A Year at Saltmarsh Light

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A short novel in four seasons

Wren Calloway

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Sample edition

For everyone who writes down the weather.

Wind from the west, the kettle on the stove, a light in the tower. Nothing else is needed for a good day.

From the Saltmarsh weather book

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First Light

Spring



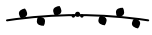
The keeper of Saltmarsh Light was called Ada Fenwick, and on the first morning of the year she climbed the eighty-one steps of the tower before the sun was up. She counted them, as she always did, because counting kept her from thinking about how cold the iron rail was under her hand.

At the top she wound the clockwork that turned the lens, wiped the salt from the inside of the glass, and opened a new notebook on the little desk by the window. On the first page she wrote the date, the wind and the colour of the sea. The sea was the colour of pewter. The wind was from the north-east, which the fishermen called a lazy wind[1].

She had kept a weather book every year for eleven years. Nobody had asked her to. The harbour office

1. A lazy wind, in the fishermen's phrase, is one that goes through you rather than around you.

sent forms each month, with boxes for pressure and rainfall, and she filled them in neatly and posted them on the first Tuesday. The weather book was different. In the weather book she wrote down what the boxes left out.



By April the swallows were back under the eaves of the boathouse. Ada noted the day they arrived and the day the first one flew through the open door of the oil store and could not find its way out again. She stood very still with the door wide open, and after a while it did.

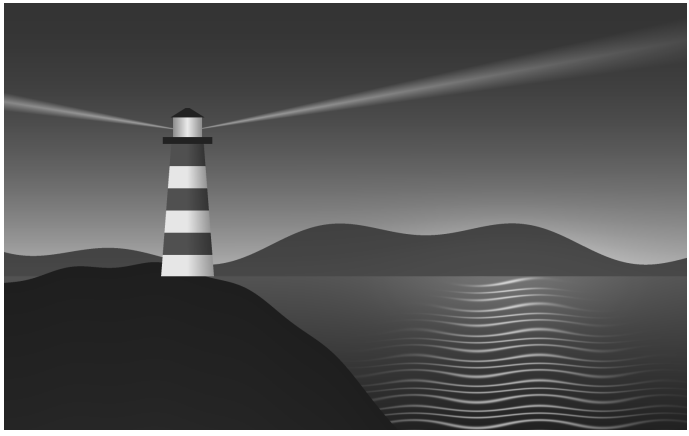
Tom Harker came up from the village with the post and a loaf of bread. He looked at the open notebook and asked what she was always writing. *The weather,* she said. He said the weather was the same every day, more or less, and she said that was exactly why somebody had to write it down.

two

The Weather Book

Summer

Summer on the marsh was mostly light. The sun rose before four and was still on the water at ten, and for a few weeks the lamp was lit for barely five hours a night. Ada used the long evenings to repair the things the winter had broken.



Saltmarsh Light at dusk, from the sea wall.

Each morning she went down to the instruments on the sea wall and read them in the same order, so that she would never skip one:

- the barometer in the porch, tapped once with a fingernail;
- the rain gauge by the gate, emptied into the measuring glass;
- the wind vane on the boathouse roof, read from the kitchen window;
- and the sea itself, which had no instrument at all.

On the twelfth of July she copied a line from the old keeper's book into her own, because it still seemed true:

> Fair all day. Haze on the water at noon. A boat with a red sail went north and did not come back past, so I suppose it found where it was going.

Ada had never met the old keeper. She knew him only from his handwriting, which leaned to the right as if into a wind, and from his habit of underlining the word *fair* twice when a day had been particularly fine[2].

2. There are forty-one doubly underlined days in his last book. Ada counted them one wet afternoon in November.

three

Fog Season

Autumn

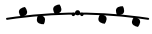


The fog came in on the last day of September and did not leave for nine days. It was the kind of fog that made the lamp look like a moon seen through muslin, and Ada sounded the horn every two minutes, day and night, until the sound of it was inside her sleep.

On the fourth day a letter came, carried up the path by Tom, who had walked the whole way with one hand on the fence so that he would not miss the gate.

> *Dear Miss Fenwick, the harbour office thanks you for your monthly returns, which are always the neatest we receive. We are told there is to be a new electric lamp at Saltmarsh in the spring. It will not need winding. We thought you would like to know. Yours faithfully, the Harbour Clerk.*

Ada read it twice, folded it in half and put it inside the back cover of the weather book. Then she went up the eighty-one steps and wound the clockwork, because it was still her lamp until the spring.



That night she wrote a few lines in the margin, which she never did:
Nine days of fog, and the horn on the hour,
the kettle, the ladder, the stair to the tower;
the sea in the window as grey as a slate,
and the lamp going round, and the lamp going late.

four

The Long Night

Winter



On the shortest day of the year the lamp burned for seventeen hours. Ada lit it at a quarter to four in the afternoon and put it out at nine the next morning, and in between she wrote the longest entry in the weather book: the wind backing from south to east, the snow that did not settle, the three ships that passed, and the fox that sat on the sea wall for an hour as if it, too, were keeping watch.

When the electric lamp came in May, the engineers asked if she would like to keep the old clockwork as a souvenir. She said no, but she kept the notebook, and the one after it, and the one after that, because the weather was still the same every day, more or less, and somebody still had to write it down.

About the author

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