



# ONE NIGHT AT THE LIGHT

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It was fifty outside, freezing for the summer solstice. Waves of rain whipped the Island with winds gusting over forty. No mercy in sight.

Martha's Vineyard was under siege. Cold fronts are not rare in June. We had handled them many times before, by fishing the south side of the Island or tucked up into the salt pond, but that wasn't going to work this time around. This was no ordinary front; this was a nor'easter.

The only good news was, it arrived on the last day of our trip. In the morning we would be pulling stakes and heading off-Island. We had been there two weeks, hunting striped bass, and done fairly well. Still, we hated missing this final bit of fishing. The last night on the Island was an important part of our trip. It was a bittersweet angling moment, made poignant by the knowledge we would not be back for a year. We would wade, discussing all that had happened during the trip. It was a chance to cap things, sort through what would soon be

wonderful memories. Instead, we were sitting on our duffs killing time.

Desperate for a diversion, we decided to take a drive. With the wipers tapping time we went to Lobsterville on the north side of the Island. It was a mess. You know the old saying about come hell or high water? At that moment, we had both. Next, we ventured to Squibnocket, on the lee side of the Island. In theory it should have been better over there. As soon as we pulled into the parking lot, however, we got the bad news. The ocean was roaring there too. There was no place to hide.

Neither of us was in a hurry to head back to the *hacienda*. So we extended our nor'easter sightseeing tour by trucking up to the Gay Head Cliffs. There we climbed into the teeth of the storm. With hoods up and heads down, we forged on, past the closed concession stands and up to the overlook. This is one of the most scenic views on the planet. A summer sunset here can blow your socks off, but this one was gunning to take your head.

At the crest of the cliffs we watched white caps marching over Devil's Bridge while the Gay Head Light punched red and white beams into a dying day. The Bridge is one of the best striper grounds in the northeast; it's also a treacherous reef, and tonight you could see why. The Bridge was an angry maelstrom.

Eventually the pelting rain pushed us back to the truck. Relieved to be out of the snotty weather, we set off for home. As we eased down the road the lighthouse stood to our left in the field. Silhouetted against a darkening sky, it loomed upwards eerily, like some medieval black tower. Something else, however, really caught my eye. At the base of the lighthouse, an orange glow leaked into the gloom. I asked Phil to stop; I wanted a better look.

Phil touched the brakes and then lowered the driver's side window. It only took a second to see that the lighthouse's front door was ajar. In all the years we had fished the Island, neither of us had seen it open before. But what we saw next was



even more unexpected. As we peered out, the lighthouse door swung wide and a man waved his arms, beckoning us over. Phil and I looked at each other. What was this about? It seemed strange, yet it was also enticing. Phil and I had always wanted to see the inside of the light.

Stoked for an adventure, we got back into the rain, stepped through the gated fence, and dashed to the door. As we neared, the man in the doorway stepped back, smiled, and then without uttering a word, pointed to the spiral staircase. It was as if he had been expecting us all along. Had he confused Phil and me with someone else? That seemed possible but unlikely. Or was this the Bates Motel? Neither Phil nor I had the foggiest. We simply took the bait and headed up into the unknown.

The ancient spiral staircase was steep and narrow. At the top it opened into a small circular space with glass panels from floor to ceiling. This was the lantern room, the heart of the lighthouse. Along the room's rim a dozen people sat on the floor with their backs to the glass, some softly talking, others deep in thought. Who were these people? Had we stumbled upon a secret society? What was going on here? I struggled to make sense of it.

In the center of the room, two large, drum-shaped lights revolved. Phil and I walked around them and plopped down. Here were the lamps that silently followed us, night after night, as we searched for striped bass. Now those beacons were at arm's length, close enough to touch. Amazing. As we watched, the lights slowly turned, painting each person along the wall – red and then white. The mystery of this adventure deepened. High above the cliffs we sat in a glass fish bowl atop a tower, bathed in colored lights as rain lashed the windows and a nor'easter pounded the door. What was next? Jokingly I told Phil the lighthouse was really a rocket, taking us to Atlantis. Better buckle your seat belt.

Despite all this, the people looked normal. No cloven hoofs anywhere. A woman in a dark brown jacket stood with her back against the glass. Her eyes closed, her hands in her pockets, she appeared lost in

a transcendental moment. Next to her, a middle-aged couple sat on the floor. The man, balding and wearing Birkenstocks, had his head down, deep in thought. The woman next to him spoke softly with someone across the room. To my right, two young girls sat near their mother, all three in winter coats. Alongside them, a well-dressed man with long sideburns spoke quietly into his wife's ear. I detected a French accent.

### **In all the years we fished the Island, we had never seen it open before; what we saw next was even more unexpected.**

Across from me, a woman occupied the only chair. Given her elevated position, I figured her to be a bellwether of some sort. Perhaps even the grand poobah. Clad in a long white cardigan sweater over a black turtleneck, she projected a sense of benign authority. A large necklace with a silver pendent shaped like a circle hook dangled from her neck. On her wrist rode a multicolored bracelet; it looked handmade. Her long gray hair hung down her back, tied at the top in a ponytail. She seemed calm and gracious, the epitome of the aging hippie – a soul still in touch with the Age of Aquarius.

Leaning in with a smile, our chairperson informed us that people all over the globe were celebrating the summer solstice. Her remark sparked conversation around the room. There was talk of modern-day Druids flocking by the thousands to Stonehenge. Mention was made of a stone circle somewhere in New Hampshire, and Candle Night events in Japan. Someone added that there was a group like ours singing in an Australian lighthouse. Were we in synch with the antipodes?

Smiles lit up the lantern room, igniting a chorus of – you guessed it – “Kum ba yah.” It felt corny. Still I convinced myself to chill out, enjoy the ride. Why not? The show was free and we had zero else to do. I glanced over at Phil to see if he was okay with the performance. As a photojournalist, he had carried a camera into some dire situations in Haiti, Rwanda,

and the mass graves of Bosnia. No matter how odd this deal might be, I was sure for him this was a country fair.

As the singing grew louder, I closed my eyes. Immediately I got flashbacks to the 1960s. I came of age in that era of bell-bottoms, long hair, flower power, and stone cold rock and roll. Today too many people see that time only in clichés. Where's the black light and the lava lamp? Pass the doob, dude. No question there was out-and-out stupidity at times. One pill made you larger and one pill made you small, but one pill too many scrambled your noodle. Still the '60s were much more than just drugs. They held a sincere belief that through awareness, and tolerance, a better world could emerge. We wanted to explore the power of peace. And that energy helped spark major changes in our culture, including the civil rights, environmental, and women's movements – all essential to our culture today.

Then my thoughts turned to the sad times we live in – the worldwide violence, the ever-present hatred, and hunger. Tragedy floods the television, the papers, and the internet, increasing exponentially year by year. Terrorism replaces civility. Madness multiplies, spreading across our society and the planet like an infectious disease. Even in the most civilized countries on earth people commit barbaric acts. Everywhere forces slouch toward Bethlehem.

As darkness fully closed in, the singing subsided and people started drifting downstairs. Our solstice séance was over. Phil and I rose and stood by the stairwell, awaiting our chance to return to earth. I had no idea how this event had come about, but I was happy we had chanced upon it. I was grateful for an opportunity to see the inside of the lighthouse. That had been a gift. Yet the biggest reward was a reawakening of sorts. It was a vivid reminder that our world desperately needs more love and understanding. More of what the '60s had strived to achieve. If that is to happen, each of us must remain open, ready to accept, ready to learn. Ready to grow. As Bob Dylan told us, “He not busy being born is busy dying.” ♦