



FOSTER BURTON



The Lighthouse Keeper

A short story

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote this short story to challenge my abilities. With short stories having such a small word count, there isn't the luxury of multiple chapters to evolve characters and build tension as you do in a novel, forcing the writer to be efficient with every word. Coming off the back of a 100,000-word manuscript, it was a challenge, indeed.

It is a work of fiction. All characters and locations are entirely of my own imagination.

I hope you enjoy it.

Foster

THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER

A SHORT STORY

FOSTER BURTON

Vincent shielded his eyes against the slither of sunlight reflecting off the emerald green sea. It was a mess of foaming whitecaps and plunging troughs all the way to the horizon, thanks to a strong northerly that nipped through the weave of his jersey and froze the gulls in flight.

‘It’ll turn,’ he said to his kelpie, Margy, sitting at his feet. ‘They’ll be out t’s evenin’, you mark my words.’ A gust of wind split his beard to his chin, flattening Margy’s coat. ‘Come on, you.’

The tussock grass swished at Vincent’s trousers as he walked back towards the lighthouse, white and proud against the crisp blue sky. His small cottage sat in its shadow, sandstone brick with red chimneys and shutters, and he made for it first.

‘Tea’s in order,’ he explained to Margy, scuffing his mudded boots against the mat before he went inside.

In the hallway, Vincent stopped beside a portrait of a round-cheeked woman with sad eyes and stern, orderly hair. ‘G’mornin’, Judith,’ he

greeted it, patting down his white hair in the reflection of the glass. 'S'cold out there. Colder than that winter of forty-three, if y'remember.' The year before she passed; ten years ago, next month. 'Y'wouldn't like it muchly. Get's in y'bones.' Margy whined, rubbing her wet nose against his trousers. 'Alright, alright. G'bye, Judith. Ta, now.'

Vincent thought about Judith as he poured a cup of tea. Not of what he'd lost with her passing, but of what she'd say at his three scoops of sugar. The spoon clinked as he stirred it. Steam spiralled around his gnarled hand as he carried it to the table.

'D'you think the *Maiden's Voyage*'ll be wit' them?' he asked Margy, who now lay on the flagstones with her pink tongue lolling from her mouth. 'Aye, I shouldn't wonder for it. She'll be there. Same as last T'ursday.' He pictured the navy sloop, brasswork polished, sails flapping merrily as it rounded the little island with the yacht club. He wanted to add that he *hoped* she would be there, but with Judith's portrait so close it wasn't respectful.

The radio crackled to life in the other room, interrupting his thoughts.

Click – ‘Are y’there, Mr Doherty?’ – *click*. The voice was distant, thick with static.

‘Aye, that’ll be Johnson.’ Vincent pushed his chair back and stood, embarrassed at the strength of the feeling he’d got from hearing another voice.

Click – ‘Mr Doherty?’ – *click*.

Vincent took the receiver off the wall. ‘Aye, Johnson, I’m here. How goes it, lad?’

Click – ‘S’alright, Mr Doherty. Swell’s up.’ – *click*.

‘It’ll pass by the noon.’

Click – ‘As I thought. I’ll be out there soon after. Anything special you need this run?’ – *click*.

‘Aye, some tobacco, if you could. Brandy too – oh, and some of those sweet butternut biscuits,’ Vincent added sheepishly, dropping his eyes to his straining jersey, thinking again of Judith.

Click – ‘As you wish, Mr Doherty. ‘Til then.’ – *click*.

The swell died off at noon, just as Vincent predicted, the ocean flat and tranquil as Johnson's launch moored beside the jetty. It was a squat little boat, Oregon planked, with a half cabin and runaway paint.

'Tha' poor penguin needs some love,' Vincent scolded, catching the line that Johnson threw out.

'I ain't a bite of spare time, running back and forth delivering you bleedin' biscuits,' Johnson barked around the stem of his pipe.

'You're a fortnight between visits,' Vincent retorted, securing the line to the cleat. 'What d'ye do with all that free time?' Those two weeks sometimes felt like an eternity.

Johnson chuckled, his eyes sparkling beneath his shaggy grey brows. 'Oh, how I wish I lived in your world, Mr Doherty.'

With all the lines secured, Johnson jumped down onto the jetty, and the two of them set about unloading the fortnight's supplies. Johnson saved the last three items until last, handing them over with a small bow.

'Thank'ya,' said Vincent, placing the brandy

and the biscuits with the rest of the supplies and the tobacco in his pocket. He gestured to the bottle. 'Stay for one?'

Johnson pushed his stained old captain's cap back on his head. 'You tempt me like the serpent in Eve's garden,' he said, frowning as he scratched his balding scalp. 'But I really must be off. Next time?'

'Next time,' Vincent agreed.

'You just give me a tingle if you need anything, you hear?' Johnson climbed back aboard.

'I'll need a drum or two of kerosene next run, but alright for now,' Vincent replied. 'And any mail, if there is...' He trailed off, not wanting to see Johnson's look of pity; one day, the children may write. 'Cheerio, lad. See you on the morrow.'

ONLY WHEN JOHNSON'S launch was a small speck near the mainland did Vincent climb the winding path up to the cottage and winch up the supplies. He unpacked them, then with

Margy in tow, headed for the lighthouse. His knees creaked and his back ached as he climbed the spiral staircase, but he was humming between his laboured breaths as he thought about the yachts that afternoon.

In the lantern room, Vincent set about his daily tasks. First, he checked the delicate shell of the mantle for damage, then cleaned the burner nozzle and chimney before topping up the kerosene. Then he polished the mass of lenses ready to reflect the light twenty-five miles out to sea, and the windows, inside and out. Finally, he shined the brass, swept the walkway, and logged the weather movements in his ledger, then with one last look towards the mainland, descended back down the stairs. The sun still sat a thumb's-height above the distance ranges. Still an hour before they came.

THE SKY WAS STREAKED with orange and pink when Vincent finally saw the yachts, recognising the six individual cuts of their sails as if

they were a herd of precious cattle. His old heart thudded against his ribs as he found the one he was looking for: *Maiden's Voyage*, bringing up the rear, tacking into the offshore wind.

'Come, Margy,' Vincent called, hurrying for the cliffs. She ran off ahead, sharing his excitement. His starched trousers bit at his knees. His polished boots pinched his toes. With one hand, he fought the wind off his freshly trimmed beard; with the other, his hair.

The first yacht passed a hundred yards offshore just as Vincent reached the cliff's edge, sleek and white and expensive, with a large polished helm that gleamed in the owner's hands.

'That's *Victory*,' he told Margy, with a little distaste in his voice; still, he held up his hand in greeting. 'And there's *Shirley-Anne*.' He pointed to the second boat, dark green with lovely oiled decking. It was smaller than *Victory*, but seemed to glide over the gentle waves, where *Victory* seemed to cleave through them. 'Aye, and look – they've changed order. *Dreamer's* leading *Pura Vida*, and *Sweetie So* is near the back.' Margy barked her greetings as each one slid past,

waving merrily to the old lighthouse keeper and his dog.

A gust of wind blew from the south, filling the *Maiden's Voyage's* sails as she appeared, her canvas stretched tight, swell breaking silver across her bows. Vincent sucked in a short breath, shooting up his hand even though he knew it was too soon, and craned his neck out over the edge in the hope of a glimpse of her owner.

And then *Maiden's Voyage* was broadside beneath him, bow dipping and fluttering like a lively pony, and from the helm, Vincent saw her. She waved enthusiastically, spotting him the same moment. Vincent waved back. It was too far to make out her features, only an unruly mass of blonde hair, but Vincent knew she was smiling.

As the sloop rounded the island and disappeared, Vincent let out a long sigh. 'She's a beauty,' he said to Margy, unsure whether he meant the boat, or the woman whose face he was yet to see; even after almost two years.

. . .

VINCENT THOUGHT about her as he pumped up the pressure tanks that fed the kerosene to the lamp, then again as he cranked the handle that spun the light. He didn't know her name, nor what she really looked like, though he'd imagined it fifty times before. It might be Elsa, or Betty; Vivian, even. Hopefully Elsa. He didn't know if she was married, single, widowed, crazy, or wonderful. She could be all of them for all he cared.

'Y'best get her out of y'head, old man,' Vincent told himself gruffly, stomping back down the steps into the brisk night. He gave Judith's portrait only the briefest of nods as he came inside the cottage.

And still, Vincent thought about her as he finished his second brandy out on the verandah under the beam of spinning light, as the wind stung his eyes and smeared his pipe smoke everywhere. He wished he could have just one conversation with her. Then maybe he could forget about her. Old Johnson's parting words

replayed themselves in his head: *You just give me a tingle if you need anything, you hear?* He could ping Johnson right now and find out her name. Find out who she was, and where she was from. Find out if she was spoken for. Johnson knew everyone on the mainland. He'd know.

'No,' Vincent said to the wind, dismissing the absurd idea; yet halfway through his third brandy, he found himself inside with the receiver against his ear, fingers hovering over the switches.

'Are y'there, Johnson?'

There was a long pause; long enough for Vincent to shake his head in self reproach and wander off to find the biscuits.

He'd just got the tin open in the kitchen when the radio burst to life.

Click – 'Mr Doherty? Everythin' alright?' – *click*.

There was an urgency to Johnson's voice, which only then made Vincent realise it was nearing nine, and that for as far back as he could remember, he'd never radioed outside of their set times. He again considered abandoning

the idea and not responding, but it was too late for that. Johnson would panic, and rightly so. A rescue team would be out by morning.

‘Aye, lad. Everything’s fine. How’s it on your end?’

Click – ‘Cold’n sweet. Y’self?’ – *click*.

‘The same.’

A moment passed.

Click – ‘So, did you need anything, Mr Doherty? Is there something I can help you with?’ – *click*.

Vincent swallowed. ‘Aye, just a question for ye... The *Maiden’s Voyage* – I saw her this afternoon, sweet little peach. What’s her story?’ He stared anxiously at the radio, waiting for Johnson’s reply. His belly glowed from the brandy.

Click – ‘Lovely little sloop. Helen Weatherston’s baby. Why, she was only in here not an hour past, asking after you.’ – *click*.

‘After me?’ Vincent repeated, though only to himself. ‘By Heavens.’ He pressed the switch. ‘Nay, I don’t know her,’ he said, trying to sound normal. ‘T’is a strange thing indeed. Where’s she from, then?’

Click – ‘Here or there, don’t rightly know. Been around a while though. Was married to that lawyer – whassis name – Bill, maybe? Kicked it a couple of years back, if I remember rightly.’ – *click*.

A widow, Vincent thought with a glee that flooded him with guilt. A voice in his head spoke through it: *ask her for dinner, old man*. No, he rebuked it. *Ask her*. No. *You’ll die alone*. I don’t care.

But Vincent did, and before he could stop himself, his finger was back on the switch, the words spilling from his mouth.

‘Won’t you ask her if she’ll dine with me next run, Johnson?’

There was another long pause. Vincent felt as if he’d eaten rotten fish.

Click – ‘Naught much would make me happier, Mr Doherty.’ – *click*.

JOHNSON CONFIRMED TWO WRETCHED, worrisome days later. Helen Weatherstone would be *delighted*. Their conversation over the radio was

awkward and short. Vincent was over the moon. Before it was over, he'd asked Johnson to bring him the ingredients for Judith's famous casserole on the next run, to cook on the night.

He hoped Judith wouldn't mind.

THE FOLLOWING week passed in a blur of tasks and fretting. The seas rolled and heaved. The wind whipped then subsided to a sickening calm. Twice, or maybe three times, Vincent had shuffled inside and switched on the radio, intent on calling the whole thing off. But each time, something stopped him. Maybe because he'd been alone ten years, with only Margy for company; maybe because it was the most excitement he'd had in a long time. He almost felt young again.

Vincent woke before dawn on Thursday morning to banging shutters and wind whistling under the eaves. He groaned, his heart sinking, hearing the waves churning on the rocks far below. He thought about radioing Johnson for the forecast, but he knew there wasn't any point. He

could feel in his bones that the squall was only getting started. Helen wouldn't be coming today.

'Maybe t'is not meant to be,' Vincent lamented to Margy, and climbed out of bed.

His tea tasted bitter, even with an extra scoop. The fire wouldn't warm the cottage though it blazed an orange glow across the room. Vincent barely even noticed the sun creep over the horizon as he refilled the kerosene, his favourite part of the day.

By lunchtime the waves were marching in hard toward the mainland and the sky was dark and ominous. Even Johnson, as brave a seaman as he was, had radioed and said he wouldn't be chancing the weather to deliver the week's supplies. Still, as dusk came on early, Vincent found himself huddled in his rain jacket, watching the mainland for a glimpse of her sail, but even he was driven back inside within minutes.

Margy was waiting for him inside the front door, her coat dry and fluffy from having the better sense to stay indoors, but recognised Vincent's mood as he hung his raincoat on the hook and slinked off to her bed.

The silence continued over dinner. Vincent's mind tumbled over what could have been: Helen Weatherstone, whose face he knew not, sitting opposite him in the soft light of the guttering candle, casting lovely shadows upon her features; her laughter, filling the sandstone walls of the cottage like a shaft of sunlight piercing the sea mist; her womanly scent, maybe even perfumed, blending with that of man and salt and dog.

He chided himself for his imagination as he slipped his raincoat back on then trudged over to the lighthouse to complete his nightly duties; he'd never felt lonelier when he climbed into bed later that night, pulling the covers up to his chin.

WHEN VINCENT EMERGED the following morning, the squall had passed and the air was clean and fresh. Dew sparkled on the tips of the tussock grass. The dawn was smeared with pastel colours. His mood had passed with his slumber, as had his bout of craziness, and he

inhaled the cold air with contentment. Everything felt back to normal.

‘S’a beautiful day, Margy,’ he said, giving her a quick scratch as he tied his laces. ‘I’m sorry for my behaviour yester’ eve. T’won’t happen again. Come on, now.’

Margy ran out ahead of him as they crossed the island. Vincent smiled to himself as he followed her: at his foolishness, at the tenderness of his old heart. What a silly old thing he’d been. He imagined Judith shaking her head scoldingly from Heaven. She’d say he needed a hobby.

Margy stopped and picked up a stick, worrying it determinedly while she waited for Vincent to catch up and throw it. Gulls swooped and cried above her, their snowy wings beating the air still carrying the musk of the storm.

‘Alright, Margy... Go!’

Vincent’s shoulder creaked like an ancient farm gate as he threw the stick far overhead. Margy streaked after it, ears pinned back, saliva trailing from her mouth. It flew through the air, then disappeared over the cliff.

‘Just you wait there, missy,’ Vincent shouted. Margy skidded to a stop just before she went over the edge. She barked impatiently, then ran in a circle as he hurried to catch up.

His breath wheezed as he stopped beside her, peering down at the sheer jagged indices of greywacke splattered with the white wastage of the birds below. The forlorn stick was resting on a narrow shelf of rock at the very bottom, the foaming white sea crashing against it.

‘Aye, lassie, I’m sorry but it’s...’

Vincent trailed off as something near the stick caught his eye. He squinted, trying to make sense of what he was looking at: a piece of navy blue timber, curved like a woman’s hip, with a sodden white strip of material pinned beneath it. A wave broke over it, shifting its position, then as the water sucked back he saw that there was something written on it in a gold-gilded script.

Vincent’s breath caught in his throat, realising what it was: the remains of the stern of a small sloop. His hands began to shake. Margy began to whimper. Blood rushed to his head, swaying him on his feet.

‘Oh, Heavens,’ he whispered, praying his eyes were playing tricks. He searched the rocks for any more wreckage, but there was nothing. Only the dreadful beauty of the sea.

‘Heavens, Margy... She came.’

THE END

THANK YOU FOR READING

If you enjoyed ‘The Lighthouse Keeper’ (or even if you didn’t), could I please ask you to leave a review? Without sounding too dramatic, they are the *lifeblood* of a young author’s career.

You can do so here (it’ll only take 30 seconds, I promise): **LEAVE A REVIEW**

Again, thank you for your support. It means the world.

Happy reading,

Foster

ALSO BY FOSTER BURTON

The Hollows - A 19th Century Historical Thriller

*The long-awaited debut novel from Australian author,
Foster Burton*

Southern Queensland, 1888

Squatter Jack Thomas has long dreamt of riches: of a grand house full of servants and a life of comfort and luxury. So when he finds a nugget of gold on land they don't yet own, he is faced with a difficult choice: listen to his older brother Bill and forget he ever found it? Or follow his heart and sell it... and lose everything along the way.

Reader Reviews:

'Reminded me of some of Wilbur Smith's work only set in Australia. Really enjoyed the plot and the historical setting

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'Not my usual genre, but I'm so glad I decided to give it a crack. What a brilliant story, great characters, and at times, I felt I was there.' - Ainsley W.

'Great read! With a strong setting, an intriguing story and characters that leap off of the page, it was tough to put the book down! Solid debut from an Aussie author who no doubt has some more fascinating work coming in the future.' - Cooper L.

'Can feel the heat and grit in the air: Australia... 19th century gold mining.. desperate times and desperate men. Edge of the seat thrills 😊. And a bit of loving too.' - Mecaza M

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Foster Burton is an emerging historical fiction author based on the East Coast of Australia, where he lives with his wife, Belinda, and two children, Wilbur, and Holland. Before writing, his career spanned everything from app development, classic car dealing, and branding; the list goes on. When Foster isn't writing, you'll find him tinkering in the shed on an old Land Rover, gardening, or exploring the South Island of New Zealand.

He is currently working on book two of The Hollows Series, due mid-2025.

Keep up to date with its launch date, and for all of Foster's latest news at <https://fosterburton.com.au>

