

The Last Lighthouse Keeper

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It is said that I was the last of them, and I suppose it is true. The light on Gannet Head still turns every night, throwing its white arm across the water, but nobody winds it now, and nobody sleeps beneath it. I am said to be something of a relic in this town, the old keeper who talks to gulls, and I do not mind. I am past eighty, my hands are stiff with weather, and it is high time I wrote down what the work was, before the last man who remembers it ceases to be available for questions.

I came to Gannet Head as a young man looking for a kind of quiet that cannot be found in cities. The keeper then was a widower named Amos Tarr, who was said to know every ledge between the cape and the islands and to hate each one personally. He taught me the great lens built in France, the brass clockwork turning beneath it, the logbooks waiting to be filled in a hand round as a child's. He had been keeping lights for forty years, and he was thought to be the hardest teacher on the coast. I believe he was also the best.

People imagine the work was lonely, and it was, though lonely is not the word I would choose. There was an abundance of small duties, and each one mattered. We polished the lens at dawn, we wound the weights at dusk, we trimmed the wicks and swept the stairs and wrote the weather into the log. Moreover, we watched. That was the duty nobody wrote into the regulations: a keeper was a witness, paid to notice. Whatever the morning promised, the evening usually broke. Whatever the sea took, it kept.

It is still told in the village how the Margaret Ann came home through the November gale of my ninth year on the light. It is said that her captain caught the flash between the waves and read the ledges from it, and that every man aboard owed his life to that reading. I remember the tower shaking like a mast. I remember Amos holding the lamp chimney with a rag, calmly, as though he had all night and intended to use it. I do not assert that we saved that ship; the sea makes its own decisions. Nevertheless, she came in at dawn, and in the aftermath the whole village walked down to the point and stood looking at the tower as though it had done something. It is a compelling story, and I have stopped correcting the parts of it that are not strictly true.

The change, when it finally came, was abrupt, and its effects were profound. Engineers arrived with a breakthrough in automation, a lamp that needed no wick, no oil, no keeper. The bureau in Washington spoke earnestly about budget constraints and the widespread demand for efficiency, and nobody spoke about the forty years Amos had given, or the twenty I had. The automation commenced in the spring; consequently, the old light ceased to belong to anyone at all. They offered me a cottage in the village and a pension, and they took the keys, and that was the end of

keepers on Gannet Head.

It is often asserted that the automated light is an improvement, and arguably it is. The new lamp has never once failed; it does not tire, does not sicken, does not grow old. Nevertheless, something subtle was lost when the last keeper came down the stairs. Whoever watches over this coast now does it from an office two hundred miles away, and, crucially, a screen cannot smell smoke, or hear a hull strike a ledge, or notice that a boat has been gone too long. Moreover, the light used to have a character, a slight hesitation in the turn on cold nights, and sailors said they knew it like a voice. Machines eliminated that voice and called it progress.

I have contemplated obsolescence for thirty years now, and here is what I know. Iron deteriorates. Paint peels. Even granite softens under the wind. A man deteriorates too, but his dignity does not have to. To strive against the sea is to lose in the end, but the striving was the point, and no committee in Washington can vote that away. Whatever they say I was, I know what I was: the man who kept the light. My conscience on that point is as clear as the glass we polished every morning of my life.

I still walk out to the point most evenings. Tourists come in the summer now, drawn by the romance of the tower, and they grasp at the romance without ever grasping the work. They ask, "Was it very lonely, up there?" and I tell them what I have written here. Some of them, the young ones mostly, look at the automated lamp with something like pity, as though a light that burns without a keeper has lost its soul. I do not go that far. Nonetheless, I understand them.

Some say the tower will be sold someday, that its autonomy from human hands is nearly complete. It is even whispered that the light is haunted, that on certain nights the old clockwork can be heard turning by itself. They say I started that rumor myself, and perhaps I did; a story is the one lamp a man can still keep. I do not advocate turning back, since a century cannot be wound like a clock. The beam comes around, the beam goes away. Whatever comes next for this coast, the light will turn until it does not, and the sea, which yields nothing it has ever taken, will not notice the difference. I notice it. That has to be enough.