited for his father's response.

It was a while coming as Josiah tried to bring his temper under control. Finally, he said: "Okay, so what are the stakes in this race?"

"Well," said Orky cheering up a little, "If I win – which I will, no doubt of it – my debts are cancelled and we won't owe Slygo any money, none at all. And," he went on to say, as if it would make a difference, "We get the profits from selling the cargo."

"I should hope so," grated Josiah with a sneer, "But if you lose? What then?"

"Ah," stated Orky sheepishly, "The debt stands, and Slygo gets the cargo." Then, following a long and awkward pause, he added: "And also the ships."

"My ships!" spluttered his father.

"Mmm," mumbled Orky quietly. "Afraid so. Sorry. But it won't happen," he put in hastily. "Believe me, I will win."

Later that day three ships sailed into Calmwater causing some confusion. "Aren't they military ships?" asked one of the fishermen. "What's the Navy doing here?"

News travelled fast, and soon enough Josiah and Orky were hurrying to the dock. They were there in time to see a man coming down the gangplank; but as he was wearing bright pink clothes with lots of frills, he was definitely no naval officer. "That's Slygo Raggs alright," observed Josiah. "Just look at him – who does he think he is?"

"I'm more interested in the ships," grated Orky angrily. Strutting up to stand bristling before the new arrival, he demanded: "What's the meaning of this, Slygo? These aren't your ships."

Slygo turned and gazed at the vessels tied up to three separate jetties. When he eventually turned back to Orky, a wry smile was spread across his face. "Quite correct, my friend. I don't actually own them. They are, however, at the moment temporarily under my command."

"But that wasn't the deal," protested Orky. "We agreed on three ships each – cargo ships; our own ships."

"You have the first part right," drawled Slygo. "As for the rest, nothing was said about the type of vessels, or who owned them."

"You are being most unfair, Slygo," said Josiah, butting into the discussion. "I'd go so far as to say you are cheating, which is typical of you. These are military frigates built for speed, much faster than ordinary cargo ships."

Slygo shifted his leering grin to the old man. "Yes, well, that's lucky for me then, eh Josiah? I haven't done anything wrong, certainly nothing that wasn't agreed to. Isn't that so, Orky? You still have the option to pull out of the race if you're not happy with the situation; but, of course, it would mean you lose the bet by default. Now that was in the deal." He watched the other two standing in shocked silence for a few seconds, finally asking: "What's it to be, gentlemen?"

Josiah scowled at him. "Load your ships, Raggs; and be sure to fill every inch of hold space. Rest assured, we are going to give you more than a run for your money – we are going to win!" With that, he grabbed hold of his son's arm and rushed him off the dock, the raucous laughter of Slygo Raggs ringing in their ears.

While Orky went to make a last-minute check of his ships, Josiah paid a visit to the Frump's cottage. Helga was outside with her parasol and greeted him cheerfully. "Yes," he agreed, "It's

a beautiful day, and hopefully it will be as fair tomorrow; which is something I would like to talk with you and Erik about. Might I come in? I have a favour to ask.”

The following day as the sun was rising, Josiah walked with Erik and Helga to meet Orky at the dockside. Slygo was standing on his ship watching as the four began up the gangplank. He called out: “What’s this, Orky – taking on passengers?”

Orky paused to call back: “No objections I trust, Slygo? There’s nothing in the rules that says I can’t.”

Slygo laughed. “Nothing at all. Take two, take twenty if you like. Just remember: if they plan to return after the race, you won’t have any way to bring them because your ships will be mine.” He beamed with self-satisfaction. “Still, I don’t mind giving them passage; for a price, of course; a very reasonable one, I might add... well, sort-of reasonable.” With that, he spun on his heel and strutted along the deck.

THE RACE

Orky’s fleet left the docks first. That was Josiah’s idea: “We can’t trust Raggs not to start the race before we’re out at sea.” Their three ships anchored just off the coast and waited for Slygo to take up a position on the other side of the river mouth. A sailor stood on the headland watching to make sure the anchors of the frigates had been dropped. As soon as they had, he touched a burning match to the small cannon beside him. It boomed out and the race had begun.

The men on Orky’s ships worked swiftly, hauling up the anchors and setting the sails. Their commander had trained them well; and as an extra incentive, Josiah had promised them a share of the profits from the cargo. “Always assuming we win,” commented Orky doubtfully.

“We will,” his father assured him. “That’s why we have Erik and Helga on board.”

“I can’t see how they’ll make a difference,” queried his son. “All they can do is tell us what the weather’s going to be, and we can see that for ourselves. Whatever it is, it’s the same for us and Slygo.”

Josiah smiled. “Have faith, son. They won’t let us down.”

Slygo had taken his time weighing anchor and setting sail, allowing Orky’s ships to take a good lead; but before long the faster frigates began to catch up. Erik had been peering over the side into the distance. He pointed and said: “Alter course. Head for that patch over there.”

“But that will take us in the wrong direction,” moaned Orky.

“Do as Erik says,” instructed Josiah.

Orky sighed, shrugged; then ordered the change in course. At first it seemed a mistake because they were going sideways while Slygo’s ships carried on forwards; and in minutes they were well in front. Then the Weames’ fleet was into the choppy water that Erik had seen; and that was caused by a much stronger wind than the one they had left behind. Before long, they were level with Slygo, then were overtaking him. “Stay in this for as long as possible,” said Erik.

Josiah had been keeping an eye on the other fleet and declared: “Raggs has changed course. He’s seen what we’re up to and he’s following us. Make as much headway in this wind as you can, Orky.”

“Unfortunately it won’t last,” warned Erik, “But I should be able to find you more of the same.”

True to his word, Erik continued to spot for favourable winds. How he saw them was puzzling. Josiah had been looking too; but the sea all around seemed the same. That was until Erik pointed, indicating another rough patch which, Josiah was positive, hadn’t been there before. Surely the old weather-watcher wasn’t conjuring them up? No, he decided – couldn’t

be. Whatever the reason, they took advantage of Erik's "findings"; changing course to move into the stronger winds with Slygo always on their tail. This was how it was for the rest of the day, all of the next; and even the one after that. The two fleets zig-zagged across the ocean towards their destination; Orky's in front much of the time, with Slygo's eventually catching up and overtaking. They were only hours out from Buckpool when Erik said: "I was hoping we could do without this; but it's too touch-and-go." Turning to Helga, he said: "We have to do it."

"Plan B," his wife stated quite casually. "Yes, I think it's come to that, Erik. Go in and change."

Orky turned to frown at his father. "Change? And what's plan B?"

Josiah raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "I guess we'll find out soon enough."

When Erik eventually emerged from the cabin he was wearing a big fur overcoat and was carrying a bell in one hand; and even though it was broad daylight, he had a lantern in the other. Walking to the side of the ship, he extended the hand with the lantern towards the fleet of frigates; and at the same time rang the bell twice, ding-ding; then twice again soon after, ding-ding.

Where it came from no-one knew. The bank of fog drifted towards the sterns of Slygo's ships, overtook the entire fleet; then it just hung there. Aside from the fact that it made visibility impossible, in that part of the sea there was not a breath of wind. Slygo Raggs was totally becalmed.

Erik turned to see Josiah, Orky and the entire crew just standing bewildered with their mouths open. "Come on, you lot," he said impatiently. "Back to work, and make this count. I can't..." The old man stopped himself suddenly; continuing after a brief pause; hoping nobody had heard his mistake: "This fog isn't likely to last forever."

Helga frowned disapprovingly on his return to her side, and she whispered: "That was silly, Erik. You're going to have to watch your mouth."

"Sorry, my love," Erik whispered back meekly. "Slip of the tongue."

Orky's fleet was in sight of the Buckpool shore while Slygo's ships were still in the fog. Erik was looking back at the white cloud and nodded to himself. "Time enough," he muttered. Turning the knob to raise the glass of the lantern, he blew out the flame. Once he had, the fog began to disappear, blown away by a light breeze that seemed to spring out of nowhere. Satisfied that Orky was far enough ahead, he went to Helga and said: "You might like to dress for the occasion. We should be landing soon and, as two of the winners, we ought to make a good impression."

And so they did: Helga wearing her finest dress and hat, while Erik had put on his brightly coloured Hawaiian shirt and shorts; sun glasses too. Josiah and Orky still had on the same clothes they had worn for the entire trip; and yet they also felt quite special as they stood in front of the cheering crowd on the docks. Needless to say, Slygo Raggs was less than happy to be the loser of the race and grated sourly: "I don't know how you did it, but I will get my own back next time."

Orky smiled. "There won't be a next time, Slygo."

"I know you, Orky Weames," Slygo sneered confidently, "There'll always be a next time. I'm willing to bet on it."

"Then you'll be on your own," offered Orky, "Because I've done with gambling; and I'm done with you, Slygo Raggs. Goodbye, and good riddance."

The fleet's return was welcomed in Calmwater; and a big, noisy party was thrown for the winners of the race. Erik and Helga made a brief appearance before heading home for a bit of peace and quiet. They had not been there long, when there was a knock at the door. It was

Josiah. "I just wanted to thank you," he said, somewhat hesitantly. "I don't know how you did it, but you saved the day for us; for me, in particular."

"I have no idea what you mean," said Helga.

Josiah's head wagged slowly side to side in disbelief. "You know very well, Helga. You two somehow conjured up the weather that helped Orky win the race."

Erik chuckled. "You can't be serious, Josiah. Weather just is, all on its own. We merely watch and guess what it's going to be."

"If you say so," Josiah responded; then he sent the pair of them a warm smile. "But I know what I saw; and I know what I know. Rest assured, however," he added following a short pause, "Your secret is safe with me." Rising out of his chair, he headed for the door. "I'd best be going." About to leave, he stopped and turned. "You've probably noticed that it's been very dry lately. We really could do with a spot of rain, don't you think?"

He was on his way down the street when something quite peculiar occurred. It was a bright sunny day with a clear blue sky; and yet he was suddenly in shadow as a dark cloud appeared above him. Seconds later, rain was pouring down. Sensing that someone behind was staring at him, he turned to see Erik Frump standing outside the old cottage wearing wet-weather gear and holding an umbrella. Erik waved. Josiah waved back before continuing on his way. At first he was merely chuckling, muttering to himself: "Weather-watchers, indeed: *weather-makers* more like." After a few more paces he was soaked to the skin, was beginning to get cold; and he was starting to regret mentioning about needing rain. Looking up at the dark cloud above he said: "I think I'd best be careful what I say to those two in future." And he started to laugh.