

The Terrible Collection
By Judith Altruda

Gail walked down the hill to the riverfront path, counting the ships at anchor-and her blessings-as she jogged from the Wet Dog toward the Maritime Museum.

One year ago they spent a perfect summer afternoon exploring Astoria's downtown when their Alaska-bound cruise ship docked there for the day. By the time they re-boarded the vessel, they'd made an offer on a charming Victorian home with a view of the river. The realtor, Deb, said the house had been built by a ship captain, pointing out its many handcrafted nautical features. Jerry took an early retirement and they moved from Duluth. Their first year had been busy settling into their new life. Gail decorated the house in a nautical style, blue and white, and started collecting nautical antiques and miniature lighthouses to go with the decor. They loved the local history and joined the Maritime museum and a sea shanty singing group, performing in period costume at the Voodoo lounge during Fisher Poet's week. They were having so much fun in their early retirement they had little time to think about what they had left behind.

When Gail returned from her jog a package was sitting on the front porch. She lifted it off the hand knotted jute welcome matt and brought it inside, grabbed a kitchen knife to slit through the tape and opened the cardboard flaps, clawing through packing peanuts with the anticipation of a child at Christmas. she lifted an object out of the box scattering a cloud of Styrofoam squiggles over the floor.

Jerry glanced over the top of his computer screen, taking in his wife and the object she kneeled in front of.

"Now I have all the lighthouses of Oregon!" she cried with glee.

It was made of wood and metal, with a plastic light inside the tower, mounted to an acrylic boulder.

"Are you sure about that?"

"This is the hardest one to find." She unrolled a creme colored scroll, distressed to look like an old treasure map, and read "Tillamook Head Lighthouse finished in 1881. From a Terrible Tilly, a

Jerry searched Terrible Tilly on the computer. He read, "Three weeks before the lighthouse was completed, in January of 1881, the *Lupatia* wrecked in heavy fog killing all 16 of her crew. The bodies of the men were found washed up on Tillamook Rock."

Gail brushed packing crumbs from the table.

Jerry's voice rose a little. "Get this; after the lighthouse was decommissioned in 1957, it changed hands several times. Currently it is the site of Eternity at Sea Columbarium. "*Your Loved One can be an Honorary Lighthouse Keeper*" He read. "Can you believe that? Lost their cemetery license in 1999 but the urns remain in the tower." He shook his head.

Gail put the lighthouse into the box and grabbed a handful of packing peanuts.

"What are you doing?"

"Sending it back."

Jerry got up from the table.

“Let me see it.”

He picked it up, turning it in his hands. “Look at the craftsmanship...The details, you can even see inside the tower....”

“Is that supposed to be a joke? she said. “This is terrible.”

“You mean, Terrible Tilly.” Jerry chuckled. “Let’s keep it.

“I don’t like what it represents, Jer. Too negative, too creepy.”

“Look here-it says *all sales final* on the invoice,” Jerry said.

She looked at the box, considering what to do. The thing had cost \$400.00

“Well, it’s going in the basement for now.” she said.

The days grew shorter. Jerry strung colored lights outside the house hoping it would roust Gail’s seasonal blues. She decorated a Christmas tree with wooden sea captains, red and white life preservers, tiny gilded life boats and hand painted sand dollars. Gail saw her reflection in the silver and blue glass balls she placed on the tree, and shuddered. The face of a stranger. Mindlessly she reached into a box for more decorations and felt a sudden stab. She swore, jerking her hand back to find a piece of wire jammed into her thumb. She looked inside the box and found the lighthouse. Tom came inside to find Gail standing at the sink bandaging her thumb. He stared at his wife. Her face was chalky, dark circles under her eyes, her hair had thinned. She must need vitamin D, he thought.

“What happened” Jerry asked.

“Come with me.” They went into the living room and she pointed at the model.

Terrible Tilly looked like something out of a horror film. Mysteriously deteriorated. The paint a chalky white with red undertones, the glass lens broken, the metal oxidized. Jerry picked up the model and took it to his computer. He brought up pictures of the present day lighthouse and compared. The deterioration was the same.

“This is like something out of Believe it or Not...or Dorian Gray.” he said, returning to Gail. He put the lighthouse on the table.

“What are we going to do with this?”

Gail said “Get rid of it. Now.”

Jerry took it into the basement. He decided to restore the lighthouse and surprise Gail. He worked on his top secret project in the evenings, feeling like one of Santa’s elves as he sanded off the chalky paint, scrubbed tarnish from the metal, replaced the broken glass. He repainted it crisp white and wired a light to shine from inside the tower. On Christmas eve he wrapped it and set it under the tree labeled *To Gail from Santa*.

“Merry Christmas!” Jerry woke her with dark roasted coffee and cardamom rolls, which they enjoyed after their traditional Christmas morning love making.

They went to the tree to open gifts. Gail gave Jerry a hand knitted Irish Fisherman’s sweater.

Jerry handed her a package.

“ From Santa to me?” she said.

“Open it!”

Gail removed the red bow and tore through the wrapping paper. She opened the box. “Is this a joke?”

“Don't you like it?”

“I don't understand” she said pushing it away. “Why would you give this back to me?”

Jerry looked inside the box. The lighthouse had deteriorated overnight. The tower was stained with rust from corroded metal, the paint mildewed. “There must be a logical reason for this...I spent weeks restoring it like new to surprise you...the basement must be too damp or something.” He put the lid back on the box, and leaned over to kiss Gail on the cheek. “Let's not let it ruin our holiday...We have to get dressed!” He pulled the new sweater over his head.

“Why?” Where are we going?”

“To see your big surprise. I got the idea when I was researching the lighthouse to restore your model. I could not believe it when I saw Terrible Tilly come up on Zillow”

Gail looked at him, her mouth open.

“I knew you'd love the idea!” Jerry gushed.

“We're going to restore her and open an Airbnb! You are now the proud owner of a real lighthouse, Darling.”