

# Silver Harvest

Daryl Fraser

**Story  
Machine**

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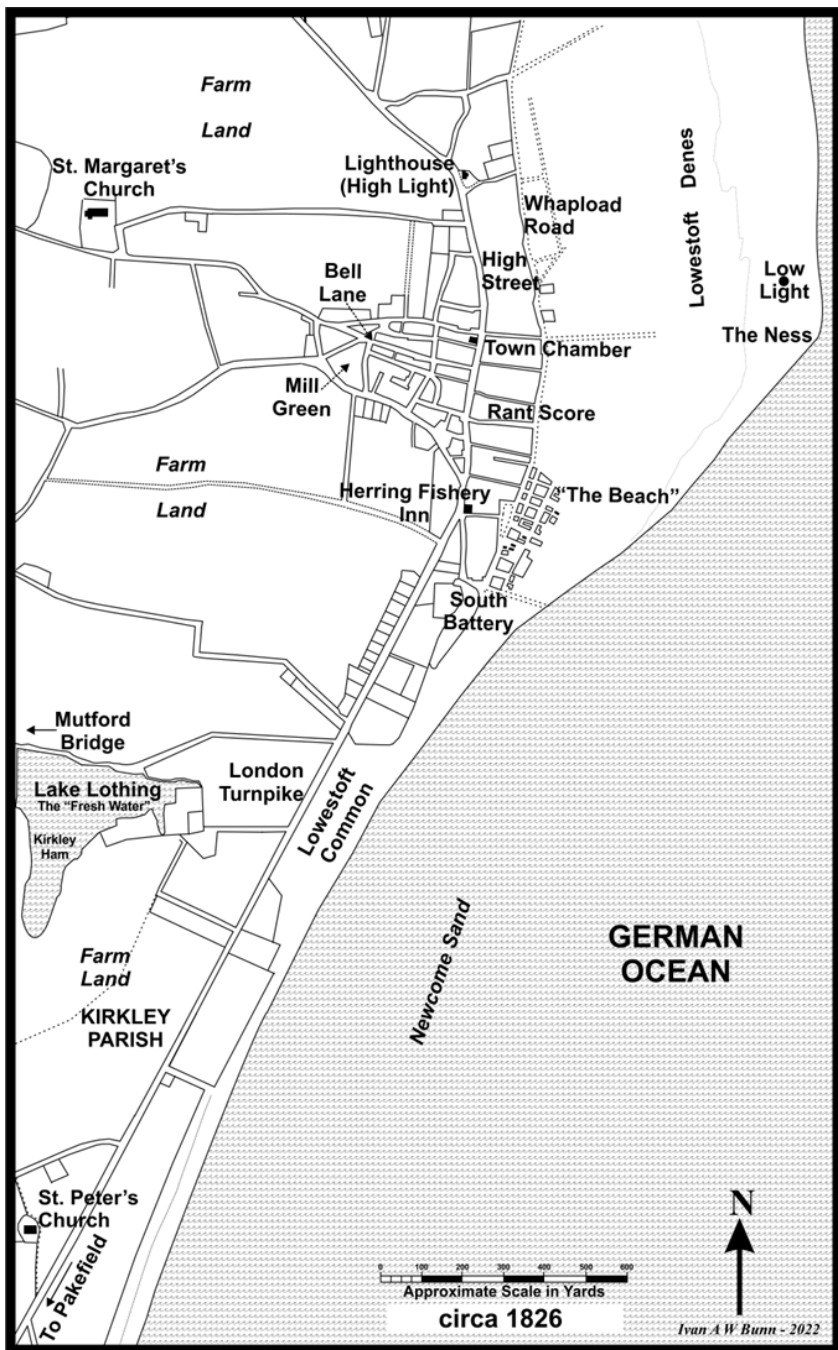
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For my mother  
Jean Fraser



# **Part One**

**1826-1827**



## Chapter 1 - The Denes

October 1826

On the dark, deserted shore of Lowestoft beach, a whisper.

‘How fare yer?’

Jacob raised his lantern. Its flame lit a sea-worn face. A breeze tugged at his hair and beard. It was said that the lost souls of mariners could be heard calling, until dawn sent them back to the deep.

‘Who’s there?’

In his sweat-filled bed, Jacob had been in the grip of nightmares. Underwater, swimming with the drowned, watching them drift their blind way through a sandstorm of currents, barnacle crusted, anemone tongued, and crab clawed.

He had risen before cockcrow, leaving his beach cottage to walk across the wide, marram grass Denes to the shore. He followed the tideline for half a mile towards Kirkley Parish, passing the nets and boats of other fisherman, until he reached a point on the shingle opposite a landlocked lake.

The horizon glimmered with the ghost light of approaching dawn.

‘How fare yer?’

A bell tolled. Chills prickled his skin. He closed his eyes. Once again he was rowing in the *Frances Ann*, a sail-and-oars, open lifeboat, fourteen shipmates pulling in unison.

They had launched from the beach in a storm, shoulders and arms bulging, faces slapped by wind and rain, on course for a stricken schooner. The battered three-master was breaking up against the Newcome, its crew hanging from the

rigging like crucified men. A pilot cutter had loomed out of the spray – single mast, a crew of eight at oars. The small craft slid broadside down a cliff of wave and capsized, spilling its crew into the heaving water. It was the *Wanderer*, his son John's boat.

'Vessel capsized to starboard! Come about!'

Survivors surfaced in the swell like the black heads of seals. John appeared, eyes white and rolling, hair plastered down as if he were caught in a net. His cry was faint.

'God help me!'

Jacob gripped his oar.

'Hold fast, son!' We're coming!. Row lads, row, for Christ's mercy.'

The crew pulled, every man's will focussed on rescue. The waves were flecked with illusion. Jacob twisted around on his bench, searching, cursing, praying. John reappeared, a small speck a hundred yards away, his face upturned towards the pressing clouds.

'There! Bend your bloody backs!'

By the time the *Frances Ann* bore down, the sea had carried away his son with the rest of the *Wanderer's* crew, leaving the lifeboat turning in heaving emptiness.

The cries of drowning men dissolved. Jacob shivered on the beach. He opened his eyes slowly, afraid to find the tragedy repeating itself. The sea was flat. But again he heard a call in the reach and draw of pebbles. Light waves curled out the sound of a voice.

'How fare yer?'

He had an urge to answer. But surely talking to the dead was ungodly.

'No more! What's done is done!'

Silence.

Jacob looked back the way he had come. Along a shoulder of cliff the outline of the small town emerged against a back-



drop of fading stars. Lamps shone dimly in windows. Disembodied lanterns bobbed down narrow scores to the track beneath the slope. The High Light on the knoll and the Low Light on the beach shone. He thought of the warmth of his home and his family.

He squatted and scooped up a pile of cold sand, allowing the grains to trickle through his fingers.

‘Let it go, Jacob,’ he said. ‘A year is long enough.’

He threw the sand into the surf as if scattering ashes over a grave.

In their cottage under the cliff, Lizzie sat in a rocking chair in her kitchen by the warmth of an open hearth. She rested her palms on the bulge of her pregnant belly. She had only meant to sit for a few moments to ease her back but her mind slipped away like an unguarded child who will creep to the very place it should not. She remembered the day.

Jacob had returned from the rescue, straggle-wet and exhausted, red eyes haunted by the drowned, his speech salt-cracked.

‘The *Wanderer’s* gone. He’s lost...’

Her wailing had brought the children down from their beds. She beat her chest and even Jacob as he held her. There followed a week of false hopes, expecting her son to have survived and walk through the door. She heard his voice. She saw his resemblance in some young man. Family and friends searched the shoreline. Oars, hats, the *Wanderer’s* broken mast and sail, bodies one by one washed ashore. But never John.

She imagined him drifting with the tides, carried to distant lands. In her whole life she had hardly ventured further than the Parish of Lowestoft. Sometimes she would walk to the shoreline by the Newcome Sand and cry out, tensing every muscle as if to squeeze the black pain through her pores.

The baby kicked. She gritted her teeth. ‘Come on, Lizzie,’

she said. There were chores to do. Food to prepare. Clothes to mend.

She heaved herself up and examined her reflection in a mirror of polished metal. Grief had bleached it of vitality. Plump and tired was her own conclusion. She tucked in loose strands of greying hair and tightened the bun, then shrugged. No difference really. She smoothed the plain linen apron which she wore over a blouse and a long skirt, and set to.

Mary came into the room carrying a lighted candle. The girl was dressed like her mother. Her long dark hair uncombed, the sheen of sleep lingering on soft cheeks like dew on a flower.

‘Morning, Ma.’

Lizzie poked at burning embers in the fireplace.

‘I’ll give you “morning, Ma”, getting up at this hour.’

‘Tis before sunrise.’

‘But not before a deal of work to be done. Fetch that pan of stew and hang it over the fire. Your father and brothers will be wanting a hot breakfast afore long.’

Mary set down her light and stirred the slop of oats, vegetables, and cuts of herring. She suspended the pot on a trivet.

‘Where is everyone?’ she asked.

Lizzie lifted linen off a trestle. The smell of fresh laundry rose to the ceiling.

‘Seth has gone down to the boat. Jem is Lord knows where – at the stables, most like.’

Mary fetched bowls and cutlery from a tall, pine dresser.

‘Where is Da?’

Lizzie folded sheets. ‘You know what day this is?’

Mary stopped laying the table. ‘Tis a year ago today that John was lost.’

‘I expect that’s where he is then.’

‘Will we all go down to the beach, in remembrance?’

‘I don’t think your Da would allow it.’

Mary's eyes glistened.

Lizzie picked up the candle. 'Come on, me love.'

They went through an adjoining door into the parlour. The waving flame lit plaster walls and simple furnishings: a small cabinet, two armchairs, and a basket of wood by the hearth. Lizzie took a white, porcelain mug from among the bric-a-brac on the mantelpiece. It bore the inscription: *A Trifle from Lowestoft*. Inside were locks of her children's hair. Lizzie selected John's dark curl and took it over to where a Bible lay on a table. No one in the family could read but it was open at the Gospels.

'Let us say the Lord's Prayer,' she said.

They put their hands together and faltered through the verse. When they had finished, Mary wiped her face with the back of her hand.

'I miss him so much, Ma.'

'I know, me love. We all do.'

'I've been a-thinking. How will he be resurrected if the sea won't give him up?'

Lizzie put her arm around the girl's narrow waist. It seemed to her impossible that her son's vibrancy and love of life could be so utterly extinguished.

'We can't question things like that. We must trust in God.'

Mary bowed her head, hiding her face behind her hair.

'Why won't Da talk about him?'

Lizzie had asked herself that question many times.

'Your Da grieves in his own way. Just be sure that he loved John as much as any of us.' She withdrew her arm. 'Come on now, go see to that stew, it'll likely be bubbling over.'

Alone in the room Lizzie picked up her son's lock of hair and rubbed it between her thumb and finger. She lifted it to her nose. The scent of him was growing fainter. She sang quietly to herself.

*As he was a sailing from his own dear shore  
Where the waves and the billows so loudly do roar,  
I said to him now, I shall see you no more  
So farewell, my dearest, you're the lad I adore.*

Jacob had returned to the Denes with his mind set on the future. He stood by the water's edge near the *Frances Ann's* boathouse, with the town on the cliff in the background. The faint light revealed tall, scaffold watchtowers where lookouts with spyglasses perched on platforms, ready to respond to signals from offshore vessels. All loading and landing of cargo and fish took place here and beachmen were always in competition to be first out with ferry boats to ships' masters. Jacob lit his pipe and whistled out a plume of smoke.

A young man wearing a tan smock walked towards him, his strides crunching on the sloping shore. At eighteen his eldest son already had a good chest on him and had grown a light beard. His brown hair spread out from beneath a shapeless hat.

'Ho there, scruff,' said Jacob.

Seth grinned and saluted.

'The *Gull's* shipshape and ready.'

'Good lad. Stow a longline and bait for the morrow. I have in mind to hook a few whiting as we drift.' He scrubbed at his black beard.

Seth mimicked the action against his own wispy growth. 'I hear the boats are catching more lasts of herring with every trip,' he said.

The herring season had begun and would last until December. Long hours and hard labour lay ahead.

'Let's hope it stays that way,' said Jacob. 'We need a good year to meet our debt.' He looked across the Denes. In the grey light, men and women moved gear between their shods and the shore.

‘Where’s your brother?’ he asked Seth.

‘Don’t rightly know, Da’

‘Didn’t he come to help you this morn?’

His son shook his head. Jacob cursed. Jem was now eleven but had never shown interest in going out on a lugger.

‘It’s about time our Jem-boy got his feet wet.’ He noticed doubt in Seth’s eyes. ‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing, Da.’

‘It’ll make a man of him. Put hairs on his chest.’

Receiving no reply, Jacob looked out to sea.

The sky glowed orange like a brightening lamp. The silhouettes of ships at anchor appeared through low, surface mist, their bare masts and spars jutting up from dark hulls. Jacob counted five-score vessels laid over: brigs, barques and sharp-bowed cutters; sloops, colliers and heavy luggers, all cargo-laden, sheltering between the shore and the sandbanks in the Roads. The crews on board would be making ready to set sail for onward passage along the East Coast trade route between Tyne and Thames.

Seth cleared his throat, as if unsure whether or not to speak.

‘Da, if we want for an extra hand I know a good lad.’

‘And why not your brother?’

‘I ain’t sure he’s keen.’

‘Ain’t keen? He’ll do what I bloody say if he wants food in his guts. Where the hell is he?’

Down by the shoreline a horse-drawn wagon stood waiting while customs men inspected its load of timber and pitch. Jacob spied Jem standing in front of the animal, reaching up to stroke its nose.

‘Jem!’ he bellowed. ‘Get over here.’

The boy ran up. He wore an old jacket too big for him, torn trousers, and shoes with soles half parted from their uppers. Seth caught him by the back of his neck with one hand.

‘I’ll thread our Jem-boy on a hook and see what we can catch with him.’

‘Get off, Seth!’ Jem wriggled free, his eyes bright. ‘Da, if you’re going to Market today can I come with you and ride the donkey? I could help at the fish stall.’ He danced in the sand on thin legs.

Jacob turned solemn. He had not planned it but the moment had come. His face crinkled into a mesh of lines.

‘Never mind the Market, Jem-boy. I’m thinking it’s time you went to sea. When we go abroad tomorrow you shall sail with us as boy. What do you think of that?’

Jem dug the open toe of his shoe into the sand.

‘Go abroad with you tomorrow, Da?’ he asked, as if he couldn’t quite grasp what his father meant.

‘Have you no ears? You can’t hang around stables all your life shovelling horse shit for a farthing a basket. You shall be a fisherman like your Da and your brother.’

Jacob took a step closer..

‘You want to go out, don’t you Jem-boy?’

Jem continued digging his hole.

‘I don’t know, Da.’

In a sudden movement Jacob knocked the boy’s cap off.

‘For Christ’s sake what’s wrong with you? All the Chapmans go to sea. We got saltwater in our veins. Look you, the water’s as calm as the pond on Mill Green. Uncle Bill and Uncle Sam will sail with us. You’ll have the time of your life. Won’t he Seth?’

Seth’s slight nod was unconvincing.

‘Right then. Seth will get you kitted out. I want you to spend today on the boat.’

Seth picked up his young brother’s cap and plonked it back on his head.

‘Come on Jem-boy. You can have some of my old gear. I’ll get you shipshape.’

Jacob watched his sons retreat over the Denes. His pipe had gone cold. He tried to light it against the wind, which seemed intent on blowing against him no matter which way he faced. He gave up and lifted his chin to the world. The Chapmans were part of a community that lived by the seasons, with skills handed down generation upon generation. When they were not fishing they ferried, salvaged anchors or mended gear. They had their associations and particular taverns. They worshipped at the Congregational Church on the Sabbath. It was a way of life that had hardly changed for centuries and he felt an obligation to it. It was unthinkable that it could be any other way.

After breakfast, Jacob rode his donkey and cart to the front of the cottage. His height obliged him to sit with his elbows and knees folded in like a grasshopper. He wore a round hat clamped low on his head, which gave him the appearance of a ranter preacher.

He had made the announcement as the family sat around the kitchen table. Lizzie had looked as if she'd been slapped.

'On this day?' she said.

'What's wrong with the day?'

'Why, Jacob, tis a year ago that – '

He silenced her with a stare.

Mary had put her arm around Jem.

'But Da, is he up to it?'

He had leant forward and raised his fork.

'Did anyone ask you, missy?'

'No, Da but – '

'But nothing.' He banged the table. 'Eat your breakfast, all of you, and be thankful there's food.'

Every clank of cutlery seemed loud and reproachful. He had gone out to fetch the cart as soon as he had finished.

The donkey shook its neck, chinking the bridle. Jacob

glared at the front door. If the women didn't appear soon he had a mind to leave without them.

A short distance across the wasteland that fronted his block of cottages, Jacob saw his father shuffling along, bent forward as if he was carrying a sack of coal.

Zebedee approached and leant against the cart. His voice croaked from a lifetime of tobacco.

'Off to Market are you?' He wiped his hand down the front of an ancient smock, an action that raised the smell of fish and oil.

'You can hitch on the back but we have errands to run first.'

Zebedee rubbed a leather patch that covered an empty eye socket.

'I'll walk up to me plot first, to see to the pig and chickens. And I'll bring us back a few carrots and parsnips, so don't be bartering for any.' He scratched his beard. 'How's the *Gull*?'

Jacob gave him the news about Jem.

'About bloody time.' Zebedee hawked into the grit. 'Maybe I'll come out with you on a voyage, give him a few pointers. I'm feeling more up to it these days.'

His father would never sail again. The old man lived near the base of the cliff in an outhouse turned into a dwelling. He had been offered a berth in the cottage but preferred his own company.

Zebedee's face turned vacant. He sucked his cheeks into his gums. With nothing else to say he slid away like a seal returning to the deep.

Lizzie and Mary came out. They wore shawls and long skirts. Wide-brimmed bonnets concealed their eyes. His wife walked carefully, balancing the weight of her belly as she stepped over the rough ground. She hoisted herself up beside him, ignoring his offered hand. Mary sat on the open rear, her legs dangling over the side, a basket of laundry on her lap.



Neither woman spoke.

Jacob gave a snap of the reins, startling the donkey forward. They wheeled onto Whapload Road, heading north along the flat track that followed the base of the cliff for the length of the town above. Handcarts and horse-drawn wagons crunched its rutted surface, transporting barrels, nets, and sacks of victuals. Workers tramped down scores from the streets above: mariners and tradesmen, women employed in net stores, and ragged, shoeless children.

Jacob pulled up at a blackened smokehouse.

'I'll be a moment. Stay here.'

He got down and went in to collect a batch of cured red herring, part of his own haul. He put his head around the tarred door and squinted against the warm air and low light. The floor was laid out in lines of smouldering oak shavings, which billowed smoke upwards. High above, rack upon rack of herring, spitted through the gills on blackened poles, ascended into charred rafters like scorched bats hanging in a smoky inferno. Their wrinkled skins glistened and dribbled with oil. The smell of curing fish was overpowering. He closed the door and went in search of his own boxes.

Outside, Mary twisted around from her perch.

'Ma, Jem don't want to go to sea. He wants to 'prentice a shore trade.'

Lizzie turned awkwardly. Her daughter could be too outspoken.

'Your Da will have his sons be fishermen.'

'But Jem's so afeard. He was a-crying in the privy. He ain't been the same since John ...' Mary's brow creased.

Lizzie turned away. Above the buildings and yards the slope of cliff loomed.

'Tis your father's will. There's nothing I can do about it.'

'But can you not speak up for Jem-boy?'

She turned around again.

‘Don’t be meddling, Mary.’

‘But, Ma.’

‘No.’

Jacob returned and they set off. Sail makers, chandlers and blacksmiths were busy. Coopers’ yards echoed with banging and sawing. Stable doors creaked and horses clip-clopped over courtyards.

They rode past Mary’s place of work, a beetsters chamber, with its wide doors open. Inside, girls worked at nets, stitching hemp cord and tying knots with nimble fingers. A young man smiled and raised his cap.

Jacob talked over his shoulder.

‘That lad has eyes for you Mary or I don’t know a cock from a hen. Seth tells me the boys are sweet on you but you don’t pay ’em no heed.’

Mary kept her back to him.

‘Cat caught your tongue missy?’

He turned to his wife.

‘What do you say, Lizzie? Is it time our lass went a-courting?’

They rode in silence past a long ropewalk before she replied.

‘I’m a-thinking about Jem at this moment.’

Jacob pursed his lips, determined to steer her his way.

‘Well, tis a moment to be marked. I remember when me own Da took me out. It made a man of me.’

‘It’s just that he ain’t strong like you and Seth. Maybe we could leave it a bit longer ‘til he grows.’

The cart creaked and swayed as they dipped into a deep rut.

‘What do you mean?’ said Jacob.

Lizzie gripped the side.