

Passing The Flame

In the village of Amberwell, tucked beside a winding river, there was an ancient custom. Each season, the Keeper of the Lanterns would light the bronze lanterns that lined the village square. These lanterns burned day and night for a season, their warm glow reminding the villagers to embrace the time they were in. But when the season ended, the lanterns were extinguished, marking a transition to something new.

For as long as anyone could remember, the Keeper of the Lanterns had been Edric. His hands were calloused from decades of lighting wicks and trimming flames, his face weathered but kind. The villagers trusted him to keep the rhythm of the seasons, but few ever asked him how he felt about his role. For Edric, it had become both a duty and a comfort — a steady, predictable task in a world that often felt uncertain.

One crisp autumn morning, as Edric prepared to light the first lantern of the harvest season, a young woman approached him. Her name was Mairen, and her eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“Keeper Edric,” she said, “how did you become the Keeper of the Lanterns?”

Edric paused, surprised by the question. “It was many years ago,” he said. “The Keeper before me chose to step down, and I was asked to take her place. I was younger than you are now, and I thought it would be a simple thing to tend to the lanterns. But it became much more than that.”

“More how?” Mairen asked, tilting her head.

Edric smiled faintly. “It taught me about letting go. Each time I extinguish a lantern, it feels like a goodbye. But lighting a new one reminds me there is always something waiting to take its place.”

Mairen considered this. “Do you ever wish you could keep one lantern burning forever?”

The old Keeper’s eyes softened. “Sometimes,” he admitted. “But if we held on to one flame too long, we’d miss the beauty of the next.”

As the seasons turned and autumn gave way to winter, Edric noticed his hands trembling more than usual, making it difficult to light the wicks. His strength, once steady, was fading, and even climbing the ladder to reach the lanterns felt heavier than it had before. Still, he persisted, unwilling to let the village down.

One evening, as snow began to fall and the last autumn lantern was extinguished, Mairen appeared again. This time, she carried a bundle of kindling and a small oil flask.

“Keeper Edric,” she said gently, “you’ve tended these flames for longer than I’ve been alive. Perhaps it’s time to let someone else carry the torch.”

Edric looked at her, his heart heavy with the weight of her words. “Do you think the village would trust someone new?”

Mairen nodded. "They trust the lanterns, and they trust the rhythm of the seasons. You've taught them that. It's not about the Keeper; it's about the light."

When spring arrived, Edric gathered the villagers in the square. The air was filled with the scent of new blossoms and the chirping of birds. He spoke of his years as Keeper, of the joy he had found in lighting the lanterns and the sorrow in extinguishing them. Then, with wistful solemnity, he passed the long iron lighter to Mairen.

"From this season forward, you will be the Keeper of the Lanterns," he said. "And when your time comes to step away, you will know when to pass it on."

Mairen lit the first spring lantern, its flame bright and unwavering. The villagers cheered, but Edric stood quietly, watching the light with a bittersweet smile. It felt strange to let go, but as he stepped back, he felt a lightness he hadn't known in years.

Over time, the village came to know Mairen as the new Keeper. She brought her own spirit to the role, decorating the lanterns with fresh flowers in spring and woven ribbons in autumn. Her enthusiasm breathed new life into the ancient custom, and the villagers found themselves delighting in the small, thoughtful changes she made.

Edric, now free from his duties, spent his days walking by the river, noticing details he had overlooked before — the way the frost sparkled on bare branches, the sound of birds returning with the thaw, the soft murmur of the water against the stones. He realized how much he had missed while consumed by his task, though he had never regretted his service.

One day, as he sat by the water, a child from the village approached him. "Keeper Edric," the child said, "why don't you light the lanterns anymore?"

Edric smiled. "Because my season for that has passed. But every season has its beauty, and now I get to see the lanterns in a new way — as someone who simply enjoys their light."

The child frowned thoughtfully but nodded, seeming to understand in her own way. She ran off to join her friends, leaving Edric alone with the river's song.

Years passed, and the village flourished. Seasons turned, as they always had, and Edric became a cherished elder. His wisdom was sought at the harvest festivals and his stories treasured by the children. Mairen, too, began to feel the weight of her years. Her hands, once so nimble, began to falter, and the ladder to the lanterns felt taller with each passing season.

One crisp autumn evening, as the last leaves spiraled to the ground, Mairen stood in the square, surrounded by villagers. She spoke of her time as Keeper and the joy it had brought her. Then, with steady resolve, she handed the iron lighter to a young apprentice who had been quietly learning the craft.

And so it went, season after season, generation after generation. The lanterns burned on, their glow a reminder that every ending carries the seed of a beginning, and every season has its purpose — and its beauty.

Edric, long gone but never forgotten, became part of the rhythm he had tended so faithfully. His name lived on in the village, because he had been so faithful to his office, and because he knew when to let it go.

His story, like the lanterns, continued to light the way — a reminder of the beauty found in both holding on — and in letting go.

— *William Zeitler*

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