



Witness to the Deep

David Conover

One day, over a decade after lift-off, the VOYAGER robotic spacecraft reached a point on its outward journey where visual contact with the earth was about to be lost. For no scientific reason, astronomers turned its cameras back and focused them towards home. There in the distance was a tiny warbling speck of pale blue light. Another few hundred miles of travel and the blue light disappeared. Experiencing the threshold between a known light and the deep has been no less mysterious and no less compelling for generations of mariners and lighthouse keepers. At this threshold, a lighthouse guides the voyager with a tangible comfort that no radar, no radio, no GPS, no outer space navigational system will ever replace. The connection is primordial, residue of a nomadic, campfire-centered past. In the darkness, actual visual contact with a known light tells us where we are. In the darker darkness, it tells us that we are.

Five years ago, a Norwegian friend and I were groping our way ashore in a small sailboat, having been dismayed towards the end of an arduous transatlantic passage from Europe. As navigator, I hadn't been able to get a celestial sight in nine days, but rough calculations and our electronic instruments put us 30 miles off the Cape Race Light of Newfoundland, an island landfall light that was the first sight of North America for millions of immigrants. We were closing in on the rocky cliffs. Night approached. We wanted to see land, to see a light, to know where we stood. Suddenly, our electronics told us we were in Winnipeg, thousands of miles away.



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Searching for the light that night was one of the many times I have understood the significance of a light for a mariner. If you have not been to sea at night, imagine this. You're confused, possibly lost. Darkness distorts the strength of the wind on your face and the size of the waves beneath your hull, making everything far away seem ever so close. "Where is that light?" you ask as you strain to see. Your look into the dark during these moments is absolutely sincere, absolutely focused, like the reaching of the shipwrecked for that first piece of floating debris, because finding the light may mean your salvation.

Some years later, I had the opportunity to meet the man who had been the keeper of the Cape Race Light that night, safely perched high on the cliff. Fred Osborne had been a keeper for over 30 years, following the course of his father and grandfather. Cape Race was his last assignment, one of the few remaining manned stations on the entire eastern seaboard of North America. He didn't have much to do, except keep the place spotlessly clean and occasionally wander up the winding steps of the 96-foot tower. As a hobby, Fred kept a ham radio watch with the call sign VO1JO. The keeper at Cape Race, he told me, was the first land station to receive the SOS of the sinking TITANIC.

Back then, mariners depended on more than the beacon being there. Like the pale blue light of

distant island earth, all lights were lived in, kept, not remotely controlled from afar. A tower was built under the light and houses were built next to towers. A keeper was always nearby. The light was a home, an extension of domestic architecture, another odd-shaped room in a simple house where brass was polished, bread baked, cows milked and a watch kept. Unlike navigation lights today, the lighthouse station was designed not only to be seen, but also to see. For the keeper, the light tower was like a giant optical instrument, a watch-tower during the day, a magnificent lens and articulated light at night. Eyes and observation mattered in this place, a visual place. This fact often goes unappreciated because most people know light stations from afar, looking at the light from a boat at sea or a car on shore rather than with it like Fred Osborne.

In Maine, my family have been seasonal residents of a former lighthouse for over 15 years. Our caretaking responsibilities do not include the fixed green light itself, only cosmetic work on the tower. The Coast Guard stops by every six months for the light, which is still active and automated. Consequently, I've always felt a visitor to the tower, apart from it and its original purpose. I've often wondered how the task of tending the light affected the lives of the keepers, what they thought about, imagined. I've read first-person accounts of

keepers' lives, looked through the extensive amount of lighthouse literature and images available in the coastal bookstores and museums, but still find myself returning to the structure itself, viewed up close.

I imagine a keeper's trip into the tower late one night sometime in the 1800s, perhaps to fill or pressurize the kerosene lamp. This task had to be done every four to six hours, around the clock. The heavy door is unbolted and swings open with a creak. The tower is dark inside, still and attic-like, with a smell of machinery oil and smoke. Sounds bounce off the circular walls and echoes layer on echoes as one ascends the curved stairs. At a landing, a crack of light from the ceiling trapdoor shines on a ladder. When the trapdoor is opened, light floods downward. The keeper eventually reaches the top room, checks the flame, then adjusts the wall vents to match the wind change and keep the correct draft. The lens and the blue glass around the lamp need dusting, but that is nothing compared to the outside windows covered with moths and bugs attracted to the biggest night light around.

There is a small door to the catwalk outside, where the wind and the sound of the surf can be heard below. Outside, a few steps away, the keeper could look back. The light is green, a color that results from the yellow beam of a lamp passing through blue glass. Turning towards the darkness, the light appears reddish as the cones and rods in the eyes struggle to compensate. The green beam hangs in the faint night mist, focused by the Fresnel lens to a 15-degree arc that covers all the water except for the surf below. A light would only reveal the danger of that place.

The mind wanders for a moment, following the beam projected out. Down in the distant darkness, a passing sail of a coastal schooner provides a tiny white screen for the light to play out its colored ID. Faint voices carry with the wind. The keeper's eye sees shadows — never noticed those before — black arms radiating out, one arm for each of the catwalk's railings and each of the window supports for the glass. Walking around the tower catwalk, the keeper sees the white house next door is also bathed in green. I wonder if the keeper's hands would ever make a shadow rabbit on its wall before heading down to ring the bell. That rabbit would be two stories high.

Keepers of the 1800s were communicators in a different age, before the telegraph, the wireless, the telephone, and the age of information. Back then, communication was tied to the limits of the human body and the pace and direction of its movements from place to place. If you wanted attention you shouted, blew a horn or waved a flag. Letters were hand-delivered, carried by someone

who walked or rode a horse or a train. News was understood in context, usually local and relevant. Hardly ever was it trivial. People paid attention to it, because it was accompanied by other people. Every message had a messenger. A lighthouse keeper was an extraordinary messenger with a singular goal: keep the light lit. To this end, each keeper was dedicated.

Along with the light stations, the keepers have attracted a good deal of attention from those romantics in love with the sea. Solitude, adventure and a unique positioning at the shoreline have everything to do with this. The light stations, whether they be coastal on a mainland peninsula, among the islands, or further out still on a rock, were always the gateway through which dreams of escape to the open sea could pass. As the energy of these dreams passed on to the keepers themselves, the question arises: Of what must those gatekeepers have been made? How did they remain calm in the storm, prepared for being cut off from supplies, with the imperative of keeping the light burning organizing their life? Eternal vigilance is the price of safe navigation, and the keepers paid the price.

Born in an age when lights were powered by the flames of a whale oil lamp and ships were powered by the wind, these aids to navigation marked a coastal waterway that was the only Interstate of the day. By the late 1970s, however, the situation in almost all the Maine stations had changed. Keepers packed their trunks with tools, paint and polish and walked down to the boats, leaving their towers and houses behind like outgrown shells. These shells had capacity, but no longer any purpose. The age of sail had passed. Most coastal traffic had moved ashore. Lights became powered by a generator or by the mainland electrical grid. Initially, the keepers' houses were boarded up and minimally maintained by Coast Guard commanders with a strong nostalgic attachment to the stations. Gradually, a few became used as research stations, museums or parks. Many years into the future, an archaeologist uncovers a primitive structure along a shoreside cliff. A signaling cairn of some sort, a few thousand years after the Druids and Stonehenge. A Promethean attempt to bring the fire of the stars to earth. A time when the ocean was important and central to people's lives. What will that archaeologist understand then, and what understanding will he have lost? Attention is then turned skyward to remote travel to distant planets, where stars are once again navigational aids. Looking back, the blue light remains. The magic of the light station is understood, perhaps, forever.

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