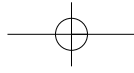


1

At its northernmost limit, the California coastline suffered a winter of brutal winds pitched against iron-clad fog, and roiling seas whose whiplash could scar a man's cheek as quickly as a cat-o'-nine-tails. Since the Gold Rush, mariners had run aground, and those who survived the splintering impact were often pulped when the tides tore them across the terrible strata of the volcanic landscape. For protection, the State had erected a score of lighthouses staffed with teams of three or four families who rotated duties that lasted into the day and into the night. The changing of the guard, as it were, was especially treacherous in some locations, such as Crescent City, accessible only by a tombolo that was flooded in high tide, or Point Bonita, whose wooden walkway, even after the mildest storm, tended to faint dead away from the loose soil of its mountaintop and tumble into the sea.

Until the advent of navigational radio, communication with the mainland was spotty. God help the man who broke his leg on the Farallon Islands between the weekly supply-ship visits. But the peril of the European War had meant Crosley crystal-receiver radio sets and quenched spark systems with an eight-hundred-mile range for all who lived and worked on the coastlines, and so, on Sunday, November 12, 1916, just below the Oregon border, at the St George Reef Lighthouse, eight miles off the California coast, there began an explosion of radio, telephone, and telegraph operations unprecedented in American history.

At high tide, roughly five o'clock in the morning, it was over an hour before dawn. The sweeping eighty-thousand-candlepower light from the third-order lens cast the frothing sea from shore to horizon into the high contrast of white against black for some moments, then back into full pitch-darkness. Two strong men in caps and slickers rowed the station boat toward the crown of stone upon which the lighthouse stood. Their passenger, her corpulent form bundled beneath a treated canvas sail, her arms crossed around her morning pitcher of coffee, was the Second Assistant Keeper, Emily Wheeler. As the



light rotated, there was a stroboscopic effect which illuminated her progress cutting across the sea foam that lay like frosting above the crags and crevasses of the ancient reef.

Emily Wheeler, in the third generation of a family of California lighthouse keepers, was a difficult woman, but, as with all difficult women who could demand such isolated work, her desire was immediately granted. Of course, send her to a rock miles off the coastline, go with the governor's blessings.

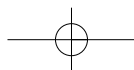
But, unlike other such women, she had thought to make her own uniform. She wore it under the sail and her layers of slickers and inflatable vests. It was navy wool, with simple gold braid at the throat, and there was a smart, matching cap under which she tucked the foundry-steel braid of her hair. After considerable thought about stripes – she didn't want to seem conceited, yet she also wanted to acknowledge her duties – she had given herself the rank of sergeant.

Her lighthouse was the world's most expensive, nine years in the making, a cylindrical housing hewn from living granite, a 115-foot caisson tower as sturdy as a medieval fortress, its imposing skin interrupted only by the balustradic slits of loophole windows. And at the very top, capped with iron painted a brilliant red, was its lantern room, in which rotated the Fresnel lens, as faceted as a sultana's engagement diamond, and which, like the eye of Argus, was chambered myriad ways, as close to omniscience as technology could dare. There was no better light in America.

To be the sergeant sharing charge of such a great beast was an honor and a responsibility to which Emily Wheeler was equal, and to be a woman superior to men was a life she made no secret of enjoying. In fact, to gain their confidence, she was known to pander to their prejudices, in effect putting her own gender up for sale. ('Gentlemen,' she said on her first day, 'I do not give the orders. The sea gives the orders, and we are at the mercy of *her* unpredictable ways.')

She was clearheaded in a crisis, and had organized the rescue of many a wayward sailor. However, it was her habit in the boring hours to engineer small crises herself. A twitching filament on the reserve lantern was occasion for much shouting; cleaning the fog signal's air compressor meant at least three separate fits of panic. It was thus the curse of her men to wish on every shift for an actual disaster.

Since no one could live comfortably at the station for more than a week, the four keeper families passed much of their lives in



cottage-style duplexes on the coast, on the dunes just above the shoreline. Husbands and wives and children were eternally, twice a day, with the waxing and waning tides, handing off hot meals and kissing each other goodbye.

Eight miles from shore, the station boat now settled into place on the leeward side of the lighthouse, which made a wedge-shaped windscreen, a small pool of calm. The men in the boat flashed their tiny lantern, and in response there was a groan from the crane housing overhead, and a winch dropped down a cargo net, into which Sergeant Wheeler stepped. Another exchange of lights, and then the crane withdrew, bringing her aloft. It was during the long moments when she swung in the wind, and the spray of the sea managed to slap at her face and neck, that she most enjoyed her job at the very edge of the map. 'I am the westernmost woman in the country' – an idea she extinguished when the cargo net placed her on granite. Trouble.

Leland, her assistant, helped her unbuckle the harness and step out of the cargo net. 'We have a problem, Mom.'

Leland was always on duty at the same time she was, less a personal choice than a request of the other families. He was twenty-four years old, talk at the lighthouse had deemed him 'unfairly handsome,' and he had wrecked two surreys on the dunes near the cottages while impressing girls. Further, he had a propensity for mail-ordering sheet music from San Francisco, *jazz rags*, which he insisted on playing on the clarinet most afternoons, and he was known to visit the picture show three consecutive days to memorize the details of photoplays rather than stay at home and help his grandmother, who had the vapors. It was hoped Sergeant Wheeler would provide discipline.

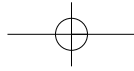
'What's wrong?'

'Craft adrift. About a mile west-northwest.'

'Anyone on it?'

Leland hesitated. He was generally quick with a quip, which melted Emily's heart too much and prevented any actual discipline from occurring. So now she looked at him not just as a sergeant, but as a worried mother. Finally, he said, 'You should come see.'

They passed through the portico into the engine room and took the elevator to the cramped observation chamber just below the lantern room. It shared common glass with the lightbox one story above. There were two men already present, a father and a son of the Field family, pushing each other away from their only telescope worth a damn, the Alvan Clark with a two-inch lens. While Emily removed



her slicker, and polished the wet from her glasses, two more assistants came into the room, having heard excitement was brewing.

‘Where’s the craft?’ Emily asked.

‘It’s ten o’clock, a mile out,’ answered the elder Field.

‘And it’s manned?’

Field looked to his son, who looked to Leland, who nodded.

‘Is it the invasion?’ For this had been a topic of discussion, at first hypothetically and of late a grim certainty.

‘No, it’s just one man. Alone.’

Frowning, Emily pulled the phone from the wall and called to the lantern room, asking them to fix the lens so that it shone at ten o’clock, and to send up the code flags, prepare for a series of two-flag signals, and notify all surrounding vessels via radio telephony that a rescue was in progress.

The engine ground down with the easing of a clock spring, and the white light went steady upon the churning seas. The fog, which most days was a woolen overcoat, this morning was but a beaded mist easily torn through, and even without the telescope, Emily could see a small boat bobbing in the swells.

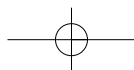
‘Lord! It’s just a skiff, an open skiff,’ she whispered. She made fluttering gestures to push back the group around the Alvan Clark, and they exchanged glances of anticipation. This was either a real crisis or one about to be shouted into existence. Emily applied her eye to the eyepiece, blinked, and ran her fingers along the reeded focus knob, making a blur, and then, in a perfectly circular iris, she saw, with a clarity that made her gasp, Charlie Chaplin.

She jolted a step backward, looking to the window without the aid of magnification, as if the telescope might have somehow fabricated this vision. She could see the boat, now rocking on the crests of ever-increasing waves as it came closer, and there was indeed a solitary figure aboard. He was dressed in baggy black trousers, a tight morning coat. He had a mustache. A cane. A derby.

‘Is that . . .’ She swallowed.

‘We were thinking it looks like Charlie Chaplin,’ Leland said, with the shame of a boy caught believing in fairies.

Emily gulped coffee, searching for it to kick like gin, and then she looked again through the telescope. The lighthouse provided a brilliant spotlight that swept away all color in the flood of illumination, casting its view into glowing white or penumbral mystery; there was no missing the open skiff, its single sail patched and sagging, its



occupant shuffling from stem to stern, toes out, gingerly leaping over each oarlock's thwart. He was rubbing his chin, and wagging his mustache as if itched by a puzzling thought, and in the several seconds Emily watched speechlessly, a gust of wind swung the ruined sail so that it hit him in his rear end, causing him to jump in place. He realized what had hit him, he tipped his hat as if he and the sail were engaged in polite social discourse, and he returned to his bowlegged pacing.

'We have to rescue him,' Leland finally said.

'Yes,' Emily whispered.

'Could it be someone *dressed* as Charlie Chaplin?' asked the elder Field, who always saw the blank physics of a situation, but even his voice had doubts. Each assistant took turns looking at the little fellow in the skiff, and each had to agree, one could certainly dress like Chaplin, and even act like Chaplin – there were contests and so on – but in the view of their telescope's eye, there were no hesitations, no awkward attempts to remain graceful. This man was not pretending or attempting to convince them of his identity. Further, they were battling against logic with their desire to believe it was true. In the end, what was right before their eyes won.

'Well,' Leland said, helplessly showing off what he knew from the magazines, 'that is definitely Charles Spencer Chaplin.' Then he whispered, 'Son of a gun. There's a hole in the hull.'

He knew this because Chaplin was now using a tin cup to bail out water. As the boat drifted closer to the rocks, waves dumped over the bowl, so the bailing was useless and frantic. Chaplin removed his hat to use it as a ladle, and now both his arms became pistons flinging water away as the sea drew his boat closer and closer to its doom.

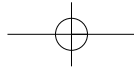
Emily's hand went to her mouth. 'There's a hole in his derby, too!'

'Perhaps he's making a movie here,' suggested Field.

'I'm going,' Leland said. Before his mother had a chance to object, he had shot to the exit, and his boots made the authoritative peal of cathedral bells as he sprinted down the circular metal staircase.

'Leland, come back,' she cried, as mothers have always called to their children who in turn were called to the brutal seas, but in truth she hardly wanted to stop him. To stop him smacked of that phantom discipline she could not muster. Moreover, he was going to aid a helpless sailor, an act that throbbed with responsibility.

For his own part, Leland could not have been dissuaded, because the chance to rescue Charlie Chaplin would never come again. On the

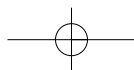


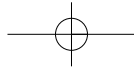
porch where the launch boats hung, he slipped into his flotation vest and jumped into the rowboat behind Johnson, who always wore a cameo of the Blessed Virgin on the outside of his protective clothing. With Johnson in first position, Leland took second position in the oarlocks, and signaled to the crane house to drop them to the sea.

For long minutes, two pairs of youthful arms rowed in splendid unison, threading the boat between spires and jags until it faced the open sea. Leland spotted the skiff ahead; it was drifting toward *la pared de la muerte*. Many points along the coast were known as the Wall of Death; this one had reasons for the name so convincing that the antediluvian Tolowa fishermen had described it thusly, and centuries later the Russian otter-hunters had agreed – *stayna greebel*, of course – for, no matter the tide, a wicked current drew anything in its grip magnetically shoreward, with unexpected speed. When you were still in the swells a quarter mile away from the obvious rocks, in the sickening drop of a trough, the half-submerged wall would be thrown erect before you, and there was a vortex into which all boats would be sucked down, then spat up against it, dashing what remained into bits.

Sergeant Emily Wheeler watched with pride and fear as her boy's rescue boat rose and fell with the ocean, oars moving it foot by foot toward Chaplin's skiff. She was anticipating the outcome – the shoreline, sunrise, seagulls chasing the spindrift, Chaplin on a driftwood log with a blanket draped over his shoulders, sipping coffee laced with brandy, and shaking from the fear and pleasure of having been rescued.

At the same time, arms fatigued and cold, Leland was staring through his partner, Johnson, considering the shape that the gratitude of Mr Charlie Chaplin might take. He imagined lecturing Chaplin; he had read *Motion Picture Weekly*, and he knew the difference between pretending to be on a dinghy in the movies, and testing your luck on such spirited seas as those near St George Reef. 'But you know, Mr Chaplin,' he would say, 'this does make quite a scenario, don't you think?' And how else could Charlie respond but to stand from his log, place one arm up on Wheeler's solid shoulder, pump his hand, and say, 'I hadn't considered it, Leland Wheeler, but you're right,' and 'Leland Wheeler is a splendid kind of name. Come to the studio – we need strong arms and strong jawlines,' and Leland constructed and reconstructed these statements with different kinds of English accents, from Ascot-races lordly to cockney chauffeur, since he wasn't





quite sure what Chaplin sounded like, eventually settling on the accent he'd heard a slapstick comedian use at the Redding Music Hall, British with a Jewish or Gypsy tint, he didn't really know the specifics; but such speculation swirled in its own vortices, and he concluded first that this rescue might be his own salvation, then: might there be a filmed re-enactment, but this time with *bathing beauties*?

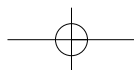
It is the nature of wishes and their potential fulfillment to travel faster than anything shackled to earth, especially a rowboat straining against a current that all but groaned in its desire to blow into *la pared de la muerte*. So Leland Wheeler's mind could travel from sea to shore to the road leading seven hundred miles south to the bare ankles of the engaging backlot sirens who fluttered and yawned at the Mutual Studios of Los Angeles, in the approximate time it took Chaplin's boat to be sucked into the whirlpool and begin an awful, irresistible spin.

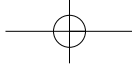
Leland was calling out to Johnson, who called back; Leland could hear just the harder consonants of a prayer. Chaplin noticed them – he visibly perked up, stood, and leaned forward until the boat tipped, and he was forced, hands on hat, to lean back. He smiled, recognizing not the danger but the rescue, and he again tipped his hat, face breaking into the smile of one about to be saved. But his boat was already turning, turning slowly, turning almost gently, in obedience to Coriolis, and the men in the rowboat were shouting themselves hoarse, and Chaplin, in order to keep them in sight, began to march in place, counterclockwise. He was in effect stationary, even as the boat was beginning to spin under his feet. Leland shouted, 'No!'

Chaplin cocked his ear as if trying to listen, holding to his temple his useless tin cup as if it were an ear trumpet, and, with the boat's rotation increasing, he stepped up his own counterrotations until he was all but a blur.

The swells drew back. The boat stopped, Chaplin continuing to spin until he toppled over. With acrobatic momentum, the tumble carried him upright, and he stood, arms in fists at his sides, looking as if he had just triumphed over the sea. He did not see what loomed behind. With the weight of a mudslide, a wave crashed down upon the boat, and Charlie Chaplin was blown below the surface.

Pressure mounting against it like the thumb and forefinger of Uranus, the hull of the skiff rocketed out of the depths, sailed six feet over the waves, and crashed into shards like a wine bottle against the Wall of Death.





The sun was beginning to rise; there wasn't yet its actual glow or warmth, but instead the gray promise of daylight. The lighthouse beam was thus fading in comparison with natural light, and the many colors of the sea were being restored: the olive bulbs of kelp atop the rich obsidian rocks, the emerald nightmare that was the sea, the lapis of the dawn skies. Leland and his companion rowed in place. They had lost their spirit. How terrible it was that God had created in humans the urge for compassion, a sensation that nature itself withheld.

The simplest pairs of code flags rode up the station's monkey pole, the blue-and-white 'A' and yellow 'Q,' then the powder flag and St George's Cross: boat lost, man overboard. An emotionless message, all was lost, all was lost. The St George Reef telegraph operator, weeping, began to tap out a note to the naval station to the south, and to all the ships at sea, a spotty and impressionistic account whose clarity was far outweighed by its emotional devastation. And yet, at the same time, he was receiving something that was not a response, that made no sense, a message of dots and dashes from the east.

From *la pared de la muerte* there was a quick bubbling, and Leland pointed, just as his mother, eyes red and wet with tears, swung the telescope to see what he witnessed: surfacing, dome up, the battered black derby, with a single strand of seaweed, like a rose upon a coffin.

Then rained down the next wave, and the hat was lost forever.

2

Three thousand four hundred miles eastward, it was nine o'clock in the morning. The autumn sun stretched thinly over Manhattan, and yet, as per local legend, it had still arranged itself so that 350 Fifth Avenue, the Waldorf=Astoria, did not fall into shadow.

At the Waldorf, breakfast was served. In its block-long kitchens, steam rose from copper kettles, Florida oranges rolled down pipe shafts to be cleaved for the juicer, the alchemical preparations for champagne truffles brought gourmet Pierre Revel from his usual tufted seat in the Hamilton Lounge into the kitchen for consultations on proper mincing of the negretto, a platoon of mushroom-hatted chefs from Brussels frowned as they tasted hollandaise sauce puddled on greenbrier-wood ladles, and a legion of metal whisks fluffed up sauces for the orders of eggs Benedict that Park Avenue doctors now prescribed as a morning antidote for the social side of the night before.

Then there was the sound of three chimes.

