

## The Wickie

I came to the lighthouse for solace. Exquisite alone time. I'd welcome the loneliness the same way the beacon welcomed incoming ships. In the weeks leading up to my internment as wickie at Pachad, the port master kept going on about how lucky he'd been to have found me; how their last keeper was "indisposed." I didn't ask questions.

A week later I stood on the barnacled dock, bearing my sole tethers to civilization (identification papers, toothbrush, shaving cream and razor, and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*) in my hands. I stared after the vessel that had delivered me as it made itself slave to the lustful tide, but abandoned that watch long before the ship disappeared around the crescent jag of the island. The port master's parting words swam through my mind: "*Always keep the light burning.*"

I walked in the bitter wind toward the lighthouse, pushing the image of the port master's pale eyes out of my thoughts.

The lighthouse was sparsely furnished, yet it lent more in the way of comfort than I'd expected: a flannel bedspread, a painting of a vessel as it cut the shimmering sea, a wide, cherry desk positioned in front of the window that would be my eyes on the world for the next year; checking the drawers, I found a matchbox and a canister of cigars— the remnants of the past wickie, or perhaps of the one before him.

I lit a cigar, blinked at its bold flavor. I sat down and made my first recording in the logbook: *25th of August, 1903, 0800 hours— Arrival*. I puffed again, watching the waves as they rolled toward shore, each one more eager than the last to slide up onto the sand.

"*Well, it seems you're the perfect man for the job, Mr. Thackitt,*" the post master had said. "*Decorated officer, no wife, no kids.*"

I brushed some fallen ash from my pants.

*“A man could lose his mind all alone out there.”*

Realizing I was breathing anxiously, I stepped away from the desk. My footsteps reverberated as I climbed to the gallery, setting about being that “perfect man for the job.”

And I was. I did my duty as keeper. I kept a weather eye, I cleaned the lamp and glass every morning as if it had never been done. If a new barnacle appeared on the dock, I documented it. I did my duty, just like every wickie before me.

*So why does the house despise us?*

I didn't record it the first time it happened. Can you imagine?

*11th of October, 1903, 1600 hours— Painting changed: ship caught in storm. Previously sturdy stair rusted through, fell apart as I ascended to bed. Swollen ankle. Broke portable lantern in fall.*

My head spun as I lay in bed that night— this time not with thoughts of drink or of conversation but with thoughts of confusion, and of fright. Until an hour ago, every step in the lighthouse staircase had been polish-black, free of rust; then, suddenly, this— *decay out of nowhere!*

Eventually I could puzzle no longer, and fell asleep.

But it's gotten worse. It's so much worse.

Seeing no way around it, I've recorded yesterday's occurrences in the logbook:

*27th of October, 1903, 1630 hours— Several stairs rusted through, incapable of holding weight. Dropped portable lantern in attempt to jump gap between stairs, glass shattered and cut hand. Painting changed again: what's discernible in the shreds depicts blood-red sea and corpses in water. Red substance on floor beneath painting: investigated— blood.*

But that's not the worst of it. Tonight—... God, I can hardly see to write. The shed is so dark, and besides, my eyes! But it's vital that I record this: tonight, I neglected the port master's one command. I didn't keep the light burning, and someone has died for it.

It's the house's doing, I tell you! I'm *not* crazy. I don't know why it's doing this, I don't know why any of this has happened, and I *certainly* don't believe that the last wickie was simply "indisposed." I don't want to think about what may have happened to him...

Nevertheless, this is what's happened to *me*: only an hour ago I was on the rocks, spying the horizon through my binoculars, and I spotted a vessel with its distress lights illuminated; in the same moment, I looked up and realized that the house's lantern had mysteriously extinguished itself.

Charged with adrenaline and fear, I rushed into the lighthouse, and had gotten halfway up the stairs before the topmost steps caved beneath my feet— rusted away from the wall, they disintegrated right underneath my boots. If I hadn't had the presence of mind to grab onto one of the lower steps, I probably wouldn't be writing this...

By wild feats of agility and grace I made it to the gallery, and found the oil well dry and barren as a desert. Pushing aside the fact that I'd filled it earlier, I poured more oil in— and groaned in horror as the bowlful of fuel immediately sank through the bottom of the well, as if the bowl had secret pores. There was nothing else to do for it except hope *some* oil would stay, so I poured yet more in and reached in to light it—...

And this is where my account becomes fuzzy. I reached in to light the well, and as if all the excess oil I'd poured had reappeared, the bowl burst into an inferno so fierce that all the glass around the bowl exploded, and some of it went into my eyes (for I was standing close).

I stumbled away from the globe, wanting and *not* wanting to dig the glass out of my face, and I think I must have stumbled backward over the railing and fallen head-over-heels down the stairs. My head booms now as if it struck every step.

The light is broken. There's blood all over me, but I *know* it's not mine. I can't be sure, but I think it belongs to the sailors in that painting; I just have a feeling that that's where the house keeps them. And there's a ship full of real men, likely dying or dead, out there at sea, and no one will know it until they don't turn up at their next port, and no one will know that the lighthouse is trying to kill me until long after *that*.

If you get this letter, please come. I beg you.

I'm not crazy.

I'm not crazy.