


They Simply Light the Way

t dusk, the lamplighter made his usual rounds, touching flame to wick as the sun slipped away. By the time the fishermen returned in the evening, the harbor was bedecked with lights.

The lamps burned all night. By morning, most had gone out. The day was well underway, the quay alive with nets being cleaned, fish being sorted and taken to market.

So it was strange, that morning, to see a stranger with a long pole and a jar of oil walking the quay — lighting the lamps.

“Too late! Or too early!” said an old fisherman, smirking.

The stranger said nothing.

He moved slowly along the quay’s edge, trimming wicks, coaxing flame back into glass globes in the shining daylight. In the full light of morning, the lamps looked faint and faintly ridiculous — small suns pretending to matter.

A young fisherman named Eli watched. His net had torn again. He sat mending it with practiced hands. The stranger worked nearby.

“You’re wasting oil,” Eli said, not even looking up.

The stranger smiled. “Only if you think lamps are for seeing.”

Eli frowned. “That’s exactly what they’re for.”

“Nope,” the stranger said. “Lamps are for being seen.”

Eli glanced around. The harbor was bright with morning.

“No one’s seeing them,” he said.

“Not yet,” the stranger replied.

By afternoon, the storm arrived out of nowhere — sudden, violent, folding the horizon flat. Fog rolled in thick as wool. Boats that should have been home were still out, swallowed by gray. Eli found himself running to the quay.

The lamps were burning.

Not bright. Not heroic. But steady. Each one a small refusal.

Through the fog, shapes emerged — boats limping home, guided not by the unseeable sun, but by tiny flames lit earlier.

When the last boat limped in safely, Eli looked for the stranger. He was nowhere to be found.

That evening, the lamplighter came as usual.

The lamps burned.

The harbor slept.
No one mentioned the daylight lamps.

The next day, Eli didn't mend his net. He left it folded on the bench — neat as a promise kept too long — and walked the length of the harbor, looking for the one who had done the pointless but indispensable thing.

Then Eli understood that acts of guerrilla goodness don't shout.
They simply light the way.

— *William Zeitler*
2026 January 21

© 2026 William Zeitler. Originally published at: GrailHeart.com

