LAST FERRY TO GULL ISLAND

A Play in Two Acts

A sample play for exploring Glowtape. All characters and events are invented.

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CHARACTERS

NORA, Nora Bell, captain of the island ferry, fifties

JUNE, June Bell, her daughter, twenty-four

WALTER, Walter Pike, the harbormaster

ROSA, Rosa Diaz, a reporter from the city

FINN, the deckhand, seventeen

MR. ABERNATHY, a passenger with a suitcase

COAST GUARD, a voice on the radio (played by the actor who plays Mr. Abernathy)

SETTING

The harbor town of Port Ellery, and the ferry Marigold. The present, late October.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

(The ferry ticket office, dusk. A long counter, a bench, a wall clock and a window onto the harbor. NORA BELL stands at the counter sorting tickets. FINN sweeps the floor.)

NORA

Leave the corner, Finn. The corner has been dusty since 1987. It has earned its dust.

FINN

Mr. Pike says the office has to be ship-shape before the inspection.

NORA

Mr. Pike says a great many things. Most of them twice.

(The phone rings. NORA looks at it and does not move.)

FINN

Aren't you going to answer it?

NORA

If it's the weather office, I already know what they'll say. If it's Walter, I already know what he'll say. And if it's my daughter, she'll call again.

(The phone stops. A pause. It rings again. NORA picks it up.)

NORA

Gull Island Ferry. Yes. Yes, June. No, I haven't forgotten. Six o'clock. I'll be on the dock.

(She hangs up. FINN leans on the broom.)

FINN

June's coming back?

NORA

June is coming back on the last boat. For one night, she says. She has news.

FINN

Good news?

NORA

With June, the news is always good. It's only afterwards you find out what it costs.

(The door opens. ROSA DIAZ enters, wet from the rain, a notebook in her hand.)

ROSA

Is this where I buy a ticket to Gull Island?

NORA

It is, if you can wait. The last ferry leaves at seven, if the harbormaster lets it.

ROSA

And if he doesn't?

NORA

Then you'll find out how comfortable that bench is.

ROSA

I'm Rosa Diaz. I write for the City Ledger. I'm doing a story about the ferry.

NORA

There's not much story. A boat goes over. A boat comes back. Twice a day for forty years.

ROSA

That's why I'm here. They say this is the last season. They say the bridge will open in the spring.

(NORA stops sorting. FINN looks up.)

NORA

They say a lot of things in the city.

ROSA

Is it true?

NORA

Ask me after seven o'clock.

(WALTER PIKE enters in a heavy coat with a clipboard. He shakes the rain off his hat.)

WALTER

Nora. The wind is up to thirty knots and rising. I'm closing the harbor at six.

NORA

You closed the harbor at six last Tuesday, and the sun came out at five past.

WALTER

Last Tuesday I was being careful. Tonight I'm being sensible.

NORA

My daughter is on the mainland, Walter. She's coming home on the last boat.

WALTER

Then she can come home tomorrow.

FINN

We've crossed in worse. Remember the night of the fair?

WALTER

I remember the night of the fair very well, young man. I remember the paperwork.

(MR. ABERNATHY enters quietly, carrying a large, battered suitcase. Nobody notices him at first.)

MR. ABERNATHY

Excuse me. One ticket, please. One way.

NORA

One way to Gull Island? Nobody buys a one-way ticket to Gull Island.

MR. ABERNATHY

I do.

(NORA takes his money and hands him a ticket. He sits on the bench and places the suitcase carefully at his feet.)

ROSA

May I ask why you're going?

MR. ABERNATHY

You may ask.

(He smiles and says nothing more. The wall clock strikes six. WALTER looks at it, then at NORA.)

WALTER

Six o'clock.

NORA

I can count, Walter.

WALTER

Then count this. Thirty-two knots. I'm not signing the sailing sheet.

NORA

Then I'll sign it myself.

WALTER

You can't do that.

NORA

Watch me.

(She takes the clipboard from him, signs it and hands it back. Lights fade as WALTER stares at the paper.)

SCENE 2

(The deck of the ferry Marigold, an hour later. Wind and rain. A wheel, a rail, a coil of rope and a lantern hanging from a hook. NORA at the wheel. FINN coils the rope. ROSA clings to the rail. MR. ABERNATHY sits on his suitcase, calm.)

(Sound of the engine and the wind. Thunder in the distance.)

ROSA

Is it always like this?

FINN

Only on the good nights!

NORA

Finn, take the lantern forward. I want to see the buoys.

(FINN takes the lantern from its hook and moves to the bow.)

FINN

Red buoy to port!

NORA

I see it.

ROSA

Captain Bell, can I ask you something while we're still alive?

NORA

You can ask me anything. I just might not hear it.

ROSA

What will you do when the bridge opens?

(A long pause. Only the wind.)

NORA

My father ran this boat, and his mother before him. Every family on that island has a story about this boat. A baby born on the crossing. A wedding party that sang all the way over. A man who proposed at the rail and was refused, and married her anyway the next summer.

ROSA

And a bridge has no stories.

NORA

A bridge has traffic.

FINN

Captain! Something in the water! Off the starboard bow!

(NORA turns the wheel hard. Everyone lurches. MR. ABERNATHY does not move.)

NORA

What is it?

FINN

A boat. A little one. There's somebody in it!

NORA

Throw the rope, Finn. Throw it now!

(FINN throws the rope over the rail. ROSA grabs the end with him. They haul together.)

ROSA

It's a woman!

(JUNE BELL is pulled over the rail, soaked and breathless, in a bright yellow raincoat.)

JUNE

Hello, Mom.

NORA

June? What on earth were you doing out there?

JUNE

Walter wouldn't let anyone sail from the mainland side. So I borrowed a rowboat.

NORA

You borrowed a rowboat. In a gale.

JUNE

I told you I'd be home tonight.

(NORA takes off her own coat and puts it around JUNE's shoulders. Lights fade.)

INTERMISSION

ACT TWO

SCENE 3

(The harbormaster's office on Gull Island, near midnight. A desk covered in charts, a kettle on a small stove, a radio. WALTER sits at the desk with the radio. He has crossed on the supply boat behind them. FINN enters with a tray of mugs.)

FINN

Tea, Mr. Pike?

WALTER

Is it the strong kind?

FINN

Captain Bell made it.

WALTER

Then it's the strong kind.

(He takes a mug. The radio crackles.)

COAST GUARD

Gull Island harbor, this is Coast Guard Ellery. Do you copy?

WALTER

Gull Island. Go ahead.

COAST GUARD

The Marigold is reported safe at the island dock. All souls aboard, plus one. Over.

WALTER

Plus one. Copy that. Gull Island out.

WALTER

Do you know what she did tonight, Finn? She signed my sheet. My sheet. Forty years I've signed that sheet.

FINN

She got us here.

WALTER

She got you here. That's not the same as being right.

FINN

Seems the same from where I'm standing.

WALTER

You'll understand when you're older.

FINN

That's what people say when they've run out of reasons.

(WALTER stands up quickly. The chair falls over.)

WALTER

Now listen to me, you —

(The fight: WALTER grabs FINN by the collar. FINN pulls free and shoves him; WALTER stumbles into the desk and the charts slide to the floor. They circle each other, then grapple across the office until FINN slips and WALTER pins him against the wall. It lasts longer than either of them expected.)

(NORA enters with JUNE behind her.)

NORA

Walter Pike! Let go of that boy.

(WALTER lets go. FINN rubs his neck. Nobody speaks.)

WALTER

He said I'd run out of reasons.

NORA

Have you?

WALTER

I've got one left. I didn't want you drowned, Nora. That's the only reason I ever had.

(A pause. NORA picks up the fallen chair and sets it straight.)

NORA

I know.

JUNE

Can I tell you all my news now? Before anybody else throws anybody at a wall?

NORA

Go on.

JUNE

I've taken a job. With the bridge company.

(Silence. The kettle begins to whistle. Nobody moves to take it

off.)

NORA

The bridge.

JUNE

I'll be the one who runs the toll office. On the island side. I'll see everyone who crosses. Every single person.

NORA

You'll take their money.

JUNE

I'll take their stories, Mom. Somebody has to.

(FINN takes the kettle off the stove. The whistle stops.)

FINN

Can I say something?

WALTER

You've said plenty tonight.

FINN

When I was little, my dad used to sing to me on the crossing. The same song every time. I don't think he even knew the words. He made them up.

NORA

Sing it, Finn.

(FINN sings, softly at first.)

FINN

Over the gray water, under the gray sky, the Marigold goes rolling and the gulls go crying by. Hold the rail and hold the line and hold the one you love, the island light is shining and the stars are out above.

(The song takes a long time. Nobody interrupts it. When he finishes, WALTER is looking at the floor.)

WALTER

Your father couldn't sing a note.

FINN

No. But he sang it anyway.

(Lights fade slowly to a single lamp on the desk, then out.)

SCENE 4

(The dock at Gull Island, dawn. The storm has passed. Gulls. The

ferry's gangplank. MR. ABERNATHY sits on his suitcase at the end of the dock, looking out to sea. ROSA enters with her notebook.)

ROSA

You're up early.

MR. ABERNATHY

I've been up for fifty years. I just haven't been here.

ROSA

Can I ask you now why you came?

MR. ABERNATHY

I was born on that ferry. Halfway across, on a night like last night. My mother always said I couldn't wait to see the island. And then we moved away when I was two, and I never came back.

ROSA

And now?

MR. ABERNATHY

Now they're building a bridge. I wanted to arrive the way I first arrived. By water.

(He opens the suitcase. Inside is a small, old ship's bell. He lifts it out.)

MR. ABERNATHY

This hung on the Marigold the night I was born. My mother took it when the boat was refitted. I've carried it ever since.

(NORA enters, wearing her captain's cap. She stops when she sees the bell.)

NORA

That's our bell.

MR. ABERNATHY

It is. I've brought it home.

(He holds it out to her. NORA takes it in both hands.)

NORA

My grandmother rang this bell every time she brought a new baby across. We thought it was lost.

MR. ABERNATHY

It wasn't lost. It was only waiting.

(JUNE, WALTER and FINN enter. FINN carries a hammer and a hook.)

JUNE

Where do you want it, Mom?

NORA

Where it belongs.

(FINN hammers the hook into the post at the end of the dock. NORA hangs the bell. WALTER puts on his hat.)

WALTER

Wind's dropped to ten knots. I'll sign the sheet for the morning crossing.

NORA

Thank you, Walter.

WALTER

Don't thank me. Just bring her back in one piece.

ROSA

What will happen to the bell when the bridge opens?

JUNE

It'll stay right here. And every time someone new comes home to the island, they can ring it.

(NORA rings the bell once. The sound carries over the water. The lights rise to full morning as the others gather around her.)

NORA

All aboard for the mainland. Last ferry of the season.

(They begin to board as the lights fade to black.)

END OF PLAY