

And the Sailor, Home from the Sea, Ray Bradbury

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“Good morning, captain.”

“Good morning, Hanks.”

“Coffee’s ready, sir, sit down.”

“Thank you, Hanks.”

The old man sat by the galley table, his hands in his lap. He looked at them and they were like speckled trout idling beneath frosty waters, the exhalations of his faint breath on the air. He had seen such trout as these surfacing in the mountain streams when he was ten. He became fascinated with their trembling motion there below, for as he watched they seemed to grow paler.

“Captain,” said Hanks, “you all right?”

The captain jerked his head up and flashed his old burning glance.

“Of course! What do you mean, am I all right?”

The cook put down the coffee from which rose warm vapors of women so far gone in his past they were only dark musk and rubbed incense to his nose. Quite suddenly he sneezed, and Hanks was there with a cloth.

“Thank you, Hanks.” He blew his nose and then tremblingly drank the brew.

“Hanks?”

“Yes, sir, Captain?”

“The barometer is falling.”

Hanks turned to stare at the wall.

“No, sir, it’s fair and mild, that’s what it says, fair and mild!”

“The storm is rising and it will be a long time and a hard pull before another calm.”

“I won’t have that kind of talk!” said Hanks, circling him.

“I must say what I feel. The calm had to end one day. The storm had to come. I’ve been ready now a long time.”

A long time, yes. How many years? The sand fell through the glass beyond counting. The snows fell through the glass, too, applying and reapplying whiteness to whiteness, burying deeper and yet deeper winters beyond recall.

He got up, swaying, moved to the galley door, opened it, and stepped forth . . .

. . . onto the porch of a house built like the prow of a ship, onto a porch whose deck was tarred ship’s timbers. He looked down upon not water but the summer-baked dirt of his front yard. Moving to the rail, he gazed upon gently rolling hills that spread forever in any direction you wheeled to strike your eye.

What am I doing here, he thought with sudden wildness, on a strange ship-house stranded without canvas in the midst of lonesome prairies where the only sound is bird shadow one way in autumn, another way come spring!

What indeed!

He quieted, raising the binoculars which hung from the rail, to survey the emptiness of land as well as life.

Kate Katherine Katie, where are you?

He was always forgetting by night, drowned deep in his bed, remembering by day when he came forth from memory. He was alone and had been alone for twenty years now, save for Hanks, the first face at dawn, the last at sundown.

And Kate?

A thousand storms and a thousand calms ago there had been a calm and a storm that had stayed on the rest of his life.

“There she is, Kate!” He heard his early-morning voice, running along the dock. “There’s the ship will take us wherever we want to go!”

And again they moved, incredible pair, Kate miraculously what? twenty-five at most: and himself leaned far into his forties, but no more than a child holding her hand, drawing her up the gangplank.

Then, hesitant, Kate turned to face the Alexandrian hills of San Francisco and said half aloud to herself or no one, “I shall never touch land again.”

“The trip’s not that long!”

“Oh, yes,” she said quietly. “It will be a very long journey.”

And for a moment all he heard was the immense creaking of the ship like a Fate turning in its sleep.

“Now, why did I say that?” she asked. “Silly.”

She put her foot out and down and stepped aboard the ship.

They sailed that night for the Southern Isles, a groom with the skin of a tortoise and a bride lithe as a salamander dancing on the fiery hearth of the afterdeck on August afternoons.

Then, midway in the voyage, a calm fell upon the ship like a great warm breath, an exhalation that collapsed the sails in a mournful yet a peaceful sigh.

Perhaps this sigh wakened him, or perhaps it was Katie, rising up to listen.

Not a rat-scurry of rope, not a whisper of canvas, not a rustle of naked feet on the deck. The ship was spelled for certain. It was as if the moon rising had said a single silver word: Peace.

The men, fastened to their stations by the incantation of the word, did not turn when the captain moved to the rail with his wife and sensed that Now had become Eternity.

And then, as if she could read the future in the mirror that held the ship fast, she said, fervently, "There's never been a finer night, nor two happier people on a better ship. Oh, I wish we could stay here a thousand years, this is perfect, our own world where we make our own laws and live by them. Promise you'll never let me die."

"Never," he said. "Shall I tell you why?"

"Yes, and make me believe it."

He remembered then, and told her, of a story he had heard once of a woman so lovely the gods were jealous of Time and put her to sea and said she might never touch shore again where the earth might burden her with gravity and weaken her with vain encounters, senseless excursions, and wild alarms that would cause her death. If she stayed on the water she would live forever and be beautiful.

So she sailed many years, passing the island where her lover grew old. Time and again she called to him, demanding that he summon her ashore. But, fearful of her destruction, he refused, and one day she took it on herself to land and run to him. And they had one night together, a night of beauties and wonder, before he found her, when the sun rose, a very old woman, a withered leaf, at his side.

"Did I hear the story once?" he asked. "Or will someone tell it later, and are we part of it? Is that why I've carried you off from the land, so the noise and traffic and millions of people and things can't wear you away?"

But Kate was laughing at him now. She threw her head back and let the sound out, for every man's head turned and every mouth smiled.

"Tom, Tom, remember what I said before we sailed? I'd never touch land again? I must have guessed your reason for running off with me. All right, then, I'll stay on board wherever we go, around the world. Then I'll never change, and you won't either, will you?"

"I'll always be forty-eight!"

And he laughed, too, glad he had got the darkness out of himself, holding her shoulders and kissing her throat which was like bending to winter at the heart of August. And that night, in the blazing calm that would last forever, she was a fall of snow in his bed. . . .

“Hanks, do you remember the calm in August ninety-seven?” The old man examined his faraway hands. “How long did it last?”

“Nine, ten days, sir.”

“No, Hanks. I swear it, we lived nine full years in those days of the calm.”

Nine days, nine years. And in the midst of those days and years he thought, Oh, Kate, I’m glad I brought you, I’m glad I didn’t let the others joke me out of making myself younger by touching you. Love is everywhere, they said, waiting on the docks, underneath the trees, like warm coconuts to be fondled, nuzzled, drunk.

But, God, they wrong. Poor drunken souls, let them wrestle apes in Borneo, melons in Sumatra, what could they build with dancing monkeys and dark rooms? Sailing home, those captains slept with themselves. Themselves! Such sinful company, ten thousand miles! No, Kate, no matter what, there’s us!

And the great deep breathing calm went on at the center of the ocean world beyond which lay nothing, the dreadnought continents foundered and sunk by time.

But on the ninth day the men themselves let down the boats and sat in them waiting for orders, and there was nothing for it but to row for a wind, the captain joining his men.

Toward the end of the tenth day, an island came slowly up over the horizon.

He called to his wife, "Kate, we'll row in for provisions. Will you come along?"

She stared at the island as if she had seen it somewhere long before she was born, and shook her head, slowly, no.

"Go on! I won't touch land until we're home!"

And looking up at her he knew that she was, by instinct, living the legend he had so lightly spun and told. Like the golden woman in the myth, she sensed some secret evil on a lonely swelter of sand and coral that might diminish or, more, destroy her.

"God bless you, Kate! Three hours!"

And he rowed away to the island with his men.

Late in the day they rowed back with five kegs of fresh sweet water and the boats odorous with warm fruit and flowers.

And waiting for him was Kate who would not go ashore, who would not, she said, touch ground.

She was first to drink the clear cool water.

Brushing her hair, looking out at the unmoved tides that night, she said, "It's almost over. There'll be a change by morning. Oh, Tom, hold me. After its being so warm, it'll be so cold."

In the night he woke. Kate, breathing in the dark, murmured. Her hand fell upon his, white hot. She cried out in her sleep. He felt her wrist and there first heard the rising of the storm.

As he sat by her, the ship lifted high on a great slow breast of water, and the spell was broken.

The slack canvas shuddered against the sky. Every rope hummed as if a huge hand had passed down the ship as over a silent harp, calling forth fresh sounds of voyaging.

The calm over, one storm began.

Another followed.

Of the two storms, one ended abruptly—the fever that raged in Kate and burned her to a white dust. A great silence moved in her body and then did not move at all.

The sail mender was brought to dress her for the sea. The motion of his needle flickering in the underwater light of the cabin was like a tropic fish, sharp, thin, infinitely patient, nibbling away at the shroud, skirting the dark, sealing the silence in.

In the final hours of the vast storm above, they brought the white calm from below and let her free in a fall that tore the sea only a moment. Then, without trace, Kate and life were gone.

“Kate, Kate, oh, Kate!”

He could not leave her here, lost to the tidal flows between the Japan Sea and the Golden Gate. Weeping that night, he stormed himself out of the storm. Gripped to the wheel, he circled the ship again and again around that wound that had healed with untimely swiftness. Then he knew a calm that lasted the rest of his days. He never raised his voice or clenched his fist again to any man.

And with that pale voice and unclenched fist, he turned the ship away at last from the unscarred ground, circled the earth, delivered his goods, then turned his face from the sea for all time.

Leaving his ship to nudge the green-mantled dock, he walked and rode inland twelve hundred miles. Blindly, he bought land, blindly he built, with Hanks, not knowing for a long while what he had bought or built. Only knowing that he had always been too old, and had been young for a short hour with Kate, and now was very old indeed and would never chance such an hour again.

So, in mid-continent, a thousand miles from the sea on the east, a thousand miles from the hateful sea on the west, he damned the life and the water he had known, remembering not what had been given but what had been so swiftly taken away.

On this land, then, he walked out and cast forth seed, prepared himself for his first harvest and called himself farmer.

But one night in that first summer of living as far from the sea as any man could get, he was waked by an incredible, a familiar, sound. Trembling in his bed, he whispered, No, no, it can't be—I'm mad! But . . . listen!

He opened the farmhouse door to look upon the land. He stepped out on the porch, spelled by this thing he had done without knowing it. He held to the porch rail and blinked, wet-eyed, out beyond his house.

There, in the moonlight, hill after slow-rising hill of wheat blew in tidal winds with the motion of waves. An immense Pacific of grain shimmered off beyond seeing, with his house, his now-recognized ship, becalmed in its midst.

He stayed out half the night, striding here, standing there, stunned with the discovery, lost in the deeps of this inland sea. And with the following years, tackle by tackle, timber by timber, the house shaped itself to the size, feel, and thrust of ships he had sailed in crueler winds and deeper waters.

"How long, Hanks, since we last saw water?"

"Twenty years, Captain."

"No, yesterday morning."

Coming back through the door, his heart pounded. The wall barometer clouded over, flickered with a faint lightning that played along the rims of his eyelids.

"No coffee, Hanks. Just—a cup of clear water."

Hanks went away and came back.

"Hanks? Promise. Bury me where she is."

"But, Captain, she's—" Hanks stopped. He nodded. "Where she is. Yes, sir."

"Good. Now give me the cup."

The water was fresh. It came from the islands beneath the earth. It tasted of sleep.

“One cup. She was right, Hanks, you know. Not to touch land, ever again. She was right. But I brought her one cup of water from the land, and the land was in water that touched her lips. One cup. Oh, if only . . .!”

He shifted it in his rusted hands. A typhoon swarmed from nowhere, filling the cup. It was a black storm raging in a small place.

He raised the cup and drank the typhoon.

“Hanks!” someone cried.

But not he. The typhoon, storming, had gone, and he with it.

The cup fell empty to the floor.

It was a mild morning. The air was sweet and the wind steady. Hanks had worked half the night digging and half the morning filling. Now the work was done. The town minister helped, and then stood back as Hanks jigsawed the final square of sod into place.

Piece after piece, he fitted neatly and tamped and joined. And on each piece, as Hanks had made certain, was the golden, the full rich ripe-grained wheat, as high as a ten-year-old boy.

Hanks bent and put the last piece to rest.

“No marker?” asked the minister.

“Oh, no, sir, and never will be one.”

The minister started to protest, when Hanks took his arm, and walked him up the hill a way, then turned and pointed back.

They stood a long moment. The minister nodded at last, smiled quietly and said, “I see. I understand.”

For there was just the ocean of wheat going on and on forever, vast tides of it blowing in the wind, moving east and ever east beyond, and not a line or seam or ripple to show where the old man sank from sight.

“It was a sea burial,” said the minister.

“It was,” said Hanks. “As I promised. It was, indeed.”

Then they turned and walked off along the hilly shore, saying nothing again until they reached and entered the creaking house.

The End