

The Light Goes on at Night

By Catherine Khaperska, age 14

Monday, August 16th, 2021

To-do list:

- Repair windowsill
- Pump tires
- Wipe the dust off the light at the top of the lighthouse

Wait a second. Didn't I pump the tires yesterday?

I check the previous to-do list entry and indeed, I have. I scratch it out and nibble on the back of my pen. What else do I need to do today? I can't seem to recall anything... oh well, I'll figure it out later.

I clamber downstairs to make myself breakfast and coffee. I seem to have run out of milk—there's something to add to my list! The mental reminder I gave myself is immediately wiped from my mind as I fry myself a couple of eggs. After breakfast I go upstairs to the bathroom to take a quick morning shower and brush my teeth.

I double-check that I turned the lighthouse light off—wouldn't want to waste energy during the day—then head downstairs to repair the windowsill. From the looks of things, the wood rotted through and it collapsed.

Three and a half hours later, I have a solid windowsill, aching arms, and no fewer than fifteen bent nails from my weakening seventy-six-year-old muscles not being able to aim a hammer properly anymore. Maybe it'd be easier if I had sons to help, but it's hard to find a wife if your entire life is dedicated to the upkeep of a hundred-and-twenty-five-year-old lighthouse. Every day since I started working here, there's been something I can't ignore. Once during a storm I was up 'till almost two A.M. making sure the ships coming into the town were safe, since I know the harbour better than anyone in town. After barely leaving the lighthouse, I properly furnished the second and first floor so I could officially move in.

I seem to be in need of groceries, I think to myself as I walk into the kitchen finding a small chunk of cheese and the last pieces of bread I own. I make myself grilled cheese for lunch and set off upstairs to clean the big light.

After I finish cleaning, I go grocery shopping and decide to treat myself to a steak. Most of the grocery store staff know me by now. When I was younger it was run by my old friend from school, Phil. Now his two daughters co-run it since Phil died five years ago at the age of seventy-one. I walk up to the cashier's, and I see the younger daughter Annelise there.

"Hello Matthew!" she says. "How's everything going?"

"Oh, the usual," I reply.

Annelise nods in understanding as she scans and bags my items.

“Alright! Have you heard that the fair is in town?” I, in fact, have not. I don’t have children and I barely leave the house. What use do I have for a fair? Especially at my age. I rally the message to Annelise in... um... *politer* terms.

“Oh, that’s a shame, but if you want, I’m going with my sister and her family tomorrow at one, and you’re welcome to join us!”

I politely decline, and take my bags from Annelise, who has a mildly disappointed expression on her face.

“Aw, that’s too bad, Paulie would love to see you!” I’ve always been closer with Phil’s eldest daughter, after all, I am her godfather. But I love both the sisters as if they were my own daughters, even if our jobs keep us almost too busy to see one another.

“Give her my love—and to your family as well,” I say before turning to leave, bags in hand.

“I will!” Annelise calls to my back. “And in case you change your mind—one P.M., we’ll be there!”

“I know.” Finally I close the door behind me and begin the long trek home; the bag strap will most likely end up digging into my shoulder by the time I actually get home. I didn’t bother taking my car coming here, but now I’m regretting it.

I eat dinner alone and in silence, the TV sport commentators mumbling and occasionally screaming if someone did a particularly good play, or scored something. I don’t follow sports teams and don’t plan to, but it’s better than silence.

When I finally finish eating, I notice the sky is getting darker, so I head upstairs to turn on the lighthouse light before getting ready for my evening routine. Once the first stars come out, I go to the lighthouse balcony and watch the waves crashing on the shoreline; white sea spray jumping up as the waves hit the rocks.

The view really is splendid tonight. Clear skies and a nice breeze. I point out constellations to myself while leaning on the balcony railing... the Big Dipper, the Little Dipper, Orion... all have been shown to me by my parents when I was young, and have stuck with me ever since.

My eyes start to close, and with a yawn I go inside to bed. My mind is blissfully blank, so it should be easy for me to fall asleep. Nothing is worse than having infinite thoughts in your head when all you want to do is dream.

I take deep, even breaths and let all my muscles go loose. In... and out. In... and out...

The next day I wake up and flick off the light as I do every morning. I stumble downstairs, half-asleep, and go make myself coffee. I’m awfully clumsy today, how strange.

I also can’t seem to open the coffee bag no matter how hard I try. It’s like my hands refuse to get a good grip on it. I watch my hands closely as they try again, and now I don’t need coffee anymore: my hands have gone straight through the bag’s material.

Am I dreaming? Am I hallucinating?

Well, whatever it is, I’m not likely to open my coffee bag anytime soon.

Firmly convinced I’m hallucinating (after all, you *do* interact with things in dreams, right?) I go to the fridge. Maybe I can make breakfast? I walk over to the fridge and freeze, my hand hovering inches from the refrigerator handle, suddenly scared.

What if my hand goes through the handle, just like it did with the coffee bag? What if I won't be able to access anything inside my fridge, and it all goes bad?

I stare at my hand hovering next to the fridge door handle, and finally my hand drops to my side. I'd rather not risk having my hand through the door handle... and as I think back to the coffee bag incident, I realize I don't have much of an appetite anyway. I'm going to change.

I go upstairs to my bedroom and notice my covers have a strange lump underneath them. 'Strange', since I don't remember stuffing anything underneath, and I'm ninety-nine percent sure I sleep alone.

Cautiously I tiptoe over and run my hand along the lump. Of course it goes straight through the lump. Of course it would. I stare at my hands, too afraid of my newfound abilities. The lump confuses and intrigues me. It's not moving (thank God) but I'm still afraid of it.

Finally my curiosity gets the better of me. I can't seem to pull the blanket off the lump, so I go to the head of the bed to look from a different angle.

Facing the wall, with pale skin and closed eyes, is... me.

I look asleep, but the habitual rise and fall of someone's chest as they breathe is missing from the sleeping me. A chill goes up my spine.

I run downstairs and try to yank open the fridge, but my hand doesn't grip the handle. I swing my hand towards it, but the collision never happens.

Heart pounding, I go to the bathroom upstairs and lean against the sink, staring in the mirror. Or I would be able to lean, if I had a corporeal form. My hands go through the counter and I fall through it, half my body under the sink, the other half sticking out the front of it.

My mind is going in circles repeating the same message over and over again.

You're dead. You're actually dead. No longer alive. You are dead.

I can't accept it. I can't. I've always wanted to live to a hundred, or at least ninety. I had so much more I could've done...

I stand up with a jolt and punch the wall in anger. But, as expected, my hand goes straight through the wall. The rapid, vicious movement did me some good though.

It takes about an hour of me pacing and freaking out and trying to smash things before I accept it, sitting with a huff on the floor. I stare at the wall, and a mild shock goes through me when I realize I have no shadow. Well... not like I can do anything about it now.

Look on the bright side, my mother used to tell me when I was younger. Well, I guess I can try.

There have been times when I've had to decline fun opportunities because of the lighthouse; taking care of it has consumed so much of my life. For the first time in almost forever, I'm free. My schedule isn't packed, and I don't have to do my to-do list every morning to keep me on track. It's a little sad that I only have this freedom once I'm dead, but on the bright side, this freedom will last forever, so I can do all the exciting things I've missed.

Annelise told me she'd be at the fair at one, but it opens at ten. I'll go early and enjoy myself.

Of course, I can't drive, but I can walk—or float, I guess. I start making my way over to the fair, but after a while I realize I'm going faster and faster, never tiring. I perk up at this new knowledge and start tearing off at full speed, my eyes shut tight, feeling the wind go through me. Finally I open my eyes to see the city sights blur past me and through me. I can't help laughing as I go through a restaurant's front windows and out through their back walls.

About an hour later, I stop to figure out how far I've run. I'm in a clearing, grass under my feet and trees all around me. There's lichen and mushrooms growing on a stump nearby.

It's quite different here than in the bustling city. I don't hear cars, or other people, or music playing from a radio on someone's balcony. I know I don't have to, but I take a deep breath to center myself in the moment. I can hear birds chirping and the wind making trees and bushes rustle. It's very pleasant, and I think I'll stay here. After all, I have time to kill.

When I think I've had enough of the woods for the day, I head home (a bit slower than before) and it takes me almost two hours. I've seen acres of grassy plains, lots of majestic trees, and so, so much clear skies. I feel like I'm ten years old again, going on day trips with my parents during summer break.

People are lining up to go to the fair and I scan around, looking for Annelise and her family. I don't see them anywhere, so I get in the back of the rapidly growing line, behind a rather large group with at least five (very loud) kids.

"Can this line go any faster?" One of the moms asks, checking her phone. "The kids are going to drive me—Jilly, don't pinch!—insane."

Their chatter soon fades into the background as I see a ferris wheel. I haven't ridden one since I was twelve, and I'm getting more and more excited.

When the family in front of me goes through the front gates and pays, I slip in with them. After all, nobody here can see me. I make a beeline for the ferris wheel and stand in line. The one downside of this kind of stuff: the *waiting*.

There are a couple people in front of me, and I'm suddenly hit by a thought. Won't I just go through the seat, like I went through the coffee bag and the refrigerator door? I guess I'll have to try, no matter what happens. Finally there is an available cart, and I hover over the seat. Beside me sits a teenage boy with a black hoodie (Really? In this weather?) and greasy blonde hair. He keeps taking pictures of the view, which is annoying since we're still at ground level. There is no view.

The ferris wheel starts moving... but I don't. The back of the chair goes right through me, and I watch the others do the same as I stay in the same position I was before. Well, that's disappointing.

I straighten up and puff out my chest. I'm not going to let that bring me down. If the chair won't take me up, I'll take myself up. I came here to have fun.

I wait for the next available chair. This one has a young girl, and another girl who looks like her sister. I squeeze in, trying to give them as much space as I possibly can. When the ferris wheel starts moving again, I will myself to slowly rise up with it.

When we get to the top of the ferris wheel, we stop to pick up passengers below us. I can see for *miles*. Everything looks so small from up here. All the tiny people, cars, houses... I can see the woods, and the sea, and everything is so colorful and beautiful!!

The ferris wheel keeps moving but I decide to stay up here and see the view. I see a cloud that looks like a dragon, and out in the distance, a big container ship floats across the water.

Suddenly I hear screams and turn to see a roller coaster with flashing lights and small carts on rails zooming around. I look around at the view one last time and float down to get in line for the roller coaster. Not having a solid form forces me to be creative, so this time I'll just go at the same

speed as the roller coaster, and follow the rails. I can even have my hands up, like some of the people on the roller coaster are doing now. They're so brave!

When it becomes my turn, the intense speeds and mechanical noises of the rails block out any other feelings and I am fully enjoying the ride, flying forwards and sideways and up and down and I can't stop grinning.

The ride leaves me a bit dizzy and disoriented. I stay at the fair until the sun starts to set and the crowds start to dwindle.

As I go to the exit, tired but satisfied, I hear a familiar voice from somewhere ahead of me.

"Kids, are you hungry?"

Cue mixed replies.

"Alright, let's find dinner."

"But I don't *want* fish and chips!"

"I never said we're getting fish and chips. We're still deciding. Do you have any ideas for what you want though?"

I slowly approach the group and recognize Annelise and her sister Paulie, along with their husbands and kids.

"It's almost their bedtime, where do you want to take them? It's a bit too late to cook, no?" This was Paulie, holding her youngest, a shy seven-year-old, by the hand.

"We can take them to that taco place they like..."

"Tacos?"

"I want tacos!"

Before Annelise could finish her sentence, the kids erupted in a chorus of "Tacos!" Finally settled on a decision, the families started going to their cars.

"Kids, get your sweaters on! It's going to be a cold night, and you know that taco place always has A.C.!"

And with that, engines revved and both families drove off into the sunset. I stood there watching them until the dust from their cars fully settled.

I had been so excited with my own experience that I had completely forgotten Annelise being there. Not that I could do anything with them. It's hard to coordinate plans with someone if you don't know they're there.

I didn't feel like going home.

The buzz of adrenaline from tonight's events plus the vibrant lights of the city excited me in a way I hadn't been in a long time. So I set out, looking for interesting things for me to do.

Living in a small town by the sea means there's not really much to do besides maybe go shopping or go to the many trails around the seaside. Nothing seems to spark my interest until I round a corner and see a bunch of cars parked in front of a large extravagant building, about ten stories high, with an arch in front and a big "HOTEL" written in lights on top.

Perfect.

I glide in the front doors and there is an immediate change in ambiance. From the cars and the streetlights and general hustle and bustle, you have this calm, delicate, posh place with chandeliers and crisp uniforms. There is light instrumental music playing from somewhere I can't

see, and everyone seems to be in some formal wear, holding delicate crystal glasses with sparkling drinks.

I can't eat or drink—after all, I don't need to—but oh, the smells! Strong smells of wines and spices are everywhere as I float around, admiring the women's flowy dresses and the men's expensive, inky black suits. As I continue floating around, I notice that the soft instrumental music I heard earlier is coming from a string quartet playing at the front of the room. Tiny appetizers are set up on a table in the back; crackers and exquisite French cheeses, caviar, and raw salmon (like in sushi!) It's amazing.

When I was alive, 'fun' was going out on a boat ride, or going fishing, or building something creative, because that was all I had time for. It was also something safe and cozy and close to home. Not that all those previous activities aren't fun, but they weren't as exciting as the day I'd just had.

Finally the day ended and people started going upstairs to their rooms for the night, or heading home. I don't remember the last time I'd slept in a hotel. Maybe I never did. I drift up the stairs and look for available rooms. As I go through doors, most of them seem to be taken, strewn with bags and clothes. Some rooms... let's just say you're quite lucky you weren't there to see what was going on.

Eventually I found an available room, the bed made with fresh white sheets. The window was slightly open, letting in fresh air coming from the sea. I lay on the bed (to the best of my abilities) and close my eyes, the buzz and excitement from today slowly wearing off. I'm asleep in minutes.

I woke up very late... much later than usual. I don't need breakfast, but I love the smell of fresh bread, like the kind my mom used to bake.

But when I get to the bakery, I overhear some people talking on the sidewalk outside. Normally I wouldn't, but the words I catch stop me in my tracks.

"Have you heard? A boat crashed this morning, right on the shoreline!"

"No, where?"

"By the lighthouse—it wasn't on last night!"

I listen, a mix of shock and guilt rushing through my veins.

Is everyone okay? Is the boat ruined? Of course it is, idiot. This is what happens when you decide to have a day out in the city.

I get suddenly tense and goosebumps spring up on my arms. What now? It's not like I can apologize. And I don't even know if everyone's okay...

The morning is foggy and chilly, strange but not unheard of for August. I should've been there, done something... even if they couldn't see or hear me, I could at least try! I hate knowing that I could've done more, yet I didn't.

I launch myself home to my lighthouse. I have to know what's going on: how the people on the boat are doing, what the townspeople will do or say about this.

When I get back there's a group of people gathered in my front yard. There is indeed a wrecked boat with planks floating out to sea. I didn't know who was on the boat earlier today until I heard a faint "No, I'm not hurt, was just a bit of a shock" from a teenage boy in the crowd below me. He's soaked from the waist-down, and the man next to him (who I assume is his father) is holding two folded fishing rods.

A police car drives up my driveway and checks that no one's harmed too severely. Even if they can't see me, I'm still scared I'm going to get arrested. It's hard to get rid of fears and ideas, no matter how illogical they may seem.

The cop in the passenger's seat, after seeing that everyone's safe, walks up to the door of the lighthouse—my door—and knocks.

"Sir, is everything okay in there? Was there a malfunction of some sort?" My corpse upstairs remains silent—thankfully—and so do I.

"Sir, are you aware of the accident earlier today?" The cop keeps knocking, and all he gets is silence.

Soon he gets angry at being ignored, and starts knocking harder and yelling louder.

"Sir, you have to open the door!"

I mean, I could try...

Finally he and his colleague decide to open the door from the outside, so with the help of a crowbar, my door is wrenched from its hinges, revealing the interior.

There was complete and utter silence as the cops marched into my house. I tried to resist the urge to race in after them. I really did. But in the end I followed the cops inside all the way until they found my body, still looking asleep, except pale, cold, and very, very, dead.

The shock on the cops' faces was so intense it was almost funny. But my heart sank as the shock turned to sadness, and they left the lighthouse with large, slow steps. I followed them, and the minute the policemen got outside, the crowd tiptoed over, curious, confused, and concerned expressions on everyone's faces.

"Mr. Matthew Osborne has sadly passed away." Murmurs and gasps were heard throughout the crowd.

"Does he have family we should contact?" Asked a woman in the crowd.

"No... it was just him." This was Paulie, who had stepped up from somewhere in the middle of the crowd, furiously wiping her eyes. "But he was my godfather. My family will hold the funeral ceremony."

At Paulie's words, everyone present offered to help in some way.

"I can help with catering, my dear."

"Ma'am, we could help with setting up. That lighthouse has saved us many times when we'd be out fishing late at night."

To say I was moved was an understatement. My eyes shone with unshed tears and my face felt hot. People who I'd never met before were offering to help not out of pity, or a sense of duty, but because of how I'd helped them, kept them safe, or done the same to a loved one. I knew my job was important, otherwise I'd have quit a long time ago. But it gave me a very warm feeling to hear those words.

That night, I decided to go up the lighthouse to see the view, like I had at the fair, on the ferris wheel. As I was almost to the top, my sleeve got caught on something and I almost died—the second time around. That wasn't supposed to happen!

I looked at what I had gotten caught on, and it was the switch that I used to turn the light on and off everyday.

That's absurd. Am I coming back to life or something?

I get my sleeve unstuck and stare at the switch. It took me an hour to get used to the fact I was dead and could go through things, and to convince myself I wasn't hallucinating. Am I hallucinating *now*? Can ghosts hallucinate?

Suddenly I remembered something. When I got out of bed, the first thing I did was turn the light off, and then I found my body.

I clamp my hand on the switch and surprisingly, I get a good grip on it. It feels familiar in my hand, like the steering wheel on my car.

I pull down the heavy, metal switch and the light flares up, as it always does. I fly up and out of the lighthouse, and as I look back I can't help thinking how nice and bright it looks against the dark sky.

The two men from the wrecked boat took my job a couple days later. But after a week or so of me subtly helping them on nights when they were too busy, a rumor popped up of how my spirit had somehow taken over; a kind soul who guided fishing boats and other marine adventurers. They will never know how accurate they were.

And so life goes on. To all the fishermen (and women), and to all the marine explorers, I will be there for you. When the sky gets dark every evening, you don't have to worry. I will make sure the light goes on at night.

{The End}