

THE GRAVE TENDER.

By David Ryan

"I need to see mother."

"What?" I said, looking up from my work polishing the lantern prism and reflectors. Anna's cold, green eyes bore into mine. The brightness of the lantern room caused her pupils to look like obsidian pinpricks in a jade shield.

"I need to see mother. I need to tend her grave." she responded impassively.

It was almost a year since Mary's body was recovered from the rocks below the North Head Lighthouse. The newspapers reported that my wife had committed suicide by jumping from the cliffs near the fire control station of the lighthouse. Just as well, I thought at the time.

In the intervening months, my daughter had not spoken a word beyond the barest civility, and only in regard to the work that was required of a lighthouse keeper's daughter. Duties that had expanded since Mary's death. Anna spent her scant free time walking along the sea cliffs. Despite my admonishments to keep a wide berth, she thoughtlessly walked inches from the precipitous edge.

We had not visited Mary's grave since the funeral. Anna showed little interest and I, of course, was not eager to go either. Anna's 13th birthday was the day before and I agreed to go, in the hopes that a visit to Mary's grave might prove cathartic for Anna and dispel her melancholy state. Prior to her mother's demise, Anna had been a studious child with a quick wit and charming laugh that I had not heard since before Mary's fall. It was the following Saturday that we journeyed to the Ilwaco Cemetery to pay our respects. Anna was morose the entire trip.

"This isn't right." she said upon our arrival at the cemetery, and repeated as we tended Mary's grave.

"What isn't right?" I asked, barely repressing my irritation.

"Mother isn't here. This is not her grave."

"Of course, it is." My anger rising. "We were both here when she was laid to rest. We saw her casket lowered in this very spot. This tombstone bears her name, the years of her life. Look!" I said, pointing to the engraved words, MARY PENSONEN. 1870-1923.

"She isn't here. This is not her grave." My daughter repeated matter-of-factly, and walked away.

Stifling my anger at her willfulness, I told myself that this was an irrational child reacting poorly under duress. The trip home was quiet. A pervasive sense of foreboding overtook my soul. The winter rains started pouring. We dined in silence that evening and retired to our rooms early. The wind and rain battered the lighthouse keeper's residence. I knew the assistants would have a hard time keeping the lantern room windows clean in the face of this storm.

Later that night, I woke from a fitful sleep. A damp chill overcame me and the stench of briny seas saturated the room. The sounds of dripping water and soft breathing echoed in my ears. Lighting the lantern on my nightstand, I was struck with terror as my daughter's visage glowed ghastly in the flame.

Her jade green eyes piercing me in the lamp light. Her nightgown was soaked and reeking of the tides. Her black hair was a dripping tangle of what appeared to be a kelp and seaweed.

“I saw mother. I tended her grave.” her voice was ethereal, rippling from her lungs. “She is very angry with you.”

I was slow to recover from the shock of this frightful intrusion and by the time I shook free the dread of her appearance, she was gone. Composing myself, I rushed across the hall to her room, intent on punishing her for venturing alone into town at night and for waking me so disrespectfully. Opening her bedroom door, I saw Anna, seemingly fast asleep in bed and bone dry, her clean hair spilling over the edges of her pillow.

Dumbfounded, I retreated back to my room, nearly slipping on some kelp lying in a puddle on the floor. Dismissing the ordeal as a nightmare brought on by the stress of the day, I resolved to punish Anna for neglecting her housekeeping chores by leaving such a foul-smelling puddle in our house. The Lighthouse Service inspectors would certainly give me poor marks for such an oversight.

Upon completion of her chores the next day, I punished Anna, exiling her to her room.

“But I have to tend to mother’s grave!” she cried. A sea foam storm welling with the tears in her eyes. I did not relent.

Evening fell upon the North Head Lighthouse in a torrent of rain and wind. I was endlessly occupied clearing the film of salt and grime that coats the outer glass of the lantern room. Failure to do so renders the lighthouse ineffective against this nest of dangers that has turned the Columbia Bar into the graveyard of the Pacific.

Soon after midnight, while fighting the raging winds to clear the glass, I looked out and saw Anna determinedly walking by the fire control station toward the cliffs. Consumed with rage at her disobedience, I clambered down the steel rails of the lighthouse stairs, intending to snatch her up and make her understand the consequences of disobeying me, as I did to her mother a year-to-the-day foregone.

I ran to the cliff edge, but Anna had disappeared. Manic, I raced across the grounds yelling her name with no response but the crashing of the surf.

I paused past the fire station, and looked down on the rocks below.

In defiance of the winds, a column of sea mist slowly drifted straight up toward me. Paralyzed, I watched as the mist rose several hundred feet and gathered before my eyes. It congealed into a familiar form. Mary’s face materialized before my eyes in all its youthful beauty. She reached out with a loving embrace.

Anna’s voice came from behind me. “I am tending mother’s grave. She told me that she is very angry with you.”

I turned and looked into Anna’s eyes. The deep green seas of her eyes washed over me. I turned back to Mary. Her youthful beauty transformed into a grim, bony rictus. Her raven hair flew about a half-bare skull. Howling, she locked me in an icy grip and pulled me to her empty rib cage. Screaming, I

plummeted from the cliff edge. As the sound of the surf overwhelmed my screams, I heard something that I had not heard for a year. I heard the sound of Anna laughing.

EPILOGUE

Alexander Pensonen's death was ruled a suicide. Mr. Pensonen was thought to have suffered from depression and believed to have jumped from the same spot that his wife had one year prior. They were survived by their daughter Anna. Anna was adopted by the family of a lighthouse assistant and became a valuable aid for the North Head Lighthouse, providing vital services maintaining the lighthouse grounds. She was often seen walking the rocky shores below the lighthouse harvesting seaweed. When asked of her activities, she dutifully replied, "I am tending the graves."

Acknowledgment- Thanks to Sydney Stevens for her marvelous book that inspired and informed this story: *Ghost Stories of the Long Beach Peninsula*.