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One Way Ticket

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The carhandlers hammered the last freight car into lock below deck at seven o'clock. Ten minutes later, the ship grated from the pilings into open lake. Evening colored clouds, bloody and ochre, glimmered from the water, and the lake was indolent and easy underneath the engine beat.

At 7:25, Purser Meade Harris was impatient in the pilothouse. Captain Bernard Stason was shaving himself with an electric raxor. Matters of carlists and passengers lining up to buy tickets could evidently wait.

True to a daily habit of 40 years, Harris nursed his peeves at stubborn whims of lake captains. They were an odd lot and of them, Bernard Stason was oddest. Harris sighed, scratched his bald head, and finally slid into Stason's anchored chair. Dick Webb, twenty-nine and tall, smirked above Coast Guard weather maps. Harris shrugged and noticed a worn spot in the neck's nape of the helmsman's pull-over. Down in front, the hull cut into a watery sunset, but Harris contemplated the worn spot, and in his mind said, "Tsk-tsk."

He did remember seeing sunsets, 40 years ago—or maybe 39. They had, in fact, fascinated him. And later they had become common everyday, like tight ferry-schedules and endless car-lists. A crumbling, an aging, a shrinking. Tomorrow there would be no more everyday; only one more trip across to his 40-year everyday. The buzzing razor bothered his head and he saw a worn spot in a helmsman's pull-over, because it clashed with everyday.

The infernal razor stopped. Webb rattled his maps and Stason swung his paunch around, hanging heavy over his belt. He looks like a frog, thought Harris, and he growls like one.

"Well, Meade, let's look at what we got."

Harris shoved the papers into Stason's hand and tilted his cap back on his baldness.

"Fifty-four cars," he said.

Stason lit a cigar, leafed through the papers, and belched a cigar cough.

"Okay. Any passengers?"
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"Half-dozen, maybe."

"This your last trip?"

"Next to last. I'll come back with you. Then I'm done."

"Jesus, I envy you, no more juggling on this sea-hammock. Wish I could retire."

Guess every man wishes it at 50, Harris thought. But not oddwards of 60, they don't. After all, when a man shrinks so far, he's just right for his job, and that one and no other. Stason would reach his prime in a few years. He'd know.

"How's the ticker?" Harris asked from habit.

The captain opened and closed his fist several times over his lumpy chest and smirked.

"A twinge now and then on the steps is all," he said, and belched a blue cough.

"Well, take them easy."

Harris went out and down the iron grate steps to the deck, trying to think of nothing. At the bottom step he conceded his failure. Ought to be some little bookkeeping place would take him...maybe in Chi, even.

"Age please?" Ha! No more juggling on this sea-hammock had been a dim, future thing for quite a while; until now, really. One more trip, then done. Telling it had made it a sudden matter of fact. I'll die in six months. Should jump and save the waiting.

Hurrying to his window in the lounge, he remembered he had meant to speak to the Captain about that helmsman's worn pull-over...

Behind the wooden bars of his window in the lounge, he straightened ticket pads and punch, and watched the first passenger in line, a hairy hulk, wheeze as he dug out his wallet. Years ago, Meade Harris had discovered a rare distraction for himself in faces of passengers---not the passengers themselves. He looked them over with chilly, blue eyes set in keen wrinkles of a credit firm. There were never enough faces in one trip to make the hobby monotonous.
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This fellow's trousers are snug on him, he speculated, if I judge from the crucified look on his face.

"Two dollars."

The man grimaced a grin and laid down a 20-dollar bill. Harris handed him his change with the ten on top.

"Now I've got to have your name for our passenger list," he said.

"Todd M. Fitz. I'm a salesman."

"Thank you, sir."

"Round-trip tickets for the three-four-five of us," announced the next in line, a tall, curly-haired family man. The three-four-five were scrambling around his better half, a patient-faced woman. One of the youngsters squalled and the man smiled.

"First time the kids have been on a boat. Wife and I thought it would be an experience for them. Hope they won't get seasick, is all."

"May I have your names please."

"Moore," the man beamed. "Henry, Alda, Kate, Henry, and James."

Harris printed the names, nodded, and looked at a woman with long, blonde hair.

"One way, please." Her face was not beautiful, but it had potentialities. If it had not been so peaked and the eyes not so large... well, she has seen more life than I have, Harris thought. As much in half as much time.

She fumbled her change and coins rolled. The Moore children squealed and pounced. She twitched a quick smile at them as they gave back her money.

"Name, Ma'am?"

"Carston. Mrs. Carston."

Harris paused. He should have an initial. Let it go this time.
"Captain?" Her voice twitched, too.

"I'm the Purser, Ma'am."

"Oh, yes---can you tell me, sir, what time we arrive at the other side?"

Harris tilted his cap.

"Oh, twelve thirty, one o'clock. Four, five hours. Do you get seasick?"

"No," said Mrs. Carston, and went.

Harris wrinkled his nose and straightened his pads.

Medium-sized waves built from the Northwest tossed whitecaps here and there, and lifted and lowered in a smooth, sideways motion. Because of this, Todd Fitz staggered to keep his huge balance upright on deck, while Henry Moore, pall-faced, retched over the washbowl in the men's head.

Purser Meade Harris yawned and went to sip coffee in the galleyhouse. The darkened pilothouse where he usually sipped his coffee would have suited his mood better, but this was tonight and Bernard Stason was not as uncommunicative as Sam Wills, the young Negro dishwasher.

Four scrubbed walls give a compact feeling of security, Harris thought, and this is compact. Or maybe the bright, unshaded bulbs glaring on the walls and out at the night and noise made it compact. Contemplating a thing like that made it seem like 40 years ago. But this is tonight and that is like me. I have been compact for a good many years. I have one more trip on which to be good and compact.

His watch said 9:15. He pushed himself up and stooped out the cubbyhole galley door onto deck. It seemed an effort. He stood and let his mind bob and bloat. Dying dusk had blackened the rolling water and blurred the shore behind; there would have been no shore at all if tiny lights did not prick through the distance. Let the Lower Lights Be Burning was what drifted into and out of his mind. Behind the faint shore-lights an arc of yellow mist said that the moon was coming.

Harris swore and tramped forward. Moons are not for old men.

The wind had a cutting edge to it in front of the hoist gears. Harris yanked down his cap and leaned over for a look at the black water splitting
into a constant, curling V of foam under the hull. Webb and the helmsman were suffering up there, he knew, in the foul fog of Stason's cigars. Stason would be starting his jokes about now and Webb would be muttering dirty words.

Harris heard someone snoring. He walked to the slatted port of the lounge and peered in. Todd Fitz, his mouth hanging and supported by first and second chins, lay sprawled over two lounge chairs. Henry and Alda Moore were sitting close together on the opposite side. A blanket covered their legs. The three children were sleeping in a heap on a lounge chair. Harris grunted and moved aft.

People must have sand in their heads to ride ferries, when there were planes, cars, and railroads. But Henry Moores kept on paying 20 dollars at one snap to let their kids feel lake wind on their faces for a few hours. Jesus, I am an old man. An old and bitter man.

He approached the port stern rail. Something was on it. He stopped at the door of the aft wheelhouse. Mrs. Carston, it was, and she was sitting on the rail. Her legs were dangling, and the wind whipped her dress against them with a wet cloth sound. Hair blew in ravelled strings against her face.

Harris stayed in the shadow of the wheelhouse. A huge bubble knotted his intestines. No two ways about it. She was going to jump!

He turned and loped toward the steps to the bridge. On the top step he banged his shin and limped the rest of the way into the pilothouse. Inside, he choked on smoke-thick air.

"Easy does it, Meade," spoke Dick Webb from somewhere in the darkness.

"Say, there's trouble aft! A woman on the rail getting set to jump! One of the passengers!"

Webb pulled the light switch and Stason broke into a violent coughing spasm. Harris blinked.

"You take it, Dick," croaked Stason, wiping his mouth. "I can't go down with my heart..."

Webb moved for the door.
"Maybe she's gone over," Harris panted. "We better get down there!"

"There's heads going to roll if she has!" bellowed Stason. "I got a 21-year safety record on this sea-hammock!"

Outside, Webb swore at his Captain. Harris limped behind him down the iron grate steps and thought himself a coward, maybe. They came up beside the aft wheelhouse.

She seemed paralyzed, hinged, almost, onto the rail. A sudden, heavy roll of the ship could end that quick.

"Who is she?" whispered Webb.

"Mrs. Carston." Webb sauntered toward the rail. "Mrs. Carston," he called softly. God, the man is cool, Harris thought.

She hung on the rail, automatically balancing her body against the thrust and pitch of the ship. She is hinged on that rail, Harris muttered. She was swaying and tattered and drenched, and her eyes were straight ahead. Webb moved closer.

"What's the trouble, ma'am?"

"Don't come nearer, please," she said without moving her eyes. "I'm going to jump."

It sounded quite final, final enough to halt Webb. A wave crashed and pieces of it redrenched the woman. Harris felt drops of it on his face.

"You thought this through now, ma'am?" Webb's face looked gray on this side of the moonlight.

No answer. Only the automatic, gyroscopic sway on the rail. There was a noise behind them. Harris turned. Henry and Alda Moore stood huddled under their blanket.

"What's going on?" asked Moore, white-eyed.

"You keep away," spoke Harris softly. Why was it people always gathered like fascinated vultures anticipating the moment?

Webb motioned. "Stay steady, Meade. I'm going for a rope."
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Scared to get too close."

Harris nodded. Webb retreated and Henry and Alda Moore remained, blanket-wrapped, watching.

Another wave hurled its topside on deck and showered chills and nausea on Harris. He gulped air. His mind wanted to quit then, but the whole damned lake was a mess of churned ink and if she dropped he would unhook No. 4 preserver and toss it, then signal reverse engines from the aft wheelhouse. Ninety nine to one they couldn't get her, though, if she were bound upon breathing water after she hit. Harris gnawed his lip and watched her mechanical rocking. Two and a half hours ago through the ticket window, her face had seen a lot of life. Maybe not, though; maybe she and I are equal, she in quality, I in quantity; or something. Guess maybe we're kind of alike in that way.

As if roused by telepathy, she looked at him, then shifted on the rail and drew rigid. Harris felt sweat moving on his neck and behind his ears. He choked on nausea. Webb, damn him, was lost, gone hours. Now maybe I got to save this woman if she's going to get saved.

The woman shivered violently and lost her steadiness. Harris felt his heart, intent on ramming out, coming up with the rest of him. But she hung on and he swallowed his vitals.

Well, only one way. He edged up and gripped the rail. Forty years, guess it'll be worth it. Her sobs were convulsions. She clasped one hand to her face, and Harris was ready. Somebody’s hand yanked his shoulder. Todd Fitz.

"Easy, fellow," Fitz said. "I'm a salesman. I know how to talk. I'll handle this."

Dandy! He shoved Fitz back into the hands of Sam Wills. The woman was shuddering back and forth. Make her fall back, make sure of it! Harris leaned over the rail and brought his fist in hard. It caught her squarely on the face. She toppled backward and landed limp in Dick Webb's arms.

Harris bent double on the rail and closed his eyes. Every muscle declared an independent hysteria, undulating and trembling against each other. It was a cataclysmic convergence of twain. It had happened tonight, now, but not necessarily tonight. Why tonight? He heard soft voices and
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soft whimpers and he heard the fat salesman sputtering, and all the sounds were unbearable because they went to and fro and crashed against each other, and whitecaps slapped and lifted and slapped and dropped, up and down, for 40 years.

He opened his eyes and saw Dick Webb. He straightened and took half his weight off the rail and put it on Webb. His breath came and went and came in jerks, and when it came he choked on it.

"Say, Dick, you tell the Captain I ain't coming back with him."

"How do you feel? You don't look good."

"Yeah, I am done, Dick, now. Not good for my job now, after this kind of stuff..."

"Sure. You okay?"

That did seem a preposterous thing for him to say, and Harris felt laughter twist his stomach into a bigger and bigger knot, so big it couldn't come up, but it had to, it had to get out. The independent, splashing waves swirled into one ageless, unshrunken breaker, and as it came and he knew it was coming, Harris grinned weakly. The bubble burst, and the liquid spasm was delicious.

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SNOW

For a fleeting fragment of time,
It clings to the vine-covered walls...
Traces gems for the lone beholder.
Its detail minute, it reigns there
Until the sun's rays touch and melt it...

The wonder falls... KAREN GERNANT

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