

A Midwinter Light

Every winter,
as the first snows settled over the hills
and the days grew short,
Emilia lit the little lantern
and set it in the window
of the old stone cottage.

She did it without fail,
as her mother had done,
and her grandmother before her.

“Why do we light it, Grandma?”
she had once asked as a child,
her voice soft with wonder.

“To guide the way,” her grandmother said.
“For those who are lost or alone,
for those who are waiting,
and for those who don’t yet know
they’re searching.”

Emilia hadn’t understood then.
But the ritual stayed with her.

Now, many years later,
she kept it faithfully,
even though she lived alone
on the edge of the village.

Winter deepened.
The world grew still,
as though the land itself
was holding its breath.

Emilia loved this quiet time.
It felt like waiting for something
wonderful,
though she could not name it.

Her days were filled with small tasks:
dusting shelves,
mending quilts,
baking bread
that warmed the cottage.

Her evenings were for the lantern.
Polishing its glass,

trimming the wick just so,
then lighting it at twilight,
placing it on the windowsill.

The little flame danced —
its golden glow spilling
across the snow outside.

To anyone walking through the village,
it was a beacon.

A promise that someone was waiting,
even if they weren't sure for whom.

It was deep midwinter
when Emilia saw him.

She had stepped outside
to gather wood
when movement at the edge of the forest
caught her eye.

A figure,
dark against the snow,
moving slowly toward the road.

It was a boy,
no more than twelve,
wrapped in a coat far too thin.
A satchel over one shoulder.
Footsteps dragging
as though he had walked for miles.

Something in Emilia's chest tightened.
She stood watching,
then turned back inside.
She did not call out —
not yet.

She set to work,
preparing for a guest.

Stew on the stove.
Tea in the kettle.
Oil added to the lantern
to keep its flame strong.

At the window,
she saw the boy draw closer.

His head was bowed.
He slowed when he noticed the lantern's glow,
hesitating,
then stopped and looked up.

Their eyes met through the glass.

Emilia opened the door.
"It's bitter tonight," she said softly.
"Want to warm yourself by the fire?"

The boy swallowed,
his face pale and wind-chapped.
He nodded.

Inside,
he stood stiffly near the door
until Emilia coaxed him to the table.

She poured tea,
steam curling into the quiet air.
"It's not much," she said,
as she ladled stew into a bowl,
"but it's warm."

At first he ate tentatively.
Then with a hunger
that said more than words.

When he finished, he whispered,
"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Emilia sat across from him,
hands wrapped around her cup.
"Where are you headed?"

"I don't know," he admitted.
"Just... somewhere."

She nodded.
"Well," she said gently,
"this is somewhere, isn't it?"

The boy blinked,
surprised.
And a faint smile
tugged at the corner of his mouth.

That night,
after the boy had fallen asleep
by the fire,
Emilia returned to the lantern.

She lit it again
and set it back on the windowsill.

Outside,
snow fell softly,
blanketing the world in white.

The flame glowed steady in the darkness,
as though waiting for someone unseen
who might need its light.

Emilia stood watching
for a long time.
At last she understood
what her grandmother had meant.

The waiting
was not just ritual.
It was for the lost and weary,
for those wandering
through the cold and dark.

It was for the boy sleeping soundly,
and for the next wanderer —
tomorrow,
or next year.

It was for the light itself,
and for the promise it held,
year after year.

— *William Zeitler*
2024 December 18

© 2024 William Zeitler. Originally published at: GrailHeart.com

