

Ghost of a Lady

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It was nothing like I'd ever seen before, nor would I ever be likely to see again. And, as with most extraordinary occurrences, it happened on an ordinary night.

I didn't think to check the time, but I knew it was some ungodly hour of the early morning. Early enough where morning and night were one and the same. Not usually a time I find myself awake, but I soon found that to be less strange as time wore on. Something stirred me, whether it was a nightmare I forgot upon waking or some sort of premonition I can't say. Everyone else was asleep, even the *Lady Washington* herself as she bobbed peacefully, anchored in the river channel. I had no business being on deck alone at this time of night, but the confined space below deck seemed to be shrinking by the minute. Stale, salty air was suffocating me.

I found just the freedom I was looking for at the helm. It was windless. Still. One of those chilly autumn nights on the Columbia River where, had it not been an ever flowing entity, the water would have been smooth as glass. The mighty river stretched infinitely onward into the dark, blurring with the horizon to the east and west. The entire town of Astoria seemed to be fast asleep. It was an odd sensation, feeling like the only one awake in the world. Even the massive cargo ships slumbered silently in the channel like great metal whales.

Peering over the taffrail I saw the water below, swirling black and speckled with reflections. It was near indistinguishable from the twinkling stars of the night sky. That's when I saw her, rippling white sails shining in the water. I would have blamed the fog for a trick of the eyes had there been any, yet when I looked up she was there - clear and sharp and real as my own hand before my eyes.

Another tallship.

I knew it wasn't unusual for these replica vessels to travel in pairs, but our partner, the *Hawaiian Chieftain*, was docked at another pier upriver. This ship, some type of brig as far as I could tell, was coming in from the west. How I had not seen her

sooner baffled me. Her sails were full, billowing white in the moonlight. Stranger yet for a windless night.

As the ship neared, I could see more of her features. Twin masts, square rigged. Gaff sail on the mainmast. Delicately carved figurehead of a woman adorning the bow. Beautiful curves and lines gave the ship an ethereal grace as she parted the river. Something about this vessel was so familiar, yet out of place. It was like staring into the face of an old friend, yet not being able to recall how you knew them. She looked weary despite her beauty, exhausted from an arduous journey. How such a striking vessel could appear out of thin air was beyond me.

She was so fixed on her course I momentarily feared she'd collide with my own vessel. But, with the precision of a surgeon, the mystery ship passed by on the port side, nearly close enough to touch. I was awestruck, paralyzed with wonder. I saw everything, every detail. Every line, sail, and man. She was fully crewed, and that crew was hard at work. I could hear them hollering, sounding off and barking orders. They heaved and hoisted, scaling masts and tying knots. Their voices were sharp and clear, though distanced from me like an echo in time. I watched them work, dozens of men all cooperating like one living organism.

In that moment, I found myself locking eyes through a lens with another observer. Standing at the bow of this peculiar vessel was a figure staring back through a spyglass, one elbow steadied on the rail. The tricorne hat atop his head set him apart from the rest of the crew. He - the captain, I presumed - kept a watchful eye on the Oregon shore. Just as I thought he'd pass without looking up from the glass, he lowered it. Our eyes met, yet the captain's gaze swept right through me as though I were the impossible one. I don't believe he saw me, yet I felt a chill course through my veins.

It was like peering into a mirror, watching a reflection of my own vessel pass before my eyes. She was perfect, identical to the vessel on which I stood in nearly every way. As she continued her journey upriver, I could make out letters on the stern of the ship. There, sparkling in the moonlight, was her name: *Lady Washington*.

In a desperate attempt to cling to this moment, I called after her. I wanted her to stay, to give me clarity as to what I had just witnessed.

But she sailed on, drifting on a river made of stars.

Sailing on the winds of time.

As quickly as she came, the *Lady* was gone - disappearing in a mist that wasn't there.