

Keeper of the Light

By: Barbara Dickson



Bumping along the side of my father's boat, an agitated whale groaned and grunted, causing the ship to shudder in the calm water. As the whale continued its frenzied assault against the ship's hull, my dad grabbed a nearby mop, hopped over the ship's side and landed on the whale's back. The act seemed foolhardy. But my dad knew the gentle giant of the sea was just using the boat as a scratching post. The whale had charted its course and had headed for the boat knowing that it would bring a respite from itchy barnacles that clung to its body. And my father, a Newfoundlander, kindly scrubbed the great mammal's back. Peace at last with grunts that gave way to whale song.

Some might say this story was a little hard to believe. Mopped a whale's back, indeed. But my dad had a way of telling his whopper fish stories of growing up in Musgrave Harbour, Newfoundland, that made anything sound possible.

He told tales of his summers on the Offer Wadham Island, 12 miles off the shore in Notre Dame Bay. He and his family moved there each June to fish the Atlantic, cold and brimming with cod.

He spoke of the Offer Wadham's lighthouse as well as lighthouses on other islands sprinkled along the Straight Shore. The red circular tower of the Wadham's lighthouse sent out its first rays in October 1858 and stood 100 feet above sea level. It became a beacon of welcome to families arriving for their busy fishing season.

But those island lighthouses were more than just navigational markers to aid local sea folk in confirming their bearings. They shone light into sable skies as fishermen navigated the rocky and treacherous shipping lane. They blinked their friendly candescent song, a melodic beam of safety, familiarity and refuge. Discovering a faint

light slicing the blackness on a stormy night was as sweet as fancy molasses.

Their lights speckled the darkness whether calm or wild. Lighthouses were lights in the window of the sea, beckoning men toward home and to the safety of their family. They were not only a beacon, but also a balm for the seafarer's soul.

Dad talked of getting caught in terrible storms on the sea. I was fascinated by the fact that my dad hadn't drowned at least a dozen times when so many "storms of wind" suddenly enveloped his family. His shipwreck stories always humbled me. Stories of fishermen, including relatives, who lost their way in savage winter nights with no light to guide them and no respite from the storm. Some

stories ended sadly. But there were happy endings too when men beheld a familiar light slitting the ebony night, and charted their course guided by a beam.

As I stood on Musgrave Harbour's shore with my dad in 1997, I studied the faint familiar lights dotting the saltwater horizon bathed in twilight. I listened anew to my father's stories of frenzied adventure while those tiny bits of light held me captive and the sea's alluring appeal tugged at my feet.

I communed not only with the shore and my dad but with God as well. Scripture tells us He is the Light of the world, and a beacon for my path, seaward or not. He illuminates my path in life on both calm and stormy nights. When life's seas roll, I look to the Light that steadies my course, comforts me in the heaving waves, and guides me.

My father died last summer. When I remember his teasing laugh as he told his fish tales, I know he is home with God, the One who is the great light keeper. ☪

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