

Short
Story
Contest
November 2025



T LIBRARIES

PROMPT #2. Tell a story in the form of a police report, news article, or journal entry about an incredible (or impossible) event.

Otter Point

Letters of a Lightkeeper

By Noah Morelock

Auburrough, WA., August 15, 1886

Dear Cassie,

As I write to you, I watch the sunrise for the seventh time since I arrived at Otter Point. It is strange- seeing light in the east and knowing that it signals the end of the day's work. Or rather, the night's work, I should say. In the spirit of familial correspondence, I shall attempt to recount the events of this past week.

For that, however, it seems to me more sensible to begin my tale some months earlier, when I saw a newspaper inquiry for a lightkeeper position. I must confess that such an occupation had never particularly interested me, but that day, when I imagined myself by my lonesome at the top of this tall tower, night after night- it looked like just what I needed. For the last year, I have felt smothered. Everywhere I went, and sometimes even in my own home, I would be bombarded with sympathies false and true. People brought so much food to me that I ended up giving most of it to tramps on the street. I was suffocating in that town.

I knew just after the ferryman rowed away that I had made the right choice. The sea air, the natural surroundings, the quiet. Oh, the quiet. It is lonely here; that is certain. But I find it better to be lonely whilst by oneself than lonely whilst drowning in community. It is not a difficult post, being a lightkeeper. I keep the lamp on during the night, of course, but I also sweep the stairs and take care of the grounds; refill the oil, trim the wick, and so on. If you find yourself comfortable with the abnormal hours, it is barely a chore. And if you do not, then you have no business on the island.

If I had one complaint, it would be the food. Your Aunt Jane accustomed me to meals of such a degree that

the packaged provisions seem wholly tasteless. Other than that, it is quite peaceful here at Otter Point. I should like to stay here for a long, long time. Perhaps I shall never return to that dusty old town. Only time will tell. Although this morning I write to you, my dear niece, I have more often found myself walking along the island's south beach before I return to the shack for a long day's rest. You would like the beach here; perhaps you could come visit me one day.

I have been reading more than I ever did before- even composing some of my own poetry. There has been ample time to think here. Since last year, I have wondered a question. What more do I want from this life? Perhaps my self-imposed solitude is the answer. Tranquility like this means a great deal to me now. I believe that I am all out of adventures.

I do not recall ever telling you the story of how your aunt and I met. It was at the harvest festival of 1866, almost a year to the day after I returned from fighting the Confederates. I could not have crossed paths with Jane Aftinson before that night, for I would have remembered a creature of such mesmerizing beauty. She was dancing in the square, elegant yet inviting. I liked the town back then; people were friendly, the streets were clean, and the future seemed so full of possibilities. I asked her to dance with me, and we spent the remaining hours of the night talking about everything and nothing. I knew not back then what an important day it was, yet here I am, twenty years later- chronicling it for posterity.

My bed beckons for me, so I will end this letter with a sampling of my new pastime. Here follows your uncle's attempt at a sonnet.

Not much changes as time passes on.

Get used to what's around you,
then some things are gone.

You could not hold on to all that you knew.

Everything changes as time passes by.

You took it for granted, all you held dear.

If only our lives were as vast as the sky.
You would give anything for just one more year.

You find yourself changed, alone in the end.

Trying to take solace in whatever you can,
You learn that memories can be your best friend.
All along, it was pointless to plan.

Things will always change if given the chance.

I will never forget that town square dance.

William Hatch,
Otter Point, ME.

Auburough, WA., September 12, 1886

To my cherished niece,

As of this cloudy morning, I have been a lightkeeper for one month. Few duties remain that have yet to fall into an unconscious routine. As it stands, my body feels as if it moves by its own accord, tending to the lamp while my mind is free to wander wherever it may please. And wander it has, Cass. I have in my possession some works of the great thinkers- Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche- and I cannot help but imagine what they could have written had they been wickies themselves. It frees the mind like nothing else.

Do you know why this little rock off the coast is named Otter Point? It is surprisingly literal; at least, it was surprising to me. The abundant wildlife here are sea otters, and through some miracle of chance, the isle seems to lack any natural predators. I see them just about everywhere I go, foraging for food, playing with one another, and swimming in the streams that cut through my land. These creatures were wary of me when I arrived, but they seem to have realized that I mean them no harm. Cass, I know you will be delighted to hear this. Not three days ago, I happened upon a pair of otters asleep on the water's surface. To my astonishment, the little beasts were holding hands!

There is something that I have begun to notice as the nights creep by. A sizable portion of my thoughts has lately been dedicated to the articulation of this intangible thing. At first, it resembled to me a sense of belonging; however, this does not fully encapsulate the sensation. In fact, I would certainly be amiss to say that I "belonged" on this island. No, I belonged in Auburough- that much was true. I simply could no longer bear that belonging. A better word has come to me to describe what I feel here: connection. I am connected

to this place in ways that run below the gray waves that lap at the beaches.

It is in the sand that crunches underfoot as I take my morning walks. It is in the forest on the other side of the island, where the leaves rustle in the breeze. It is in the otters that scamper around on their animal instinct. It is in my lighthouse from which I watch the ships whose crews trust me with their lives. Indeed, it is not that I belong here at Otter Point. Rather, I am a part of the island itself- connected. And I think I shall stay here.

Allow me to continue my tale of Jane's and my fostering acquaintanceship. After that harvest festival, I was smitten, of course. I could never have let myself part ways without inviting her to a further companionship. I was taken by her oak-colored hair, her joyful smile, and the way each word she spoke seemed to burrow deeper into my heart. The next day, after I finished my route, I took her out to the theater to watch a production of one of Shakespeare's works, as she had mentioned of love of the drama. I do not remember a thing about the play itself, for I was engrossed in Jane's presence.

Afterward, the two of us went for a stroll around town. She talked and talked about the performance, yet I found myself unable to contribute much to the discussion. Jane made so many of these intelligent observations that I found myself wondering if we had truly seen the same show. But I was glad to hear her talk about it with all of her passion. I held her hand for the first that night. I still remember the warmth it brought me.

My study of the pen has continued, and I have come across many a thought-provoking verse. This time, I shall try my hand at a limerick.

Seawater glistens on your chestnut pelt,
You finished your swim, and I wonder how it felt.
 You find berries on a vine,
 The day was sublime.
You sleep hand-in-hand, and you make my heart melt.

William Hatch,
Otter Point, ME.

Auburough, WA., October 10, 1886

Young Cass,

As I have previously mentioned, one of the chief reasons for my sequestering was the desire to be alone. I told you that I had thought it more bearable to be truly lonely than to be lonely while surrounded by friends. I am beginning to think that I may have been mistaken. Perhaps there is something to be said for the state of simply being around others- hearing their voices even if they are not speaking to you.

I reason that the best way to explain my feelings on the subject is to guide you through a day of my recent life. As you know, my waking hours are in the night. Yet, I still call them days to myself. Why do I do that, I wonder? Whatever the reason, I awoke just before the sun began to set on the 7th of this month and walked up the hundreds of stairs to my lamp. It did not take long to perform the majority of my labors.

It is around this time of the evening when I usually settle into my nightly reading. Foreseeing a long time by myself, I brought along ample material. And I have never been the best reader, so the going is slow. This time, I found myself reading a familiar passage. The problem was that I did not realize this familiarity until I had all but finished it. I am thirty-nine years old, and I have always been in possession of a sharp mind.

I believe that the issue was how well this place lends itself to thinking. Perhaps too much so. Maybe I have been losing myself in thought. The rest of the night passed by without issue. However, when the sun rose, my troubles yet continued. As I enjoy doing, I stood out on the shallow deck at the top of my tower to watch the morning light creep over the island of Otter Point. This may be difficult to put into words, but I

shall try my best. The eastern half of this rock is covered by a forest, and as I watched the line of illumination crawl onto the beach and over the tops of the trees, it seemed to me that there was a spot in those woods that would not light up. I kept my gaze on it long after the whole of the island was bright and the sun had fully emerged from the horizon. It remained as dark as night.

I was so disrupted by the phenomenon that I stayed in the lighthouse until almost noon. Eventually, I resigned that I had to sleep in order to be an effective lightkeeper, so I forced myself to retire. Even as I lay in bed in my shack, I could feel that dark spot. When I did finally sleep, I dreamed about Jane visiting me in my lighthouse. I have not seen the dark spot since. As I write this letter to you, my niece, I await the morning light just to see if that occurrence was isolated.

To take my mind off of things, I will now relate to you the circumstances surrounding my engagement to your aunt. At this point, we had been courting for over a year. A long time, I know, but I was not a reckless young man at the time. I held no desire to rush into things. One of our favorite activities together was to take long walks through the vast wooded hills behind the town. It was on such a venture that our path took us to an overlook point from which we could see the whole of Aubourough sprawled out before us. I think she had known the whole afternoon what I had been planning, for she was overjoyed when I asked- but not surprised. It was a beautiful wedding; she planned, and I executed. That was generally the best way we found to do things.

I have been constantly missing my wife, so the poem I give you today is called a villanelle.

I could never have known what it would entail.

She would provide all that I sought.

Waiting for me while I delivered my mail.

We walked through the trees, along every trail,

Forever best friends, sharing every thought.

I could never have known what it would entail.

We solved problems together no matter the scale,

I could not regret that we tied the knot.

Waiting for me while I delivered my mail.

I hung on each word, even an exhale.

She loved me for all that I was and was not.

I could never have known what it would entail.

We stayed inside to watch the snow and the hail,

Nights spent talking until our eyes were bloodshot.

Waiting for me while I delivered my mail.

She went away without me, gone beyond the veil.

Left me alone, left me to rot.

I could never have known what it would entail.

Waiting for me while I delivered my mail.

William Hatch,

Otter Point, ME.

Auburrough, WA., November 23, 1886

Cassandra, my eldest niece,

I must begin this letter with a brief apology for missing my regular writing time. While I feel all of the guilt due to such an oversight, I am relieved that the offending period lasted little longer than a week. As I am sure you have worried about your old uncle, please allow me to explain myself.

I have been somewhat distracted, for there is simply so much about which to think. As I have mentioned in previous correspondence, there is the issue of my solitude. It can feel almost crushing at times. Once per month, a man rows to Otter Point to bring provisions, and I hand off my letters. Unfortunately, due to some delegatory complication of nature unbeknownst to me, he cannot deliver any writings from others. Therefore, our fleeting interaction is the only contact I make with another human in all that time. This isolation was so alluring to me not four months ago, but it has invariably taken its toll.

On his next visit, I must make the decision to either terminate or renew my contract. Some days ago, it would have been an easy one. I could have gotten far from this lonely spire, from that dark spot in the forest that never goes away- always haunting the corner of my vision. But the situation has changed. In my last letter, I recounted a dream I had of my departed wife. I am beginning to wonder how much of a fantasy that initial sighting truly was, for there have been others since. I have smelled a familiar scent in the breeze, glimpsed a faraway figure lying on the beach, and heard an echo of footsteps from the long spiraling staircase. It is becoming increasingly clear to me that I may not be as alone as I might have believed.

Cass, have you ever heard of a mermaid? I first learned of the concept during my days as a soldier. Back then, stories would spread through the troops almost as fast as pneumonia. Supposedly, if someone loses their life at sea, their spirit may return as something both physical and phantasmic, yet neither at the same time. They follow ships, calling out to the sailors, giving companionship to the stranded, and warding off danger. I understood them good fortune, and that was all I considered the tale: good fortune-something that we like to imagine during tough times.

My mind is not unchanging. If presented with evidence of my wrongness, I shall gladly correct my view. Can I dare to hope that this may be the case for mermaids? I have seen Jane, I tell you. I have seen her. If some part of her truly has returned, then I must stay here to accept it. I have to keep the lamp alight! In one month's time, you will either hear my knock at your door or read my letter in the mail.

In the meantime, I would like to write down one of my favorite memories of my marriage, seeing as the event itself ended my last letter. While your aunt and I spent so many of our years together, there were not enough- and lately, I keep finding my thoughts drifting back to this singular weekend. We did not go out, nor was there any holiday or special event of note. It was a weekend like any other, so much so that it exemplifies our relationship as a whole. I do not even remember the date, but Jane and I- we tended to our garden together. She was so proud of those flowers. We cooked food, laughing while we ate and singing to one another afterward. That was how we rested: in each other's company. Her very presence was rejuvenating.

I like to think that she would enjoy the poetry I have written. Here is a haiku for your enjoyment.

On my tall tower,
A kingdom of loneliness.
A king with no queen.

William Hatch,
Otter Point, ME.

Auburrough, WA., May 25, 1887

To my dear Cassie,

Jane and I were up late last night, talking while we took care of the lamp. I happened to notice my stationary sticking out from a shelf, and I realized that I had all but abandoned my letters to you. It certainly was not that I forgot about my precious niece. No, we speak of you frequently- about when we used to call on your mother and father almost daily to see you. Rather, I have been so occupied that I lapsed on my commitment to keep up with the letters.

Do not think that I have been miserably busy, for it has been a joyous occupation that distracts me. My Jane, my mermaid, comes up to my tower every evening when I turn on the lamp. She stays with me, sometimes talking, sometimes just holding my hand, until morning light. My solitude lies vanquished. We have even started another garden here at Otter Point. She brought us a bounty of seeds, and we do what we can to keep them growing in good health. Oh, Jane adores the otters. They were never afraid of her, even at first. They just act as if she is not there.

This rocky isle is home to me now. Additionally, I feel the best I have felt in years. My constitution is hearty, and my body abounds with the energy it had two decades ago. Perhaps it had something to do with that dark spot in the woods. Looking at it always made me feel sick. When I knew it to be peering at me from below, no matter how high my tower was, it turned my stomach and chilled my bones. Jane has dispelled it. Her very presence brightens my whole world. Sometimes, when she has been below the water's surface for a while, I can see the spot among the trees begin to darken. But my Jane always comes back before it can fully form.

I suppose I should inform you of the event that was once known to me as the end of my marriage to Jane Hatch. Your parents probably refrained from telling you the details when it occurred on account of your young age, but you should know what happened to your aunt. In the spring of 1885, Jane was to visit her family in Scotland. She had never been out of the country before and was understandably excited to make the journey. I purchased two tickets for a boat across the Atlantic; it was to be a wonderful vacation for the both of us. Since before I even knew her, I had always wished to see the Scottish countryside.

The day before we were due to set out, I fell ill to such a degree that there was no possibility of me leaving the house. She was fully prepared to cancel the trip entirely, but I urged her to go. I knew how excited she was, and I did not wish for her to miss out on the experience for such an unimportant reason. I hired a nurse, and Jane set off with my blessing. Her ship never made it to Scotland. During the darkness of a nighttime storm, the boat drifted into rocky waters and sank. There were some survivors, but my Jane was not among them.

How glad I am that she has returned to me. It is for this reason that I will soon be ending my term as keeper of the Otter Point lighthouse. I will speak with the company man at our next meeting about arranging for a replacement. As happy as I am with Jane's presence here, the island is not her home. She is a mermaid, and she is one with the sea that embraced her. Thanks to her, I have figured out the next stage of my life. I will join her forevermore in the heart of the ocean, and we will be together.

Jane tells me that she likes to see my creative side shine through, so here is an acrostic for you.

I closely examined that ship's doomed voyage.

Knowing who caused it boiled my blood.
In the lighthouse, he dozed in a stupor.
Lulled asleep by bottles abundant.
Lazy and complacent, unfit for the job.
Even prison would not be enough.
Death alone would atone for the crime.

Hidden well among the thick forest.
Insidious shell of a man long hollow.
Molding alone in the dirt of the woods.

William Hatch,
Otter Point, ME.

auburough

long years since i followed Jane into the vast blue
came back onto the island because i would never forget
about my dear niece cassandra aftinson how are you
doing sweetheart we miss you over here just got back
from a theater show Jane enjoyed the acting and i
failed to follow the plot but it was a nice treat for
the senses probably going to tend to the flowers and
bushes tonight she does love that garden and i have
grown almost as fond of it as she is still feel that
aura from the eastern part of Otter Point where the old
lightkeeper if you can even call him that henry gylles
rots under the dark spot in the forest it has kept me
far away from the grounds these past years and i know
that it has festered in the time since good thing that
monster will never be a mermaid for i made certain he
felt no spray of the sea as the life left him i have
kept a watchful eye over my replacement a young man he
seems to be doing well keeps the lamp on every night
there will be two dark spots if he lapses on his duties
you mark my words i miss the otters though When Jane
and i hold hands the littles creatures always enter my
mind i see them sometimes when they venture a ways out
to the ocean i wonder if they remember me their old
friend so glad to spend my days as a mermaid there is
no want for money or shelter for the sea provides all
maybe we will swim to scotland together one of these
days you know we have always wanted to go sometimes the
currents are strong and they leave my wife and i
drifting miles apart but i always find she is so bright
to me Jane is my lighthouse forever and ever

william

Auburough, WA., March 15, 1867

My affectionate William,

I could not imagine that a soul in this world is as happy as I am these days. Engaged to be married to the one whom I love the most! Though I would like to avoid wishing away this wonderful period of time, it is most difficult to wait for our wedding. Every night upon my retirement do I imagine what it would feel like to brush my hair next to you. And when I wake, I can almost hear you shaving while I sleep a little longer. It is an occupation of thought I have not experienced since you first courted me.

I have read a couple more books on the subject of botany, and my garden is flowering with all kinds of beautiful blooms. To think, I only began to pursue this interest to give you a unique present, and it has now undeniably become a passion of mine. Will you build me terraces and dig up the rocks while I water our flowers? My dearest dream is for the two of us to spend time pursuing some kind of passion together. It does not have to be gardening, but I think I would prefer something similarly artistic.

Speaking of the matter, I have recently taken up painting, learning from a friend of my father's. As prevalent as your handsome face is in my thoughts, is it any surprise that I have already undertaken a portrait of you? I fear it may not be very good, but I would like for you to see it nonetheless. If you would call upon me this Sunday, my darling, I can show you.

When I recall the times we have shared thus far, the memories of you stand out like a light in a storm. William Hatch, you are my lighthouse forever and ever.

Jane Aftinson,
Auburough, WA.