The Lower Light

Also by Margaret Vane

The Salt Year

A House Without Clocks

Weather for Leaving

Charts of Small Islands

The Lower Light

A Novel

Margaret Vane

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For my father, who kept the harbour light at Halsay,
and for everyone who climbs the stairs at dusk.

The light shall be exhibited every night from sunset to sunrise, and the keeper shall on no account leave it unattended.

— *Standing Orders for Keepers*, 1922

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Part One

Low Water

The Keeper of the Lower Light

The lamp on Sorrel Head had been lit every night for a hundred and four years, and Iris Calder had lit it for nine of them. She climbed the eighty-one steps at dusk with a tin of oil in one hand and the day's weather in her head, and she did not think of it as duty. Duty was a word for people who had a choice.

The tower was cold in the way that stone is cold, which is to say patiently. It had been cold in June and it would be cold in June again. Iris had stopped noticing it in her second winter, the way you stop noticing the sound of your own house, and she noticed it now only because the engineers had made her look at the place as a stranger might: a cylinder of granite ninety feet high with a lantern on top, a kitchen at the bottom, and a woman inside it who was about to become surplus.

She trimmed the wick. She wound the clock that turned the lens. She stood a moment at the gallery rail while the light swung out over the water and came back and swung out again, and below her the village showed four windows, and above her the sky was doing something complicated with the last of the orange.



Sorrel Head at low water, from the causeway.

Nine years was not a long time to keep a light. Her father had kept it for thirty-one. His mother had kept it for twenty-six before that, and the ledger in the watch room carried all three of their hands: the slanted copperplate that had been taught in a schoolroom with a coal stove, the cramped block capitals her father used because he had been told once that his writing was untidy and had never forgiven it, and Iris's own, which she thought looked like a fence in a high wind.

She wrote the date. She wrote the wind, north-west, light. She wrote, as she did every evening, *lit at 4:51, all well*.

It was not all well. It had not been all well since the letter came in March.

⁂

The letter was from the Northern Lights Board and it was two pages long, and the second page was the one that mattered.

It explained, in the flat voice that institutions use when they are removing something from your life, that Sorrel Head would be converted to automatic operation in the autumn. It thanked her for her service. It offered a sum, expressed to the penny, which was neither insulting nor generous and had clearly been arrived at by a formula.

It said that the Board understood that this represented a significant change and that a member of staff would be available to discuss the transition at a mutually convenient time.

It did not say what she was supposed to do with the eighty-one steps afterwards.

Iris had read it eleven times. Then she had put it in the ledger drawer under a coil of spare wick, which is where her father had kept things he did not want to look at, and where she had found, after he died, a photograph of a woman who was not her mother and a bill for a boat engine he had never bought.

The drawer had a particular smell — paraffin and old paper and the metal of the wick coil — and she had come to think of it as the smell of postponement.

Now it was September. The surveyors had come twice, first in a hurry and then in a temper, and had both times parked their van where the tide would have had it if she had not gone down and told them. There was a crate on the quay with a serial number stencilled on the side. The crate was the future. It was three feet tall and it weighed less than she did.

She wound the clock a second time, which it did not need, and went down.

In the kitchen she made a pan of soup she did not particularly want, and ate it standing up at the window, and watched the beam pass over the water at the rate it had passed over the water since 1922: four times a minute, white, twenty-one nautical miles on a clear night, and on a night that was not clear, as far as it could reach, which was the whole of what anybody had ever asked of it.

A Visitor Who Does Not Knock

The boy came out of the fog at low tide, walking up the causeway as if he had been told it was a road, which for four hours of every twelve it very nearly was.

Iris saw him from the kitchen window and did not move.

People did come. Birdwatchers mostly, in the spring, who wanted the terns and were disappointed by the terns. A photographer from a magazine who had spent a whole afternoon lying on the wet rock to get the tower at an angle that made it look as if it were falling. Once a man writing a book about loneliness, who had stayed two nights and asked forty questions and written, as far as she could tell, nothing. But they came at midday and they came with rucksacks and they came in twos and they came having read the tide table in the shop window.

This one came alone, in the fog, at the hour when the sea was thinking about coming back.

She met him at the gate with a lamp, because the fog had swallowed the last of the afternoon and because a lamp is a thing to hold when you do not know what else to do with your hands.

"The water turns in forty minutes," she said.

"I know," said the boy. He was perhaps sixteen, and entirely wet from the knees down, and carrying a canvas bag with a strap he had mended himself, badly. "I did the sums on the train."

"Then you did them wrong."

"No," he said. "I did them so I'd be stuck."

Iris looked at him for a while. The fog moved between them in the slow way of fog, thickening and thinning, and somewhere behind her the beam came round and lit the underside of it and went away again.

"Come in, then," she said. "Since the sea has an opinion about it."

⁂

His name was Fen. He drank two cups of tea without stopping and ate most of a loaf and told her, in the disordered way that people tell true things, that his grandmother had been born in this village, that she had died in June, that there was a photograph in her house of a woman standing at the door of this lighthouse in 1959, and that he had come to find out who the woman was.

Iris put another log in the stove.

"That will be my grandmother," she said. "Or the dog. There's a dog in most of them."

Fen laughed, which surprised them both, and then stopped laughing and looked at the table.

"There's a crate on the quay," he said. "With a number on it. The man at the shop said they're turning the light off."

"They're turning me off," said Iris. "The light stays. It just stops needing anybody."

"That's worse."

"It's cheaper. It isn't the same thing, but the Board has never been able to tell the difference."

She said it lightly, and was annoyed to hear that it had not come out lightly, and got up to fetch the biscuit tin so that she would have something to do with her back turned.

Outside, the sea came over the causeway the way it always did, without hurry and without apology, and the road the boy had walked in on stopped being a road.

He took the photograph out of the canvas bag then, wrapped in a tea towel, which told her more about his grandmother than anything he had said. It was a small print, four inches by three, black and white gone brown at the edges. A woman in an apron stood at the door of the tower with her arms folded and her chin up and an expression that Iris recognised at once and could not have explained to anybody who had not grown up with it: the face of a person who has been told to stand still and is deciding whether to allow it.

There was a dog.

"That's her," Iris said. "Annie Calder. And that's Tam, who bit the doctor."

Fen turned the photograph over. On the back, in pencil, in a hand that had learned copperplate in a schoolroom with a coal stove: *Sorrel Head, June 1959. For Mary, with our love. For Mary, with our love.*

"My grandmother," he said, "was called Mary."

Rules of the House

There were rules, and Iris gave them to him over breakfast, because rules given at night sound like threats and rules given in the morning sound like information.

"You don't go up the tower without me. You don't touch the clock. You don't go out on the rocks on the seaward side, ever, not even when it looks flat, because it is never flat. You wash your own cup."

Fen nodded at each one, gravely, the way a person nods at a list he intends to keep most of.

"And the causeway?"

"The causeway is open from eleven until a quarter past three today. Tomorrow it's later. The table's on the back of the door." She pointed with her spoon. "If you want to go, go. Nobody here is going to stop you."

"I don't want to go."

"No," said Iris. "I didn't think you did."

He did not go that day, or the next. He slept in the room at the top of the kitchen stairs that had been her father's and then a store for paint and then nothing in particular, and he came down in the mornings with the creases of the blanket still on his face and ate whatever was put in front of him with the steady attention of somebody who has recently been living on what he could carry. He asked before he touched anything. He did not ask about the letter from the Board, although she had seen him see it, on the second evening, when she opened the ledger drawer for a match.

In the afternoons he followed her about. He was not in the way, exactly. He was simply there, at the edge of whatever she was doing, holding the other end of things. He held the ladder while she scraped the gallery rail. He held the torch while she looked at the hoist motor for the hundredth time and decided for the hundredth time that it was beyond her. He held the bucket of whitewash, and then, without being asked, the brush, and did the lower course of the wall behind the coal store with a care that made her look away so he would not see her notice it.

"You've done that before," she said.

"My gran's back yard. Every Easter." He stood back and looked at the wall. "She said whitewash was the only thing in the world you could make better by doing it badly. It all comes out the same once it dries."

"That's not true."

"No," he said. "She just didn't like watching me do it."

⁂

He showed her the letter on the third evening.

They had eaten, and the light had been lit, and the wind had gone round into the north and was trying the windows one at a time, the way it did in autumn, as if it had lost something in the house and wanted to be let in to look. Fen had been quiet all through supper. When she came down from the eight o'clock winding he was sitting at the table with the canvas bag on his knees and an envelope in both hands, holding it the way you hold a bird you have picked up off a road.

"It was in the same drawer as the photograph," he said. "In her flat. I found it when we were clearing out. It's not to me. It's not to anybody, really. It was never posted."

The envelope was cream once and had gone the colour of weak tea. There was no stamp. In a round, careful hand, the hand of a person who had been made to practise her capitals, it said: *Mrs Calder, The Lighthouse, Sorrel Head*.

Iris sat down.

"That's my grandmother," she said. "Annie Calder. In your photograph."

"I know. I worked it out on the train." He pushed the envelope across the table to her. "It's open. I opened it. I'm sorry. I didn't know who it was for until I read it."

She took the letter out. One sheet, folded in three, written on both sides.

> *Dear Mrs Calder,*
> *We came out over the causeway this afternoon, the three of us, and I stood at your gate for a quarter of an hour with this letter in my hand, and then the tide began to turn and Robert said we must go back, and I was glad of the excuse. I am ashamed of that. I will post it instead, once I have found the courage to read it over.*
> *You will remember November. I do not need to write it down, and I find that I cannot.*
> *She is called Mary. She is seven months old and has opinions about everything, and she is well, and I am well, and every night from the window of our room in Halsay I can see your light come round, and I count it, four times a*

minute, the way you told me to count it in the boat when I could not stop shaking.

I wanted you to know that I still count it.

With our love, and with more thanks than this paper will hold,

Jean Rowe

Iris read it twice. The second time she read it more slowly, as if the words might rearrange themselves into something she already knew.

"Jean Rowe," said Fen, "was my gran's mother. My great-gran. She died before I was born." He was watching her face. "Do you know what happened in November?"

"No."

"You don't—"

"I was not born. My father was away at school in Inverness. If anybody ever told him, he never told me." She turned the sheet over and back again. "My grandmother was not a woman who told you things. She told you to shut the door."

Fen let out a breath that sounded as if he had been holding it since the train.

"I thought you'd know," he said. "I thought — I don't know what I thought. That there'd be somebody here who just knew."

"There is," said Iris, and she got up and took the lamp off its hook, because the watch room was cold at night and the stairs were dark, and because she had remembered, all at once and very clearly, a thing her father used to say when she asked him a question he could not answer.

It'll be in the book

.

What the Ledger Remembers

They opened the ledger because Fen asked to see 1958, and because Iris had run out of reasons to say no to a boy who had deliberately stranded himself on her island.

The watch room was halfway up, a round room with a window on the seaward side and a desk built into the curve of the wall by somebody who had understood that a desk in a lighthouse must be part of the lighthouse or it will never sit straight. It smelled of paraffin and cold brass. There was a chart on the wall with three generations of pencil corrections on it and a tide clock that had not worked since 1974 and had been left because nobody could face the argument about whether to take it down.

The ledger was the fourth of its line, bound in black cloth gone green at the corners. It lay open on the desk under the window, where four generations had left it open, because a keeper's ledger is not a book you close.

"Nineteen fifty-eight," said Iris, turning pages backward: through her own fence-in-a-high-wind hand, through her father's block capitals, into the copperplate. "March. April. Here."

The entries were four words long, most of them.

Lit at 6:12, all well.

Lit at 6:09, fog, all well.

Lit at 5:58, all well.

A life reduced to the minimum that could be honestly written down.

Fen read for a long time with his finger under the lines, the way people read when they are not used to old handwriting and are unwilling to say so.

"She never says anything," he said at last.

"She says the light was lit," said Iris. "That was the whole of what she was asked."

"But didn't anything *happen*?"

"Things happened. The book isn't for things happening. The book is for whether the light was lit."

She heard her father in that, word for word, and did not mind as much as she expected to.

⁂

But on the fourteenth of November the copperplate ran on past the fourth word, and kept going, and filled the margin, and continued upside down along the top of the page where there was room.

Lit at 4:33. Wind SSW rising. Vessel showing red to the east at 7 and not answering. Went out in the punt with T. Marr. Took off two men and a woman. Woman had a child inside her coat and I did not know it until we were ashore. Back at 11. Light burned the whole time. All well. All well. All well.

Iris had read this page before.

She had read it at eleven years old, sitting where Fen was sitting now, with her knees drawn up on the same chair, and she had understood it then as an adventure: the punt, the red light, the rising wind. Her father had let her read it and had said nothing at all afterwards, which was his way of saying that a thing was important.

She understood it differently now. She understood it as the only time in sixty years of the book that her grandmother had needed to say a thing three times before she could believe it.

"The child," said Fen, carefully, in the voice of someone stepping on ice and listening. "In the coat."

"Yes."

"My grandmother was born in 1958."

"Yes," said Iris. "I had got there too."

The lens turned overhead, and the room went bright and dim and bright again, the way it had four times a minute for a hundred and four years, and neither of them said anything for long enough that the beam came round eleven times.

"She never told me," Fen said. "She told me about the shop and the school and a man who fell off the pier. She never told me she was born in a boat."

"She wasn't born in a boat. She was born somewhere warm, a week later, probably, to a woman who had been very frightened and had not mentioned it." Iris put her hand flat on the page, not covering the words, just resting there. "People don't tell you the thing that nearly didn't happen. They tell you the pier."

Fen wrote the date in the back of a notebook, and then crossed it out, and then wrote it again.

"Can I take a photograph of it?" he asked.

"You can copy it out," said Iris. "It'll go in better."

So he copied it out, at the built-in desk, in the round room, under a light that his great-grandmother had been carried towards inside her mother's coat, and Iris went up and checked a wick that did not need checking, because there are moments you should not be in the room for.

Part Two

High Water

Standing Orders

The ledger was not the only book in the watch room. It was only the one that was kept open.

On the shelf above the desk, behind a tin of brass polish and a barometer that had been wrong in a consistent and therefore useful way since the war, there was a slim volume bound in grey board, with a cloth spine that had been mended at least twice with different coloured tape. On the cover, in gilt that had worn down to a faint gold shadow, it said STANDING ORDERS FOR KEEPERS, and underneath, in smaller type, the name of the Board and the year: 1922.

Fen found it on the morning after the letter, while Iris was below checking the oil. When she came up he was sitting cross-legged on the floor with it open on his knees.

"Is this allowed?"

"Probably not." She stood in the doorway and watched him turn a page. "Nobody has read it since my father. He used to read it on Sundays. He said it was the only book in the house that had never once lied to him."

"It's rules."

"That's why."

He read her one, in the solemn voice of a boy reading in church:

> *The light shall be exhibited every night from sunset to sunrise. The keeper shall on no account leave it unattended, nor permit any other person to attend it in his place, save in case of sickness, when the occasional keeper shall take the watch and enter the same in the journal.*

"What's an occasional keeper?"

"My grandmother," said Iris.

She had not meant to say it like that. It came out of her flat and complete, the way things do that you have known for so long you have stopped noticing their shape.

Her grandfather, the keeper of record, had died in the winter of 1935, of a chest that had been bad since the trenches and was made worse by eighty-one steps four times a night. The Board had written to his widow — a letter of two pages, Iris supposed, and the second page the one that mattered — and had informed her that a replacement would be sent in the spring. In the meantime, as occasional keeper, she would continue to attend the light.

The replacement never came. There was a shortage of men after the war, and then there was a shortage of money, and then, Iris suspected, there was a clerk in an office who had looked at a year of entries in a hand that never missed a night and had quietly decided that the problem had solved itself. Annie Calder kept the light on Sorrel Head until 1961 on half her husband's pay and under his name. The Board's list of keepers for those years, which hung framed in the kitchen, still said *J. Calder*.

"That's—" Fen stopped.

"Yes."

"Didn't she mind?"

"I expect she minded very much," said Iris. "I expect she minded every single night. And I expect she went up anyway, because the boats didn't know whose name was on the list."

Fen closed the book carefully, as though it might bruise.

"She wrote it all down, though," he said. "Every night. In her own name."

"She wrote the light was lit," said Iris. "That was the whole of what she was asked."

She heard the echo as she said it, and so did he, and for a second neither of them could look at the other.

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In the afternoon the weather turned soft and bright, the kind of autumn day that arrives without warning and makes everything look rinsed, and Iris took Fen out along the landward rocks to show him the things that you could only see at the bottom of a spring tide.

She showed him the iron rings set into the granite where the supply boat used to tie up before the causeway was built, so worn on their inner curve that they had gone thin as wedding bands. She showed him the cleft in the rock where her father had kept lobster pots illegally for thirty years and the Board had known and said nothing because he gave the district superintendent two every Christmas. She showed him a name cut

into the stone at the height of a child, *W. C. 1931*, and told him it was her father's elder brother, who had drowned at sea in 1943 and was the reason her father had never learned to swim.

"That doesn't make sense," said Fen.

"It made sense to him."

He crouched and put his fingers in the letters, the way he had put his finger under the lines in the ledger, and Iris looked out past him at the water, which was flat and blue and lying, and at the white tower behind them, which had stood there being honest about the weather for a hundred and four years and was about to go on doing it without her.

"Can I ask you something?" said Fen, without looking up.

"You can ask."

"What will you do? After."

Nobody had asked her that. The man from the Board had not asked; he had talked about the transition. The woman at the shop had not asked; she had said it would be a shame and had given Iris extra change. Her sister in Inverness had not asked, because her sister had been telling her for nine years what she ought to do and saw no reason to stop now and listen.

"I don't know," said Iris, and found that it was true, and that it was possible to say it out loud on a bright afternoon on a rock and for nothing very much to happen.

Fen nodded as if this were a sensible answer, which it was not.

"Me neither," he said. "About anything."

They walked back along the rocks with the tide coming in behind them, unhurried, filling the cleft and the iron rings and the child's initials one after another, and covering them over, and leaving them exactly where they had always been.

The Marrs of Halsay

There was one other name in the November entry, and on the eighth morning they went to look for it.

T. Marr

. Iris had read it at eleven and again at twenty and again a week ago over Fen's shoulder, and every time she had read past it, the way you read past the name of the street in a story about somebody you love. Tom Marr had been the boatman at Halsay when she was a child, an enormous silent man with a beard like a burst mattress who brought the stores out on Thursdays and could lift a full barrel of paraffin onto his shoulder without changing his expression. He had died when she was fourteen. She had not thought about him in years.

"He had a son," she said, as they crossed the causeway with the sand still shining wet on either side. "Davie. He had the boat after. He'll be eighty now if he's anything."

"Is he still alive?"

"He was in the summer. He waved at me from the bus."

Halsay was a single street that ran along the top of the beach and then lost its nerve and turned inland: a shop, a church that opened twice a month, a war memorial with eleven names on it — two of them Calders, one of them Marr — and a row of low white houses with their backs to the wind. Davie Marr lived in the last one. He was in the yard when they came up, mending a creel on an upturned fish box, and he looked up and saw Iris and did not seem in the least surprised, which she would remember later as the most surprising thing about the whole day.

"Iris Calder," he said. "They're turning you off, then."

"On Tuesday."

"Aye." He looked at Fen. "And who's this?"

Fen told him. He told it better than he had told it to Iris, more in order; he had had a week of practice. Davie Marr listened with his hands still moving in the creel, knotting and pulling, and when Fen got to the name Rowe the hands stopped.

"Jean Rowe," said Davie. "Well, now."

He put the creel down and went into the house without another word, and they stood in the yard and looked at each other, and after a minute he came back out with a shoebox and set it on the fish box between them.

It was full of Christmas cards. Dozens of them, held together in bundles with perished elastic bands, robins and stagecoaches and snowy churches, the cheap bright cards of forty years. Davie took out the top bundle and handed it to Fen.

"Every year," he said. "Every year till my father died, and then every year to my mother, and then every year to me. The last one came in 1991. I supposed she'd died."

Fen opened one. Iris read it upside down. *To the Marrs, with love and thanks always, from Jean, Robert and Mary*.

"Always the same words," said Davie. "Forty years. Never a word more."

"Did your father ever tell you why?" Iris asked.

Davie Marr looked at her for a long time.

"Once," he said. "The once. I was about the age of the boy here, and I'd been out in the boat in weather I shouldn't have been out in, being clever, and I came back and he was waiting on the slip. And he didn't shout. I thought he would, and he didn't. He sat me down on the wall and he told me about a night in fifty-eight when Annie Calder came down the steps of that tower at nine o'clock at night in a south-westerly and banged on our door and said, 'Tom, there's a boat on the Skerries showing red and nobody answering, and I can't leave the light, and I can't row it alone.'"

"She said she couldn't leave the light?" said Fen.

"She said it. And then she left it." Davie picked up the creel again, as if his hands needed something. "That was the thing he wanted me to understand, see. Not the rescue. Anybody can be brave once. It was that she'd worked it out — she'd stood at the top of the tower and done the sums — and she knew the clock would turn the lens for four hours on one winding, and the oil would last six, and she knew it would take them two hours there and back if it went well. And she wound it to the top and went. And she wrote down after that the light burned the whole time. Because it had. She'd made sure."

He knotted a mesh, pulled it tight, and bit off the twine.

"My father said, 'That's the difference, Davie. She wasn't brave instead of careful. She was brave because she'd been careful.' And then he told me if I ever took the boat out in a gale again he'd sell it. And he would have."

⁂

They walked back to the causeway slowly, because there was time, and because neither of them wanted to arrive anywhere yet.

Fen carried the shoebox. Davie had pressed it on him at the gate — "It's yours more than mine, son, it was always going to your lot" — and Fen had tried to refuse it and then had not, and now he held it against his chest with both arms the way he had held the envelope, the way he seemed to hold everything that mattered, as if it had been handed to him to carry across a river.

"She left the light," he said, at the top of the beach.

"She did."

"The rules said—"

"The rules said she shouldn't leave it unattended." Iris looked out at the tower, white against a sky that was clouding over from the west. "She didn't, though. She'd attended to it. She'd attended to it so well that it didn't need her for four hours."

Fen was quiet for a while.

"That's what the machine does," he said. "Isn't it. It's just — attending to it. So well that it doesn't need anybody."

Iris stopped walking.

She had been angry at the crate on the quay for six months. She had been angry at the letter and the formula and the man who talked about the transition and the surveyors who parked where the tide would have them. She had been angry, she understood now, standing on wet sand at the edge of the causeway with a boy and a shoebox full of Christmas cards, at the idea that a thing could be kept without being loved. And here was her grandmother, who had loved the light more than anybody and had proved it by building it a way to go on without her for one night, so that she could go and do the other thing that mattered.

"Come on," she said. "The tide's turning."

It wasn't, quite. But it would be soon, and she had always liked to be early.

Weather

The forecast on Sunday evening was for a gale, south-westerly, severe gale nine later, veering westerly, and Iris listened to it in the kitchen with her hand flat on the table the way her father had, as though the radio might be steadied by it.

"Is that bad?" said Fen.

"It's weather."

"But is it bad?"

"It's the last weather," said Iris, and got up to fill the lamps.

She meant that it was the last gale she would keep before Tuesday, and she knew as she said it that it sounded like something else, something out of a film, and that Fen would hear it that way and be unable to stop himself being thrilled. She let him. He was sixteen, and the sea was about to do something enormous in front of him, and there were worse ways to learn respect than to begin by being excited.

The wind came in at dusk exactly as forecast. It began as a restlessness in the grass on the landward side, and by the time she had lit the lamp at 4:40 it had found its voice, and by eight o'clock it was the only thing in the world. The tower was built for it. That was the point of a tower: ninety feet of granite dovetailed course into course by men who had known that one day, on a night like this, somebody would be standing at the top of it and would need not to be afraid. Iris had never been afraid in it. She had been many other things — cold, bored, sick to her stomach with loneliness in the first winter so badly that she had sat on the gallery steps and howled into the wind where nobody could hear — but she had never been afraid. The tower did not move. The lens turned. The beam went out into the black and came back with nothing to report and went out again.

At nine the lights of the mainland went out.

Fen saw it first, from the watch room window: the four windows of the village, and the scatter of farms behind, and the long dotted line of the coast road, all gone between one sweep of the beam and the next, as if somebody had blown on them.

"The power's down," he said. "The whole coast."

"It does that." Iris came and stood beside him. "There's a line comes over the hill at Strathcaul. The wind gets under it."

"So we're the only light."

"We're always the only light. That's rather what we're for."

But she stayed at the window longer than she meant to, looking at the dark where the village had been, and thinking of all the other nights this tower had stood here in a dark like this — in 1958, and before, and before that — with somebody at the top of it winding a clock and nobody below able to see them do it. Only the light. Only ever the light.

⁂

She wound the clock at ten, and at midnight, and at two. Fen tried to stay awake and managed until one, when she found him asleep on the watch room floor with his head on the coil of spare rope and the Standing Orders open on his chest, and she put her coat over him and did not wake him.

At ten past three the radio on the shelf came alive with a burst of static and a voice, very calm, the voice of a man who had been calm for a living for a long time.

"Sorrel Head, Sorrel Head, this is Halsay lifeboat. Do you read, over."

Iris had the handset before she was fully aware of having moved. Fen sat up under her coat with his hair flattened on one side and his eyes enormous.

"Halsay lifeboat, Sorrel Head. Reading you. Go ahead."

"Sorrel Head, we're inward bound from the Skerries with the *Margaret Anne* under tow, five persons aboard, all well. Coming round the head in about twenty minutes. The shore lights are all out and the harbour lights are out with them. We'll be steering on you. Just wanted to say, over."

"Understood," said Iris. "We're here. Over."

"Good lass," said the voice, and then, with a slight hesitation that was the only unprofessional thing about it, "Heard about Tuesday. Sorry, Iris. Out."

She put the handset back on its hook very gently, as if it were asleep.

"What do we do?" said Fen. He was on his feet. "Do we — is there something we do?"

"Yes," said Iris. "We keep the light lit."

"That's all?"

"That's all. That's the whole of it. Come up."

They climbed to the lantern. The wind up there was a solid thing, leaning on the glass, and the rain went sideways across the beam in long silver threads that appeared and vanished four times a minute. Out to the south-west there was nothing. And then there was something: a single white light, low down, lifting and falling, and behind it a red one and a green, and behind those, very small, a second white.

They watched it come. It took a long time. It came the way things come in a sea like that, not in a line but in a series of decisions, each one made and committed to and then made again, and every time the beam went round Iris saw it pick out the lifeboat for half a second — the orange of the hull, the white wake, the little tethered fishing boat yawing behind like a dog that did not want to go home — and then lose it to the dark, and then find it again.

It came round the head at half past three, near enough to see a man on the deck lift his arm. It went on, past the Skerries, towards the harbour mouth where no light was showing, and Iris understood that they were steering on her light and the set of the tide and memory, and that this was enough, and that it had always been enough.

Then it was gone round the point, and there was only the beam going out, and coming back, and going out again.

Fen was crying, very quietly, in the way of somebody who is not sure that he is allowed to.

"I don't know why," he said.

"I do," said Iris. "Go back to sleep."

⁂

In the morning the gale had blown itself out to a stiff westerly and the sea was the colour of slate and full of torn weed. The mainland lights had come back sometime before dawn without anybody noticing. Iris put out the lamp at 7:22, and trimmed the wick, and went down to the watch room, and opened the ledger, and wrote the date.

She wrote: *Lit at 4:40. Gale SW 9, veering W 7. Shore lights failed 21:00 to 05:30. Halsay lifeboat passed inward 03:30 with* Margaret Anne *in tow, steering on the light. All well.*

It was the longest entry she had written in nine years. She looked at it for a while. Then she turned back, a long way back, past her father's block capitals, into the copperplate, and laid her hand flat on the page for the fourteenth of November 1958, not covering the words, just resting there.

"Well," she said to it. "There you are."

All Well

The engineers came on the last Tuesday of the month: two of them, apologetic, competent, carrying the crate between them up the eighty-one steps because the hoist had not worked since 1991 and had been reported every year since in a form that went to an office that no longer existed.

Iris made them tea. It seemed important to her that they should be given tea — that the transfer of a hundred and four years should happen between people who had been given something warm, and not between a woman and a clipboard.

The younger one asked whether she had always lived here and she said no, that she had been away for eleven years and had come back, and he said, "Oh, right," in the voice of a person who has decided not to ask the next question, and she was grateful to him for it.

The new mechanism was the size of a bread bin. It had a light sensor, a battery, a solar panel that would go on the south rail, and a radio that would tell somebody in an office two hundred miles away if anything went wrong — which meant that from Tuesday onward, the answer to *all well* would be produced without a human being being asked the question.

"It's a good unit," said the younger engineer, meaning to be kind.

"I'm sure it is," said Iris.

"They last. We've got one on Muckle Roe that's been in since '09, never touched it."

"That's a long time not to be touched," she said, and he looked at her, and decided she meant the unit, and went back to his drilling.

⁂

They left on the afternoon tide.

Fen stayed. His mother had been telephoned; arrangements had been made; an argument had been had and lost and then quietly won again by the method of simply not leaving. He had been there nine days. He had learned to wind the clock and had

broken a cup and had discovered that you can see the mainland from the gallery on exactly the kind of day when you do not want to.

At four forty-eight he followed Iris up the steps for the last lighting that would be done by hand.

She let him strike the match.

The flame took, and steadied, and the lens picked it up and threw it out over the water in its old unhurried way, and somewhere out past the Skerries a boat that did not know or care who had lit it altered course by two degrees.

They stayed up there until the cold made it silly. Then they went down to the watch room, and Iris opened the ledger and wrote the date and the wind, and stopped.

The next words were a lie now, or would be by Thursday. She had never written a lie in it. Neither, as far as she could tell, had anybody else, and that — not the granite, not the lens, not the eighty-one steps — was the thing she had actually been keeping.

Fen looked over her shoulder.

"Write it," he said.

So she wrote: *Lit at 4:48. Wind NW, light. Handed over to the machine. All well.*

And because there was room in the margin, and because her grandmother had taught her by example that a ledger will hold whatever you need it to hold, she added one more line underneath, in her own hand, the fence still standing in the high wind:

The light stays. That was always the point.

She closed the book, which she had never done, and then opened it again and left it open, which was better.

Downstairs the stove was going and there was soup, and a boy at her table copying an old woman's handwriting into a notebook, and outside the beam went round four times a minute over a sea that had never once been impressed by any of it.

All well.

Acknowledgments

This book began on a wet afternoon on a causeway I had misjudged, and it would not have been finished without a great many people who were kinder to me than the tide was.

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About the Author

Margaret Vane grew up on the north coast of Scotland, the daughter of a harbour master, and spent twenty years as a hydrographic surveyor charting the sea lochs and outer islands before she began to write fiction.

Her first novel, *The Salt Year*, followed a family of herring curers through the last good season on the east coast. She has since written three more novels and a collection of short stories about people who live at the edges of maps.

She lives in Edinburgh with her husband and an elderly collie, keeps a barometer that has been wrong in a consistent and therefore useful way for many years, and still reads tide tables for pleasure.