



NIGHTTIME GUARDIANS OF THE SEA

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As the sun met the horizon, Old East opened his eyes to a brilliant, crimson sky that seemed to embrace the sea below. This was a special time of day for Old East. While the East End village was winding down, Old East was just waking up and making ready for work - a job he had held for almost twenty years.

Old East had one of the most important jobs in East End. It required him to be alert and attentive at all times. No sleeping on the job on his shift! His father had taught him that. Alone, he was the nighttime guardian of the sea.

"Evening East," shouted Turtle Cat in the distance. "It's almost nighttime. Where's your light? Are you not well?" Turtle Cat, an eighteen-foot long catboat, had just returned from a tiresome day at sea. He had carried three large green sea turtles a very long way and now his bow lay beached in the sand, his sail secured to his mast, and his red mangrove oars perched on his side. He was ready for a good night's rest, but he was concerned that his old friend East, sitting way above him on the Bluff, was not yet lighting the night sky.

"Don't worry about me Turtle Cat," bellowed Old East. "Austin just seems to be running a little late this evening. That's all. I hope he arrives soon though. The full of night will be upon us any minute!"

No sooner had he spoken these words, he heard Austin cheerfully humming away a favourite mariner's song as he climbed the bluff:

**Friday morning seven o'clock
We started from the bluff
With all our sails set fore and aft
On board the schooner Frank.**

Austin, the lighthouse keeper, had arrived to light the kerosene lamp that Old East supported firmly with his powerful wooden arms. It was his responsibility to see to it that Old East's light was lit every night and extinguished every morning.



All was quiet now. As the night settled its shades of dark all around, the sea quivered softly, and the air was still. Everyone and everything was asleep...except Old East of course. He stood wide awake, his steel-cylinder body vigilant, and his light radiating for miles out to sea. After twenty years of doing the same work, he had grown accustomed to solitude.

Old East worked on through the uneventful night, keeping a watchful eye out for approaching ships. And, as the sun illuminated the skyline, he watched East End village awaken. Miss Lula had risen early to rake her sand yard; Turtle Cat was casting off for another day's work; Captain Carson, a local fisherman, was preparing his lines for a good day's catch; and on arriving, Schooner was preparing to enter East End's port.

Austin returned early in the morning to extinguish Old East's lamp right on schedule. Despite feeling weary, Old East decided to catch up on some news before going to sleep. He liked being aware of what was happening and he was particularly curious about why there seemed to be fewer and fewer ships arriving at East End of late. "Good morning," he called out to Mrs. Quit, who was flying about gathering materials for her nest. "Perchance, have you any idea why the port seems less busy these days?"

"As a matter of fact I do," responded Mrs. Quit, hurriedly chewing off bits of bark from a nearby birch tree. "You remember Mrs. Swallowtail Butterfly? Well, she told me that young Treefrog told her, that Miss Anole Lizard told him that Mrs. Ironwood told her, that East End will no longer be used as a port of entry. Can you believe that?"{

Old East could not have been more surprised if the sea had turned yellow. "How can that be?" asked a mystified East. "Well, it would appear that they have built a road connecting East End to other villages on the island. This means that people will no longer have to use the sea to get here," replied Mrs. Quit.

Old East stood silently considering what he had just heard. Could this really be true? Humans arriving by land rather than sea? As he pondered how this new road might change things, exhaustion took over and Old East fell quietly into a deep sleep.



He was abruptly awoken by an ear-splitting noise coming from the bluff. Four men were scurrying around hammering, sawing, painting...building something, and what's more, building it directly in front of him! How would the ships see his light at night with *this thing* right in front of him? Old East was bewildered. What on earth were they building? And couldn't they build it somewhere else? The men continued to work noisily throughout the day, depriving Old East of his much-needed rest.

By the end of the day, a new, odd-looking structure stood before Old East. It was an unfriendly steel tower with a ladder running up its side that led to a railed landing of some sort. Balanced at the top of this tower was a clear, spherical object made of glass. "What in heaven's name is this thing?" Old East puzzled.

Day passed into dusk and Old East began, once again, to ready himself for work. Austin would be here any minute now to light his lamp and he needed to be ready. But night fell, and no Austin. He began to worry. Then suddenly, without warning, the spherical object at the top of the new structure burst into light.

The full weight of the truth hit Old East like waves pummeling the reef. He understood everything perfectly. Those men had worked all day building a new and modern lighthouse! "I wonder what will happen to me?" worried Old East out loud.

"They'll forget all about you," came the supercilious response. "I am replacing you. I am the new generation lighthouse and you are his-to-ry."

A new generation lighthouse? "What's that?" questioned a startled Old East. "It's simple. My light is automatic, sun-valve controlled, and it can be left unattended for as long as six months. I shine brighter and I don't need keepers to light my lamp every evening or to extinguish it in the morning. I am what you call *low maintenance*," responded the new lighthouse smugly. As he listened, Old East's sadness deepened for the loss of his light and the loss of his work.

Months passed and Old East stood dormant in the dark while the new lighthouse lit the night skies. He listened as New East rambled on about her abilities. He was alarmed that she wasn't being as attentive as she should. "New East, you chat too much."



You must pay closer attention to the sea if you are to do your job well," scolded Old East. But New East completely ignored his advice, forgetting that Old East, after all, had twenty years of experience under his belt.

Then one night, as New East was boasting about her talents, her light went out without warning and the ocean was shrouded in darkness. "My light! What's happening?" cried New East! "Help! I can't see! I can't see!"

"Of course you can't see," chided Old East. "I warned you! You need to chat less and work more! You have not been paying attention to the sea or to your light! This was bound to happen."

Almost intuitively, Austin appeared over the Bluff. He had come to light Old East's lamp. "We can always depend on you old friend," asserted Austin as he gave Old East a couple of friendly pats on his strong steel base. "And you," directing his voice to New East, "are temporarily out of order."

Old East was overjoyed. He realized that New East's light would eventually be repaired, but he also learned that he still had a purpose in life.

"Let me tell you a story", recounted Old East, in the hopes of calming the agitated new lighthouse. "Once upon a time, there was a busy little village in Cayman called East End. It was isolated from the rest of the island. In fact, the only way you could reach it was by sea, but even that route was made difficult by hazardous reefs. There were many a ship wrecked on those reefs, so many that they earned the reputation of being the Graveyard of the Caribbean.

The most famous wreck of all was The Wreck of the Ten Sail. Legend has it that Captain Lawford and his convoy of ships had set sail from Jamaica en route to Cuba. One dark night, believing that they were from land, the Captain gave the command to turn north. What Captain Lawford didn't know was that the darkness held an eerie secret: the convoy of ships was, in fact, dangerously close to land. Tragically, a strong current smashed the ships, one by one, into the reef. And, as the rough seas pounded against them, the ships broke up forcing men to fight for their lives. East End villagers tried to rescue the men, but sadly they could not save them all. At least eight lives were lost that night in the darkness!"



"Why are you telling me this? I feel bad enough as it is" snarled New East uncomfortably. "Don't you see?" continued Old East unperturbed. "You're missing the point. There was no lighthouse back then. Perhaps if there had been, such tragedies would have been avoided. This is why you must pay attention to your work. You must never lose your light, for darkness over the seas spells danger. Maybe there will be fewer ships arriving at our port because of the new road, but there will always be ships passing in the night. Your beacon must help guide them. Do you understand?" As her sobs subsided and her pride diffused, New East recognized the truth in Old East's ancient wisdom. "I understand," she acknowledged quietly.

When New East's light was repaired, Old East's lamp was retired forever, never to gleam again. But now he had a new job. After all, he still had something that New East didn't have: the wisdom that came with twenty years' experience. His sadness gone, Old East became a teacher, sharing his knowledge, advice and trade secrets with New East.

Together, they were the nighttime guardians of the sea.

