

Crossing The Bar
By Vicki Berger

It was last call at the Fort George, twenty to midnight on a slow Friday night. I was pulling a pint for a lonely Coastie, when Kim elbowed me at hip level. It wasn't sexual harassment. Kim is about five foot nothing, and I'm close as damn to seven feet tall.

"Dude. I think you've got one in the corner", she said, nodding at the booth under the neon hop sign.

"Sorry?"

She snorted. "Don't get all coy on me, Longshot. One of your winkies." She tilted back to look me in the eye. "And if I can see her, then you sure as hell can too."

I took a moment to serve the young sailor his Thousand Years of Silence, with just the right amount of head cresting the glass, and then gazed across the bar to the seat butted up against the glazed green wall and foggy window.

"See?", whispered Kim. "She must be an oldie, the way she winks in and out like that."

"That does not necessarily signify...", I began.

"AND, she paid for her ale with THIS."

It was a beaver pelt.

"Okay. Fair enough." I sighed and headed to the booth and my sketchy client.

In all my years, Kim is the only person who not only discovered what I do, but also has the grace to keep it entirely confidential.

And now, she was seeing clients faster than I could. I'd wondered if there was something special in her background, like Wicca or Theosophy, but it turns out she just really, really, likes people.

She liked me so much, she'd pulled me out of the fake Fort Astoria diorama where I used to sit and wait before they turned the automobile dealership into a pub. The place was ground zero for the town, or at least, it was the heart of it's history. She gave me a job on the night shift. And, because she cared, she figured it out.

I squinted, and was just able to make out the shimmer of a girl across the table. Kim was right. She'd been avoiding passage for a long time. Beer untouched, she was scribbling on paper napkins. Probably bad poetry. It goes with suicides like scum on a pond.

"My dear", I said, gently, "Are you ready to pay your penny and cross the bar?"

She seemed to be weeping.

"I write", she moaned, "and yet never does he come. Letter after letter does Gabriel take to the ships for me, but never comes a message back."

Oh crap. I hate this kind of thing. Unless you can reassure them enough to get in the damned boat, you're sunk before you start.

"Who are you, my dear?" I kept my voice low and sonorous, like Admiral Nelson's. You probably don't remember him.

She lifted her gaze to me. "Gabriel tells me I am the daughter of Captain Gray and his slave, Ne'ula, from the far Sandwich Islands. My mother was cast from the Columbia Rediviva. The Clatsop people took

her to safety."

"Your name, my child?"

"They do call me Polly, good sir. I help Gabriel at the Fort and I know my numbers as well as my letters."

With this, she gathered the napkins to her breast and lowered her head in grief.

These cases are nearly impossible. Her focus was on some sailor known only unto God, impossible to find and useless to try. She was fated to wink and fade around the site of her former life, and then turn to sea mist, never going home.

Suddenly, Kim scooted into the seat beside Polly, with her telephone computer in hand. Frankly, I was stunned. This seemed rather intrusive to say the least. Unprecedented to the extreme.

She tapped madly on the little keys, and then pushed her glasses back up her nose.

"Char", she said to me, "If she was born in 1792, she would have been twenty one when the HMS Raccoon sailed into town to take the fort for the British in 1813."

Polly began to keen, "So bright his hair! His uniform so sweet upon his body. Oh where is my Will?"

Kim tapped some more, her fingers flying like a Dutchman's.

She read aloud to us, "Captain William Black, Commander. Looks like they were here for a couple of months. He was replaced in 1815, whatever that means."

I tried to take control. "Well, Polly, I'm sure if you come with me, we can find your young captain when we get you ferried across the divide, eh?"

Kim put an oar in. "Polly, stop being a moron."

The girl looked up at her.

"Moron?" she queried.

Tap tap tap. "Daft. Fool". She held the girl's attention. "One salmon short of a good dinner".

"Mistress", answered Polly, "I do know I am a poor girl, but am I too

lowly for my Will?"

"You, kiddo, have wasted two hundred years on a guy who had a wife and three prissy little daughters in Bristol. Are you crazy? Girl!" Kim took the shadowy hands in her own pink ones, "You have to get a life! Do something for yourself! Maybe your mom couldn't help being a slave, but you have choices. You can stand up and kick ass. You deserve so much more than that loser. You're smart and strong and YOU CAN DO THIS, GIRLFRIEND!"

She drew Polly out of the booth, a moth following a lantern of feminist illumination. As they reached the bar, Kim turned back to me and said with her sweet smile, "It's okay, Charon. It's not just a free bike and health insurance. We have a great retirement plan, too. You'll be fine".

A female bar pilot. Sure. Why not? And maybe I could take Intro to Computers up at the college. After all, I'm smart and strong, too. I could do this.

Besides. Kim doesn't have the keys to the boat.