

The Lighthouse by Bri Wilson

The lighthouse stood alone on the shore, boulders scattered around its base like fallen meteors. Its white tower shone in the settling dusk, the lantern room a dark mass that pulled all light towards it. Over the rocks fell the waves, crashing with the volume of a thunderstorm. The spray struck the lighthouse as if trying to tear it down. Miles beyond the watery storm, under silent waters, floated hundreds of luminescent jellyfish, their blue skin surging with electricity. They swarmed upwards from the depths, a mass of pulsing light.

Hugo stood at the foot of the spiral staircase. He held the key to the lantern room in one hand, his grip light and loose like he'd forgotten he was holding something. A wall of water slammed against the door behind him and he felt the mist glaze his back, soaking the coat that had once belonged to his grandfather. His waterlogged boots anchored him to the dirt strewn floor. A second wall of water slammed against the door and the force of it almost knocked the key from his hand. He looked down at it, iron gray and as long as his index finger, the biting stained with blood from its time hanging around the lighthouse keeper's neck after the knife punctured his heart. A third wall of water slammed against the door and Hugo lifted a waterlogged foot and placed it onto the staircase. Then the other. The wooden steps rattled under his weight as he moved up them. Outside the white stone walls the mass of jellyfish moved closer to shore, their skins glowing brighter with each breath they took.

The key slid into the lock in segmented jolts. Hugo wrapped a hand around the cold doorknob and pushed. The door stumbled open into darkness. He extracted the key from the lock and forgot to put it in his pocket. A howling wind raced around the glass, a cloak for the settled night. Out to sea a throbbing blue light drew Hugo across the lantern room. It seemed as though the ocean had swallowed a lantern and was returning it to shore. Transfixed, he watched it move with the ebb and flow of the waves, undulating its way closer to the lighthouse. The underwater light, a piercing blue, distorted by the waves, inflated and deflated in the rhythm of a beating heart. The key fell from his grasp and he was jolted from his trance by its clang on the floor. He turned from the blue light and pulled the matchbook from inside his coat. The lamp was smudged with grease but there was no time to clean it. He lit a match and held the trembling flame to the wick, and shielded his eyes as the fire flared in its new home. The beam soared through the night and the wind, tracing a path over the vicious waves. Hugo dropped the extinguished match on the floor and found himself at the glass, watching for the blue light. The lantern's heat billowed in the room, drying his grandfather's coat and sucking the water out of his waterlogged boots.

The blue light had disappeared. Hugo scanned the blackening ocean, following the lantern's beam, but all it illuminated was still dark water. He felt his fingers press against the glass as if they too had eyes. Something flashed near the shore and his gaze magnetized there: the blue

light, pulsing brighter and faster, clinging to the rocks like an amorphous creature. It began to disintegrate and scatter, particles of blue light separating themselves from the mass and climbing over the jagged rocks. Hugo squinted closer at the particles and realized they climbed with tentacles, and that the blue light gleamed with the electric intensity centered in the heads of jellyfish. They pulled themselves over the rocks in a steady march, forming streaks of blue as they inched in lines toward the lighthouse door and the tower base. Hugo watched the water drain of light, leaving behind a sudden stillness; the waves had ceased their attack. The ocean felt deadly calm, the kind of quiet that preceded a monstrous explosion.

Behind him the lantern hissed and spat, and the flame's heat scorched his back. His boots felt as if they were melting, gluing his feet to the dusty floor. As his eyes tracked the jellyfishes' path, they caught sight of the fallen key beside him, almost obscured by shadow. He picked it up. The dried blood on the biting matched the blood on his hands and for a moment he regretted sliding the knife between the lighthouse keeper's ribs. But it had to be done. The flame needed to rise one last time. Hugo took off his grandfather's coat and let it collapse on the ground. He pulled off his shirt and wrapped his left hand in the fabric, balled his fingers into a fist and punched a hole in the glass window. Splintered shards pierced his skin. He traced the key's shape in his hands one last time and threw it into the night. He could not see where it fell.

A horde of jellyfish painted the door to the lighthouse, tentacles rippling over the wooden frame. The yard surrounding the tower glowed blue, and the glow was starting to creep up the white stone. Creature by creature climbed upwards, until several pairs of tentacles gripped the railing surrounding the lantern room. Beneath them a pained groan rolled into the night as the jellyfish painting the door pulled it apart at its hinges. They latched onto the stones of the foundation and pulled, yanking the lighthouse out from under its feet. The tower crumbled, in an aching and languorous descent. As it fell the jellyfish surged upwards, consuming the deteriorating structure in a casing of astonishing blue. And then it was gone, rubble and dust left in its stead. The jellyfish oozed off the broken stones and slid back into the water, and the mass of pulsing blue light swam out to sea. Behind them the waves began to scream at the rocks again, and threw themselves over the space where the lighthouse had stood.