

The Watchtower

Laten Cecil

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1. Glass

He worked the cloth soft against his palm. Then he put it to the glass. A cloth that had gone stiff overnight would smear, and a smear had to be done again, and doing it again was time he had already spent. Below the glass the road lay out across the flats with water still standing on it. He did not look at that yet. He had been thinking since he woke about being sat down with nothing in his hands by the time it got light. He could not have said why.

He did the glass before anything. When it went the view went, and the view was the whole of the job.

Eight panes on the watch floor, and one of them above the door. The salt was on all of them, always. It came up out of the flats in the damp and it set hard in the cold, and there was yesterday's salt still in pane one, set overnight and there a good while before that.

He worked at it and it did not come clean. It came off gray and moved about under the cloth and settled again a hand's width along.

He stood back and looked at what he had made. He could do this one pane properly and leave the other seven with today's salt on them and yesterday's underneath it, which

was two ages of salt on one floor, and there was no way to write that down. Or he could do all eight again.

He did all eight again.

It cost him two trips to the cistern. He went down for the water and came back up with the bucket held out from his side. The mirror on the sleeping floor had gone black years ago, where the salt got in behind it. He went on up.

The outer faces could only be got at from the head, so he went out. The stone of the parapet was rough on the seaward side and smooth where a man's hands went, and rust came down out of one of the fittings in a stain two fingers wide. The wind had nothing to break it out there. He got the outer faces done with his arm through the rail and the cloth going stiff again in his hand while he worked.

The bell was up there. He looked at it. The clapper was lashed, which was all procedure asked for.

His leg went on him on the stair, three or four steps from the top. He stood and waited for it and went on down.

By then he was ten minutes behind, and the day had not had ten minutes in it. He did not put it that way. He went to see about the sweep.

He meant to take the ten minutes back off the afternoon. The sweep was four times a tidal day, and it could not be hurried and it could not be split in half, because a half of

it was not a thing the log could take. Eight panes, and a count of forty at each, and then the next one, and round.

He started at the pane above the door. The road toward the shore was in pane one, and everything that ever came to him came up that road, and he gave it the forty and moved on. The flats were in pane two, and the birds on them, thin calls going out over the water. He counted through the ones that held nothing but weather.

The road going out was in pane five, and the far light with it, every night he had been here. By day there was nothing to look at. He counted anyway, because four sweeps a tidal day was four sweeps a tidal day. A third post lay further out, past the second post. He had never seen a light in it.

The daylight went before the work did. He was at pane six when he could no longer properly count what he was counting, so he went and lit the lamp and finished by it. The oil was measured out to the month and he knew the figure. Lighting it now took a little over an hour off the far end of the month, and he would find that hour somewhere else. It was the only way the sweep got done correctly.

The manual was on the desk where it lived, open at the page it had been open at for a fortnight.

The glass shall be observed in numbered order for a count of forty at each pane.

A sweep is entered as done or not done.

4. Sound from seaward at slack water shall be reported.

5. Birds rising together after dark shall be reported.

7. Water standing on the road at an hour when the table shows it dry shall be reported.

8. Any pane fogging from the outside shall be reported.

The watchman shall not attempt to determine the nature of the occurrence.

Which was sensible. If he decided for himself what a thing was, he would write down what he had decided instead of what he had seen, and then the record would be worth nothing to whoever came after it. It had never had to be applied to anything.

He did the log with the lamp pulled over. The tide went in to the minute, and the hour, and the weather, which was yesterday's. Field seven was headed nature of occurrence. He left it as he had left it every day since he came here, and as it had been left before him. Field eight was the reading at the post gauge. No gauge had ever been fitted to his tower, and the manual said that where no gauge was fitted he was to enter nil, so he entered nil. He had no idea what a post gauge was or what it would have told anybody. Field nine was his initials.

C126, tide 51,108

7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

At dusk he was still up there with the cloth, doing the last two panes the second pass had cost him, and the lamp going since the middle of the afternoon.

He began the evening sweep on time. He was in pane two, counting, when a red light came up in pane one, which he had already done.

He lost the number. It was moving water he had been counting and there was no way back into it. Starting again would be counting different water, and there was no line in the log for a count that had nearly been right. There was done, and there was not done. He entered it as done and did not mark it.

The red light was low down on the road, and it was turning. He watched it come, and it took a long time about it, and the engine arrived somewhere behind it and went on for a long while more. Then the engine stopped, and there was a man getting out below.

His hand had gone back onto the glass while he watched. He noticed it there.

He finished the pane he was on. He put the cloth in his pocket and went down. The glass was not finished.

By the time he got the door open the crates were already off and standing on the wet rock, and Amos had one of them up on his shoulder. Nothing in the procedure covered arriving late at his own door. He stood in it a moment and then went out.

“Emmet. Road’s not bad today.” Amos got the crate settled and jerked his chin back at the dark behind him. “Worse last month, mind you — there was a stretch out by the second bend I thought I’d be walking.”

“You’re twenty minutes ahead of the water.”

“Am I.” Amos looked pleased about it, and carried the crate in past him. The cold came through the door after it, and the wet off Amos’s coat, and the tower had a second man in it.

Amos had got his hair cut since last month, and his collar was flat, and his boots had been done. His hands were bare and red with the cold. His mustache was the one thing on him out of order.

The cloth was still in the watchman’s pocket and the last pane upstairs was still wet, and neither of them said anything about that either.

They carried. Two of them made it four trips instead of nine. The plums came off with the second load, a few of

them knotted up in a cloth, off a tree at Amos's house. Amos set them on the table with the rest. Neither man said anything about them.

The rest of it went where the plan said it went, and the plan had put everything at a different height. Lamp oil down to the stores floor, where the damp was, because that was where the plan had put the food and the fuel both. Preserved food after it, stacked off the wall. A little fresh that would be gone inside the week, and that went up two floors to the living floor, because the stove was there. Matches, candles, soap, cloth for the glass. A packet of forms and amendments, which went up two more, to the desk. The stair was most of his day and it was most of this, too. The list had no fishing rod on it and never had, and he had never put in for one.

He had the manifest in his hand and he went down the list with it, item by item, against what was standing on the floor, the way he did every month.

Lamp oil, four.

Preserved, one case.

Fresh, as available.

Matches. Candles. Soap.

Cloth, glass, two.

Forms and amendments, one packet.

Countersigned at the depot: R.L.T.

Everything on it had come off. It always had.

“Third from the top,” he said, when Amos went at the stair with the case. “Don’t put your weight on the middle of it.”

Amos stopped and put his boot on it and felt it give. “How long’s it been like that?”

“A while.”

Amos took the stair slower after that, and on the way back down he came off the third tread onto the fourth without being told, and did it again the next trip, and the trip after that.

Then the work ran out.

He took the crate, because there was one chair. It was standard-issue and it was built for one man. There was no line anywhere for a visitor, and a man could not ask for what the plan did not have. Amos sat in the chair with his legs out. Neither of them had ever said a word about it.

Two cups. One of them was issued and the other had come from somewhere, and neither of them had ever said anything about that either. The plums sat on the table where they had been put down.

Amos talked. He talked about a roof at Whittam’s that had wanted doing for two years and had finally been done, and done wrong, by a man who had come

recommended. Whittam's boy would not settle to anything. He had been put to three trades and had come out of all three, and he would come right in the end, probably, they mostly did.

Prices had gone up. Amos went through them one at a time, and did not seem to want anything done about any of them, and the watchman nodded where a nod would do.

He talked about a run he had made once out past the end of his own, days of it, and a house he had stopped at both ways where there was a good stove and a woman who would not take money for the second night. He talked about a dog at Sarn's yard gate that had taken against him in particular, out of everyone who used that road. It had been doing it for years.

The watchman sat on the crate with his cup and let it come. He knew none of these people and never would. Whittam had a roof and a boy. Sarn had a gate and a dog on it. Out past the end of the road it was all going on. Every month some of it got carried in here and set down with the rest of the load.

Amos put his cup on the floor by the chair. His hands with nothing in them were not quite steady, and he put one of them flat on his knee.

"Anyone else been out?" he said. "Besides me."

“Not this year.”

Amos shifted in the chair. “They ever say anything about sending someone? To spell you a week.”

The window had the dark in it and the lamp in it twice over. “Three years this eleventh month,” he said, to the window.

“Ah,” Amos said.

The watchman had asked, once, in his first year, what the watch was for. The answer came back on paper and courteous. It was not a question for the post. He had let it go, and had not thought about it since except as a thing he got wrong early and put right. Amos had asked him the same thing that year, and he had told Amos the truth, which was that he did not know. Amos had nodded and had not asked again either.

Amos was looking at the stove, and then at the table, and then at the stove.

“There’s a fella does the other run,” he said. “Tolley. Had a post on his list years and years and never once met the man. Just left it at the door and drove on. All that time.”

The watchman waited to see whether there was more of it.

“...Anyway,” Amos said.

The tide was turning by then and the docket was not signed.

They always did it last. It was duplicate and it took both hands and it could not be hurried, and Amos was late now and both of them knew it.

The watchman signed it, pressing hard for the duplicate. Amos wiped his hands down his thighs and countersigned it without reading it. The watchman read his copy through before he put it anywhere, because it was a form and forms were read. "Right," he said, and one copy went into Amos's coat and one stayed.

"Same day next month, near enough," Amos said at the door.

"The one-six-eight."

"The one-six-eight," Amos said. "Mind how you go."

He went back up. There was a pane for it and a count of forty, and that was how he watched anything. The beacon went down the road at a walking pace, with the water already over the far end of it, and a red light going along above the water. It got small, and stayed small a long time.

He put his hands in his pockets against the cold, and the cloth was still in one of them.

He filed his copy where the manual said, on the stack with the others, and entered the delivery.

C126, tide 51,109

7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

2. Level

The tower was full. The oil was down where the plan put it and the food was stacked behind it, the paper was filed, the plums sat on the table in their cloth, and there was nothing owed and nothing late and nothing wanted. By his own reckoning he was exactly level.

Low water fell about fifty minutes later than it had the day before, and fifty minutes later than that the day after, so his hours walked round the clock and were back where they started in a month. He was awake at every turn of the water whatever hour it fell on, because two of the four sweeps carried the tide entries and those had to be to the minute. He slept in pieces and never twice at the same hour. There was no clause about that and he had never looked for one.

Four sweeps a tidal day. The glass every morning. The cistern, which needed nothing and was checked anyway. The lamp at dusk and out when it got light, entered both times. The log after every sweep.

The sweep could be got through in less time than the manual gave it. He had worked that out in his first year. He had never once done it in less time.

On the night sweeps his eyes went to pane five. The far light was in it, and had been every night since he came.

The tide table lived on the desk with the manual. It had been computed years before he came and was issued in booklets, and in a gray country with no seasons in it there was nothing else that told him where he was in a year. He read it and did not check it. There was nothing to check it against, and it had never once been wrong.

Deliveries had been missed. Twice in three years, and both times the man had come the next month with the two months' stores and nothing said about it. He knew that the way he knew the count of forty.

C126, tide 51,168

7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

The months passed and the road went under twice a day and came back twice a day. Two more manifests joined the stack. Two dockets, signed and countersigned, one copy back and one filed where the manual said. The stack sat in its place and did not look any thicker than it had the month before.

The periodic return was form nine and it fell due on the schedule and he did it a week early. Name of post.

Condition of the fabric, which was fair. Stores held. The form had a box for a dependant, and he wrote the name he had always written there, in the same hand as the rest, and went on to the next line and finished the form and filed it.

C126, tide 51,228

7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

By the third week of a month he was ahead of everything. He got further ahead. He did the things that were due and then the things that would be due, and then there was a stretch of days with nothing in them that anybody had asked for.

The dunlin worked the flats in the hour before the water turned, in flocks that went up and came down all together, and their calls were thin and carried a long way in the wet air. He knew the hour they would be there. They kept to it, and the months they went early there was weather behind them.

He fed them. He took a handful of meal out of the stores and put it out on the flat rock outside the door, and stood back from it, and they came down for it in about a minute. He never entered it. There was no field it would

have gone in, and he did it in the hour the road was under, when nobody could have been on it.

Then there was the shelf.

It stood on the living floor, and with the stove ticking as it heated and the wet running down the outside of the window, he could stand at it as long as he liked.

The volumes on it were bound and they were not his. They went back decades and they were full of other men's handwriting, and he had read all of them in his first year to learn the job and he read them still. He knew their hands. This one had pressed hard enough to mark the page under. This one never crossed a seven. This one made his fours with a flat top, which was not wrong, and which he had never got used to. He could tell one from another with the volume open at any page and the initials covered.

One of them, about forty back, he admired. The entries in it were perfectly even, every day, for twelve years, and the hand never once got tired.

The shelf had been built to hold a set number of volumes, and the room left in it was visible from the doorway. He had never worked out how many years that was. It was where the next man's would go.

He put the volume back square with the others and went up to do the sweep.

The delivery came on the month's biggest low water, which fell late, so it was dark. The engine came on for a long while, and the beacon came down the road red and turning in the wet, and then the engine stopped and it was Amos on the rock with a crate on his shoulder, saying the road was fine and the water was slower coming back than it had been.

The damp was in the stores. It had got up the wall behind the preserved food and into the bottom row of what was stacked there. The watchman found it with a crate in his arms, and set the crate down, and went at it. The manual had a clause for it. Where the stores are affected by damp, the affected portion shall be condemned and the remainder raised clear of the floor. The clause had been in the manual since before he came, and so had the plan that put the stores at the bottom of the tower, where the damp got in.

He condemned what had to be condemned. It came to about a month, and a month was inside what the clause called managed, so managed was what he entered. He and Amos got the rest of it up off the floor and onto boards. They had been doing jobs like this together for three years and neither of them said much.

Partway through it he stopped and did the manifest, because the manifest was checked against what came off and not against what was on the floor an hour later.

Lamp oil, four.
Preserved, one case.
Fresh, as available.
Matches. Candles. Soap.
Cloth, glass, two.
Forms and amendments, one packet.

Countersigned at the depot: D.V.

Everything on it had come off. The list was correct.

He had the sheet a second longer than he needed it. The initials at the bottom were the wrong shape. He read them and they were two letters where there had been three, and they were made differently, in one movement, without the pen coming off the paper between them.

“Whose is that?” he said. “At the bottom.”

Amos came over and looked. “Couldn’t tell you. I don’t go in — there’s a hatch round the side and a lad brings the sheets out to you.”

The watchman looked at it again.

“Is it wrong?” Amos said.

“No.”

They went back to the stacking, and got it done, and the tide was coming and Amos was in no hurry about it. The

docket was signed and countersigned and one copy went into Amos's coat and one stayed, and then the beacon was on the road with the water already over the far end of it.

Afterwards he took the stack down.

Three years of sheets, in order, because he kept them in order. He worked back through them one at a time and the letters at the bottom were the same on every one of them until the one in his hand. R.L.T. on the first he had ever taken in. R.L.T. on all of them since. He went through the whole stack, which took an hour he had not planned to spend, and he was careful, and he was right.

Then he got the manual down and went looking.

There was a clause for damp in the stores and a clause for the lamp and a clause for a pane cracked in its frame, and a clause about the bell, and a clause for what to do with a form that had been replaced by a form with a different number. He read it through, which took the rest of the evening, and there was nothing in it anywhere about a change of hand on the paper.

He wrote the date on the manifest and put it on the stack with the others. The stack was a finger thicker than it had been a year ago.

3. Paper

C126, tide 51,348

Delete and substitute.

The glass shall be observed in numbered order for a count of forty at each pane.

A sweep is entered as done or not done.

1. Movement on the road not accounted for by the table shall be reported.
2. A light not accounted for shall be reported.
3. Not in this issue.
4. Sound from seaward at slack water shall be reported.
5. Birds rising together after dark shall be reported.
6. Not in this issue.
7. Water standing on the road at an hour when the table shows it dry shall be reported.
8. Any pane fogging from the outside shall be reported.
9. Any person on the road other than the bringer shall be reported.
10. Loss of the far light for more than one night shall be reported.

11. The bell sounding when it has not been rung shall be reported.

A report shall be made at the time of observation.

A report shall be made on a form, and not entered in the log.

The condition shall be reported by its number.

Where a condition is reported, the sweep shall be completed as usual.

The watchman shall not attempt to determine the nature of the occurrence.

Periodic return, form nine. Received.

Manifest, countersigned. Entered.

Stores condemned for damp, managed. No action is required of the post.

C126, tide 51,408

1. Form nine, the periodic return, is superseded.

2. Form fourteen is the current form.

3. It is required that the current form be used.

4. Stocks of the superseded form shall not be used.

5. Stocks of the superseded form shall be retained.

Manifest, countersigned. Entered.

Docket, one copy retained. Noted.

C126, tide 51,468

In clause six, for “shall” read “may”.

Manifest, countersigned. No action is required of the post.

C126, tide 51,528

1. Entries shall be made in pencil, grade four.
 2. Ink is not permitted in this climate.
 3. A pencil of another grade may be used where the issued grade is not held.
 4. A bell from the post seaward shall be acknowledged by the post inward ringing back.
 5. Pages shall be numbered in the top outer corner.
 6. Numbering shall run continuously through a volume.
 7. A new volume shall begin at page one.
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Manifest, countersigned. No action is required of the post.

C126, tide 51,588

Manifest, countersigned. No action is required of the post.

4. Fog

He watched the fog come in over the flats. The road went under it the way the road went under water, from the far end inward, so that for a while there was a tower and a rock and nothing at all between them and the shore.

Then a color in it. Not a light yet, a red that the fog was holding, moving at the pace a man walks. The engine came on under it and ran for its ten minutes.

He was at the door before it stopped. The bolt was already back.

“Emmet.” Amos came up off the rock with a crate against his chest and his coat already dark at the shoulders. “It’s filthy out there.”

“You’re late.”

“I am.” He got the crate up onto his knee and shifted his grip on it.

The window was short and getting shorter. Low water had been and gone while the fog was coming in, and the far end of the road would start taking water inside two hours, and both of them knew the figure without saying it. The watchman worked at the speed the window wanted,

which was his own speed anyway. Amos did not. He set a crate down and said something about the second bend, and picked the next one up, and stopped halfway to the door to get his coat straight, and the load took longer than it had any business taking.

The watchman noticed it. It was Amos, and Amos was not a deviation.

The stores stayed on the floor they came in on. The paper went up, and the stair took the watchman twice, and his leg went on him on the way, high on the outside of the thigh. It had always done that. There was nothing that had happened to it and nothing to be done about it, and he had never had it looked at, because having it looked at was not on any list he held.

One of the tins had a lid gone tight with salt. He took the knife out of the pocket it lived in. It was a small flat thing with an embossing on the side, worn smooth where a thumb went. He levered the lid off, and wiped the blade down his sleeve before he folded it and put it back.

He worked the manifest down at the table with Amos still in the room, as he had forty times and more.

Lamp oil was two short. He wrote the notation against the line.

A quantity of the preserved stores was short, and he had to go and count what was there, because he could not

have said from memory what was on the second shelf, and he opened it every day. He counted it twice and came back and wrote the second notation.

The third was the replacement tide table, which was due this year and was marked not held.

He went up for the current booklet and brought it down and checked it while Amos watched, and did not take long about it. There were about sixty tides left in it. That was a month. A delivery came in a month. He wrote the notation against the line and moved on to the fuel, and it was the fuel he sat with.

“They’ve had it short at the depot,” Amos said. “Two months running now. Load comes as it comes. I’d have said something if I thought it would help.”

“It’s noted. Three lines. That’s the procedure for it.”

“There was a stretch, years back this’d be, where they missed two clean. Both fine. Fella before you never said a word about it.” He turned his cup round on the table.

“Then it has happened before.”

“It has.”

Lamp oil, two. Noted short.

Preserved, part case. Noted short.

Fresh, as available.

Matches. Candles. Soap.

Cloth, glass, two.

Tide table, replacement. Not held. Noted.

Forms and amendments, one packet.

Countersigned at the depot: D.V.

He read the manifest through before he put it anywhere. It was a form, and forms were read. The letters at the foot were the two he had been getting for seven months now. No action is required of the post. He did not go and look at the stack.

Then it was the part of the day that was not work.

The stove was in and the room was warm at one end of it. Amos sat down in the chair, heavily, all at once, and the watchman took the crate.

Amos was sixty-six and had been driving the tidal road since he was fifty-one. He put his boots out toward the stove, and he had never once dried out properly in the tower, because he arrived damp and the fire was only ever going for three hours.

The watchman filled the two cups.

“Early for them.” Amos put the cloth bundle on the table and opened the corners of it. “They’ll want another few weeks yet. Brought them anyway.”

The plums went on the table with the rest. There had been plums last year, at about this point in the going round of it, and now there were plums again. That was two. He had never asked for them and would not have. There was no line anywhere for fruit off a tree at somebody's house, and he did not ask for what could not be got.

"That's good of you," he said, which was not thanks and was not taken for it.

They talked about the weather, which was what they talked about first. It was closing. The rain had gone sideways an hour ago and had not come back level.

"Road'll be tight going back," Amos said. "Coming on earlier than the book says, this month."

"It has been."

Amos looked at his cup. "You ever think about riding back with me, Emmet? Just for the trip."

"Road's under by four."

"Aye," Amos said. "That's about right."

And then the depot, because the depot was always where Amos started. A man called Cobb had gone over to the other run and was sorry about it, and had said so twice, and Amos said it twice as well in the telling.

"How long has he been on it?"

“A while now. Nine month, ten.”

“Then he has done about nine of them.”

“He has,” Amos said.

His voice filled the room. He did not bring it down indoors, and the watchman had got used to that in his first year. It was a voice for being heard over an engine. On the months the weather was bad and the talk went long, the room had a sound in it that it did not have at any other time.

The price of lamp oil had gone up and nobody at the depot could say why, and the price of what the engine ran on had not, which Amos said was the sort of arrangement that only made sense to whoever had made it. The watchman said that the figure on his own docket had not moved in three years. Amos said that was because it was a standing order, and standing orders were the last thing anybody looked at, and then he said it was a good thing too, and left it there.

Then a woman on the depot road who would not go and live with her sister, though the sister had asked her twice and the house she was in was too big for her and had been too big for her for four years. She had been born in it. That was the whole of her reasoning and she gave it every time she was asked.

“She’ll not shift,” Amos said. “You’d not get her out of it with a rope.”

“How far is the sister?”

“Twenty mile. Less.”

“Then she could see her and come back the same day.”

“She could,” Amos said. “It’s not the distance with her.”

The rain had got heavier while they were talking. It came at the window on the seaward side in bursts, and between the bursts there was the other sound, which was the water starting to come up the road, and which he heard the way he heard the stair.

A door that had never shut right had been made to shut right, Amos said. Everybody had gone through it sideways for eleven years and thought nothing of it. “Then one of the new lads said the door didn’t shut right, Emmet. Said it like it was nothing. Fella had it off its hinges the same afternoon.”

“And nobody said.”

“Nobody said. Eleven years, and it wanted a chisel and about an hour.”

The watchman put more on the fire and sat down again. The rain kept on, and for a while neither of them said anything.

“There’s a fella at the depot,” Amos said. “Been there longer than me. Won’t take a transfer. Says he’s used to it.”

“How long?”

“Twenty-odd year. Won’t take a transfer, won’t take a route nearer home, and he’s—”

He stopped in the middle of it.

The room went quiet in the particular way it went quiet when Amos stopped, which was a different quiet from the one it had the rest of the month.

“...Anyway,” Amos said.

The watchman gave it a moment in case there was more of it. A silence was a thing he had no procedure for, and courtesy was what came to hand.

“Twenty-odd,” he said. “That’s a long time in one post.”

“It is,” Amos said, and did not look up, and after a moment he said something about the other run again, and the afternoon went on over the top of it.

It had been a good afternoon, and he would have said so.

The road had started to go by the time the docket came out, and Amos was well past the hour he would have gone himself. The watchman bore down on the pen, for the duplicate. Amos dried his hands on his thighs before he

took the pen, and signed under him without reading what he was signing. One copy went into his coat. The other stayed.

Amos got up out of the chair in two movements, and stood a moment with his hand on the back of it.

“I might not be on the usual day next time,” he said at the door. “I’ll be here, mind. Just maybe not the day.”

“The seven-six-eight.”

“The seven-six-eight,” Amos said. “Mind how you go.”

The watchman went back up. There was a pane for it and a count of forty. The beacon went down the road at a walking pace, with the water already over the far end of it, and a red light going along above the water. Then the light went into the fog.

He filed his copy where the manual said, and entered the delivery.

C126, tide 51,708

7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

The room downstairs had gone cold at the far end of it and the lamp wanted seeing to before the dark came all the way in.

He washed both cups and hung the issued one back on its hook.

5. Stores

He had the stores floor clear four days before the delivery was due, the boards swept and the space set out the way the plan wanted it filled, oil at the wall and the preserved behind the oil. He had counted what was on the shelves, so that the count would be right when the crates came off. The docket book was out on the desk and squared to the edge of it.

The month's biggest low water fell in the afternoon this time and it was a long one. He had read it off the booklet a fortnight before and marked it.

On the day he did the morning sweep and the glass and the cistern, and counted the fuel down to the quarter, and then there was nothing owed until the water went.

The day was flat gray. The flats came out of the water in the order they always came out, the high ones first, and the smell came up off them, mud and weed and clean rot. The birds came down onto them and worked the edge of what was left.

The road came clear a length at a time, from the near end, about an hour after the tide started going, and it held for four hours. A man on foot could be at the shore

inside an hour of that, which was about what the beacon took.

He watched it in pane one. He gave it the forty and went on round the glass, and came back to pane one at the end of the sweep and gave it the forty. He did that four times before the water turned. The cold came off the glass at him and he did not go down to the stove. The water standing on the flats took what light there was, and the road dried in patches and went dark again wherever the wind crossed it.

It stayed a road.

The manual had no clause about how long to wait. A delivery came, or it was short, or a line on it was marked not held, and all three of those were notations with somewhere to go. Nothing anywhere said when watching stopped. So he watched until the road went under.

The hiss of it came first and the water after, and it went over the far end of the road and worked up at a walking pace, and there was no light going along above the water.

He came away from the glass and entered the day.

He looked for where it went, briefly and in order. Every one of the eleven conditions was a thing that turned up. The log had a field for the weather and a field for visibility and a field for a reading at a gauge his tower had never had, and field seven was for the nature of an

occurrence. A docket took two signatures, and the second one was not his to make.

So he wrote the entry.

C126, tide 51,768

7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

He did not put the stores floor back.

The space stayed cleared and the docket book stayed out and squared on the desk, because the delivery was next month and doing it twice was doing it twice. He passed the cleared space every day on his way down to the cistern.

Two had been missed in his own three years. Both times the stores had come double the month after, with nothing said about it on either side. And there was an older pair, from years before his own time here, that Amos had raised himself, unasked: two gone clean, both of them fine, and the man who had the post then had never said a word about it.

So it was four, and four had come right.

And Amos had said at the door that he might not be on the usual day. He had said he would be here, and that it

was just maybe not the day. He had not come on the usual day.

So there was a month to get ready in.

The last manifest came out of the stack and went where his hand would go for it, with the three notations still against the lines, oil and preserved and the tide table. Down in the stores he took the preserved off the boards in the corner where the damp had been, and looked at the wall behind, which was dry, and put it all back. The periodic return was due at the end of the month and he did it a week early, with the same name as always in the box for a dependant, and filed it. The amendments packet he read through again, and there was nothing in it he had not already done.

The weather stayed off all week. The wind came across with nothing to break it. The tower took its note out of the wind. The glass held two days longer than it usually did.

The far light was in pane five at the usual hour, small and steady in the clear air, and he counted it through and went on round. He had the stove going in the evenings, and the last sweep of the day was the cold one, and coming down out of it into the heat was the best hour there was.

The dunlin were out on the flats an hour before the turn, and they were not early, which meant there was nothing behind them. He put a handful of meal out on the flat

rock and stood back from it, in the hour the road was under.

And there was the tide work. The tide entries had to be to the minute, and two of the day's sweeps carried them, and the minute was printed on the page in front of him, so he read it off and copied it across. The reading took no longer than the copying.

At the end of the week he went for the next delivery's window, three weeks off, and turned the booklet forward to find the month.

The page was not there. He turned the last page and turned it again, and there was the back cover.

The last printed tide in the booklet was the one for that afternoon.

The replacement tide table had been on the manifest, three lines down, marked not held. He had checked the current booklet with Amos watching, and the arithmetic had come out: a month of table still in hand, and a delivery due inside the month. The delivery was the half of that arithmetic that had not happened.

He got the manual down and went looking.

It was in there. A post that could lose a page could lose a booklet, and there was a paragraph for it somewhere behind the clause about ink and the clause about

numbering the pages and the clause about beginning a new volume. It was short.

Where the table is exhausted, the tides shall be computed at the post.

The interval shall be taken from the last computed pair.

The daily lag shall be applied in whole minutes.

The result shall be entered in the field for it.

He wound out a new lead, from the packet they sent, and put a point on it with the knife, and folded the knife and put it away.

Then he worked it at the desk, in the hour before the lamp. He did the working on a loose sheet, because the working was not a record and there was nowhere it would have been filed.

The last page had two low waters printed on it. He took the interval between them off the page and carried it forward a day. He went slowly at the lag, because the lag was where a figure went wrong. It came out with a fraction on the end of it, and the clause said whole minutes, so he wrote the whole minutes down and let the fraction go. Then the carry, and the hour walked on round the clock, past midnight and back into the afternoon, and at the end of the working there was a figure.

He did not write it into the booklet. He had never written down a tide that was not already written down somewhere.

He went back four days in the booklet instead, to a pair he had not used, and worked forward from that pair to a day that was printed, and did it all again, the interval and the lag and the carry. His fingertips had gone gray against the paper by then. Then he put the two figures side by side, and one of them was printed and the other one was his.

It came out to the minute.

He wrote the figure down for the next one, and entered the day.

C126, tide 51,783

7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

Then he turned the booklet over.

The daylight had gone while he worked, and he had the lamp pulled over. The back cover had room on it, and a figure wanted the other figures round it, and if he did the month now he would not be doing it a month from now. He ruled the lines by eye. He put the dates down the left of them and the times against the dates, in his own hand.

6. Light

The night sweep went in the usual order, and he came to pane five at the usual hour, and the far light was not in it.

He gave the pane the forty and went on round and came back to it at the end, and the far light was still not there. Then he got the manual off the desk and looked the clause up, because looking it up was the thing to do.

10. Loss of the far light for more than one night shall be reported.

One night was not a condition. He read it twice for the wording and put the manual back on the desk where it lived.

The third post lay further out than the second and he had never seen a light in it. It had been dark when he came. No clause covered that and none had ever needed to, because condition ten was about a loss, and a thing that was already dark when he got here had not been lost. There was no night on which it went. He had kept the watch four years with the post beyond the second one

dark and had never filed a word about it, and there had been nothing to file.

The next night the far light was there.

So the count was nothing and began again.

Two nights gone and one back. Three gone, and one back. Then four, and then it stood two nights together and the count went back to the start.

On the nights it came on, it did not stay as long. The far light had always been in pane five for the first sweep and still in pane five for the last, every night he had been here, and now it was gone before the last sweep. He got that down as well. Then it was going before the second sweep, and then it was only in the early part of the night, and then there were the nights it did not come on at all.

He counted all of it. The threshold came up and went away and came up again, and each time the correct thing was the same, which was to watch and be sure and file nothing.

He was at the glass every night at the usual hour with the lamp out behind him, because he could not see out through glass with a lamp at his back. Putting it out took ten seconds and was entered like everything else. The watch floor was cold in the wet way that got into the cloth of a coat, and the wind came off the water with nothing between it and the glass, and the tower had its note in it.

He stood in the dark and looked at where the far light was not.

He did that for three weeks. The cold got into the coat and stayed in it, and he hung it by the stove and it was never quite dry by the evening, and he put it on damp and went up. By then he had stopped putting a hand out in the dark on the watch floor, and the glass gave him back nothing but the shape of the room behind him, and out past it the flats, and the water going out and coming in, and the place low down in pane five.

He started a tally. One line a night, dated, on a sheet he kept on the desk with the manual and squared to its edge.

One night in the second week he put the line on in the dark and dropped the pencil doing it. He went and got the lamp and lit it and got down and found the pencil under the desk, and then put the lamp out again and went back to the glass. The count for that night was not affected. Nothing asked him for it. When the condition was finally met he would be able to give the duration exactly instead of about. The sheet filled up and he started a second one and ruled it the same way.

On the night he first found pane five empty he had entered the day.

C126, tide 51,827

7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

The window came round and went. He had the docket book out and squared for it, and the road came clear twice a day and he watched it in pane one, and there was nothing on it either time.

Two was not a pattern he had a rule for, so he made one, which was to be ready for the next. The stores floor stayed as it was. It had been cleared a month already and there was no sense in clearing it twice.

The manual had a clause for stores in this climate, and the clause covered quantity as well as damp. He worked out what it gave him a day, and wrote the ration out, and put the sheet up on the stores floor where the food was, and kept to it from the first day.

The clause gave him a figure and the figure gave him a schedule, and he kept to schedules.

Working ahead on a ration meant taking the day's portion later than the schedule put it, after the second sweep instead of the first, and then after the third. The sweeps between were the long ones.

Lamp oil was stores, so the same clause covered it. He worked that one out the same evening and wrote it up

beside the other, and after that the lamp was lit later and put out sooner, which was what the manual permitted.

The knife had work every day under a ration. It stopped going back in the pocket it lived in and started staying out on the table, and the embossing on the side of it went smoother than it had been. Other things he had brought with him four years before went the same way.

And every night at the usual hour he put the lamp out and gave pane five the forty, and put a line on the sheet in the dark.

It was the time of year for the plums. There was no delivery to bring them, and there had never been a line for them on anything.

Then the dunlin did not come.

It was the wrong month for them not to come. He watched the flats for three days in the hour before the water turned and they were not on them, and then he got the manual down and checked, because birds were on the schedule.

They were on it the other way round. Condition five was birds rising together after dark, which was birds doing something. There was nothing anywhere about birds not being there.

He put the meal out on the flat rock the next day at the usual hour, and stood back from it.

He went through the manual for what covered a watchman leaving his post.

There was nothing. Not a clause refusing it and not a clause allowing it. The paper did not have it. He put the manual back and went and did the sweep.

Then the far light did not come on again.

Two nights, and then three, and then a week. The tally ran past the threshold and went on running, and somewhere in that week the question stopped being whether the condition had been met.

He was at the glass on the ninth night with the sheet in his hand, and there was no mark on it for that night.

He stood there with the sheet a while longer. More than one night was a wording that had been in the manual as long as the manual had been on the desk, and for three weeks it had described nothing at all, and now it described this. The clause fitted. He went and got the form.

The bell was in the manual too, in its own place, and he read that as well. It went on a sound from the post seaward and nothing else, and it ran to a count of forty, and it ran until somebody rang back. The far light going out had made no sound. There was nothing to ring, and the protocol asked him for nothing, and he did what it asked.

The form came out of the packet with the others. He read condition ten once more, to be sure the number he was reporting was the number of the thing he had watched. The line under the schedule said he was not to determine the nature of what he had watched, and he went no further than the number. Then he filled it in at the desk in grade four pencil, one line to a field, and the figure came off the sheet.

Condition reported: ten.
Nights: nine.
E.K.

A report went back with the bringer, and the copy stayed at the post. He read both of them through. Then he filed his copy where the manual said his copy went, and set the other one out on the desk, ready to go.

Then the day's entry.

C126, tide 51,886
7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

He put the lamp out and went back to the glass. The bell was above him on the outside of the tower, in the

weather, where it had been every night he had been here, and nothing about the evening had called for it.

Four hours of the night were left, and the count was not finished.

7. Oil

He watched the oil go down, slowly and then not at all.

The oil had been on a ration since the clause took it, and the lamp had been lit later and put out sooner every week after that, and he had entered it both times every day. There was enough in it that evening for about an hour, and the candles had gone the month before.

He got the manual down while there was still daylight to read it by, and looked.

The manual had a clause for a post with no gauge fitted, which told him to enter nil, and he had entered nil every day for four years. There was a clause for a table that ran out, and it told him how to make his own, and he had made his own. There was a clause for the far light going and coming back and going again, and he had used that one to the end of what it covered. There was a clause for stores gone damp and a clause for stores gone short.

Running out was not in the manual.

He read it through twice, because a thing he could not find the first time was usually there the second, and it was

not there the second time either. Then he put the manual back on the desk and squared it.

He lit the lamp at dusk because the manual said the lamp was lit at dusk, and he sat with it and did the things that wanted doing by it, and it went out at an hour that was on no schedule anywhere. He went down to the sleeping floor and lay there.

He went up at the hour.

No clause said he should not. The watch was the duty and the lamp was equipment, and nothing in the manual had ever put the two in the same paragraph, so there was nothing to weigh and nothing to decide. He went up the stair in the dark, which he could do, and stood at the glass and gave pane one the forty and went on round.

Nothing was lit anywhere he could see. Not in the room behind him, and not in pane five, and not on the road.

The glass was easier than it had ever been. There was nothing in it but what was outside it, and he got all eight panes done without once stopping to let his eyes get used to the dark. They had been in it since the lamp went. He noticed that, and put it in with the visibility.

The cistern got done early that day, because he was ready an hour before dawn and there was nothing else in front of him.

The tower had got bigger. That was how it presented itself. The stores floor was a long way down and the head was a long way up. The clause about fuel had covered both kinds, and he had put the last of what would burn into the lamp, where it did the most work. He went down to the sleeping floor to sleep and not for anything else. The living floor he crossed on his way to somewhere and did not stop in. What the tower came to was the stores at the bottom and the watch floor at the top and the stair between the two, and the stair had always been most of his day and was more of it now. He did not count the steps and never had. He knew them as a number of times his hand came off the rail and back on it, and the number had not changed, and what had changed was how long the same number took.

He took the stair in two goes now. He had started doing it with a crate in his arms, which was ordinary, and then he had gone on doing it with nothing in them. The second half was the worse half. His leg came in on the way up, high on the outside of the thigh, and went again, and it had always done that, and it was not a thing that got better or worse.

The ration was in its third month and he had not once been over it. There was a figure a day and he took the figure, and when the figure was in him the day went on. He had worked out in the first week that the count in the stores did not reach the next delivery at the rate the

clause allowed, so he had set his own rate under it and written that down as well, and it was the one he had written that he kept to.

The stair had a tread going soft, third from the top. He stepped over it. He did not remember starting, and he did not think of it as a thing he did.

Then, on an afternoon, there was an engine on the road.

It came up from the shore end and it ran for about ten minutes, which was the length it had always run, and the road had been under water for an hour and a half.

He was at the desk when it started. He put the pencil down and listened to it with his head up and his hands still, and it did not get nearer and it did not stop getting nearer. It was simply there, and then it was there for a while, and then it had been there for about ten minutes. He got down the stair in two goes and was at the door before it stopped, and the bolt was already back.

There was nothing on the rock.

He stood in the doorway and gave the road the forty, and there was the water going over it and the flats past that and nothing on any of it. Then he went up and gave pane one the forty, and got the form out of the packet, because movement on the road not accounted for by the table was the first condition on the schedule and the first condition was reportable.

The form took him a few minutes, and his copy went where the manual put it, and the other copy went on the desk on top of the one that had been waiting there since the far light went.

C126, tide 51,945

7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

Four days later it happened again.

The same engine, and about the same length of it, and the road was under. He did not stop at the door this time. Once was a thing heard. Twice was a second observation, and a second observation wanted a better look than a doorway gave.

He went up past the watch floor, and then up the last of it, and stopped under the hatch to get his breath back because there was no getting it back at the top. The hatch wanted both hands and a shoulder and it had wanted that since he came. He got it open and came out at the head of the tower, into the weather, above everything.

The lashing was up there at the stock of the bell where it had always been, and it had gone soft and dark in the middle where the weather sat on it. He put his hand on it

going by and did not look at it. There was no clause that said when a lashing was renewed, so there was no day on which it was due, and a thing that was never due could not be done early.

He could see the whole length of the road from up there. It came out of the water at the near end and went into the water at the far end and there was nothing on it, and nothing on the flats, and nothing at the shore that had not been at the shore all his life. He gave it the forty and gave it the forty again. It was colder up there than he had allowed for, and his hands stopped being much use to him, and after a while he came back down and got the hatch shut behind him.

The hour had gone while he was up there.

He did not write it. An entry made after the hour was not an entry made at the hour, and the difference was the whole of what an entry was for. He looked at the page and left it, and there was nothing on the schedule about a thing seen and not entered, because the schedule was about seeing.

After that he arranged the day around the hour.

The cistern and the glass and the stores count went in the morning and were done by the middle of the day. From the middle of the day he did nothing that could not be put down at once, and he was at the desk a good while

before the hour came round, and he sat there with the pencil out and waited for it.

It was not a hard rule to keep. There was not much else in the day by then. The stores count took him less time every week because there was less on the shelves to count, and the glass took what it had always taken, and the rest of the hours were his own and there was nothing in them. The entry was the thing the day was arranged around, and everything else in the day was what he did while he was waiting to make it.

And then the sweep, complete. All eight panes. Forty at each, and he did not lose the count.

He took the volume down off the shelf. There was room beside it. He set it square on the desk. He opened it at the page.

He took the pencil. He entered the tide. He entered the hour.

C126, tide 51,960

7. — · 8. nil · 9. E.K.

8. Sweep

The tower was colder than it had been and took more climbing, and he had arranged for that as well. The sweep went earlier. Everything that could be finished before the hour was finished, and what was left of the day had nothing in it but the hour.

And then the sweep, complete. All eight panes. Forty at each.

The road toward the shore was in pane one, above the door. Everything that had ever come to him had come up that road. There was silt over the surface of the road now, gray and smooth and taking the color of the flats, and weed had got in along the edges of it where the water stood longest. It had not cracked anywhere. He gave it the forty and went on to pane two.

The flats were in pane two, gray, with no shadow down anywhere on them. He counted through the ones that held nothing but weather.

The road going out was in pane five. By day there was nothing to look at. He counted it anyway.

The number stopped being there in pane six.

He was at twenty-something. He stayed at the pane and waited for the number to come back. It did not come back, and he could not get to it from either end. A count he could not vouch for was not a count. So he went back to the beginning of that pane and gave it the whole forty, and the second forty came off the part of the day he had put by so that nothing would be late.

The open water was in panes seven and eight, and there was nothing on it anywhere, and he gave them the forty each, and the sweep was done.

Then the tide, before the pencil.

He worked it at the desk on the loose sheet, the way he had since the booklet ended. The interval off the last computed pair. The lag applied to it. The carry, and the hour walking on round the clock and coming back. The lag came out with a fraction on the end of it again, and the clause said whole minutes, so he wrote the whole minutes down and let the fraction go.

He had nothing printed to set it beside. The printed pairs had run out a long way back, and every figure since then was a figure he had made.

So he worked it again, lower down the same sheet, and put the two workings alongside each other.

They agreed to the minute.

He took the pencil. He entered the tide. He entered the hour.

He squared the book. He put the pencil back in the groove along the front of the desk, where it went. Then he stood the rest of the hour at the glass. The water was coming up over the far end of the road and the weed on the road was lifting and going down with the water, and he could pick out single pieces of the weed from where he stood. Past that the flats went out level and gray as far as the weather allowed, and there was nothing on any of them.

* * *

The days after that walked round the clock as they always had, low water fifty minutes later each time, and he was awake at every turn of the water whatever hour it fell on. The cold in the tower was the wet kind. It came up out of the stone, and it was in the rooms before he got to them, and it did not sharpen and it did not let up.

The lower part of the tower had begun to smell of the flats at low water. The smell was a clean enough one and had not been in the building before. He went from the one job to the next at the speed the job took, and nothing in the tower was waiting on him. The cistern wanted nothing. He tested the water anyway, and it was sweet.

He did the glass in the morning, because the schedule put it in the morning. He made two trips to the cistern for the

water, and he stopped on the stair on both of them. Then he worked round the eight panes with the cloth. The grit came up under it, and the cloth went gray, and he rinsed the cloth out twice. The salt was heavier on the days the wind was up, and the wind was up most days now. When he had finished he could see the flats through them.

By the sweep they were white again.

There had been a time when a clean pane was a thing he could stand in front of and know the day's work was in it.

One morning the panes went white before he was down the stair. He checked the manual. The clause said the glass was washed daily. There was nothing after that clause about a pane that would not come clean, and nothing before it either, and he squared the manual and left it where it lived.

The salt had got in behind the mirror on the sleeping floor, and the glass of it had been black for years. Nothing else in the tower showed a clear surface.

The hour came round.

He took the pencil. He entered the tide. He entered the hour.

He squared the book and went down.

Another day, at the hour, he took the visibility. He had always taken it off more than one pane and put the

readings together. He stood at the glass and looked out at what there was to see. What there was to see was white, and near. He gave it the time the reading wanted, which was long enough to be sure. The white did not move and it did not lift. He moved to the next pane and looked, and it was the same. He went on to the one after that, and it was the same there. The log had a field for visibility, and he carried the reading to the desk for it.

He took the pencil. He entered the tide. He entered the hour.

There had been a soft tread on the stair as long as he had been at the post, third from the top, and there was another one now, lower down, between the living floor and the stores. Two soft treads, and he stepped over both without deciding to.

9. Chair

An engine came on at the shore end and kept on for ten minutes.

The fog had been down since the morning, so there was the sound of it and nothing with it.

And this time he went down.

He took the stair down from the watch floor at the pace the stair wanted. He did not go down to the door for much any more. At the bottom he drew the bolt and set the door wide, and there was the fog and the rock and the water going over the near end of the road.

Then up the one floor to the room with the stove in it, and the chair.

It stood against the wall beside the shelf, where it stood when there was nobody due, which was most days. He turned it in to the table and squared it to the edge, with the seat to the stove.

Then the cups. He set out two, the way he had always set out two, and only one of them had ever been issued.

He had nothing to put in them. The setting out was the step and the filling was a step after it, and a step he could not do was not a step that stopped him. He put them a hand's width apart, which was where they went.

The stove had been out since the fuel went. The room held what the weather gave it and no more, and the cold in it was the same cold as the rest of the tower, and he had stopped taking his coat off indoors.

"Road's not bad today," from the doorway.

He went round to the stove side of the table and let his hands down at his sides.

A delivery had a length to it. It ran three hours when the road allowed, and less when the road did not, and he had never once been the one to bring it to an end. He stood the whole time.

The tower had a note it made in a wind off the water, low down under the floor somewhere, and the note went on the whole time and did not stop.

Down past the open door there was the sound of the water coming up over the road, and getting to the rock, and going on round it. He had only ever watched that from the glass before.

"Road's not bad today," from the doorway.

He straightened the nearer cup a quarter-turn, and when it was straight he put his hand back at his side.

He was not given anything to carry.

When the time was up he took the cups off the table and set them where the cups lived, and put the chair back against the wall, and that put him in front of the shelf.

The volumes on it were the men before him. They went back decades, and he knew every hand in them. The backs of them had gone the same color as each other from standing in the same room. His own was upstairs on the desk and had been since he moved it there, and the shelf had a gap in it the width of one volume.

Past the gap there was more shelf than that.

He evened the row with the side of his hand, and the spines came up level, and you can feel a row come even under the palm. The row he evened ran up to the gap and stopped.

Then up.

The leg was in every step of the stair. That was what the leg did after he had stood that long. He got to the top and held the rail a moment, and then he went to the glass.

It wanted nothing. He had done it that morning and it was as he had left it.

Above the door, pane one had the road toward the shore in it. He gave it the forty, turning his face off the glass when he breathed and coming back to it.

The fog was on the flats and on the water and on the near end of the road, and the far end of it was not there to be seen at all.

Nothing was in pane five. Nothing had been in it for a long time.

He counted it out and went on to pane six.

10. Bell

The evening had nothing owed in it and nothing due.

The glass had been done in the morning and the cistern with it, and the stores took no counting now, and the day had come down to the watch and the hours it was kept in. He went up at the hour. He had the pencil in his pocket and the book was on the desk where the book lived, and there was nothing between him and the next thing he had to do.

He was at the glass when it came.

Something came out of the dark over the water. It was a long way out and then it was not as far out, and it did not hurry, and it held the one line the whole way in. He stood at the glass and gave it the forty, and at forty it was still coming.

Whether it was the thing he had been put here for, he could not have said. Nobody had ever told him what that was.

Then the bell.

He had not rung it.

He went to the desk.

He put the manual flat and open at the schedule. There were eleven lines and he went down them anyway.

Movement on the road not accounted for by the table. There had been none, and there was hardly a road left for any. A light not accounted for. Sound from seaward at slack water, and it was not slack water. Birds rising together after dark. Water standing on the road at an hour when the table showed it dry, and the table showed it dry. Any pane fogging from the outside. Any person on the road other than the bringer. Loss of the far light for more than one night. That was condition ten, and he had used ten.

The bell sounding when it has not been rung.

That was the one. It was the only line in the whole schedule that was true of the evening, and he read it a second time with his finger against it, and then a third time to be sure the line he had found was the line for what had happened. It took him some minutes. Whatever was out over the water was out there for the whole of that time, and he was at the desk with his back to the glass, and the pencil was in his hand and the form not yet started.

The packet of forms was thinner than it had been and he took the top one off it without looking at what was under. He filled it in at the desk in grade four pencil, one line to a

field. The number went in the field for the number. There was nothing on the form that asked him what it had been, and there was nowhere on it he could have written it down.

The manual said where his copy was to go and he put it there. The other one went on the desk with the rest of them.

Then the day's entry.

He took the pencil. He entered the tide. He entered the hour.

Field seven was headed nature of occurrence. He left it as he had left it every day since he came here, and as it had been left before him.

He squared the book and left it open at the page.

Then he went up the last of it. That part was the steepest and he was a long time on it, and he put both hands and a shoulder under the hatch and got it up, and got out at the head of the tower.

Nothing at the head of the tower stood high enough to get behind. The wind came across the top of it with nothing in its way at all, and it went through the coat and through what was under the coat, and he stood in it and let it come. Below him the water was going over the road. Out past the road there was the dark.

The lashing at the stock of the bell was long gone. The salt had rotted it, and there had never been a day it was due for renewing, and the clapper had hung free ever since. Nothing had moved it in all that time.

He got his hands on the rope.

Three strokes. The bell was a bigger thing than it looked from under it, and the sound of it went off the tower and out over the water and was gone almost at once, because there was nothing out there for it to come back off.

Then the count of forty, under his breath, with the wind taking most of it away from him. He gave it the whole forty. He did not hurry it and he did not let it run long.

Then three again.

Nothing rang back.

He stood and gave it the forty, and it was a long forty with the wind in it and nothing to do inside it but count. The water was over the road below him and the dark was where it had been. He rang three more.

Nothing rang back.

His hands had gone past being much use to him and he took what hold of the rope he could get.

And he began the count again.

Thank you for reading.

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