

## The Eighth Lighthouse

Legend had it the old lighthouse was cursed in some way. Folks said there were sounds in the night, unnatural sounds, and that the keeper's cabin always had an air of sorrow.

Wasn't much to look at, not by my standards anyhow. A crooked little structure and the great candy-striped tree that towered over it. Even then, not the biggest I'd seen. Not the grandest. Not the most appalling. Just a lighthouse, a stone's throw from being identical with half a dozen others.

The lights in the keeper's cabin buzzed like flies when I flipped the switch. Took their sweet time flickering to brightness, but that was expected with a building this age. I looked 'round at the small kitchen, the small sitting room, the small hall that led to the presumably small bedroom. I heaved my bags onto the couch and nearly hacked up a lung from the dust that billowed into the air. I forced open a rusting window and drank in the salt-laden breeze coming off the ocean. Somewhere in the distance, seagulls were cackling to each other.

I flipped the switch again, killing the furious buzzing, and carried my supplies back through the door. I was an artist by trade - decent enough, some folks said, though there's no accounting for taste. Some fellow with a fondness for lighthouses had me painting a baker's dozen to go with the reference book he was writing. Couldn't see such a book gaining much favor myself, but who was I to argue with a man willing to write the check?

I set my easel near the edge of the cliff, where I'd have a good view of both cabin and tower. The book fellow wanted a variety of paintings; different angles and times of day, that sort of thing. Three canvases at the very least, five preferred. I set out my paints and got to work. Though lighthouses weren't of much interest to me, by that eighth one I was developing a fondness for them. They had their differences, if you know where to look. The shades of white and red, the patterns of rust and weather damage, the shape of the roof and the walkway around the window.

That was what I was working on when I saw something. I had just started the shadowed gray of the windows when a movement caught my eye. I squinted up at the tower, trying to make out what I was seeing.

The gray of the windows, and the gray of a figure. Two different shades barely

indistinguishable, but different. I was positive they were different.

I got inside and started up the stairs, flinching from the humming of the lights. The stairs curled 'round the inside of the lighthouse like ivy 'round a streetlamp. Took me an age to reach the top, and when I did, there was no one about. I looked, of course, but there weren't many places to hide.

The great lamp stood in the center of that top room, the lens standing at attention behind it. I must have danced 'round the thing three times before I was satisfied no one else was there. Chalked it up to bad eyes and made the trek back down the stairs.

When I reached the cabin, I paused. Those lights were still droning on, and I was sure I'd switched them off. I supposed I might've flicked 'em on and then forgotten, but at the same time, I asked how I could forget a thing like that; especially with how loud they were. Still, it didn't seem worth the worry, so I let it be.

I went back out to my easel and finished the first painting, casting my eyes occasionally up to the windows. I didn't see any more movement, but I still felt uneasy. I washed my brushes and fixed my dinner, straining to hear any strange sounds over the lights. I pushed the old couch in front of the door leading to the lighthouse stairs, just in case. Then I got ready for bed.

In my dreams, there was a woman. Gray dress that seemed to fade at the ends, like dust. Long blond hair that floated 'round her face. A smile that could shake the devil's boots. In the dream, I knew her. We walked along the beach, and she didn't make a fuss when the tide came in and her skirts got wet. She threw back her head and laughed like a gull, the ugliest laugh you ever heard, and I woke up with my own laughter in my throat.

Second day started much like the first. I set out my easel to paint the far side of the lighthouse, and this time 'round I didn't notice anything in the windows. The sun shone down on my back, and more than a few times I found myself dozing off from the warmth of it. Once the painting was finished, I decided to rest my eyes in the shade cast by the tower. The breeze brought the smell of fish and salt from off the water, and soon I was dead to the world.

By the time I woke up, it was close to four. I stretched and yawned and meandered back inside, passing my canvases where I'd set them against the wall.

And I froze.

The one I'd finished a few hours earlier, still not fully dry, was different than I'd left it.

There was a small figure peering out from the lighthouse window, painted so lightly it would be easy to miss. But it was there all the same, and I hadn't put it there.

I looked from one painting to the other. Nothing else seemed wrong. I cast a wild eye 'round the room. Nothing looked out of place. The couch was still blocking the door to the stairs. Had I locked the door before I'd fallen asleep? But why would someone wander into the cabin just to mess around with my painting?

I stood there for a long moment, breathing heavily, and then I realized something was different in the cabin.

The lights were on and buzzing loudly.

~

I dreamed about her again that night, after an hour of staring at the ceiling. She stood waiting for me at the base of the hill leading up to the lighthouse. She ran ahead, laughing her seagull laugh when I couldn't keep up. She got to the door well before me and held out her hand. I woke up with my arm in the air, reaching.

Spent the morning unscrewing every lightbulb in the cabin and lining 'em up neatly against the sitting room wall. Spent the afternoon sitting on the floor, staring at the blocked door leading to the stairs.

I'd never been much of a believer in any particular thing. Didn't hold much with religion, chuckled at the superstitious. I felt like laughing at myself, that day, as I rolled one of those glass bulbs between my hands.

What.are.you.waiting.for?.What.do.you.think's.gonna.happen?

Didn't know. And that's what kept me waiting; I'd been stubborn longer than I'd been alive, and I didn't like being taken for a fool. I knew something was wrong, and I had to know what.

I waited the day out. Made it through the night with my eyes open. You could've heard a fly cough in that cabin, it was so quiet. But there was nothing to be seen, nothing to hear, nothing at all.

I went outside just before dawn and started on my third painting. I watched the sun come

up behind the lighthouse, turning the white tower into a dark silhouette. I coaxed grays and blacks across the red-orange of my canvas. I haloed the lighthouse with a yellow so pale and bright it was nearly white.

Just as I was adding the final touches, I felt a hand on my shoulder. Light and warm and unmistakable. I never turned my head. I knew there was no point.

~

In my dream, she led me up the stairs. We stood on the balcony that ringed the tower, peering out across the roiling ocean. She clung to my arm and laughed endlessly, and I held her hand and grinned like a fool.

Finally, she looked up at me, her eyes glinting with happy mischief. "It's not forever, you know."

The words were clearer than any dream I'd had before. I tried to ask what she meant, but I couldn't force the question past my lips. She laughed again as I struggled and tapped one light, warm finger against my nose. "You know."

I jerked awake, nearly rolled to the floor. I fought to catch my breath, tears filling my eyes. I couldn't have told you why, but right then I felt a sadness I'd never felt before, not even when I lost my mother. Like all the stars had gone dark and would never brighten the sky again. Like the dance was over and it was time to join the war.

That was how I came to understand.

I staggered to the couch and pushed it aside. I unlocked the door and flung it open. I fell to my knees and touched the old concrete. It was freezing, the kind of early morning chill only stone can generate. I ran my fingers over the surface, feeling the small cracks.

I jumped to my feet and darted to the sitting room, grabbing the first light bulb I saw. It screamed when it was finally screwed in, but it was easy to ignore. It was clearer with the light, more apparent. I could see the flecks of red, the tiny specks that had been caught in the cracks, too difficult to clean up, too hard to reach. But I could see them. I could feel them.

I looked up the length of the lighthouse tower, and I wondered. Why did it happen? Was it quick? Was it terrible?

It's not forever? you know;

I slowly started up the stairs, running my fingers over the cool, rusted railing. I counted as I climbed, though I couldn't tell you now why or how many steps there were. I kept wondering, all the way up. Was it an accident? Had she jumped? Was she pushed? I still don't know, even now. It doesn't matter at this point.

When I reached the top floor, I wasn't surprised to find the great lamp bright and spinning. It hurt my eyes to look at; it was overcast that day, and the light was more brilliant than the sun. I stood with my back to the lamp, staring out the window, watching my silhouette appear and vanish on the glass.

It was quiet up there, far above from the buzzing lights and the crashing waves. I could see a whale breaching far off, could see thin rays of daylight forcing their way through the clouds.

Could see a second silhouette, just beside me.

I shut my eyes and felt my way back to the stairs, but the light still shone through my eyelids. It took a few minutes to blink away the spots. It took another moment to clamber over the stair railing.

It's not forever•

And it wasn't. Not really. It took less than a second to loosen my grip, to tilt forward, to feel my feet leave the metal.

The wind on my face was cool and strong and whistling. I couldn't have closed my eyes if I'd wanted to, and I didn't want anyhow. I watched the stairs fly past. I watched the concrete come closer.

I saw when she appeared. Billows of hair framing her smiling face and gray dress sparkling like starlight. She held her arms out like she meant to catch me.

In a way, she did.

~

Legend has it the old lighthouse is cursed in some way. Folks say there are sounds in the night, unnatural sounds, and that the keeper's cabin always has an air of sorrow.

Here's what I say; the sorrow's from the living. They paste it to the walls so thick it sinks in deep, with their "Poor man"s and remembrance plaques, their whispers of depression and

theories of accidents. The dead don't pay mind to that sort of thing. There's nothing left to fuss about.

As for the noises? That's just the buzzing of fluorescent lights, and the laughter of a couple happy fools.