

Three winters back, the lighthouse quit working. But that didn't really matter to Mr. Every night at dusk, he still trudged up the hill to switch it on—just like he always had.

People in town sometimes peeked through their curtains to watch him go. Some shook their heads. Some just tried not to see him at all. The harbor hadn't seen a big ship in years; even the council sent him two letters, asking for the keys back.

He ignored them.

Six-thirty on the dot, he'd cross the narrow road, coat buttoned up tight whether it was freezing or the middle of July. In the summer, gulls cried overhead. When winter came, the wind tried its best to knock him sideways. He kept climbing anyway.

The lighthouse stood out on the black cliffs, right where the sea chewed at the rocks all day and night. Salt crept up the windows in pale crusts, and paint stripped off the railings in curling shreds.

Inside, his boots made the staircase groan with every step. At the top, the lamp waited—quiet and cold.

Once, the machinery roared if you yanked the lever. Now the gears wouldn't move, and the big lens just sat there, smudged with dust, tossing back broken pieces of his own reflection when he leaned in close.

Still, every night, he cleaned it. Rag in hand, he circled the lamp, polishing the glass while the daylight faded. Sometimes he'd mutter a few words—not really talking, more like letting scraps of thought slip out.

"Storm coming."

Or:

"Cold tonight."

As if someone else was standing there with him.

Below, the waves clapped hard enough against the rock to rattle the walls.

One night, a boy from town trailed after him, clutching a flashlight so heavy he could barely keep hold of it.

"Why do you still come here?" the kid asked.

Mr. Vale fiddled with the lantern's dead wick, not looking up.

“Same reason people leave porch lights on,” he said.

The boy squinted, confused. “But for who?”

Mr. Vale didn’t answer right away. He just stared out at the horizon where the fog blurred everything to one endless, gray line. Then he pressed his hand against the cold lamp glass.

“In case someone’s still trying to get home.”

The boy went quiet.

Far below, the tide dragged itself over the rocks in slow, heavy breaths.

And even though no light touched the water anymore, the lighthouse held its lonely vigil until morning.