QA-JO3-SYNTHETIC-TIDE-LEDGER-2026-10-04

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Front matter

QA Synthetic J03: The Tide Ledger

Original synthetic fiction for a Wordsmith quality-assurance test. Not a customer manuscript and not an acquisition result.

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1

The Empty Harbour

Mara arrived at the harbour before the first bell. The ferry office was dark, and the tide board still carried yesterday's numbers. She had promised her brother that she would collect their mother's ledger and leave before the storm. Her brother had called it a simple errand. Mara had spent twenty years discovering how little that phrase meant in their family.

Inside the office, an old man sat beside an unlit stove. He introduced himself as the keeper and placed a brass key on the desk. The ledger, he said, was in the locked cabinet behind the tide board. He had not opened it since her mother died. Mara took the key, but the keeper covered the cabinet with his palm.

There was one condition. Before she removed the book, she had to replace the missing entry for the winter crossing. The keeper pushed a blank sheet towards her. On the night in question, thirteen people had taken the ferry. Twelve had arrived. The official ledger recorded an ordinary crossing, which was precisely why her mother had refused to leave it alone.

Mara remembered standing at the window that night. She had seen a lantern moving across the water long after the ferry docked. She had told nobody, because the person carrying it wore her father's coat. Now she looked at the keeper and understood that the simple errand had always been a question.

2

The Name in the Margin

Rain began while Mara searched the cabinet. The key fitted, but the lock resisted until she held the door against its frame. Her mother's ledger lay beneath a bundle of ticket stubs. Each page contained the tide, the weather, and the names of passengers. In the margins, her mother had written what the official forms could not hold: a quarrel on the quay, a sick child, a promised return.

The winter page contained twelve names and a thirteenth line that had been scraped clean. Mara could make out the beginning of a letter. She thought it was the first letter of her father's name. The keeper said the missing passenger had been a stranger. He spoke too quickly and then went to the window, as though the rain required his full attention.

Mara found a ticket folded into the binding. It belonged to her brother. She had believed he was away at school when the crossing happened. The ticket was dated that same night, and someone had written a second destination on its back: North Spit.

She called him, but the storm had taken the signal. The keeper brought two cups of tea. He admitted that the ferry had made a second stop. Her mother had discovered it years later. The missing passenger was not missing from the water, he said. Someone had wanted to disappear from the village.

Mara put down the tea. Her mother had spent her life keeping names on a page. Her brother had spent his life asking Mara to leave them there. She decided to visit North Spit before the last boat stopped running.

3

Across the Spit

The keeper lent Mara a small rowing boat. He wanted her to wait until the wind eased, but she could see a lamp burning in the cottage on the spit. She kept close to the stone breakwater and counted each pull of the oars. Halfway across, she heard the harbour bell. It sounded distant and wrong, as though somebody had wrapped its iron tongue in cloth.

A woman opened the cottage door before Mara knocked. Her hair was white, and her eyes were the same green as Mara's mother's. On the table lay a newer ledger, open to an entry for that morning. The woman had written Mara's name beside a question mark.

She was Mara's aunt, the sister her mother had described as dead. She had left the village after being blamed for a theft she had not committed. Mara's father had carried the lantern. Her brother had arranged the second stop. The keeper had changed the passenger record. Everyone had preserved a different piece of the same silence.

Mara asked why her mother had kept searching. Her aunt said that an answer was not always an invitation to return. She had wanted a life that was hers, and her sister had wanted a family that could be repaired. Neither had known how to offer the other something smaller.

The woman asked Mara to keep the erased line blank. Mara looked at the fresh entry on the table. She could not promise that. A name could be private without becoming a lie. They sat together until the rain stopped, deciding what a true entry might say.

4

The New Entry

Mara reached the ferry office at dusk. The keeper was closing the shutters. She returned the boat key and placed her mother's ledger on his desk. On the blank sheet she wrote the date, the weather, and the number of people who had arrived at the harbour. Beneath it she added that one passenger had continued to another destination by choice.

She did not write the cottage address. She did not erase her brother's name from the ticket. When the keeper asked whether that was enough, Mara said it was enough for the record. Their other questions would need conversations. The old man read the sentence twice, then signed his own name below hers.

Her brother called as she left the office. He began with an apology and stopped before he could finish it. Mara told him that she had collected the ledger. She would bring it home, but she would not pretend the errand had been simple. He asked whether she had seen their aunt. Mara said yes, and waited.

For once, he did not ask her to keep anything quiet. He asked whether their aunt would let him visit. Mara said that he would have to ask her himself. The harbour bell rang, clear this time, and the first lights came on along the quay.

Mara carried the book under her coat. She had come for the last page her mother wrote. She left knowing where the next one would begin.