

Jacquelyn Bengfort

The Mathematician

from "Triptych for Saint Venantius"

It began with a small request. "Darling, I can't concentrate, I can't get this equation right. This proof, it eludes me," she said, in her foreign voice. "Do you think, perhaps, I could work in the lighthouse?"

A reasonable request. The lighthouse was my inheritance. My grandfather took his bride there and they lived in the lighthouse and tended to the light, but by the time my father turned it over to me the lighthouse needed little to keep it burning. It had been automated, alarmed, forgotten, an oddity useful only to the mariners who came that way by night. I said yes, of course my love, let's go.

We arrived just after the sun set opposite the ocean, at that time when the water takes on the look of liquid pearl and the clouds color dove gray and pink. My father had taken to locking the iron door with a padlock when he stopped living in the echoing tower, and I fretted that it could not be secured from inside.

"Little matter," said she, "just lock me in."

My dear, I said, what if you should need to get out?

"But I won't. I need to be locked in. Locked in with my thoughts."

Though I worried—about fire, about other more obscure and terrible disasters, about no hot water and a kitchen now only a home for birds—I left her there with a picnic basket and a blanket and her notebooks, and took her assurances with me. I drove home along the coast, watching the water take on the hard dangerous look it has by night.

Two days later I returned, and she came down from the lighthouse and came home with me, a look on her face that I could not understand. She seemed...reluctant? Pleased? Some admixture of both, perhaps. And we went on much as before, she with her numbers and I with my coat and tie and my fine job in the city. She with her thoughts, and I with my worries.

Winter came and went, and in the spring she came to me again,

with the dirt of fresh planting on her hands, and said again she wished to go to the lighthouse. She insisted, she pleaded. “Spring presses on me. There is too much life here. I must go to the rocks and the sea and the sky so that I may have some peace.”

And so, I locked her in the lighthouse, this time with a larger basket of food. She would not take a phone, insisted it be only this—her, some apples and bread and water, her notebooks, and her thoughts.

“Take a boat out if you worry,” she told me. “If anything is wrong, I will make the light show red. Then you will know, and you will come and get me.” She held up a scarf she brought for the purpose, proof to me that she knew my mind. “But never will I need it. Nothing could ever go wrong.”

This was hardly sufficient precaution (I did not even own a boat), but I was overruled. And again I made my way home, to a dwelling that seemed, despite its garden and its familiarity, less welcoming than before.

After a week of poor sleep and nightmares I drove back to the lighthouse and undid the lock. Did I imagine she was less happy to see me? Did I only invent the hesitation in her step, the backward glance, as though she were departing a lover and not a pile of stones? Or not a lover, but near to it: a love of something I did not understand.

From that date, the frequency with which she requested to return to the lighthouse increased. She spent as many weeks that summer concealed in the tower as she did in our house, while weeds overran her once-beloved garden.

At summers’ end, only two days after more than a fortnight’s absence, she came again, a bright frenzied look in her eyes. “My love,” she said, “I near a solution to the problem I have sought all these months. It is time. Let us go to the lighthouse.”

I argued. I fought against her zeal. I admit that she scared me—I had become scared of my own wife, of her attachment to this problem of numbers I could not comprehend, of her willful confinement in the lighthouse that had once been of such insignificance in my own life.

But she conquered me, knocked my misgivings aside like so many gnats, and we drove once more to the lighthouse. She promised to stay only four days, “And less, my love, if I succeed.”

Once again the sky was pink, the sea was white, and the lock closed with a dull clack. I drove home.

On the appointed day, I returned. I opened the lock, surprised to find myself trembling, all the worry of the days previous and the weeks and months before now manifest in my limbs.

I opened the heavy door, called her name up the stairs. No answer. I made my way up the worn stone column, through air pregnant with cobwebs and damp, thoughts of solitary falls and sprained ankles and cracked skulls tormenting and spurring me.

I came to the highest point of the lighthouse and felt the start of a late summer storm whip past the slowly revolving light. The air smelt of salt and the singe of alchemy. Her notebooks lay on the blanket under a broken-out pane of glass, the scarf a pool of silken blood on the stone floor.

She was not there. But one of the notebooks lay open to a back page, and on it I saw a long equation, and under it two words, leaping from the page, emphatic with victory: *human flight*.

Jacquelyn Bengfort spent eighteen years reading library books and staring out at the North Dakota prairies before departing for stranger shores. Her writing has appeared in *The Labyrinth* and is forthcoming in *District Lines* and at the Baltimore Playwrights Festival. She lives in Washington, D.C. with her husband, daughter, and Winston-the-dog.