

THE LIGHTHOUSE

by M.T. Mathieson

<http://www.mtmathieson.com>

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The characters, places and events in this story are fictional. Any similarity with real people or places is coincidental.

8th July 2011, 5:00 p.m.
Hennerton, East Coast of England

The woman stood at the bottom of the narrow dirt track that sloped gently up towards the old lighthouse. She was slim and upright but almost impossible to put an age to. From a distance, her clothes and hair said middle age. She wore plain black shoes with just the smallest of heels and a cardigan, carefully chosen to match the yellow of the flowers on her calf length skirt. Her hair was cut short for easy management rather than appearance and the grey strands had increased in number to create light streaks in the darkness of her natural colour. However, had anyone been inclined to look closely they would have seen that Ann Barford was little more than forty. She was grateful for the fact that few people ever did.

Seagulls flew overhead, their shrill call contrasting with the rhythmic murmur of the waves beyond the lighthouse. There were no human sounds. There was not another person around for as far as the eye could see but, even if there had been, they wouldn't have given a second glance at the plain-looking woman, alone on the country lane. That was just the way Ann wanted it.

She gazed up at the imposing red and white striped building remembering how, as a young child, she had come here every summer holiday with her family. She remembered the old, candlewick bedspread laid out as a picnic blanket and how her brother, three years older, had told her stories of shipwrecks and smugglers as they ate cakes and played catch, their mother calling to them from behind her book not to go too close to the sea. She remembered how her father had once held on to her so that she could peer over the edge of the cliff to the rocks so far below, how she had felt both afraid and excited at the same time.

Inevitably, her thoughts moved on to later, darker memories. She shuddered, took a deep breath and started her ascent along the dusty path.

It's not too late to turn back, she told herself. *I could turn around now, go home and forget about it.* She laughed at the ridiculousness of the thought. Forget about it? Oh how she wished that were possible. If she hadn't managed to forget about it in over thirty years, she was hardly likely to forget about it now. No, there was no going back. She might as well get it over with.

It took only a few minutes to reach the top of the path. The door to the lighthouse was just as she remembered it — vertical slats of unpainted wood, weathered by years of coastal exposure and fixed solidly to the frame with iron hinges, once black but now rusted brown. The grassy area to the front where they had laid out their picnic so many times seemed smaller than she remembered and the trees and bushes that surrounded it taller.

She carried on to the open land at the side of the building where she and David had played catch and shared hopes and dreams. Such happy memories, all snatched away, tainted. She tried to turn around, to look back towards the lighthouse, the rear of the lighthouse. She couldn't. She hated herself for her own stupid weakness.

Eventually, she mustered the strength to turn her body but her eyes closed in reflex resistance. It took every ounce of her strength to lift her head and open her eyes. She had expected it to look exactly as it did in her memories and dreams. It didn't — not because her own child's-eye memory had distorted the reality but simply because it had changed. The rusty, metal frame that she had never been able to identify, but which had been fixed in her memory all these years, had gone. Why did she expect it to be there still? A wooden dining chair was placed looking out to sea and an old mattress lay half propped against the

rear wall. She walked further, drawn towards the spot where it had happened. Looking down at the ground, the memories came flooding back.

She remembered the smell of tobacco on his breath as he brought his face close to hers. She remembered the feel of his calloused hand over her mouth. She remembered how his voice, usually so bright and amiable, turned quiet and sinister as he spoke:

"If you make a noise I'll throw you over the side. I'll say it was an accident – that you fell."

August 1979

Hennerton, East Coast of England

Pat O'Boyle and his wife, Margaret, had been friends of the family for most of Annie Baker's life. The two families had met on holiday and had kept in touch, arranging their annual trip to Hennerton at the same time each year. The O'Boyles had never had children of their own. Margaret was over ten years older than Pat and, by the time they had realized it wasn't going to happen, she was too old to adopt (the only option available to childless couples back then). Although there was always a hint of melancholy about her, Margaret accepted her lot, put on a brave face and doted on any children she came into contact with, including Annie and David. Annie was more than happy to return the affection of this kind and gentle woman.

Pat was a different matter. Annie had never really been able to take to him. He was friendly enough, and generous, and her parents seemed to like him. He was always telling jokes and entertaining them with stories of his own childhood. Despite that, there was something Annie didn't like. It was not the way he looked or anything in particular that he said or did. He was a small-framed man, barely taller than Annie's mother and he spoke in the smooth and charming tones of Dublin. He kept his near-black hair cut neat and short and his pale blue eyes were always smiling, the picture of amiability. There was just something about him that made Annie feel uncomfortable.

It was on the last day of their holiday when Annie was ten years old that she discovered that her instincts could be trusted. She slept late and, by the time she awoke, her father had already left the chalet. He had returned to work on the train, leaving her mother to pack up and drive the children home.

It was a beautiful day, the sky was blue, the sun was shining and the heat was tempered by a gentle breeze. Annie stumbled through the living room, rubbing her eyes, and headed straight for the small table by the patio doors at the edge of the kitchen. Sitting opposite David, she waited, watching him shovelling cereal into his mouth as if he was afraid it was going to disappear.

After a few moments, her mother emerged from one of the adjoining bedrooms. Helen Baker was a good looking woman and, like many women, she worked at making the most of it. By now her dark brown hair was brushed and backcombed into place and her make-up was done for the day. Her figure showed the signs of child-bearing but she managed to limit its effects by keeping a check on her weight.

"If you want breakfast you'll have to get it yourself," she said, plainly irritated by Annie's late arrival. "I've got too much to do."

With a stifled sigh, Annie got down from her chair, grabbed the cereal packet from the cupboard and the milk from the fridge and took them back to the table. She poured out far too much cereal and managed to slop more milk onto the table than she got in the bowl.

"Mum, Annie's making a mess," David called, shooting a spiteful grin at his sister.

"Oh for goodness sake you two, don't start already. I really can't be bothered with it today."

Annie opened her mouth to protest that she hadn't started anything but decided that it wasn't a good idea. She knew her mother well enough to know when she was stressed and she also knew her well enough to know that doing anything to add to that stress would only get her swift smack on the backside.

"You two need to entertain yourselves today," Helen called from the kitchen.

"I'm going out anyway," David replied.
Helen raised her eyebrows. "I'm sorry?"
"Ok," he sighed, "Can I go out today?"
"That depends where you're going and who with."
"Paul and Rick. We're going to play football over the field."
"Ok, just make sure you're back by 2 o'clock. We have to hand the keys in by then."
"Can I go with him?" Annie asked.
"No." David shot back before his mother could reply.
Helen glared at him then turned to Annie. "No love, it's too much responsibility for David. Anyway, you'd only argue."
"No we won't," Annie pleaded.
"No. It's not a good idea."
Annie adopted her best, dejected posture: shoulders slumped, head down, bottom lip protruding. "Can I go over to the playground then?"
"Who with?"
"On my own."
"No." Helen shook her head to emphasize the point. "That really isn't a good idea."
"Why not?"
"Because it's not safe."
"I'll be really careful crossing the road. They taught us how to do it at school."
"It's not just the roads that are dangerous."
"What then?"
"You're too young to understand."
"Pleeeeeease."
"No and that's the end of it."
Annie gave up. She knew that tone.

Half an hour later, David had left and Annie was alone in the chalet with her mother. She remained at the table, amusing herself with her new palette of watercolour paints and a pad of plain paper, merrily creating her masterpiece while her mother bustled in and out of rooms, gathering their belongings together and packing them away.

She noticed the shadow cast across her painting but it took several seconds before it occurred to Annie to look for its cause. She didn't smile when she saw Pat O'Boyle standing at the patio door.

"Mum, Pat's here."

From somewhere at the back of the chalet she heard her mother's voice calling back. "Come in Pat. I'm just packing up."

Helen entered the main living area and smiled at Pat O'Boyle. "No Margaret?"

"She's got things to do and I'm in the way," he said, rolling his eyes in sheepish innocence. "She thought you might have things to do as well and I could take the children out of your way for a while."

"Oh, what a shame, David's gone out to play with friends. I'm sure Annie would like to go out though. Wouldn't you love?"

Helen walked over to the table and looked down at Annie's painting. She smiled. "Oh Annie, that's lovely."

A red and white striped pole stood in the middle of a blue sky with a bright yellow sun in the top left corner, its spiky rays descending far down into a rectangle of green. Dotted around the rectangle were various other shapes.

"Who's that doing the Irish Jig?" asked Pat.

"That's David and he's doing Keepy-uppies," Annie replied pointing to the brown blob just above the figure's knee.

"Oh, I see." Pat winked at Helen over the top of Annie's head.

"Is this me?" asked Helen, indicating what was clearly a woman in an A-line skirt sitting on the grass.

"Yep and that's me and Daddy." Annie pointed at a mass of limbs. "Daddy's giving me an aeroplane ride."

Helen tousled her daughter's long wavy hair. She loved to see her happy.

"So, do you fancy going out for a while then?" Pat asked.

The truth was that she didn't but to say so would be rude. She turned to her mother.

"Are *you* coming?"

"No, I've got packing to do and I need to clean up this place so they've got no excuse to keep our deposit."

"Can't I stay here with you?"

"Don't be silly. You'd be bored. Anyway, not an hour ago you were complaining to go out."

"I know but I don't want to now."

"No arguments, you shouldn't be stuck indoors on a day like this."

"Come on," Pat cajoled, "we'll go and play some ball and then I'll buy you an ice-cream."

Annie had no choice. Reluctantly, she followed Pat out of the chalet and onto the country road that led to the old lighthouse, passing the O'Boyle's chalet on the way and waving to Margaret, who stood at the kitchen sink overlooking the window, the same kitchen where Pat had watched David pass by just a little earlier.

They walked along the lane, a man in his holiday sandals, chatting away jovially to a small child at his side in her pink summer dress. It was a common enough sight in any seaside town.

8th July 2011, 5:10 p.m.
Hennerton, East Coast of England

The minute or two that Ann had spent at the rear of the lighthouse was long enough. She walked towards a rocky outcrop on the far side, where she stood looking out to sea. She could hear the waves breaking violently against the rocks.

Ann was glad she had chosen to come to the old lighthouse, although she had had moments of doubt during the preceding weeks. She hadn't known how being there again would affect her. She had hoped it wouldn't weaken her. It hadn't. The emotion she felt, which ran through every vein in her body, was not fear or shame. It was anger.

As Ann listened to the crashing of the waves, she felt strong. It was not the carefully cultivated facade she had worn for most of her life. Ann's strength was as real and as solid as the rocks on which she stood. The images of the past still haunted her but she was no longer that frightened little girl, she couldn't afford to be.

Peering over the edge of the cliff, she could see the ebbing tide had started to expose the rocks below. She stood there for a moment, listening to the rousing rhythm of the waves, then turned and walked to the front of the lighthouse once more. Positioning herself in one of the few spots where she could see through the bushes to the road below, Ann tucked her skirt under her knees and sat on the dry, prickly grass. She waited.

August 1979
Hennerton, East Coast of England

When Pat returned Annie to the chalet shortly before 2 o'clock, Helen was busy loading the car.

"Oh there you are. I was beginning to think you two had decided to stay for another week."

"Sorry to have kept her for so long Helen, I lost track of the time."

"I'm only joking. It was handy to have the place to myself so I could get packed without them under my feet." Helen lifted a suitcase into the boot as she spoke. "You'll have to have some of the softer stuff in the back with you, Annie. We've somehow managed to go back with twice as much as we came with again."

Annie didn't reply.

"She's not feeling too well. It could be the heat but I think she might have overdone it with the ice-cream," Pat smiled apologetically.

"Oh dear," Helen bent down and felt Annie's forehead as she kissed her on the cheek. "Why don't you get in the car now. You can sleep on the way home if you like. David's going to sit in the front so he won't bother you."

Annie climbed into the back of the car without speaking, closed the door and rested her head against the frame. She didn't close her eyes; she didn't like what she saw when she did that so she kept them open, staring out of the car window at a world that she no longer recognized.

Once everything was packed and Annie and David were both in the car ready to go, Helen did her final check of the chalet. When she returned, she handed Annie the picture she had painted that morning.

"You nearly forgot this," she said brightly.

Silently, Annie took the painting. By the time they had handed in the keys at the reception desk and were driving along the main road towards the motorway, she had managed to compress most of it into a single fist. As she stepped out of the car at the service station an hour later, she let the crumpled page fall from her hand.

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