

My Mother and the Light Station at Cape Beale

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WHEN I WAS FIVE, MY MOTHER, MINNIE—sick with the cough that choked out her life—sat me at the kitchen table. The oilcloth was slick like the dark counters and cupboards, licked by the grease of machinery. The room smelt of lye. We darned socks with needles and wool and practised speaking. In the muddle, Minnie slipped into my apron pocket the gift of words. Words like shiny beads. Words that she jingled in her own secret pocket. There weren't enough ears at Cape Beale for her to give them to: my father, Thomas; Lee, then a baby; and me. So they slipped out. She mumbled as she scrubbed the floor of the engine room or skinned a chicken.

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HER HAIR SPREAD THICK AS OIL ACROSS THE PILLOW SLIP. She dreamed. The dream was cool, cooler than the sea spray that wicked off the rocks and onto the red shingles of the house. In her dream, Minnie pulled a canoe over stones slippery with seaweed or sharpened by colonies of barnacles. She smelled decay. The wind, loaded with moisture, licked their faces: hers, Isabel's—one of the few women who visited the lighthouse—and Joe's, an Indian who once paddled with Minnie the five-mile journey from Bamfield to Cape Beale. Isabel started the fire. She crouched where beach met forest. Her wide, frank lips twisted, but Minnie couldn't figure the words. The sky thickened with rain. Joe fashioned beds from blankets and branches beneath trees that looked too thin. Minnie's small bones pinched with cold. Wind tilted her head back, black hair whipping her eyes. Those eyes, dark as a charcoaled stick pulled from the fire. Minnie heard the smack then drag of surf against a distant rock. At that moment the dream took on a precision, a sensation she would recall long after waking, after wading waist-deep through numbing waters, after receiving recognition from the federal government of Canada (imagine!).

She would recall the swirl of her brain when wave met rock and wind confused her dreamed hair and she felt the sensation of falling, or flying, or drowning, or swimming deeper as prickles scurried along her spine. Then reality pressed. A stone set on her chest. The weight of Thomas lowered her to white-washed walls, windows warping with wind, a crack in the beam that needed to be mended before Gaudin came to inspect, and her husband's large face staring into hers. His jowls—twin lumps of fat below his chin—swung close to her head.

He fumbled with the sheets and began to strip the bed, his forehead a knot of concentration. She wanted to slap his soft front, force him away from her cave, her dreams, her clarity.

The horn moaned. Fog had dropped to confuse their stretch of coast. Perhaps I heard it, curled in my short bed. My brain roused, then slipped. Thomas's fingers found Minnie's wrist. The circle they made was rubbery like the yolks of cold fried eggs, but strong as the bracelet he had given her the previous year on the anniversary of their marriage. He'd fashioned it from piping torn, then discarded, from the engine room.

"The light's out?" she whispered. "Oh Lordy, please not a ship, please nothing blowing toward those rocks. That I could not do." She imagined her own mam, Kathleen, when Mackie—her da, my long dead grandpa—used to pull her from bed on those icy Alberta mornings; a cow with colic, a mare giving birth.

"A real lady," Mackie would say to strangers—his voice thick with Irish—as if the word "lady" was a china egg cupped in his palm.

Minnie understood a bit of what it was to be a lady, the uncomplaining riser at odd hours of the night, the comforter, the giver of bladders of hot water or cups of tea, the speaker. "The words of a lady swirl, slide past," Minnie explained to me before I was old enough to think metaphorically. Words are currents of the tide, unseen, with the power to pick up and move entire sandbars or colonies of crabs. Minnie piped music with her words. A tune that kept her husband hopping, hid the way her mind entered and exited lady socials, church picnics, and volunteer boards before accepting that reality for her was endless solitude, endless wind, endless polishing of the light, the floors, the brass fixtures.

Cold air rushed down the neck of Minnie's nightgown and pulled tight as a man's belt around her middle. Her stomach sucked further into itself, that vulnerable organ—too thin, Thomas reckoned. Her feet in Thomas's woolies thumped the floor. The cougar tooth zipped across the chain around her neck, the rub sparking with heat. She'd shot the cougar as a girl in Alberta, outside the cabin in the bush. Her da had soldered the sharpest fang onto the gold chain, the one that knocked the space high on her chest.

When I was seven years old, in the wet cemetery outside Bamfield, before they lowered Minnie's body into the earth and folded it back over her, the last glimpse I caught was not of the still body but a flash of gold, the sparkle of the chain, the tooth, oblong and dull.

Every tenth second the beam from the lighthouse swung past the window, which bent and groaned as wind rammed it. A flash. The bedroom lit grey-blue,

like the sea on a cloudy day, most days. Thomas: his hair falling forward, his chin against his chest as his hand disappeared into the cradle. The baby hushed. Her husband “had a way,” Minnie often said. Minnie’s bladder swelled and pushed other organs. A flash of liquid blue. Thomas’s hand, too thick where the thumb joined on, reached for her, palm up. The flesh was hot. “The wind’s blowing faster than a freight train,” he said. “A ship’s floundering”—the fog horn bellowed. “She’s tipping. I think we have to”—another blast.

“I dreamed wind,” Minnie said, but her words disappeared beneath the bellow of the horn. “Naturally I would.” Thomas moved toward the door. Minnie imagined her mam, her ivory nightgown, her way of walking as if the air weighed heavily on her shoulders. Minnie often recalled her mother. In the year to follow, after the balance of the family shifted, Minnie thrust bits of this woman into my hands, this Kathleen who, when she died, left the role of woman behind like a starched frock that Minnie pulled around her narrow bones. But it sagged. She tried to pin it together with words, round-headed wires with tips to draw blood, as she struggled to maintain her family, her sanity, her husband’s job, the softness about him like liquid soap.

Minnie followed Thomas through their bedroom door, into the tiny kitchen, and out the back. Rain flung in gusts of wind, hard then soft. The surf roared. It screamed against the rocks below the cliff that dropped just yards from the lighthouse. The air smelt sharp, spiced by salt from the tossing sea and pine from the swinging trees. Different from the soft scent of haying days in Alberta when spores of wheat hang in the air, pulling the breeze to stillness. Minnie’s short arms lifted with the wind that blew to the cliff east of the tower. Her nightgown inflated. A white cloud. She could float, rush with the wind over upset seas. Her chest vibrated as sound moved through her, rolling to her lips. Thomas turned. His eyes drooped at the bottoms, heavy with pleading. Minnie swallowed. She found his hand and touched his wide forehead, wet with rain. The horn moaned. The tower raced up the sky above them, disappearing into clouds. Only the light cut through. The long sweeping light that beamed over rocks, shifted, lit trees, shifted, revealed the house, shifted, showed darkest seas, shifted, started over.

The doorknob beat against Minnie’s palm. The hinges whispered high-pitched complaints, and she reminded herself to attend to that. A little oil would do. They were out of extra fixtures—hinges, knobs, faucets, and screw taps. Everything rusted before you could scream, “Ship on the rocks.” The rain licked and licked until metal bled orange.

The lantern that hung from the ceiling cast a burnt glow over the table cluttered by maps and charts for the documentation of weather, ocean activity, and daily chores. Minnie found them tedious. Her back ached when she perched on the stool, her fingers cramped around the pencil. Thomas found solace in the stroke of lead on the neat rows and stacked columns. The shaft of a telescope pointed toward a window facing out to sea. Beside that was a squat door and beyond that, the neck of the lighthouse. The mingled smells of metal and oil touched Minnie's face and settled in a film on her lips. The cement floor chilled her feet through the wool socks, now wet.

"Northwest. I figure I can handle this," Thomas said. "But then telegraph's down." Shadows settled in the grooves of his face.

Minnie's wits were thick with sleep. That's what she hissed at Thomas for the year to follow over lukewarm dinners cooling on their plates as they quibbled over the details; whose fault where, whose triumph when. Their children—a dark girl and a dark boy—watched, silent.

At that moment, Minnie said, "Remember when we first came here, the romance, the ways? Too often, probably." Her eyes partly closed, as they did when she slipped her hands, sleeves rolled back, into hot soapy water. Thomas would remember her question into old age—at first angrily, for Minnie's disregard of the situation; later with gentle pity; and finally, his elderly limbs wasted without evidence of their former flesh, with love, with wonder.

He rocked his head. "Skin over my chest's tight." He breathed carefully.

"The turret of the tower was exciting then." Minnie gazed out the window into darkness.

Thomas cupped the shaft of the telescope. His thick lids slid half-shut. His lips pursed, trouble forgotten in the moment of contact with the slippery finish of the device—a machine that used perplexing concepts and befuddling ideas to produce tangible results. He loved mechanisms; trucks, clocks, coils, screws, tongs, hammers, and thingamabobs that strummed together, beat each other to make more than grinding noises and metallic smells but light, or sound, or motion. Or with the telescope, sight. Minnie touched the scope as she moved to its peephole. And they were connected, Minnie and Thomas, the apparatus between them cooler than rain. Thomas's lip drooped. His face folds of softness, the eyelids, the cheeks, the chin, the jaw line. Minnie wanted to bury her hand, herself, inside his folds, test the depth of him. Gratitude landed like a sparrow in her brain. Grateful that the wind hadn't chiselled him, formed a harder man. For all her sparseness of body, she shielded him and he curled inside, a clam, stuck by softness, at times too tight.

It may have been behind the Hope schoolhouse—where they met at a community picnic—near the creek in the grove of grass. The chatter of men and ladies, the screams of children, audible over the bubble of the stream. No one noticed them slip away, chicken and potatoes unfinished on their plates. Or maybe in the cab of the monstrous truck Thomas used to haul goods from Vancouver to the tiny towns that dotted the rest of the province—on the bench seat, parked on a logging road outside Hope, far from the schoolhouse and Minnie’s pupils. Either way, his tongue brushed the roughness above her lip. She found the luxury of his chest, the unthrifty use of flesh and skin. Their bodies yarn, they knit.

“I’m asking,” he began—his cheeks floundered, searched for the shape of the words to give form to his intent—“I’m asking for you to figure this one, Minnie, ‘cause I don’t see any steps to take.” He tapped the tube with three fingers. The foghorn. A gust of wind pushed the door against the wall. They’d forgotten to close it. Later, Minnie said this is when she gained clarity, a sensation of the magnitude of events: when the doorknob cracked the wall and wind burst into the room.

“You should have told me instantly,” she said and wrenched the telescope from his grip. It swung hard to the left.

“It was placed perfectly. Perfectly positioned.” He moved to the eye of the scope and swung the tube into place, while his other hand readjusted the focus knob.

Minnie tucked the viewfinder against her eye socket. She saw a circle, dark all around. The form of a ship. A ragged sea. The horn moaned.

She sucked air into her chest and existed inside herself. But a bit slipped out. She whispered, “Telegraph down. Saints alive, saints alive.” (An epitaph she’d murmur later in the delirium induced by her illness.) She saw the faces of the men who, four months ago, had staggered through the picket fence. “Whiter than the robe of Gabriel,” Minnie had said that summer as her paintbrush licked the gate in one final stroke. So white against dirty bodies. Their coats and pants were wet and stuck with mud and leaves, evidence of their trek through wilderness to our door.

Minnie’s lips whispered an endless trail of words, but not enough to guide anyone home, lift those men and women on the sinking ship, the *Coloma*, off the rocks, from the sea. The two parts of her—one figuring, one retreating—travelled in opposite directions.

Four months earlier, the *Valencia* had filled with water and joined the seabed. Four months earlier, men—wet, dirty, ragged men, most sailors—had walked

across our cut grass. The first one had moved to take off his hat. Patted his head then realized it was bare. "Minnie. Minnie," he'd said. His words had dwarfed her. Fred Lancomb. She'd poured him coffee seventy-seven times. Her hands, wet with soap, red from heat, had wrung her tea towel into a cord. I must have hung behind her, my face and fists full of calico skirt, or crouched on the porch, two hands on the slippery beam. Thomas would have stood on the path, swung his watch on a chain like he always did.

A small man in an oversized coat at the back of the group of four men had dropped onto the grass. "You're so soft, lady," the wee fellow had said, his fingers tangling in the green. His torn coat had slouched forward, a child in need of mending. "Dammit all to the surf, eh?" He had laughed softly. His mates parted. We stared, unmoving as he sang: "Down, down, down, down, she's deep, she's deep, ohhh, she's deep." He had paused, looked straight at Minnie, and said, "They'll likely be dead by now, Miss."

Fred had spread his hands, compact and graceful, like twin butterflies as they extended. "The *Valencia*. We're the only ones made it to shore. We need to telegraph or she'll be their coffin."

The little man—named Joshua we learned later—had looked up. His fingers ceased tearing our feathery lawn. Green flecks twinkled on his thighs. When he spoke his words were plain, well-chopped kindling stacked in neat rows. "She's a passenger ship, as you likely know. We were bound for Victoria. The damn fog plugged up the coast and the capt'n missed the Strait. We ran into shallow waters and she split her belly on the seabed. Two lifeboats full of women and children overturned, all dead. We're strong swimmers all, but that's not what did it. We were pushed by the hand of God to you."

Minnie's insides had splintered. For all his measured words, Minnie detected the manner in which something slipped in the man's heart and went skidding to a plane of blackness, and she was there to catch his head in her lap and feel the slickness of his hair with her chin as she knelt on the green lawn beside the temperate rainforest, wedged against the coldest ocean that, miles away, toyed with 117 men, children, and women.

This is the scene Minnie now recalled as she pressed the telescope over one eye. In the year to follow, as her bones lost density and her skin stretched thin as bumblebee wings, she lay semi-prone on the couch and explained the memory, connecting the two shipwrecks while I spread hot, wet strips of linen across her chest to coax out the illness.

Later, after the fanfare over Minnie's heroism subsided, Thomas would grumble over the slowness of her response. How she stared for minutes through the telescope, trying to make sense of the form on the ocean, a scene that he had understood in seconds.

Now Minnie lifted her head, her hair black around her face, over her shoulders. She paused. One of her eternal pauses, the type she made while considering which chicken to kill, where Thomas left his pocket watch, how to best remove an oil or salal-berry stain. She thought of her mam, her quick decisions, made before she could raise an eyebrow, which she inevitably did upon choosing. And the words dropped from Minnie's lips: "The *Quadra*'s moored in the harbour not far from Bamfield. If word can be brought, she can surely save the lives of those aboard the ship."

Thomas's face showed no comprehension. Its heaviness responded slowly, but his brain, with its quickness for understanding the way things work, comprehended. Before Minnie died, curled under flannel sheets on the sofa, Thomas wondered why his mechanical mind never drummed up the solution, then ventured that perhaps it had.

Minnie touched the thickness of her husband's shoulder. She stared into his eyes, and he into hers. In 1906, men and women rarely said, "I love you." They just looked. Minnie's feet slapped the concrete floor. She dragged Thomas's slippers out from under the big table with one toe. Thomas bounced his words about the small room: "Fitting I should stay behind. If something occurs down at the rocks they'll likely need a man on land with some strength behind him. Take the lantern." Minnie peeled off her wet socks. The insides of the slippers tickled the tops of her feet and she almost laughed, the absurdity of the situation catching her in its hook. Her in a nightgown, a slicker, and Thomas's slippers as Thomas justified, explained away the oddity of their roles.

And so she shuffled down the dark path that looped and twisted to the sea. Maybe she thought of her mother, or maybe her children. Her boy, no bigger than the length of her arm, elbow to wrist, curled under blankets; maybe he slept, maybe screamed, maybe choked, his pink chest constricting, then losing tension, becoming slack without life. Her girl, who sat on her mother's bed like a stone; her eyes closed as she imagined she was tucked in the wide-lipped pocket of her mother's apron.

How often I wished I were next to Minnie, the smell of her body like licorice root, the sound of her cotton dress like moving leaves.

Maybe she did think of me as she picked down the rooted path. Prior knowledge of its gullies and grooves guided her step, the slippers soaked through, heavier than she'd intended. The trees swayed with the wind, pushed her toward a destiny. She moved out of the eye of the tower. The moan of the horn sounded louder than waves, battering her temples. The air pressed her arms and legs. She touched the cat's tooth beneath her nightgown and felt the familiar energy.

Water covered the strand of beach that connected the light station to the mainland. High tide. Minnie pushed off the path. Underbrush scratched her jacket, pushed up the nightgown and poked her legs. The rowboat, usually burrowed between two trees, was gone. The imprint on the pine needle-strewn ground—a square, rounded at one end—remained. Minnie fought to the water's edge and sank a slippered foot into black liquid. Cold attacked, gnawing the fine bones of her ankle, charging up her leg. The chill of the Pacific waters could drown a man in seconds, suck the air from his lungs as it suffocated him. Minnie waded. Water covered her knees and swam to her waist. The nightgown floated around her middle, her centre. And here's where she chose, looked up to the sky and saw no stars, nothing. Her chances, choices, whirled with the rising tide. Breath blew from her body in soft gasps. She didn't speak, but watched the essences of her life flash like phosphorescence in the sea. The cougar's tooth cut against her hard chest. A prickle, something like chance, scurried over her skin. Maybe the moon flashed for a second or maybe the wind gusted. Opportunity floated like a rowboat, to drift, to leave, to escape the metal bracelet of her husband's grip, the scream of her child, the weight of Joshua's head in her lap. She didn't linger long. The moment was quick as a shooting star, which slows with time, streams more clearly, more deliberately, with the weight of memory tied to its tail. Long ago, I decided she felt an ache in her breast. The milk stirred. A pang for her baby. Duty to her children, to return to them complete, untouched by sorrow, prodded her onward. Only now, with age and greater knowledge of life to confuse me, I decide: she saw the pliant face of my father, unmarred.

Her feet gripped the sliding pebbles of the ocean floor, and she pushed off. She continued unaware that her husband would grow to resent her fame, her success, her popularity with the press, and eventually withdraw into himself, his body a shell. Her own body would never recover from the physical taxation of that night's trek for help. But with her healthy frame half in the Pacific, half piqued by an offshore wind, opportunities slid past, a glittering school of fish that brushed her bare legs and set them shivering, churning forward.

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OUT MY KITCHEN WINDOW, THE SUN SINKS BELOW THE HORIZON, which stretches straight as the sea on a calm day. I cup the metal bracelet. The sharp edge digs into the flesh of my palm. I don't return it to the tin with the rusted seam, but slip it into my apron pocket. Its weight pulls the cotton as I move across the worn linoleum and pause in the doorway. My husband Conrad's head slumps against the back of his chair. His feet make a V on the coffee table. I slide the almanac off his lap. The pages slip thin as tissue. Scrolling a finger down one column, I feel the choices spark and think of my mother and I hope I've got some of it right. At least a piece of her. Wind batters the house, eliciting a groan from the old frame. I open the front door and step out onto the porch; wind tips my head, freezes the passages of my nose. My earth, my universe spin, the colours blurred and confusing, and in the centre is a fuzzy form that won't remain still, but slides a little to the right, a little to the left, her hair slick like oil.