

A Ghost Story

Come nightfall, the lighthouse is lit. The first light scrolls over the bay, dark waves glistening in wake before they simmer and waver away. A faster stroke follows along the sea-eaten spit, brushing over the oil house and the old keeper's hut, shanty, decrepit things that pale in the moonlight. There's a girl laying awake inside the hut. Usually, she sleeps fine with the on and off glow as it illumines the yellow patterned wall and paints roaming shadows of the lampshade and coat rack, counting the headboard slats as they stretch like an accordion until she dozes off.

But lately, there's someone in the light. A silhouette standing by the dresser. Disappearing and reappearing with each turn of the beacon. It's quiet, save for the gentle rattle of the window in its pane, a muffled howl of wind whenever its tempo rises. There's nothing in the room that could cause a shadow like that, a barely discernible head and shoulders, a faceless black cloak. The girl can't stop staring, she thinks the silhouette might seize its moment when the room goes dark. But with each rotation of yellow light, each shadowed visage captured upon the wall, among the contorting and elongating shapes of furniture and belongings, the silhouette remains by the dresser, unmoved and unbothered.

Come dawn, the old keeper returns from his post, lugging a metal barrel, its hollowness thumping in tow. The oil house wrinkles his nose as it turns the brisk morning heavy with the pungency of grease, the lock sticky with a slim slime coat. He nestles the empty barrel of kerosene in with its brothers, they softly clang from their wooden shelf cot.

Down the cobble path, the old keeper arrives at his hut, waiting a moment by the weathered door. The nights have grown long. When he enters, he takes his smoking pipe and sits at the table by the window, his tired eyes prefer the hand-stitched cloth to the first sign of day cresting the horizon. He pinches the ink-stained cloth, folding an embroidered pear in two.

The girl watches him strike a match from the doorway. His wrinkled lips suck on the golden mouthpiece, raspy breaths between each toke. He glazes over her presence as she walks in the room, exhaling and averting his attention outside. She stands there in the middle of the cabin, with a frown on her face and a blanket wrapped around.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she says.

The old keeper grunts and points to a cabinet filled with dusty bottles of brown. The girl complies, running over a label that says *White Horse*, the liquid sloshes around. She places it on the table and he nods.

“Sit,” he says, pulling the chair out beside him. It squeals along the floor.

The girl bundles up her blanket and climbs onto the Windsor chair. Together they sit, both miserable and spent, the old keeper has his whisky, his tobacco to keep him in check, but the little girl relies only on her mind, and it’s been poisoned by the silhouette.

“She won’ shut up about ya,” he says, finally, smacking his lips as it warms his throat.

“She won’t talk to me.”

“Well, sure sh’ has her reasons.”

“Did she like to live here?”

He looks out along the headland, where the salty breeze rips through the crags and scatters the grass in a wild dance. The ivory obelisk stands solitary at its end, towering above the capped sloshy waves, its white painted timber pearlescent in the morning sun. Like a siren atop her rock. “Only when the lighthouse was lit.”

Come sunset, the little girl walks down the path from the lighthouse. Still with her cotton-knit blanket, it’s been wrapped around her all day, prickles littered where

it's dragged along the ground. Today she's been stuck in a dreamy plane of existence, floating between patches of grass and sand, watching the little ants and crabs go on their march. It's one where she's unsure of what's up or down nor here or there, or whether her tummy hurts or if her eyes ache with fatigue, and now she's been sitting by the lighthouse for hours, wondering to herself, why would something be so pretty if its purpose is to steer away?

The clouds have darkened and there's an angry tempest on its way. She and the old keeper switch places without an exchange of words. The oil house door is left wide open to whine on its hinge and he's trudging toward the storm with kerosene in hand. She watches him up to the lighthouse, the ungainly gait to his step.

When she returns home, there's notes of grainy liquor and burnt smoke lingering by the curtains, a mildew mix with the coming rain in the air. From the keeper's desk she finds a leatherbound pad and a ballpoint pen, she sits by the window and starts to scribble, making her way from one corner of the page to the other, shading and hatching his old written word until it turns into a scrawl of dark blue. She turns the page and begins anew. Scratching with fervour, her hand clenched tight around the pen. The ink stains her fingers like she's eaten a juicy plum with blue flesh, she drags them down the tablecloth, leaving a fading print of her hand.

She seems to always be alone.

Thunder rolls in the distance and rain starts tapping at the window, a gentle crescendo becoming a thrumming ballad on the tin roof. The world is slowly drained of its colour before the first stroke of the lighthouse scrolls through, plunging the girl back into ever-changing dark and light, where the shadows dance on the walls, bigger and uglier than last night. She shrinks inside her blanket to muffle the overwhelming sight. The floor is cold to her feet, but she scurries quickly to her bed. The girl tries to stay still in her cotton cocoon, her heart pounding in her head.

The rain pours in a wavering roar, battering against the window, it moves with the wind at such a rigorous force she imagines the walls might blow clean off. The only way out is to picture herself in the deep blue sea, sinking beneath giant crashing waves, the biggest and blackest she can conceive, titans who pummel each other, their throes exploding in white mist. Down they push her, far, far into the abyss.

Come midnight, the last drops of rain drip from the eaves as the girl rouses from her slumber. She's relieved to have survived the storm, and now, rather daringly, decides to peek out. This time the lighthouse light has found a much more comfortable position, no longer with the on and off disappearing act, the

yellow-patterned wall stays lit in the soft glow, the shadows in a much milder flicker as if they've been exhausted of their fervent spinning dance. There, by the quivering dresser, the silhouette remains unmoved and unbothered.

The girl sits up in bed. "Why am I always alone?"

She gets no response, just a shimmer without any tone.

The girl stands up. Reaches her hand to the shadow, the cool, cold wood touches her bones. There's a faint breath, tickling the edge of her ear, the silhouette with a delicate whisper. You've been very brave. It was wrong of me to ignore you. I'm sorry it ended this way.

It's then when the girl starts to cry, for her tears were held behind a dam of child-like lies. She kneels, shuddering as she pulls her blanket tight, like she's trying to compress her woes into a smaller, perceivable thing, a thing more slight.

Through the window in her room the lighthouse stands bright. No more do the stroking beams circle around the bay, setting the hills and sea white, in fact the beams have been replaced by a harsher more flickering light. The crackle of burning timber, the lighthouse is alight.