

## Gladys Hindmarch / TWO STORIES

### THE WATERY PART OF THE WORLD

We reach Point Atkinson in the late afternoon. I've just dished myself a bowl of potato salad when I see through a porthole in the mess the shiny-white red-roofed lighthouse. I step on grey paper I put there moments ago to protect the mess deck from whatever might happen in port; they don't care, Puppi said, shore mechanics don't care if they tramp oil in or not, it's not their boat. I turn the brass knob. But before I step outside, I glance at the clean walls and ceiling, the shiny green table, the clean honey pot and chutney jar and sauce bottles, sparkling ashtrays, a blackboard that is really *black*. Nothing's going to stay this way long, but the clean order makes me feel good. I step outside to see the lighthouse which I saw perhaps before I could even speak, then again and again as a little girl and young woman on ferries to Vancouver.

I walk along the red deck and sit in the sun on a wooden box just outside the fidley. I take a bite of creamy, new potato salad, which tastes so good. West Vancouver homes and North Shore mountains on one side, distant university towers and green trees and huge sandbanks on the other. Everything is clear and sharp. Have a wee beer with that, lass? asks Jock from just behind me. I turn left and Jock's not there. I stand up and shout into the dark fidley to the pails, mops, and sinks: you in there? Aye, he says. But I, caught by the glare of white paint and sun, can't see where he is. His hand, then his upper body, comes out of the darkness holding a plastic glass of beer. Thought drinking was against *all* rules, I say over into his slightly red, close-shaven face. It's only apple juice, Jan, Jock says as he steps out of the fidley and I step back to my box. I sit down in the sun. Thanks, I say. I feel the fluted ridges of the glass then take a swallow of warm beer. Best juice I ever had, I say. It's

only half a one, Jock says, not to worry. I look up at his stubbleless face, so much younger without the grey. I imagine passing him on an escalator in Woodward's, wondering about him, about his energy, about what he does. I look at his dungaree shirt and *clean* coveralls and imagine him at thirty.

You off now? I ask. Not yet, lass, he says, but there's nothing to do till we dock. I take a sip of beer: my skin and hair all clean and warm in the sun, the potato salad and beer so good, the lighthouse beautiful (white so white, red so red); everything seems perfect. And what are you going to do when you get in? I ask Jock as he leans on the ladder. Go to the Legion with Mabel, he says, maybe quarrel a bit. Must be nice to have *two* nights off, I say, trying to ignore what he just said. Not the way the wife blathers, he says, been together forty years now and mostly we just fight. What about? I ask, what do you fight about after forty years? Nothing, he says, canna even remember what started the last one or what it was about — never do — they're always the same. I look at him. He's gotta be kidding. We drink, he says, dance (I imagine a fat lady shorter than Jock and the two of them foxtrotting belly to belly), quarrel a wee bit, more than a *wee* bit, love a little. You have any kids? I ask. No, he says, never had any, don't regret that either.

I want kids, I say, someday, not many, maybe two. Enjoy yourself first, he said, no sense rushing into marriage when most of them don't work out. I don't say anything more. I look out at Spanish Banks and the sea and the little sailboats gliding through muddy green water. I see the sand of the beach and cars moving between willow trees along the Spanish Banks Road. We slowly pass a yellow barge full of gravel heading in and a green barge full of woodchips heading out. Even without getting up, I can see streams in the water: wide bands of brownny-green fanning out from the Fraser River amongst bluer, non-river strips of ocean water. I love that, I say to Jock, ever since I was a kid I've loved seeing that Fraser mud in the ocean. Sometimes I've seen it halfway to Nanaimo. One time I flew and I could see it even further. Jan, he says, you love many things. You should go around the world before you settle. Never can tell what might happen or who you'll meet. Go to Piraeus. Sail the Greek islands. The ocean is so clear you can see down a mile or more, and visit Egypt and Australia and Hong Kong. There is nothing, nothing like the smell and noise of sailing into Hong Kong. I might, I say, I just might ship out on a Norwegian freighter. I met a mate in Tahsis, you know, he said it's not impossible for me to get on. That so? he says.

After we chat about the possibility for a few moments, Jock leaves me to go into the galley. I stand at the rail and dream; I could sail on a Norwegian freighter and my travel and food would be free, or I could work here every run they give me and save up for a year. I love being right where I am now. The sun, when there is no barge in the way, reflects off the *Nootka* and ocean floor in such a manner that rays come up from below creating broken strips of light in the murky brown-green. I haven't seen enough of British Columbia to leave it. The mud here, good soil, is washed down from the interior, from places like Osoyoos and Summerland and Kamloops, brought down by the Thompson and Similkameen to flow into the Fraser to form part of the delta or to settle in the inlet or to drift out to the Gulf.

I feel like it's part of me and I want to merge with it, to swim among the particles in the ocean of everchanging water and light. We pass a green and grey freighter which is wider than we are long, a hundred and sixty-five feet according to Beebo. Six or eight of us wouldn't make one of her: Japanese? Russian? Greek? German? I can't see her name. She is floating high (without cargo) and is waiting, waiting for what? Grain? Salmon? Lumber? Sulphur? She's out on the edge of English Bay and Kitsilano Beach 'cause there's not room in the inner harbour for more than the freighters that are already loading or unloading or just waiting to load.

I think about Hong Kong and Bombay and Port Said; I'd love to see Cairo, Athens, Singapore, Rio de Janeiro. I look up at the centre of the Lions Gate Bridge coming towards us, not the actual centre but the centre of where we are which looks like the real centre coming out faster than the edges, and I hear the traffic whirring away and look straight up as we float under tons and tons of vehicles and steel. And I can smell them, or I can smell it, the city and Stanley Park; maybe it's all the people and all the fumes and all the trees and dust combined, but it's a smell I haven't had for days, a wonderful, particular, Vancouver smell. I am surrounded by it. I enjoy several breaths and then try to imagine the smell of other city-ports I've been in like New York or Montreal or Seattle or San Francisco. Can't. But I've always come from the land. I bet Jock and all of the men know the smell of each city, could recognize each with their nose.

Coming up on the north are triangular piles of yellow sulphur which were loaded in the gasfields of southwestern Alberta and

northern B.C., a byproduct that's become a product for something, loaded into railway cars in small towns and unloaded into piles here, piles that are larger than three-storey buildings, piles that are brighter yellow than anything else in the harbour, piles that will be loaded into ships' holds as cargo to be carried to where? . . . to be unloaded by more men to be used for what?

What are you dreaming about? says Hal. Loading, I say. I didn't hear him come. I didn't know he was here leaning over the rail just a few feet from me. He, like Jock, is clean-shaven and just-showered. Loading, he laughs with a mug of tea in his hand, loading? Sure, I say (he looks like a darker, slightly smaller James Dean wearing a green plaid shirt), why not? I thought you'd think of other things, he says. Like what? I reply looking right at him, right at the *married man*, Beebo said, *married man*. Like how you're going to spend your paycheque, Hal says, or what you're going to do when you get off. I look away from his wet lips. Kissy lips. Just-showered body in clean clothes. I don't have any plans, but I certainly won't tell him that. I stare at the sulphur piles and the boxcars from all over North America. There must be tons of sulphur — thousands of thousands of tons — in that huge bright pile, and the air doesn't smell of it at all.

Hal, I say. Uuh-huh? Do you have any idea where that stuff goes to? The sulphur? Yeah. I think it's used for chemicals to make plastics, he says, much of it goes to Europe for that. Then we buy it back, I say, in coffee grinders and kitchenware and such. I guess so, he says, but someone told me it's also used for fertilizers and explosives and pharmaceuticals. We smile. Well, that's one of the things I was thinking about, I say, about how the whole province, about how the workers of the prairies and us are just growing and loading and unloading and cutting trees and killing fish and harvesting grain and loading then unloading, always moving cargo elsewhere, waiting to do it or doing it, but all this energy, and for what? So we can buy a pill made in England or a car from Japan? Or sugar from Cuba? Sure, he says, what's wrong with that? Keeps us all working, doesn't it? Yes, I say, if you look at it that way. I do, he says.

He smiles. He takes a drag of his cigarette and broods. I'd love to touch his arms through his shirt which I am looking at in order to avoid his eyes. You didn't answer me before, he says. I don't know

what I'm going to do, I say as I cover what I'm feeling. Hal, let's go over there. He follows me starboard as we pass Pier A where the *Princess of Vancouver* always docks. I glance at it and Piers B & C where hundreds of immigrants who built the railway who farmed the delta who fished the ocean began their Canadian lives: more loading and unloading, beginning and beginning again. You know, I say to him, that's where we always docked when I was a child. I can see and smell the inside of that building even now. I remember how exciting it was to get outside of it, to be on the mainland and in the city. He smiles. Island girl in the big city.

Hal, I say, I think I'm going to ship out again. He flicks his cigarette butt into the bay. You know what I think about that, he says (black eyes into blue, I can't think at all, can you?), you should throw away your shipping book and forget this, just forget it. (I would love to run my tongue under the edge there, under the edge where the ribbing of his white undershirt touches his neck.) We both look right into each other. I wish, I wish life were more settled for me than it is. We both laugh a little. I was only trying to find out if you're coming for a beer with us, he says. Does everyone? I ask. Usually.

I want to hug him but don't. I look at the brick sugar refinery again, old bricks in a city that's mostly built of wood and concrete. What are you thinking about? he asks. I don't say you, I love the way you look. Sugar and golden syrup and bricks, I say, then hesitate. I was thinking about my uncle who has worked in that factory there for thirty years (we both look at the refinery as if my Uncle Frank is at this very moment looking out at us). I can't imagine what that feels like, I say, thirty years, but you couldn't last a month? No, I couldn't, he says. Wet kissy lips say.



Well? he says. Well? I say. We can see the company building, a cream and red warehouse sitting in the sun on a dock covered with crates and boxes of cargo. Well? he says, will you be coming for a beer? Sure, I say, thinking this is not the end, we'll be on land together before we part, all of us sitting around a beer table instead of a mess table, sure. At the Princeton, he says, want me to sign for your cheque? It's ready? Of course, he says, the Old Man radios the information in to the company office. I'm fetching everyone else's... how about yours? Sure, I say, totally pleased that I'll get it so soon, sure. You're in for a sweet surprise, he says as the *Nootka's* engine stops. Huh? You'll probably earn more here in five days than you did on the CPR in two weeks. No kidding. Would I *kid* you? Hal says and chuckles. Not about that, I say. Gotta go, he says, I have to jump off the moment we tie up 'cause it's closing time at the office already. See you at the Princeton, I shout at Hal's back.

As the *Nootka* drifts into dock and Jock prepares to throw the line, I breathe air full of fresh salmon, look up at our lush North Shore mountains. Then glance down into the swirls in the harbour waters.

## TAHSIS: HOLDING MY BREATH TO JAPAN

This is my land, Vancouver Island, where I was born on the eastern side. We live on the edges of it, one huge green hill pressed up from the sea, mountains and mountains of timber on its top, the bottom joined to the mainland under the Straits of Juan de Fuca, Georgia, Johnstone, Queen Charlotte; the edges defined by blue and grey water, pockets of lakes, scratches of rivers.

I breathe the cut forest air as I walk between stacks of lumber at Tahsis. These creamy stacks are shorter than whales but were originally longer, giant Douglas Firs, just a few weeks ago standing upright with their branches out, needles, green short needles pointing, surrounded by air, feeling the sun and rain. And now they are planks, horizontal, lying on each other; only the bottom ones touch earth. My head turns to the grey sky: it's so low that I feel if three firs were placed on top of each other I could climb them and touch it. I skip through the maze of the largest lumberyard I've ever been in as I feel Hal's navy-blue jacket on my arms, his shape around me. I love it, so soft.

For the first time in my life, except for Port Alberni and Point No Point, I'm on the western side of the Island, blocked by an island, Nootka Island, held in by an inlet, Tahsis Inlet, but it's the West Coast I've been on these last three days, not the east of the west but the west of the west. Nothing out there but water between us and Japan, Coco said to me yesterday. I see myself crawling miles and miles holding my breath to Japan. I stop. Rest a moment. Place my hand flat against two pieces of thick wood. Will you be used for a house or to hold cement in for an ugly apartment? Become part of a dock, a huge shipping container? Stay in British Columbia or go to the Orient? Be taken by train hauled through the Coast Range the Cascades the Kootenays and Rockies to Saskatchewan? Or be carried on a Norwegian-flagged Greek-crewed vessel of an American-

owned Danish company to Europe? Will you be the same one piece of that much larger tree even one month from now or further cut, further cut, maybe one end a toy boat and an edge of you burned, thrown into a furnace to give heat and return to the earth and sky? A pulp mill: some of the cells which once joined these may already be paper. I lean over and touch my lips to one of the boards, then run.

In my ears, I feel the salt/forest air and hear machines: the winch and engine throb of the *Nootka*, the whines and shrill turnings of metal from inside the mill, and other ships, freighters, deep-sea, just down the harbour, loading, huge winches, loading, taking lumber away, and lighter sounds from stilted-yellow-empty-in-the-middle machines which move piles of lumber in their middles and make a swishing sound through the puddles. Men at work. All men. They are taking and carrying and bringing and lifting and driving and maintaining or repairing too, I suppose, because no lumber is being cut on Saturdays. Cleaning chains. Young men get work cleaning chains. I used to wish when I was defrosting a fridge and doing weekend chores that I were a boy, that I'd grow up to be a trucker or maybe be, like Smitty next door, a highrigger, or maybe a parachute tester, or maybe a fisherman—not a sports fisherman, but a fisherman fisherman. But I don't kill. I couldn't fish unless I was willing to kill and to gut.

I stop. I can't decide which way to go—to stay here amongst the lumberstacks just smelling fir and cedar or to go left along the paved road. I hesitate a few seconds, look at the unpainted mill to my right and the high rows of lumber piles in front of me and the about-to-rain sky above, then turn left. The edge of the yard is enclosed by a high metal net fence to stop stealing, I guess, but it seems silly: *metal poles* bent at the top in, metal poles freighted here by the *Nootka* to hold in pieces of dead forest which once belonged to all or did until there was a licence on a piece of paper from Victoria, a piece of paper made perhaps from pulp from this very land, and that piece of paper says, what does it say, I don't know, I've never seen one, yet it exists and gives title to companies, a right to cut. Then the men of British Columbia work: cruisers and riggers and whistle punks and fallers, buckers and chokermen and cat-drivers and boom-men, barkers and sawyers and tailers and green-chainers. And that's why lumber costs so much, or so the companies say, it's the labour, but my dad knows of a guy in Chemainus who got a percentage discount because he worked at the mill and it turned out cheaper for him to buy wood—cut



in Chemainus and maybe even loaded by him — through the catalogue, Eaton's or Sears of Edmonton or Calgary, and to pay the freight costs to bring it back from the prairies to build his home five miles from the Chemainus mill. He saved one hundred and twenty dollars by doing so; that I don't understand; that makes no sense to me.

I pass a V-roofed-attached-to-a-shed structure. There are cards in wooden slits: time cards, check-in and check-out. I cross the road which must be the main street 'cause there is a general store and a post-office up and over there. There aren't any houses along it, just a rectangular building up the hill almost straight in front of me, and over and up a larger hill to my left there is a *pink* church with a cross and a few recently built houses. The store must be closed. Or, here it is, Saturday afternoon, and no one except for a red-haired man is standing on the wooden platform, and there are no cars nor trucks nor station wagons in front of it. Odd. No cars or trucks on the road either, not like Ladysmith or Chemainus Saturdays with teenage boys in second-hand cars gunning up and down the main drag circling, slowing down, teasing, try to pick up girls. The man waves at me and I wave vaguely back and decide not to go there but to stick closer to the waterfront and visit one of the deepsea freighters if they'll let me.

The first one, Japanese, doesn't. The second, Norwegian, does. The officer, about my height and around thirty, speaks English and after I tell him I work on the *Nootka*, that little freighter right over there, we walk up a spotless gangplank that seems longer than our ship is wide, and he gives me a tour of the wheelhouse (all sorts of instruments), the galley (stainless steel — complete stoves and a separate grill), and a huge freezer stocked with full sides of pork, lamb, beef. Wow. Enough to live for weeks. He opens an empty cabin on the upper deck. I can't believe it: so light, clean, wooden, with a little desk and bookshelf and a bathroom. Are the crew's quarters like this? Almost the same, he says, but below deck; this is, how do you say, spare crew? Extra? more than you need? No, he says, the radio operator flew home because her father died and another will arrive to. . . . Replace or relieve her, I say, to take over. Yes, he says, relieve, replace. You have women operators? I ask. Certainly, he says, is it not so in Canada? Not so, I say, at least not on the west coast where the officers handle the radio-calls. Women, he says, make excellent operators — why not in Canada? Why not? I say, I don't know why — maybe that will change soon — there just

aren't many positions. Maybe it is because before you become an officer of any sort you must belong to a union where many men are already out of work. Why is that so? he asks. I don't fully know, I say, but Canada used to have a large deepsea fleet which was disbanded, broken up, after the war or during the battles between unions, and now those boats sail under the flags of other countries and use cheaper labour. That is too bad, he says, the situation is comp-li-cated? Complicated is right, I say, complex too. But women do not have the same opportunities as men? he says. Yes, I say, you understand English very well. He smiles with pride.

He takes me to a dining room where there are polished wooden tables all attached solidly to the wooden deck. On each, there is a basket of fresh bread and a carafe of wine. This is beautiful, I say, so airy and spacious. This is not like your *Nootka*? he asks, it is not the same? Not the same at all, I say, but I've been in Vancouver restaurants which aren't as uncluttered or well-designed as this. He takes the compliment personally. You would enjoy a glass of wine? he asks. I'd enjoy it, I say, but no thanks, I must go soon. Coffee? No thank you.

Your vessel, he says as I look out a large porthole towards her, it used to be a fishpacker? A fishpacker? I do not understand. He laughs slightly at my not understanding an English word. We built several like that in Norway, he says, I think it was o-rig-i-nally — is that how you say it? — built in Norway as a boat which takes the fish from the grounds to the canneries, like a mother ship. I don't know, I say, I'll find out. Find out? I will ask those aboard and perhaps one of them will tell me. Find out is an idiom? he asks. I guess so, I say, uum, I find out from you that the *Nootka* may have previously been a Norwegian fishpacker. I found out from you that radio operators are sometimes women. Discover. Learn. Come to know. Good phrase, he says, I find out that our dining room gives pleasure to our guest. That is right, I say. I found out that she likes our ship. Yes, I say. What other languages do you speak? he asks. Just English. Only English? no French or Spanish? I took French in highschool and two years Russian at university, but I can't say more than hello and good bye and yes and no in either. Why not? We don't get to use them, I say, we didn't even speak in the classes — mostly grammar drills and not even the most frequently used phrases. English grammar is most difficult, he says, but I am amazed, you rarely speak in class, why? Our classes were too big and most of us did not learn much. Everyone in Norway, he says,

learns some English and Danish; they are needed for commerce and travel. I could travel for a thousand miles north, east, and south, I say, and the main language would still be English. You should come to Europe, he says, see countries smaller than your province. Different peoples and cultures, they are exciting, no?

Yes, I say, I suppose. I've always been in school or working to earn money to go back to school. No holidays? Once across Canada to Montreal and Toronto and New York with my parents, I say, and to California with my professor and his family. A custom? he says. No, no, not a custom, I say, but many people my age have not seen our country. Not so in Europe, he says, but you work on the *Nootka*, why not here? On a Norwegian vessel? I ask. You would like to? I might... is that possible? Not impossible, he says. How? You would go to see the Norwegian Consulate in Vancouver and arrange an interview. If a Master agrees and you have a passport and the right papers, you might join as a cabin girl or officers' messgirl. Really? I say. Really, he answers in my intonation and we both laugh.

It might take several months, he says; the Consulate has to know you are of good character and have references. The Master has to need to replace (I smile at the word) someone. Thank you, I say, I really must go now. You are in Tahsis this evening? he says, you could return and meet our officers? No, I say, we go on. On? Sail—move to another port called Zeballos. It is a shame, he says, we could all practice our English and maybe you could begin Norwegian? I would love to, I say, but not by myself. It is much better with native speakers, he says, I find out, or I found out? You have found out, I answer, and thank you for everything. It has been my pleasure, he says.