

FERRY RIDE

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THE BIG STEEL doors slid open slowly, and I could see that it was the *Governor Lehman* sitting in the slip. The crowd spilled down the ramp and onto the boat. From behind me came the rapid, echoing clack of secretarial heels—must've had to work late, I thought, and after 11:30 the ferries only run once an hour.

The Staten Island Ferry can hold a couple thousand people; maybe forty had made the passage to Manhattan at this hour. They had been let off before we could board, and hurried out of the terminal toward Battery Park or the subway, hands jammed into pockets, the *New York Post* under one armpit, looking down as they walked.

It wasn't too chilly a night for late November, though the constant harbor wind hadn't lost its bite. I stood on the outside deck. Lower Manhattan was dark; in some of the office buildings, a tiny window glowed here and there. The Trade Center was flecked with light, as it would be till dawn. I could hear the tarred pilings moan and creak as the big boat nudged them. We bobbed in water that was absolutely black, except where the ferry's exhaust had churned it into an almost phosphorescent green. The air was salt and diesel.

I walked around to the other side and watched pair after pair of headlights float across the Brooklyn Bridge. The city's buildings might have winked out, but the streets were rivers of blue neon, teeming with life. A gull perched on one of the pilings, looking at me—through me—acting as if he were the only one around.

The ramp doors finally rumbled shut. I'm sure most of the weary passengers were thinking, "I did it—I escaped the City again." The *Lehman* shuddered, sounded her whistle and pushed out, slowly at first, away from Manhattan. It swung wide toward Ellis Island then straightened its course and headed south across the bay. I remained—alone—at the rail, watching the skyline recede. The East River bridges shimmered from this distance; the headlights became a solid golden stripe. The crossing would take half an hour. Once on the open water, I began to feel cold and damp. I went inside.

The boat was fairly full for so late. A lot of custodial types, office types, young executive types. They sat, reading or sleeping, on the ferry's big, curve-backed wooden benches. Few people spoke; four or five stocky women laughed and conversed in what sounded like a Slavic language. The big shoeshine guy with the thick black hair limped up and down the aisles: "SHOE-shine! SHOE-shine!" No takers. I found a spot in the middle of the boat and could see the Verrazano Bridge from my window.

As usual, the heat poured relentlessly from the vents under the seats. It was dry and harsh—unwelcoming. That, coupled with the smell from the grill (franks in a day's worth of grease) and the motion of the boat, made me feel vaguely queasy. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes. "Just twenty more minutes," I told myself.

Then I heard a loud metallic clomp—as if someone were setting down a large bucket—followed by a voice going, "'Scuse me . . . 'scuse me . . ." I rubbed my forehead, "What're they going to do—start mopping the floors?" I pressed my cheek against the window; the glass was cool. That's when the singing started.

Opening my eyes, I saw someone in the aisle about six rows down from me, standing at a washtub bass. It was your standard, galvanized steel washtub, ten-gallon (or whatever those things hold), shiny—it looked like it'd been on the hardware store shelf that morning. It rested on the floor upside down, a hole punched through the bottom from which a broom handle protruded. A length of white clothesline rope was strung from the top of the broomstick to the outer perimeter of the tub.

Plucking away at the instrument was a rather tall man with a few day's growth of a beard. A woolen hat was pulled over his head, almost to his eyebrows. He had on a heavy black topcoat. A small boy of eight or nine sat facing the washtub, rapping out a rhythm on it with one of those wire-strand brushes that professional drummers use, producing that strip-tease kind of swish. The man's hands moved fluidly, the left sliding up and down the thick cotton cord, the right snapping out the low, dull tones: thump-thump-tha-thump; as he played, he sang.

He aspired to the Vic Damone or Tony Bennett belt-'em-out school, singing with his head back, his eyes shut. Beneath his vocals, the deep thuds of his homemade bass bounced around. His voice couldn't always hold a pitch, but it was strong and not unpleasant. Any true musical counterpoint the washtub provided was purely coincidental, but the man appeared to be doing more than just flailing at the string; his movements, his timing—they all made some sort of sense. Meanwhile, the boy kept the beat with his brush, his hand a blur but his face oddly expressionless.

We were favored with the likes of "What a Difference a Day Makes," "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You," and "I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter." After each, there was the scattered patter of self-conscious applause. "Thank you, thank you," he said, his eyes still closed. A quarter

clinked onto the tub; he nodded in no particular direction and smiled. He went right into another song, this time a spirited cover of "New York, New York." The ferry was nearing its destination by now, and people started to get up and walk to the foredeck. A few purposely doubled back to avoid passing our singing friend. Others approached the impromptu bandstand and put down a coin or two—even a few crumpled dollar bills. The man seemed to acknowledge these contributions (he must've heard the sound of silver ringing on steel, or the shuffling of Florsheims). The boy drummed on, dispassionate.

The song ended, and those of us still seated began clapping. More and more of the late-night commuters joined in, till we'd reached a near-ovation. People looked at each other, nodding in agreement, smiles cracking through the hardened residue of a long working day. Many rows back, others turned to see what the commotion was about. I felt the boat tremble as it reversed engines, cut its speed, and nestled into the slip. I sat for a moment, hesitating. The *Governor Lehman* was emptying quickly; men and women hustled off to the train, the taxi stands, or the parking lots, looking straight ahead. Finally, I pulled a buck from my wallet and walked toward the ramp. The man was leaning on his broom handle as I passed him; I pressed the bill into his hand. "Enjoyed it," I said.

His eyes opened and he looked right into mine, then scanned the rows of empty benches. "Uh-huh." He tossed the dollar to the boy, who added it to the evening's take.