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MOONBERRY PIE



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PAULA MUSSEL'S LAST HURRAH

Innistorm had grown over the years to become more than just any old port: now it was one of the biggest and busiest in the country. Ships of all kinds would sail there from distant lands bringing tropical fruit, spices, bales of wool and even cars.

As you might imagine, these cargo ships were large, some of them massive; and because of this it wasn't easy for them to move in and out of the harbour using their own engines in case they ran into something or each other. Here was a job for the tug boats; much smaller craft than the cargo vessels, but with really powerful engines. They would go to meet the bigger ships out at sea, tow and push them into port; then carefully position them beside the dock.

Not only were supplies brought in from elsewhere; sometimes empty ships would arrive to load goods that were being shipped to other places. Innistorm was one of the few ports that handled wheat for export. Delivered by trucks from farms, the wheat was put into huge tubular bins called silos that sat on the dock; and when a grain-carrying ship tied up close by, the wheat was poured into its hold; tonnes and tonnes of it.

While the latest ship was being loaded with wheat, skipper Towie Roper and his deckhand Bluey Green sat watching from the wheelhouse of their tug boat, the Paula Mussel. "I guess you'll be sorry to see her go," said Bluey. He was talking about the fact that at the end of that week, Paula was heading for the scrap yard.

"M-mm," murmured Towie quietly. Needless to say, he was having sad thoughts. "Been together for pretty much a lifetime," he mused. "I was your age when I first started as a decky; did my training and took over as Skipper..." and he drifted back into his reminiscences again.

Bluey nodded, imagining how it must be for his skipper. "What will you do after she's..." He couldn't bring himself to say 'scrapped'. "Maybe we could take on that new tug they offered you?" he suggested hopefully.

"You could, mate," said Towie, closing his eyes in a long blink. "As for me...? I don't think so. It wouldn't be the same." He paused to take another sip of tea. "What bugs me is they put old horses out to grass; but Paula's just going to be ripped to pieces. That's all the thanks she gets for years of faithful service. It's not right."

Towie was obviously becoming bitter and angry, so Bluey switched the conversation: "Going to be a long one today," he commented unnecessarily, "What with the container ship to take out. And then there's the sheep carrier."

"Be glad to get rid of that one," said Towie downing what was left of his tea. "It stinks something awful."

Once loading of the grain was finished, the holds of the carrier were closed and the Captain ordered the engines to be started. They wouldn't be needed yet, of course, because the tug boats would tow and push it away from the dock and out towards the harbour entrance. That was the idea, at least, but it didn't go according to plan. One engine was okay, but a second simply coughed and spluttered for a bit before stopping again. Towie let out a sarcastic: "Wonderful. That'll clog up the dock while they fix the problem."

This was the expectation until a tinny voice came over the intercom: "Have to shift it, Towie – there's a second empty grain-carrier waiting out at sea to come in and be loaded. I'll get you some help to take the one with the engine fault to the shipyard for repairs."

As arranged, the Paula Mussel and three other tugs guided the grain-carrier to the shipyard; then returned to the dock to await further orders. They weren't long coming. "More problems," said the tinny voice from the radio's speaker. "There's an oil tanker out in the bay. She's got engine trouble too," continued the voice, "And she's fully loaded, which is a worry; but we don't have a choice. After you've taken that container ship out to sea, bring in the tanker."

The skipper and deckhand of the tug boat simply went through the motions. They had done the same things every day for ages, almost to the point where they didn't have to think about it; but they did anyway; because, when shifting vessels that big, a moment of inattention could cause a catastrophe. The tanker was brought in slowly and taken to the shipyard where it was positioned carefully between a cargo ship and the grain-carrier. As they were heading back to the dock, Towie noticed Bluey wiping sweat from his brow. "A bit nervous there, were you?" he asked casually. "Me too. Being up close and personal with a floating bomb isn't my idea of fun. Still, not our problem now, eh?"

The next couple of days went too fast for Towie. Paula's ultimate fate was on his mind constantly, and the closer it came made him more anxious. While waiting on the latest job, he busied himself boxing up personal items from the tug boat's wheelhouse – a framed photo of himself on the deck proudly holding up his skipper's certificate; his grandfather's pocket watch which always sat beside the control panel, even though it had stopped working; and the old brass oil-can he used to use before spray-oil became available. He paused to stroke it gently. "You know, Bluey, this reminds me of one of those lamps that has a genie. Pity there isn't one in here so's we can make a wish for Paula."

"Best we can do is give her a bit of a send-off," put in Bluey, "Like, have one last party to say goodbye..." Further comments died when something caught Towie's attention. He spun and rushed out on deck. Puzzled, Bluey followed him to find the skipper casting a worried frown across the harbour.

"There's some kind of kerfuffle going on over there," declared Towie. "Blokes are running around on the dock like hairy goats."

No sooner had he said that, than the Port Controller could be heard barking on the radio: "There's a fire on the grain-carrier! It's in the engine room and they reckon it's spreading. They can't contain it. The biggest worry is the oil tanker sitting right next door. If that goes up it'll take out the entire shipyard and everything in it. I need you over there to pull it out, Towie; and the only other tug left in port is Anna Konder. Do you think two of you will be enough?"

Towie dived back into the wheelhouse and grabbed the microphone. Replying to the Controller's question, he said: "It'll have to be Mike. Leave it with us." Turning to Bluey he ordered: "Cast us off, mate. I'll start the engines."

The deckhand hesitated. "Won't the tanker be too heavy for only two of us? I mean, the Anna's a bit on the old side like Paula, and she's due for replacement next year."

"Neither of us is finished yet, not by a long chalk. Anyway, we're not going for the tanker, only the grain ship. That's where the fire is, and if it makes it to the hold there'll be one almighty explosion."

"How come?" asked Bluey. "It's only wheat."

"But the dust from it is highly flammable," explained Towie. "And don't forget the fuel tanks – they're full, and if they go up..." He closed his eyes, trying not to think of the consequences; then finally added: "We have to get it out to sea before it blows. Now cast us off; and maybe pray for a bit of luck. We're going to need it."

There was much to organise in a short space of time. Towie ordered everyone off the grain ship except for essential crew. After that he radioed Mike in Control: "Can you clear our route of traffic? And get onto any ships waiting outside the harbour – tell them to move well away. We'll also need a rescue boat, in case what's left of the carrier's crew don't have time to launch a life raft." As soon as Mike confirmed he had everything in hand, Towie got onto Anna Konder's skipper: "You up for this, mate?"

"Always fancied going out with a bang," Shingle Shaw replied jokingly.

Nerves kept the crews of both tug boats sharp as they eased the grain-carrier out of the shipyard. With Paula at the front and pulling on the rope tied to the ship's bow, Anna was behind, pushing on the stern. Adjustments had to be made along the way, compensating for the flow of the tide, keeping the large vessel in a more-or-less straight line. Not soon enough for Towie or Shingle, they were eventually through the harbour groins and into the open sea.

Mike had done his job. Other ships were out there still, but they had moved well beyond range, should the grain-carrier blow. Towie was pretty sure it would. A quick glance around confirmed that there was a boat to pick up the carrier's crew when they jumped; again, as Towie was already convinced they would have to. The next few minutes seemed like hours. Smoke could be seen rising up from the fire which had obviously spread and must have been very close to the hold. All it would take was a spark to...

Suddenly it happened: first one explosion, then another. Flames erupted, tossing the hatch covers high into the air. It was probably a sight to behold; from a distance, though, which the Paula and Anna weren't. Towie was on the radio to the crippled ship: "Get your men off now! Swim clear – there's a boat ready to pick you up." He watched, scowled when it seemed no-one was heading his warning. "NOW, I said!" almost screaming into the microphone. He let out a relieved sigh as men began leaping from the deck of the smoking grain-carrier into the sea. His mind was racing – what to do next? He noticed the rescue boat closing in on the men in the water, a bit too close to the burning ship, really; but he was also aware that there was someone else even closer. "Back off, Shingle!" he barked.

Anna Konder's skipper returned: "What about you?"

"Be with you in a flash," said Towie, instantly wishing he'd used a better phrase. "Bluey," he yelled from the wheelhouse, "Cast us loose; and do it quick – use an axe on the tow rope."

Not a moment too soon, with the last of the grain-carrier's crew hauled onto the rescue vessel it was powering away. The Anna Konder followed, not as speedily, but fast enough to be clear when the burning ship exploded in a massive ball of fire. Shingle gasped and spun around to look back. All he could see were flames, more

explosions, and dense black smoke, presumably from the fuel tanks. As for the Paula Mussel, there was no sign of her.

Eyes were on the scene, many peering over the sides of distant vessels watching the tragedy unfold through binoculars. Sputtering around in the sky above was a TV news helicopter, video cameras presumably rolling. There was little to see except for the billowing cloud of black smoke hiding the grain-carrier; and a litter of unrecognisable objects in the surrounding sea; some just bobbing lazily, others on fire and floating.

Aboard the Anna Konder, Shingle was close enough to view it all with the naked eye, and an emptiness was aching in his heart. It was sad to witness the last minutes of a once-mighty cargo ship; quite another to be mourning the loss of a long-time friend. Maybe, he thought, he shouldn't have said what he did. It would be wonderful to be joking right now that Towie had tried to steal his thunder by almost going out with a bang himself. Except Towie hadn't tried – he'd actually done it...

"Look!" gasped Shingle's deckhand in wide-eyed amazement. "They made it!"

It seemed Bluey had managed to cut the tow rope enabling the Paula Mussel to escape the explosion just in time. The helicopter tracked the tug boat overhead for a way before swinging back to the burning cargo ship. Bluey couldn't help but notice. "Hey, we could be on the six o'clock news," he quipped. "We'll be famous."

Towie growled under his breath: "Who cares? I don't. All I want is a shower. I smell like a chimney sweep."

Messages of congratulations flooded the radio, along with a 'Thank You' from the Port Authority for preventing a disaster in the shipyard. Initially, Towie and Shingle were both relieved to be tying up at the dock; but they weren't expecting their reception. The jetty was clogged with milling reporters and news teams; all taking photos and videos and firing questions – "What was it like being so close to the burning vessel?" "What were you thinking at the time?" And one that struck a nerve: "Is it right that the Paula Mussel is due for the scrap yard next week?"

The tug boat skippers and their deckhands answered a few of the questions, but ignored most. Towie felt a little better after returning home for a shower that took longer than normal. As usual following the end of another day's work, he flopped into a chair and switched on the television just in time for the evening news report; then was wishing he hadn't. The lead story covered the heroic efforts of the two tug boats and their brave crews in dramatic detail. He was just going to switch off when he caught the closing comments about Paula's fate. They were calling it Paula Mussel's Last Hurrah. Towie sneered, ground his teeth and switched off the TV.

The news story apparently touched the hearts of many viewers who had contacted the various TV channels expressing their dismay that the little boat that had saved the day should be treated so badly and tossed on the scrap heap. When Towie arrived at the dock next day he was greeted by a mass of protestors chanting and waving banners, all targeting the mean attitude of the Port Authority. Once in the wheelhouse, the first message he received on the radio was from Mike: "Get over to the shipyard, Towie. Your boat needs a clean-up. She looks pretty grubby."

"What's the point?" Towie growled sourly; then he had an unlikely thought, a brilliant one if it was right: "I don't suppose by any chance that means...?"

Mike cut him short: "You've won, mate, you and the six o'clock news. The Port Authority bowed to public pressure – Paula's back in service; you both are."

Towie didn't respond for a long few seconds, when finally he punched the air with a fist and let out a relieved, very satisfied: "Yes-sss!"