

Lighting The Way

By Kathy Childs

Port Fairy. The place I have been told will mend my broken mind. This is a forced retreat, time out for a woman on the edge of a breakdown.

I stand on the foreshore and watch the waves. Mesmerized. They build far out to sea, a gentle swell that becomes a mountain. A surge that can no longer contain the power, it breaks. Droplets of water cascade as it envelops itself, crashing, crumbling. Self-destruction. Careering to shore with unmatched determination. Sliding onto the sand before being sucked back with the undertow. Millions of grains of sand being dragged out to sea. No way to resist. Back and forth - relentlessly, tirelessly, incessantly. Me, for the last six years.

“Grand isn’t it?”

Startled, I utter a small cry. A yelp.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. You’ve been here a while. Just watching. I used to do that a lot as a kid.”

Conversation. Response required. I run my fingers through my hair. I can do this.

“You grew up here?”

“Sure did. Quinn’s the name.” He holds out his hand. I can feel callouses. His hand is warm. He doesn’t let go when he should. I pull away sharply.

“Caz. Short for Caroline.” Unsettling. Familiar.

“Yeah Quinn’s a short for too – named for my Dad.” He is smiling at me. Warm. Inviting. Friendly. He draws back on his cigarette and slowly releases the smoke, watching it blow away in the breeze. The pungent vapours tickle my nose. I sneeze.

“You here for a holiday?”

“Mmm.”

“Well make sure you get to Griffith Island. Shame the old lighthouse is closed up now. Great view from the top.” I am fascinated by the embers that grow brighter and brighter as he draws back on his cigarette. I hold my breath against the smoke remembering to release it only after he gives me a strange look.

“Thanks I will.” I withdraw my attention; focus on the waves until he leaves.

The sun warms my back as I stride across the winding footbridge. Two feet wide like a man made tightrope linking land to land across the sea. Connections. The tang of salt air, a reminder of summers past, of a childhood I have almost forgotten. Structure. I elect to walk the Griffith Island circuit anticlockwise. Contrary.

I stroll along the sand, stepping in the footprints made by those who have come this way before me, knowing any memory of me, of them, will be washed away with the incoming tide. A clean start. My spirits lift.

I turn the corner. Quinn’s lighthouse. Solid. Dependable. I see movement in the tower. A lifted arm, a welcoming wave. I pick up my pace anticipating the climb.

Quinn was wrong; the lighthouse is open. Today I will climb. I skim the information board at the start of the causeway – built in 1859, 41 feet above the waterline. The stairway was built as part of the wall. The last light keeper left in 1952. What was it like? The solitude. Standing each night on the edge of the world. I used to believe that this was my destiny, to be the first woman lighthouse keeper. Alone. Sentinel. What happened to that me? Where is the young woman who craved a peaceful existence? I fill my days with meetings, phone calls, urgent matters. Busy work. No time to think. I walk along the bluestone causeway searching inside for the girl I was, the child who had dared to dream.

Wrong. It's wrong. The door to the lighthouse is painted bright red. It should be blue for the ocean not red. The padlock is solid and icy cold. It rattles, a harsh sound against the murmur of the breeze. I must get in. There was someone up there. They had waved, beckoned.

"Hello." I cup my hands around my mouth, calling upwards.

"Who're you yelling at love?" She stands beside me dressed in black, the one exception a faded red shawl around her shoulders. Red like the door, only old. I reach to touch it, to feel the coarse wool between my fingers but I pull back. No. Not appropriate. Her face creases into well-worn lines as she smiles.

"So who're you calling to? No one up there. Place has been empty since old Hugh left in the 50's. It's kept locked now."

"You grew up around here?" Easier this time.

"Something like that." She avoids my eyes and the question.

“I saw someone up there. Perhaps they broke in?” I keep the conversation going for practice.

“Or it’s the ghost.”

“There’s a ghost?” A whisper on a breeze that stokes the imagination.

“No. Not really. Old wives tale. Talk is that when they demolished the keeper’s houses in the 50’s they found some old bones buried beneath the storeroom floor. They say that the ghost, not happy at being disturbed, found a new home and now haunts the lighthouse. Makes a good story if nothing else.”

“Whose bones were they?”

“Don’t think they ever said. Female, mid twenties. Likely dated back to when it was Rabbit Island before it joined the mainland. Pretty isolated then, anything could have happened and no one would have known.”

I look up again, searching the tower for some sign.

“Come on, it’s getting dark, time to head back. I’ll walk back with you.”

Tempting. Just to be closer to the red wool shawl. Just for a moment.

“Thanks but I’ll stay a little longer. I like it here.”

“Don’t stay too late, the foot bridge isn’t lit and it gets slippery if the tide turns.” She glanced briefly at the lighthouse and then gave me a slow sad smile. “Give Mum my love.” Soft, like a whisper on the wind. She turned and left, her shoulders straight and her head held high. Strange. Familiar.

I wait five minutes. The pounding of the waves on the rocks lulls me. I will climb the tower. Padlocks. Security. I use my penknife to force the lock housing leaving the padlock intact. Throw open the door. Stairs confront me, painted blood red like a river rushing down unheeded. I rub my arms furiously to dispel

the cold, to halt the shivering. A need to climb drives me. Breath misting in the cold as I climb, grasping a handrail that is icy to the touch. Burning thighs from a body unused to exercise. I pause at the small window, wipe away the dust with my palm. Nothing to see. I climb again. The cabin is wood lined with brass fittings stained green from the salt air. I circle the small room, fingers caressing the wood. I am alone. The old lamp is still there, forgotten and unused. Sleek modern solar panels and a harsh light have usurped this old timer. I feel its sorrow. Empty. Bleak. I need to get out before... Uncertain now. I look out across vast oceans as the dusk turns to dark and the storm blows in.

I see a light in the darkness. It draws me outside. I squeeze through the small hatch door to stand on the narrow balcony. I grip the handrail absently noticing the ice but I feel no cold. I am alone in the dark but for this solitary speck of light. A single ship moves steadily with the tide, towards the safety of the port. The solar panels are gone now, as is the new light. I smile. It feels right. I squeeze myself back inside and with a nod to the ship begin my descent.

I shut the lighthouse door behind me noticing it is now blue. I am settled. I sit on the causeway wall, the wind howling around me. I wait. I know someone will come. The lighthouse keeper's cottages stand before me, the light from the windows welcoming. There is movement there. Something in the back of my head screams to be let out but I dampen it down, push it away. I am searching for peace and I will have it.

He walks towards me, his ill-fitting trousers held up by frayed braces. His shirt is cotton, hard worn but clean. The oil lamp he holds lights his features. He has a kindly face.

“How did you get here then?”

“Climbed up and came down.”

“From where?”

“Port Fairy.”

“Ah.” He sat down on the wall beside me and looked out towards the mainland. “Which year?”

“2014.” My voice is calm. It was a straightforward answer to an unusual question. Strangely, I am unsettled now. The back of my head is buzzing. Something inside my skull does not like this new reality.

“I’ll take you back to the mainland tomorrow. In the meantime you best come in and have a hot meal.” He stands up, offers me his hand. I rise and walk beside him towards the cottages ignoring the voices in my head that are screaming that the houses shouldn’t be there. They were demolished years ago. This is not real. I shut them down.

He pushes open the door to the cottage. “Got another one.”

“Oh dear.” She dusts her hands on her apron. “Come here love. Let’s get you warm and something to eat.” She holds out a hand, still white with residual flour. “I’m Sophie. You’ve met my husband Paul. This here is Irene and Quinn.”

“Welcome to hell.” A deep voice resonates from the armchair in the corner of the room. He lifts his cigarette and draws back, the embers flaring brightly in the dimly lit room. I breathe in, draw in the smoke. A memory stirs.

“Quinn.” Irene sits at his feet in the front of the fire. “Don’t be cruel.”

“Real isn’t cruel. She’s stuck here like the rest of us.”

“I don’t understand.” I say. Blank. Unwilling.

“Move.” Sophie orders. Irene moves away from the fire, wrapping her bright red shawl around her shoulders.

Red. Shawl. Fragments. Quinn. Cigarette flaring. Past. Present. I drop to the floor as the pain in my head explodes.

“It’ll wear off in a minute. It’s something to do with the time loop.” Irene is holding me now, rocking me gently. Soothing.

“Better. It’s getting better.” But the pain has opened a door. Reality was streaming in. This wasn’t any dream; this wasn’t my mind playing tricks. This was real.

“Where am I?” Somehow I knew Quinn would be straight with me.

“Rabbit Island. 1922.”

“But I met you on the beach today. You were younger. Kinder.” She turned to Irene. “Your shawl, you were wearing it today. Faded. Worn. We spoke.” Another memory. Say hello to Mum she had said.

“Just like bloody Susan. Full of it.” Quinn stands up and thrusts his arms into his jacket. “Going to check it, the damn portal’s still open. Perhaps we can get home once and for bloody all.”

“Like Susan did?” Irene’s voice is edged with hope. Same voice. A shawl passed to the next generation, mother to daughter. Irene was not going home.

“Susan?” I ask.

“She came through about a year ago. Wandered off one night and was never seen again – figured she found the way back. Bitch could at least have let us in on it.” Quinn wipes his nose on the back of his sleeve.

Bones and ghosts. How often was there truth in fable? “How old was she?” I look up at Quinn. He towers above me. There is no kindness in him.

“Twenty six. Body of an angel.” He sneers. “Perhaps that’s what got her back.”

I sway and grip the edge of the wood box to steady myself. I look once, briefly towards the storeroom then avert my eyes. The room with the hard packed floor where the bones had been found. Susan had never made it home. Her ghost had called out through time and I had answered.

