

## Low Tides

The Lighthouse Keeper was a tired old man. His whole life he had known nothing but the ocean in front of him. He knew the piercing sting of crushing waves more than he knew the embrace of another. Each day he woke to the smell of salmon and salt, so much so that the scent was entirely blind to him, as was the rest of the picturesque scenery that sat before him. The shore he had known as a lively place of brightness and a still mind had aged along with him. The gray in his hair reflected the gray of the clouds that hung threateningly over the vast expanse. As his wardrobe came to consist of a deep pewter, the ocean had changed its dressing to an akin shade. The Keeper believed they knew each other very well.

From sunset to sunrise, The Keeper never had to worry about what the next day would bring, because he already knew. He would wake from his flat, hard bed, to dress, and went to do the chores, then a break, the rest of the chores, then back to bed. Each morning when he dressed, he slipped on a jacket, heavy in material but not in continents. The spacious pockets were left empty. The man found no reason to carry with him meaningless objects, so he left the clearing of fabric as merely a warm place to tuck his hands into. The consistent schedule that was unknowingly mandated would only shift when the ocean threw a fit. But even then, on days when the water had rage to unleash, The Keeper knew how to handle it.

This morning in particular, The Keeper was expecting a hassle. This past week had been savage waves and substantial rain and today would be no different. The water pinging the sturdy stone was so intense the night previous that The Keeper had a strange sensation bubbling deep in his stomach. For the first time in his long, long life he feared the ocean. He feared the loud whips of salty water and the drops leaking through the meeting corners of brick and mortar. Sleep that night was far away but eventual, and when it did come, all the disruption outside was nowhere to

be found inside of his vivid dream that occurred that night. This dream was not that of the perplexing or odd sorts, but rather it showed imagery of his life in all of its mundane chronicles.

He woke the next morning to dimmed light from a foggy window. This window in particular had become part of his morning routine as well. Each day was started by a long gaze out of the very pane of glass he was watching, but not today. Today there was a mist too thick to peer through, and when he swiped his rough hand across the surface the mist did not buckle beneath him. It simply sat unbothered, as if he never touched it at all.

The Keeper slipped out of the covers and into his shoes, but for once, felt too lazy to dress in his orderly gray attire. Creeping down the old wooden stairs he took in the abnormal silence. Despite their age, the steps did not creak beneath his feet. It must have been the storm, he assumed, it must have knocked them back into place. He tramped along the known pattern of walls and tables, all cold in hue as the pallet reflected from the windows surrounding. At the door that divided him from his well-known companion waiting outside, he felt apprehensive. The unease from the night before lingered. A feeling so rare to come was hard to shake smoothly. He watched his tottering hand turn the door handle, but did not feel the cold burn of the frosted brass. With a chattering spine, he let his hulking steps lead him out the door.

The water was still. More still than he had ever seen it before. The familiar, dull pewter hue was now a vivid glaucous. Any trace of the upheaval was gone. The sand sat with a light yellow, stunningly warm from the sun. Shells laid at the bend in which the ocean and shore met, as if strategically placed there by the wit of the waves.

The Keeper walked lightly towards his familiar, hoping to not leave footprints behind in the case of disturbing the solitude the world currently held. He wanted to speak but couldn't find the words to say. He wanted to reach out, but there was nothing to hold onto.

They stared at each other for a while, long enough for The Keeper to feel a sweat building up on his skin. As he looked up to find the basis, his hand flew up indistinctly with him, saving his retina. The harsh yellows and oranges of the fully exposed sun rained down on his dull, deep skin; skin that hasn't touched raw sunlight in years on end. Unlike every other day of his life, there wasn't a pull to the ocean that was drawing him in, it was the sun. Despite the vigorous light, he found that the sun had no burn to him. He wanted this warmth to envelop him. He wanted to fill his heart full of pleasant sensation, but the reality he had known for so long looked up at him with a blank and unmoving expression.

A coruscating shell caught his eye as the rays reflected off the glossy surface. He observed the colored conch shell with intensity. Waves of nostalgia rose upon him as he ran his calloused fingers along the cracks and ridges. Delicately holding the shell, as if afraid to break it, The Keeper raised it to his ear and listened in a familiar pattern. In his past, when the ocean was a new and uncharted place, he would pick up shells as such and listen to the waves crashing within them, for it was told that they carried the sounds of the ocean along with them. It was true, he found. Today however, there was nothing. He listened and listened. If he focused hard enough, he could pretend to hear the breaking of the waves and the screeching of seagulls. But in reality, no comforting sounds were presented.

The Keeper plunged his hands into the water before him, grasping at the feeling of anything hard and smooth, yet each new shell he dug up had the same effect as the last. He brought each up to his ear, less and less careful as the numbers increased and waited for a sign

that the ocean was still with him. He was met with silence each and every time, and each and every time he stored the shells away in the waiting pockets of his pewter jacket. Maybe next time he tries, they would present to him the tune of his life. Just maybe if he surrounded himself with the creations of his creator he could be enveloped and taken away forever in the only thing that has ever brought him comfort and solace. Same as the last, shells weighed down his pockets and his dropped shoulders weighed down his body. Sunken to his knees and reduced to a pleading mess, he cried. He shed the first tears in a century. The man sobbed for the lost wind and in mourning of his once beloved equal. He sobbed and sobbed and sobbed yet when he reached up, grabbing at his face to get a full inhale, he found his face dry. And when he reached down to his feet that he had stood within water, they too were desiccated. And finally, when he searched deep inside his soul, he knew that all the water was missing; that he no longer knew the ocean.

The Keeper trailed back to his bed, his mind so empty that the journey there was forgotten, and by the time he reached the comfortless mattress, he collapsed into it. He gave his weight away and let his body sink into the impressionable wood base. A deep sleep crept upon him, willing him to rest. He did not tussle with slumber, rather he let it come to him, and take him into a warm steady embrace. The Keeper's last thought before being taken from his consciousness was the sound of waves crashing, and tides of a deep pewter, for in the morning, he would not wake up.

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