

The Shipwright's Daughter

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Not too fast (♩ = 135)



Jeff wished to see the world be - fore he sett - led down from ro - ving.



I said I'd see it with him, but he said that would not do,



For tra - ve - ling to - ge - ther is like sett - ling down while mo - ving.



He spoke a - bout re - tur - ning one year la - ter, may - be two.



I got a let - ter week - ly, and that las - ted for a sea - son.



I got a let - ter month - ly for a - no - ther half a year.



There were no let - ters af - ter that; I did not know the rea - son,



Nor what he might ex - pect if e - ver he should re - ap - pear.

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Jeff wished to see the world before he settled down from roving.
I said I'd see it with him, but he said that would not do,
For traveling together is like settling down while moving.
He spoke about returning one year later, maybe two.
I got a letter weekly, and that lasted for a season.
I got a letter monthly for another half a year.
There were no letters after that. I did not know the reason,
Nor what he might expect if ever he should reappear.

I happened to meet David on the day of Jeff's last letter,
Though neither fact would strike me as important for some time.
I shared a house with two gay men and with the landlord's daughter.
The porch was rotting through; its steps were dangerous to climb.
The landlord's son was David. When he took the porch's measure,
I held one tape end for him; he wrote numbers and made notes.
To watch him pry old boards, then saw and hammer was a pleasure;
I thought of my own father and his years of building boats.

In April, David changed a sink; in fall, rebuilt a closet.
Both times he stayed for dinner after helping me to cook.
When no work needed doing, he would sometimes come to visit,
His pretext being to borrow or return his sister's book.
And when, one day, he asked me if I'd like to see Otello —
He knew I spoke Italian some, the opera was on tour,
And he could get good tickets through a cousin who played cello —
I said "I'd really like that" when I might have just said "sure".

We soon were filling weekends with the best parts of Vancouver,
With picnics in the mountains before concerts, films, or plays.
I had no hesitation when I took him as my lover.
The time since I had heard from Jeff I would not count in days
Or even weeks, perhaps some months. When did I get that letter?
Could it have been a year ago? I'm sure it was not two.
And, as a correspondent, though I'd wanted to be better,
I'd ceased to write myself, unsure my words were getting through.

The two gay men had plans to run a B and B together;
They bought a house convenient for their target clientele.
The landlord's daughter left to live in Scotland, and her father
Was pleased to deal with David, as the time was ripe to sell.
I shared a flat with David while we did the renovation,
In gaps between his paying jobs. The house in good repair,
Its outside had not changed much, but the new configuration
Had space for two good kids' rooms, and a third one as a spare.

My sons were three and one that day. I heard the doorbell chiming.
The memory is etched so deep, the kind one can't forget.
My hands engaged with diapers, I yelled out, "Hold on! I'm coming!"
How strange his words in greeting me, the words "Well met, well met."
My old true love of seasons past did not try to enfold me.
Instead, he took some papers from the pocket of his coat.
"I'm ready now to settle down while moving," so he told me
And handed me a half a dozen photos of his boat.

I could not shut my inner eye against that boiling cauldron
Awaiting me in hell as final payment for such guilt:
To leave a man so like my father, father to my children,
To join the man who sailed the final boat my father built.
Some remnants of the sense my father claimed was in his daughter
Inspired me to be practical and not give my reply.
I asked what we would do for money, out upon the water.
He laughed and said we'd go where there was nothing we could buy.

He told me there had been a princess he'd a chance to marry;
He'd met her at a costume ball behind a sequined mask.
He knew there was no hope of my believing such a story,
His way of saying there were questions that I should not ask.
And, so I never asked him how he reached the situation
Where he could buy my father's boat, just what it was he sold:
His services, while risking either life or reputation,
Or something small a boat that size can carry in its hold.

My father, like Trudeau, believed in reason over passion,
But reason was not strong enough. I'd bid the land farewell,
To join a man who said he loved me, out upon the ocean,
Aboard a craft my widowed mother'd sadly had to sell.
I heard the turn of David's key. I kissed my two sons gently,
Then David, and I told him I was packing things to go.
He asked if ever I was coming back, for evidently,
I looked as if my mind might change. I said, "I do not know."

By cleverness or accident, the photos Jeff had shown me
Did not address one question. As we made our final turn
Along the dock to reach the boat, a rush of joy came on me.
Jeff let me run ahead of him, and I caressed the stern.
A second time within five years, the boat had been rechristened.
I'd been depressed when it was sold, to see what it became.
Could Jeff, halfway around the world, have caught my thoughts and listened
And vowed that, like my father, he would paint it with my name?

We seemed to be Alaska bound, though not in any hurry.
In Georgia and Queen Charlotte Straits we anchored for three nights.
A cargo of two lovebirds, that was all we seemed to carry,
Out seeking stars too weak to fight the spill from city lights.
I said, "Let's visit Haida Gwaii". He said, "That's what I'm planning.
We'll do it on our way back south." Those few words were the most
He'd ever said about our plans. That day, he started scanning
The radio for messages. I took us up the coast.

Ten minutes at a stretch, he'd keep a most peculiar vigil,
Don earphones, and tune random channels on the VHF.
At least that was the way it looked. I'm sure there was a schedule
Where someone had arranged to get a message through to Jeff.
I saw him tense the day it came; I'd watched him listening, sitting.
He spoke five words, or maybe six. That's all he had to send.
To eavesdrop would have been no help, for what he was transmitting
Was too brief to triangulate, too strange to comprehend.

At sunset, I'd been watching both a whale and a raven.
I checked the charts and nudged the wheel: my father'd taught me well.
I said, "This is the closest that I've ever been to heaven."
Jeff scanned the channels one more time, and then he sputtered "Hell!".
He jabbed the button to transmit, yelled "Why?", and then released it.
He listened, scribbled notes, then swore "That goddamned Russian crew!".
He touched the throttle, set to halfway forward, and increased it.
He said, "They got the date line backwards!". That was all I knew.

A new note in the sound caught my immediate attention.
It wasn't that much louder, but it pounded in my skull.
My father never would have tried to fit so large an engine,
Against all rules of good design, not to that class of hull.
Jeff said, "We need to make up time!". The sun was disappearing.
We weren't in open water. I asked, "Can't we wait for day?"
A crescent moon peeked out through clouds. I'd hoped it would be clearing.
Instead, a storm was coming. I'd forgotten how to pray.

If I could still imagine hell, did that make me a Christian
Who, fearing that her end was nearing, therefore should repent?
Though I had but a moment left, still, I composed a question
That filled my mind instead of prayer, awaiting the event.
Would I be damned for so few days I'd spent with that entrancer,
One week – I'm sure it was not two – since we first left the dock,
Against three decades virtue? I was soon to learn the answer.
Jeff pushed the throttle up to full. We smashed against a rock.

This song is a retelling of the events in Child 243, variously known as "James Harris", "The Demon Lover", or "The House Carpenter".