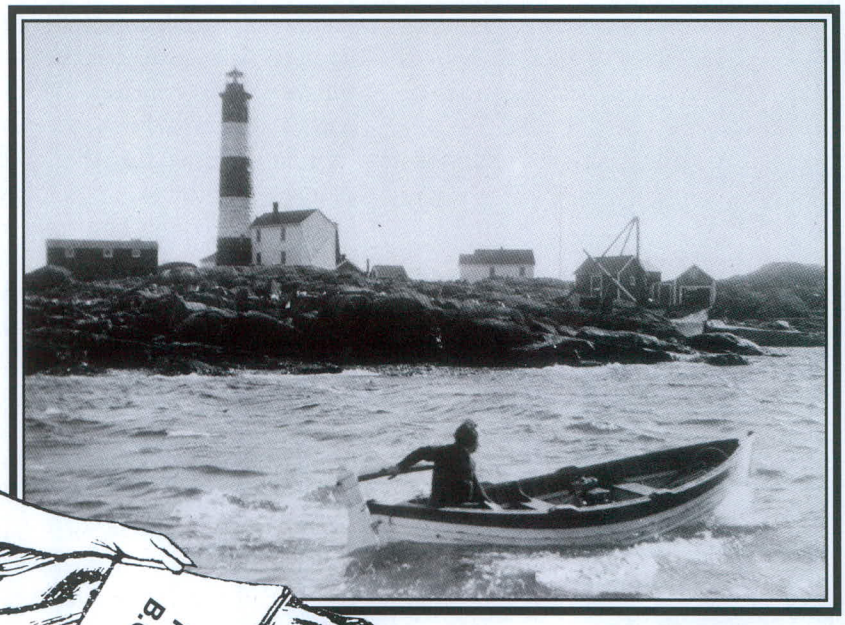
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Race Rocks Light Station



Race Rocks
author photo



Lighthouse Memories

Recollections of a Keeper's Daughter

By Ruth Raymond

The 1850's saw an enormous increase of shipping on the Canadian west coast. With fixed lights at New Dungeness and Cape Flattery on the United States side of Juan de Fuca Strait, Canadian authorities saw that the need for navigational aids was becoming crucial. It was agreed to erect a light at Fisgard Island, marking the entrance to Esquimalt Harbor, and another on the treacherous group of rocks called Race Rocks. Ten miles southwest of Victoria, this group was named Race Rocks, or affectionately, "The Race" after the ten knot riptides which race around it. Although Race Rocks and Fisgard were both built in 1860, Fisgard was finished first, becoming the first lighthouse on the Canadian west coast.

On Race Rocks' 100th anniversary, it was awarded a brass plaque to mark the occasion. We were annoyed that Fisgard received a much bigger celebration. After all, we considered "our" lighthouse more important, as it heroically stood watch over the fearsome currents rather that resting in comfort at the harbor entrance.

Race Rocks may have taken second place chronologically, but it took first place in architecture and beauty. The 105 foot granite and sandstone tower was painted bold black and white stripes, helping it to stand out by day. By night, the light could be seen from nearly twenty miles away. The light beams were produced by a Fresnel lens. The reflectors and kerosene lamp apparatus were on a turntable which, floating on a bed of mercury, was powered by a clockworks and weights. Every two and a half hours the keeper would wind up the weights and they would inch their way down the length of the tower, turning the cogs which turned the lens.

Even since the lighting of the Race Rocks beacon, many ships have been grasped in the jaws of the fierce riptides and drawn helplessly onto the rocks. The advent of steam driven foghorns, radio beacons, and radar has made navigating this area much safer, but it is still a place to be approached with respect.

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Nine acres of rock in Juan de Fuca Strait was once the universe to me. Like an amoeba in its petri dish, I inhabited a world where nothing existed beyond the familiar horizons. The crashing of waves and the burbling of receding tides on pebbles were constants. I did not know the sounds of children engaged in stick hockey on cracked city back lanes, no purring motors or humming transformers filled my ears with their insidious haze, no persistent jackhammers tattooed their urban madness on my eardrums. My backyard was the ocean in all its calmness, it all its ferocity. From birth until the age of seven, when my family moved, this was my world—the world of Race Rocks Lighthouse.

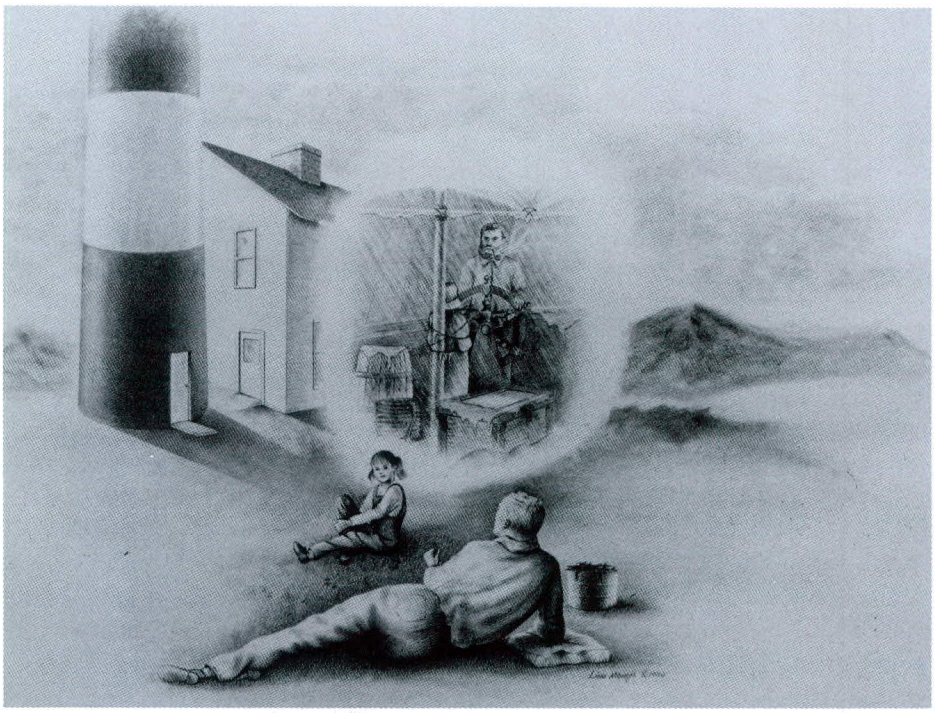
Its black and white striped tower was more than a beacon to navigation, its imposing form was the focal point of my young life. It was a kindly old friend who carefully watched over me every moment of the day or night. If, straying beyond my boundary, I was about to clamber onto the slippery low tide rocks it would tap me on the shoulder and beckon me back to safety. If, in my bed at night, I awakened from a dream it would pull back the curtains and remind me of its presence with a wink of light. It was an ever-watchful, all-seeing guardian.

Our house was a magnificent stone structure which was always cold and drafty. We shared it with a number of gigantic spiders whom I found to be chummy until I started to watch television and saw that the cartoons always depicted them as villainous creatures wearing eight gloves, bowler hats, and smoking short fat cigars. Before developing a fair case of arachnophobia I would often play with these scurrying fellows, scooping them up in a jar then letting them go again. They probably found this to be an annoying detainment on their spidery rounds, but I considered it fine amusement and they never came to any harm.

The only entrance to the tower was inside our house, through a door which was kept locked to prevent my wandering into the tower on my own. I loved to accompany Dad up the long spiral staircase. The stairs were neatly painted a shiny grey and wound their way up to a short metal ladder. Painted a brilliant red, the ladder was always a welcome sight after the long climb. It led up to the lantern where the glossy cream walls and dark green machinery always triggered a sort of reverence in me. This was a serious and dignified place. The light was reflected by three mirrored panels so that each revolution would produce three flashes of light. Outside, the catwalk was an excellent vantage point, but more fascinating to this child's eye were the details on the bright red rail around it. Atop every upright post was a scalloped dome of about four inches in diameter. I always fancied that they looked like half grapefruits which had been turned there once to extract the juice, then left to harden and become part of the railing. The lights of two other Canadian stations, Trial Island and Albert Head were visible as well as the lights of Ediz Hook and Port Angeles in the state of Washington. We could also hear the horns of these stations, and the grunt on the end of New Dungeness' blast if the wind was right.

Between our house and the engine room, there was a grassy area dotted with daisies. A wing hung from the fuel pipes which ran from the oil shed to the engine room. Dad would rid this area of dandelions on summer afternoons, carving out one hundred per session with Mom's good paring knife. Lying on the grass, he would weed in comfort, resting one elbow on a brown plastic cushion which was reserved exclusively for this purpose. I would be close by listening intently to his stories. Sometimes they were tales of his childhood in the city, sometimes they were fascinating lessons on meteorology or astronomy, sometimes they were poems like "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" or "The Wreck of the Hesperus"; they were always spellbinding.

Mother grew vegetables in three separate gardens—of note were the giant cabbages which she nourished with sea water. I would help her pick peas, but the colander was often empty by the time the picking was done, and I was too full for dinner. The lighthouse tender came once a month with the groceries and supplies that we had ordered. If poor weather prevented its landing, we would have to wait until the



"Dad told me about the Wreck of The Hesperus"
Drawing by Linda Menges

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next month's scheduled boat, so besides our garden there was a pantry stocked from floor to ceiling with canned goods. I loved to play there. It was my own little supermarket, its shelves packed tight with a captivating array of brightly labeled tins. They were much more interesting on the shelves, however, than their contents were on my plate. Nothing on earth is quite as bland as a portion of greyish tinned peas. Neither of my parents were keen on fishing, but we kept chickens, so fresh meat was available from time to time. Dad did the head-chopping, I did the feather-plucking, Mom did the roasting, and we all enjoyed the feast. Because we only received groceries once a month, we always ordered things like facial tissues and paper towels by the carton. The empty cartons made outstanding forts and hiding places. Whenever I went missing, it was a fairly safe bet that I would be found somewhere in a box.

I began reading at the age of four. The first word I learned to spell was not Dick or Jane or even Mom or Dad; it was "oil", a word found often on labels around a lighthouse. Letters were our lifeline to friends and family, so the art of letter writing came as naturally as street slang comes to a city child. Once a week Dad ventured out in the little station boat, weather permitting, to collect our mail from the mainland several miles away. Mail days were very special. There were letters from Grandma and Grandpa, and sometimes a gift or two for no reason. Grandpa would often write me in Rebus, drawing pictures to represent words, like an eye for "I" and an awl for "all", or would communicate instead by poetry. He wrote poems for every occasion and many for no occasion at all. I still enjoy a good letter far more than a long telephone conversation, but few people write letters well these days. Once every month the Victoria Public Library would send us a truck full of books, and we would send back the previous month's supply. Books were our source of adventure and knowledge so we treated them with great respect, turning the pages carefully from the top and never even entertaining the thought of marking them in any way. To this day, I find it nearly impossible to take a yellow highlighter pen to a textbook.

The biggest excitement of the year was the arrival of Christmas catalogs! The first ten pages were covered in bold color photographs of the most desireable toys one could imagine. When I knew each picture intimately and had read each description thoroughly, I would proceed through the rest of the catalog, imagining hours of play with the beautifully dressed children in the pictures, picking out the prettiest ladies on each page, salivating over the section of luscious boxed chocolates. Thumbing through already dog-eared catalog pages, wondering what would be under the tree, wondering if the tree would arrive safely in time for Christmas; I remember these things much better than the actual Christmases themselves.

The paint shed was another place of fascination. Those were the days when the keeper did all the painting himself, even the tower. I was a bit envious that Dad got to hang from the tower on a bosun's chair; it looked like a lot of fun. The paint shed was dimly lit and smelled of turpentine and paint rags. In one corner was an old treadle-operated sharpening stone, in another was a big black bellows, dusty from years of inactivity. I was not entirely convinced that it would not breathe again of its own accord, so I stayed away from it. The walls were lined with shelf upon shelf of gallon cans. The labels were relatively uninteresting but it was the trickles of spilled paint which gave away what lay inside, as if the contents were too excited to rest quitely and in their effervescence spurted from under the lids and ran down the sides, obscuring the dull labels. Painting days were especially entertaining because I was allowed the honor of stirring the paint. It was the right consistency when I could write my initials on the paint's surface with the trickle from the split shingle which served as a stir-stick. It was much better to open a can which had been used and reused than a brand new one, because—with any luck—there would be a nice thick rubbery skin on the surface to remove and save for later play.

Besides the boathouse and upwind of our home, stood the chicken shed. Inside, the small of straw and feathers filled the nostrils, took hold, and refused to let go. One had to let the ocean breeze coax it out of the olfactory system with tact and aplomb as only a salt breeze can. The chickens were not especially friendly, but were generous with delicious fresh eggs. Occasionally one or two of them would decide to eat the eggs themselves. Mother would cure this cannibalistic tendency with a good portion of Coleman's hot mustard tucked into an empty shell and planted underneath the offending hen. Chickens, although not noted for diversity of facial expressions, are capable of showing quite a degree of surprise and wide-eyed panic. This was usually followed by a lot of coughing and flapping.

Forty-five gallon drums of diesel fuel were housed in the oil shed. Visiting this building was fun in the spring when it echoed with the chirping of barn swallows. The chirps bounced off the metal surfaces, making even two or three tiny birds sound like a whole chorus with a Jamaican steel band accompaniment. With a boost from Dad, I would crawl up onto the drums and investigate swallow nests in the rafters. I could just reach high enough to wiggle my baby finger at the chicks who, wide-mouthed, would peep frenetically, no doubt thinking that my finger was a nice pink juicy worm.

Our rainwater supply was held in two cisterns below the ground. One lay adjacent to the tower, the other under a large cover of nice flat planks. This prime playing surface was unfortunately a restricted area to me. I am unsure whether that was to prevent kicked up dirt from falling between the planks and into our drinking water, or to prevent one overly curious little girl from falling in. We drank the water straight from the tap without boiling and are still alive, so it was probably safe. Once in a while, a bug or two would come out the tap and land in one's water glass, but that never seemed to bother us.

Although the engine room was not on my list of regular places to play, it did offer some interesting tools which amused me while my father was busy

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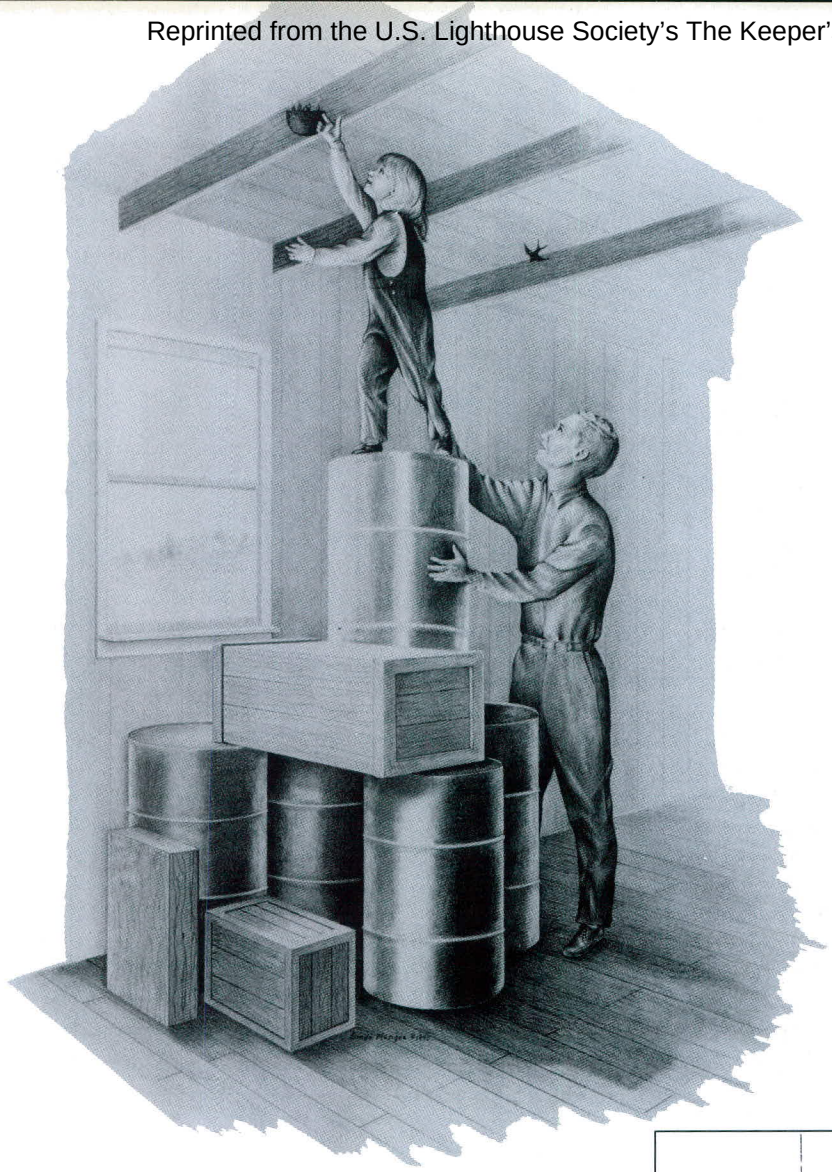
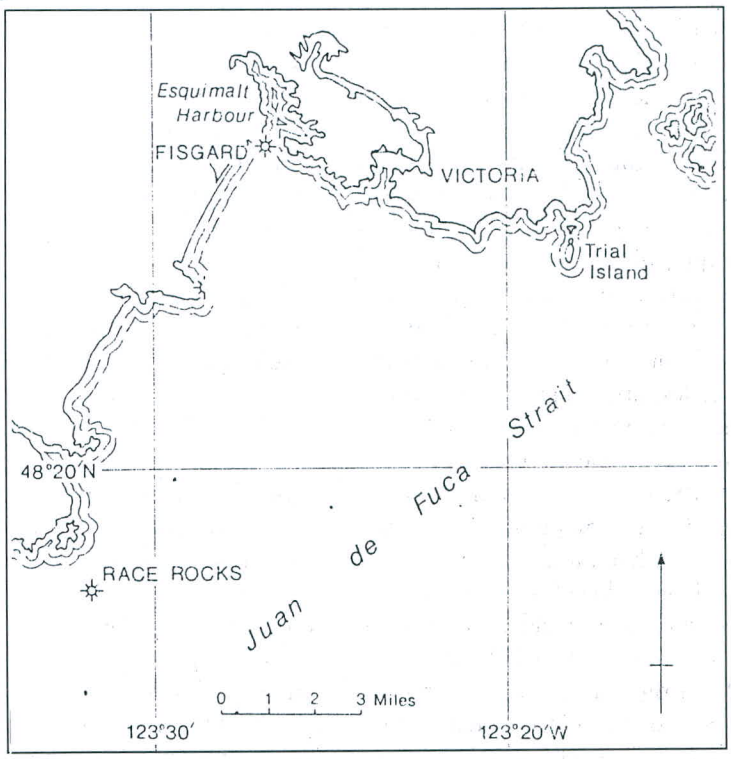


Illustration by Linda Menges

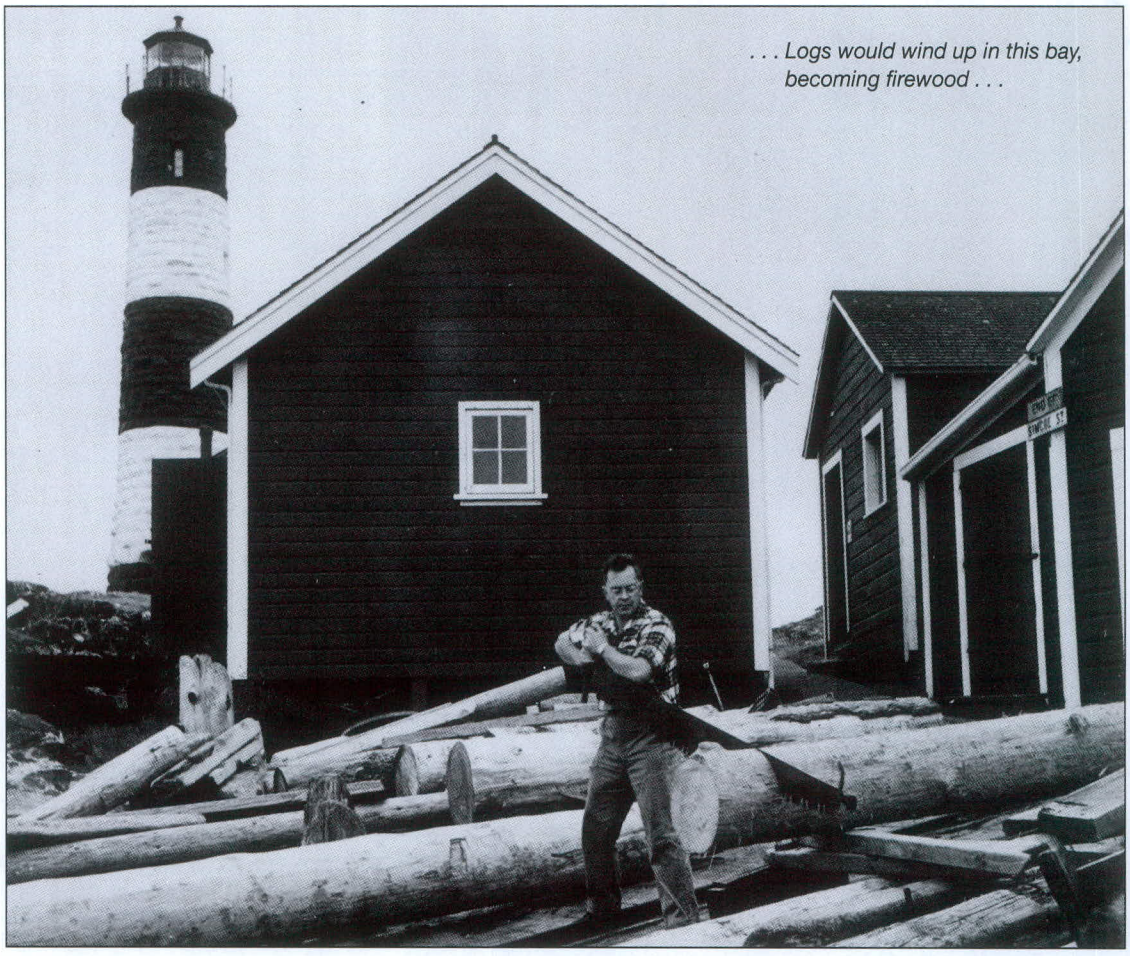
working on something. My favorite was a magnet the size of a cantaloupe. Combined with a little pile of nails, this provided an absorbing activity which could occupy me for the duration of almost any project Dad was working on. The smell of diesel fuel was a pleasant one, connected more to watching Dad work than to engines and machinery.

It was fine on a rainy day to watch Dad working in one of the buildings, but any outside activity was far and away more stimulating. Among the most exciting were the yearly expeditions helping my father band seagull chicks. The gulls nested on the craggy southwestern exposure of the island. Banding days were a great adventure for me. I would tag along with my father, who wore a slicker and was armed with an umbrella—a necessary shield against natural seagull revenge. The rocks were white with what we scientifically referred to as "padoodle". I loved looking in the nests each day, seeing who had hatched and who were still mottled greyish eggs. The chicks were adorable little fuzzy lumps, like dustballs from under your bed, only with little hungry beaks and oversized webbed galoshes. Checking the nests for newcomers so distressed the mother gulls that they would squawk and swoop low to frighten us away. Occasionally, when Dad was off his guard, a protective mother gull would fly up from behind and give him a smart web-footed rap on the head. This of course, would result in gales of laughter from me and a reluctant but good-natured chuckle from my father. The incessant cries of seagulls were not just a backdrop, but an integral part of the fabric of my existence, woven and intertwined with the crashing waves, the smell of seaweed at low tide, and the fresh winds sweeping off the ocean.



Chartlet from the book "Keepers of the Light" courtesy of Donald Graham.

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. . . Logs would wind up in this bay, becoming firewood . . .

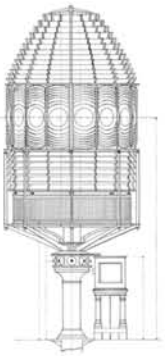
Photo by Gar Lunney Courtesy of the National Film Board of Canada

On the west side of the island was a little beach which was almost entirely made of smashed shells. Every time the tide went out it revealed a brand new beach, all artistically rearranged—a mosaic pieced twice daily by a great ocean Artist. The bits of mussel shells were the prettiest of all; dark blue and purple, like pearlized violet petals. Luminescent shards of oyster shell glistened in the sunlight, scallop-edged fragments of clam shell, broken limpits and perriwinkles, little lumps of colored bottle glass worn smooth by the sea. It was a place of enchantment which held me in a spell whenever I was there. I would examine it piece by piece, picking up a bit of mussel here, a half limpit there, a pebble of deep blue glass; then replacing them so the ocean could work its magic again with the next tide. It would not have been right in my mind to remove any pieces of the picture, leaving the Artist less material with which to work.

At low tide, the northeast side of the island was a dense blue forest of live mussels completely carpeting the rocks. This was a grand neighborhood of tide pools which housed many a companion for this inquisitive little girl. Disturbing a rock or two would bring forth a great slithering of blennies and other squirmy creatures. Many hours were spent just gazing into my favorite tide pools, becoming one with the inhabitants. They were in their little petri dish world too and I was an undetected onlooker vicariously taking part in their tiny lives. The limpits looked so pretty underwater, their shells are quite drab looking when out in the air. The barnacles would be feeding, plucking microscopic marine morsels which strayed within their reach. Sometimes there would be small sea anemones which bloomed like underwater chrysanthemums. I would feed them perriwinkles, which was immensely gratifying for me and the anemone but somewhat less so for the perriwinkles. There was a bounty of seaweed on that side of the island and it was glorious fun to find kelp bulbs to pop. They make a wonderful explosion under the steady pressure of a girl's foot.

On the north side was our jetty, winch, and launching ramp for the sixteen foot inboard. The waters were treacherous around the island, with fierce rip tides and whirlpools, so swimming was cut out of the question and boating was restricted to our weekly mail gathering. Logs escaping from passing logbooms and the fate of becoming newspaper would wind up in this bay. They became, instead, fuel for our fireplace. Chubby purple starfish, large orange anemones, and spiny ink-colored sea urchins clung to the slimy sides of the jetty, and one could often see jellyfish floating about like tiny aquatic paratroopers. The beach had whole unbroken shells, but I knew to pick them up gingerly, as not a few of them contained Hermit crabs as tenants. At night, a gentle stirring of the water with a stick, and the cove was full of dancing fairies called phosphorus. Stars in the sky, stars in the water, stars in a child's eyes.

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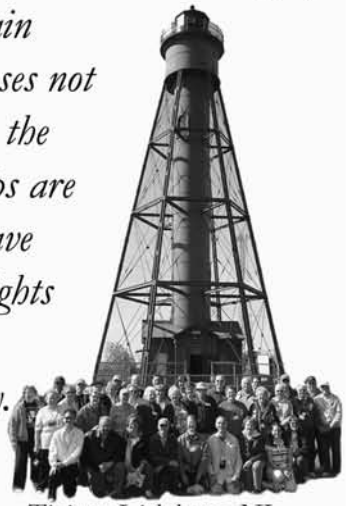
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