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It had been a long while since he first had dreamed about the staircase and the doorway. He didn't sleep well and spent most nights dozing and waking. Sometimes he couldn't sleep at all and would lie awake and listen to the night sounds. In the quiet darkness he heard the ventilating system hum an imperceptible tune, the gentle vibration touching him everywhere at once. A door close and a toilet flushed, both sounds muffled by the thick walls. An occasional voice, high pitched and urgent, would call the name of a child or long dead spouse, and he sensed the torment caused by sleep induced memories. He listened hard, identifying each sound precisely until the effort tired him.

When night was almost over, and he lay exhausted in bed, sleep would come. And then the dream.

The steps were steep and mottled with shadows from an open doorway. As he climbed up he heard water falling. The sound was deep and distant and like the mute thunder of a far off waterfall. It sent a tremor into the ground that he could feel. The warm air swirled around him with a pleasant odor; a familiar, welcome odor. He continued up but the doorway remained at a stationary distance, its shadow fluttering in the breeze.

He always awoke suddenly before reaching the top. Although he knew it was a dream, it left him with an inner urging that he couldn't explain.

A hand touched his arm. "Hello Dad, how are you today?" It was Denice. "Am I early? I've interrupted your breakfast," she said.

He looked at the cold oatmeal, an unopened carton of milk and a glass of orange juice with the pith gathered in a ring around the top of the glass. "No, I'm finished, let's go sit somewhere else." He allowed her to help him up but pulled the arm away as they began walking.

Denice was a small woman thirty-nine years old. Her dark hair was peppered with grey and the center of her body wrapped in extra flesh. Her clothes were discount store bargains. A large handbag, its bulging vinyl sides bounding against her back, hung from the shoulder. Greasy makeup covered her face and the watery brown eyes watched sadly as her father hobbled ahead of her.

His body was withered. The bones of the hips and shoulders poked at the loose clothing as he walked. Sparse white hair covered the shiny, freckled scalp and his arms hung helplessly by his side as he shuffled down the hall.

They neared the lounge area while Denice looked around. The facility was spotless as a hospital, the antiseptic atmosphere interrupted only by an occasional green plant beneath a skylight. As they approached an elderly woman in a faded housecoat, Denice heard her conversing with herself. She stopped speaking and stared at Denice as they passed. The conversation continued when they rounded a corner. Further on a man sat outside a doorway in a wheelchair. His thin legs were crossed and looked entwined. A cruelly curved spine forced him to hold his head awkwardly. His lower lip jutted out as he stared at the wall.

Denice could not avoid watching the faces of the people her father lived with. Their expressions were strange, even when they smiled the eyes contained something odd. She thought it was loneliness or fear of maybe a reflection her appearance stirred.

She didn't know but wondered what her father felt, and it bothered her until she couldn't think about it. His problems weren't real to her, she had substantial, concrete problems of her own. Children to raise, a husband to care for, a house to run. These things taxed her attention. Father would fend for himself as he always he. There was no other way, these few hours were all she had to give, even if it wasn't enough.

The tile beneath their feet changed to carpeting as they entered an enclave filled with parlor furniture.

The old man dropped into an armchair and put the cane on top of a table scattered with dog eared readers digests. Denice pushed a straight backed chair to the table and sat down. She fidgeted with the handbag and put it beneath the chair after unbuttoning her coat. With a crumpled tissue in hand she dabbed her nose while looking at him and asked, "How do you feel Dad?" His tired eyes met hers while his hands trembled as he folded them.

"As well as an old man should, I expect," he said. She wasn't a child anymore even though her features gleamed through the middle aged face like a beam of light, reminding him of her as a girl. He longed for the days when they were close and an exchange of hugs could solve any problem, soothe any hurt and send the cares of the world into flight, away from the protective circle of their arms.

"The kids send their love. It's been a busy week for us. The first week of school and all," she said. Her face was flushed and damp with perspiration. She pulled her coat off and let it fall behind her. She continued to speak, offering family news and other bits of information, held out like a candle to a man in the dark. She hoped they were important to him but he didn't hear. Instead the words flowed past him in a wave, and he wished he could tell her. And she would understand, and it would change things. He wanted to blame his misery on her, but it was his fault, and it would never get better. The failure hurt the most. He tried to be happy but couldn't. It was in a slide down. He had lost control.

"What time is it," he said suddenly. It didn't matter to him but Denice was eyeing her watch like a school kid waiting for the bell to ring. "It's after ten Dad, I'll have to leave soon, the kids will be home for lunch," she said.

She kissed his cheek and said goodbye. He watched her walk quickly down the hall towards the exit.

The rest of the day was spent sitting in his room. They brought his meals and chided him for not eating, but he didn't answer. Thinking of the dream, he sat and watched nothing until it was dark.

He felt tired and got into bed. He was weary and his arms and legs ached. He fell asleep and began to dream.

He climbed the stairs without hesitation, the sound of the water and the touch of air drawing him up. The stairs disappeared behind him and the doorway drew nearer until he stepped into its archway.

He stood in a flurry of bright shadows, a gentle tide touched him with a warm rush and he joined the breeze, moving with it through the door.

That morning, the nurse opened the blinds in the oblong room and walked to the bed. She touched his shoulder to wake him, but her hand came back quickly.

Vernon Lloyd was dead.

*People sail through life — like ships passing in the night.
Occasionally, a lighthouse appears — that beacon is like a friend.*

— Mary Ryder-Swanson '83