

The Lighthouse With No Keeper

The diary of Nell Ferris, age 10, written in pencil on the back of a shipping ledger

Day 1

I am writing this with a pencil stub and I only have one, so I will not waste words on how I feel. I will write what HAPPENED.

The ferry hit something in the fog. Not rocks — everyone said rocks, but I heard the crunch and it was too soft for rocks. The grown-ups got very loud very fast. Dad put me in a lifejacket and said “hold the rail, Nellie, I’m coming right back,” and then the deck tipped and the sea came up and took me like a hand picking up a marble.

I don’t remember swimming. I remember cold. I remember being furious at the water, which is a strange thing to remember.

I woke up on gravel. Not sand — gravel, grey and sharp, with cold water sliding in and out of it.

And a dog was licking my ear.

He is enormous, shaggy, the colour of wet toast, and he belongs to the ferry captain. His name is on his collar: BISCUIT. He is the least biscuit-like creature I have ever seen and I have decided not to hold it against him.

There is nobody else here. I called until my throat gave out.

There is one thing on this island besides rocks and grass and us.

There is a lighthouse.

Day 2

The lighthouse has no keeper. I knocked anyway, which Biscuit found ridiculous.

It is white going grey, four storeys, with a spiral staircase inside that groans like an old man getting out of a chair. Somebody lived here once and left in a hurry, or left in an orderly way a very long time ago — I can’t tell which. There is a cot. A table. A cupboard with four tins in it, no labels, all rust-spotted. A tin opener on a string. Somebody thought about the person who would come next, and that somebody was very kind.

At the top there is the LAMP. It is bigger than me. Rings and rings of glass in a shape like a beehive, and every ring bends the light so that if you stand close you go all rainbow-striped. It sits on a turning table. Underneath the table there is a machine with a crank and a weight on a chain, like a grandfather clock that got ambitious.

There is no bulb, though. There's an oil burner. And no oil.

I opened one tin. Peaches. Biscuit and I split them and it was the best and worst meal of my life — best because peaches, worst because it made me think about our kitchen at home so hard my chest hurt.

Three tins left. I am not opening another until tomorrow. That is a rule now.

Day 3

The problem is water. It's a stupid problem to have when you are surrounded by an entire ocean of it, but seawater makes you thirstier, not less. I know that from a book. Books are turning out to be worth more than I gave them credit for.

There is no stream here. This island isn't the friendly kind with palm trees and bananas. It's grey and cold and honest about it.

So: rain. There was a rain barrel round the back of the lighthouse, split down one side and useless. But the lighthouse has GUTTERS. And I found a bucket, and two tin basins, and the split barrel still holds water up to the split.

I cleared the gutter of forty years of dead leaves and one very surprised beetle. I lined everything up under the downspout.

Then I sat and waited for weather.

Which is, I am now realising, the actual definition of living on an island.

Day 4

It rained. It RAINED. I stood outside in it with my mouth open like a fool and Biscuit barked at the sky.

The barrel is half full and the basins are full and I have drunk so much water I slosh.

While I waited for it to stop I explored the cupboard properly, and behind the tins, right at the back, I found a tobacco tin with the lid stuck shut with rust. I worked at it for an hour with the tin opener.

Inside: a stub of pencil (which is what I'm writing with now — thank you, stranger), a brass key, and a folded paper that says in old smudged writing:

"Lamp will light if you feed her. Oil in the store, if the store's still standing. Wind the weight all the way up or she'll not turn. — J.M., keeper, 1931"

The store is not still standing. There's a stone rectangle of foundations near the cliff and that's all.

But a note is a note. Ninety-five years old and J.M. is still trying to help. I have decided I like J.M. enormously.

Day 5

Bad day, so I'll be quick about it.

I got it into my head that I could see further from the cliff, and I climbed out onto a wet ledge to look, and my foot went, and I only didn't fall because I landed hard on my hip on the ledge instead of past it. I lay there a while. My hip is black and green. I cried in a loud ugly way that I'm glad nobody heard except Biscuit, who put his whole head in my lap and let me.

Then I got up and hobbled back and made a rule, out loud, to make it official:

NELL'S RULES OF THE ISLAND 1. Never climb anything wet. 2. Never go anywhere Biscuit won't follow. He's smarter than me about edges. 3. Cry if you need to. Then do the next thing.

The next thing was: eat. Tin three. Beans, cold. Fine. Actually fine.

Day 6

I have been thinking about oil.

There is no lamp oil on this island. But a lamp doesn't want *lamp oil* especially. A lamp wants *something that burns slowly with a wick*.

Here is what there is on this island: gulls, grass, gravel, and along the whole east shore, seals. Fat, snoring, complaining seals who watch me go past like I'm a bus they've decided not to catch.

I am not going to hurt a seal. Let's be extremely clear, Diary. I would rather never leave.

But there is a lot else on a shore. There is driftwood, and dried grass, and rope, and a plastic crate, and half a fishing float, and — this is the good part — a whole tangle of nets and floats and rubbish washed up in the cove, including a red plastic jerry can, sealed tight, three-quarters full of something that smells like an engine.

Diesel. From a boat, sometime, somehow.

Diesel will burn on a wick. Badly. Smokily. But it will burn.

I dragged it back a metre at a time. It took all afternoon. Biscuit supervised.

Day 7

Today I did the maths on the thing I have been avoiding, which is: nobody is coming.

That's not me being gloomy. It's just true so far. Seven days and I have seen one aeroplane, so high it was only a scratch of white, and nothing else. This island isn't on the way to anywhere. If it were, it wouldn't have needed a lighthouse.

But that's the whole point, isn't it. A lighthouse is a thing you build in the place nobody looks, so that ships know where NOT to go.

Ships still avoid this island. Which means somewhere out there, in a wheelhouse, there is a chart with this rock on it, and a note, and possibly a lamp keeper's number that nobody has rung since 1931.

If the light comes on, someone will notice a light that has been off for ninety-five years.

That is my plan. That is the entire plan. It's the only one I've got and I'm going to be very good at it.

Day 8

Wick day.

I unpicked the rope from the cove into strands, and I braided it — thick, tight, tighter than I thought my hands could — and I soaked the braid in diesel and it stank and my fingers went numb and Biscuit sat six feet away with an expression of open judgement.

Then I cleaned the lamp.

The glass rings were furred with dust and salt and one truly historic spiderweb. I did it with a rag and rainwater, ring by ring, and the light coming through the window went from grey to rainbow as I worked, and by the end the whole top of the lighthouse was full of small bent colours moving across the walls.

I sat in the middle of it with my arms round the dog and thought: whatever happens, I did this. Somebody in 1931 polished this glass and now somebody in 2026 has polished it again, and in between, nobody.

Tomorrow I light her.

Day 9

She lit.

Not straight away. The first time, the wick guttered and went out and I said a word I learned from the ferry crew. The second time it caught, and smoked so black I had to run down two flights coughing. I trimmed the wick shorter — a lamp doesn't want a big flame, it wants a *steady* one — and the third time it settled down into a small orange tongue and stayed.

Then the weight. The chain goes up and up through the whole tower, and you crank it, and cranking it is like rowing a boat uphill. It took me twenty minutes and both arms. When I let go the machine went *tick* — and the table began to turn.

And the light went round.

Diary, I have to tell you exactly what it was like. The beam came out of the glass and swept across the sea, and where it went the black water turned to a road, and then it moved on and the road closed up behind it, and then it came round again. Over and over. Patient as anything. Like the island was finally saying something after ninety-five years of keeping its mouth shut.

Biscuit howled at it. I let him. I nearly did too.

I have diesel for maybe five nights.

Five nights is a lot of chances.

Day 10

I didn't need five.

I woke at first light to Biscuit standing on my chest, which is not a good way to wake up, barking his head off at the window.

There was a fishing boat in the cove. Blue, rusty, with a crane on the back and a man in a yellow jacket standing at the rail with binoculars, staring up at my lighthouse, and even from up there I could see his mouth was open.

I ran down four storeys, out the door, across the gravel, and I don't know what I planned to shout but what came out was "IT'S ME, IT'S ME, IT'S ME."

His name is Tam. He's fished this water for thirty-one years. He said — and I'm writing it down exactly because I want to keep it — "Lass, that light's been dead since my grandfather's time. I saw it turning at two in the morning and I thought I'd finally lost my mind."

Then he said the thing I'd stopped letting myself think about, in the flat ordinary voice of a man reading a weather report:

"You'll be the Ferris girl. They've had boats out nine days. Your father's been on every one of them."

I sat down on the gravel very suddenly.

Day 11 — the boat

Writing this at Tam's galley table with a mug of tea so sweet it's basically pudding.

Dad is coming to meet us at the harbour. Tam let me talk to him on the radio and neither of us said anything sensible. He kept saying my name and I kept saying "I'm fine, I'm FINE," and then we both stopped bothering with words.

Biscuit is asleep under the table with his chin on my foot. His captain is fine too. Everyone is fine. It turns out the ferry went down slowly enough for the boats, and that all nine of those days, the people I thought were gone were out on the water looking for me in the wrong direction.

Before we left I went back up the tower one last time and put out the lamp properly, the way you should, and I put J.M.'s note back in the tobacco tin and left it in the cupboard where I found it.

Then I took the pencil stub and added a line underneath, in my handwriting, ninety-five years later:

“She lit. Diesel from the cove works if you braid the rope tight and keep the wick short. Wind the weight all the way up — J.M. was right about that. Thank you. — N.F., keeper, 2026”

Because someone might come after me.

And somebody should tell them it works.

THE END