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Nighthawk and Friends

When he was a boy, Jim Ladd always wanted to go to sea, as young boys do. So, as soon as he was old enough he signed up, first as a ship boy, then as a seaman until he learned enough to become Captain of his own ship. He was good at his job, sailing the seven seas to faraway places that were quite different to his homeland and of much interest; but what he really loved was feeling the deck rolling beneath his feet and especially gazing up into the night sky. To Jim, the stars were truly amazing and he knew some of the groups like The Plough which he used as a guide to make sure his ship was going in the right direction. But there were more than just a few, millions actually; and being out on the ocean, because there were no town lights to interfere with his vision, he could see so many of them that it often took his breath away. Most evenings he would stroll around or just sit and look up at the sky, a habit that earned him the nickname Nighthawk. Although there was no-one around because most of the crew were asleep in their bunks, Jim would talk; to himself, it seemed, but he was, in fact, talking to the stars above.

Jim eventually retired and never went to sea again; he did, however, stay in touch with things that were happening in the port and knew when ships were about to leave or return. One such time was coming. Apart from it being Christmas Eve which was pretty exciting anyway, the main fleet was returning home and was due in that very evening. Once close enough to land he would be able to see it approaching in the distance, and Jim had a particular spot for this. It was a high point, the headland overlooking the entrance to the harbour, and more importantly the open sea. Standing on top of the cliff with his telescope the retired Captain could watch the ships riding the waves, coming closer and closer; and it was sure to remind him of good times past.

With still two or more hours to spare, Jim had left home that night to head for his cliff-top viewpoint. It was a walk he took even when there were no ships coming home. He just went there to look up at the stars in the sky. It wasn't quite the same as being at sea, although there were fewer town lights out there to spoil it for him; but there was somewhere he always visited beforehand. Further back down the hill from the headland was a small wood and it was probably his second-most favourite place to be at night. The sky was clear and with no moon the only light was that from the stars, but it wasn't enough to ensure his safe passage through the darkness, so Jim took a torch with him. He much preferred the old-fashioned oil lanterns seeing as they had a glow that reminded him of shipboard life. They were, however, difficult to light, especially when the wind was blowing, and it was already freshening so the battery torch was more convenient.

It grew even darker as he entered the wood, to start with anyway; but as he went deeper into the undergrowth he could see a strange eerie glow ahead. A little closer to it he switched off the torch. It wasn't necessary anymore. There was no sky to see beyond the dark umbrella of the trees above, no stars sparkled in the Heavens; yet the air was ablaze with lights, tiny ones

that skipped and danced almost fairy-like – hundreds, maybe thousands of fireflies. It was like his own private Christmas grotto complete with flashing lights. Jim stood for a moment gazing up in wonder; then he padded over to his usual spot, the trunk of a fallen tree. Here was where he always sat and looked and talked quietly of times gone by. It might have seemed he was simply talking to the stars as he had on his ship, but the Nighthawk had a different audience here in the woods; at least he believed he did...

"We were on a long voyage," he began, "And we could see them coming – storm clouds so heavy that they blocked out the sky. Then it was on us, fierce and pounding, perhaps the worst I had ever known. The temperature had dropped suddenly and it was freezing. The ship pitched like a cork, waves crashed over the bow and the decks were awash. I don't mind telling you, we thought we were heading for Davy Jones' Locker – that's the bottom of the sea in case you don't know." The explanation was for his special friends the fireflies. As in the past, many of them had come down really close to dance around Jim while he was telling his yarn, but this time something peculiar was happening. Instead of flitting about happily they appeared quite agitated. Suddenly he realised why and said: "Sorry my tiny friends. I didn't mean to frighten you. But softly... As you can see I came through it safely. In a matter of days we were anchored off a beautiful coral island where the sea was like a millpond and the sun was warm. It was as if the storm was just a nightmare that had never happened." The frantic dance of the fireflies slowed to a steady rhythm again and Jim breathed a sigh of relief. "Now, let me see if I can remember a happier time..."

Jim told the fireflies another tale, a far more pleasant one, at the end of which he took a watch from his pocket to check the time. "The fleet will be here soon. I have to go, my friends; but I'll be back to tell you all about it." Jim stood up from his seat on the fallen tree, and as he did so the fireflies rose back to flit and hover under the tree canopy. Once through the far side of the wood and away from the dancing lights the torch flicked back on and Jim began his trudge up the hill.

Out in the open it was darker than expected. The sky had disappeared behind a mantle of black clouds stretching off into the distance. Apart from his torch, the only other light was the strong beam from the lighthouse on the headland. It pierced the blackness, sweeping slowly round in a complete circle, then continuing to go round again, and yet again. The strength of the beam was quite an achievement considering the light source was only small; but a mirror behind it increased the glow and sent it out through magnifying glass so that it could be seen from a long way off. This was an important warning to any approaching ships that there was a dangerous reef of jagged rocks, unseen from the surface and to be avoided at all costs.

Jim took his telescope from the leather tube hanging from his belt, pulled it out to its full length and brought it up to his eye. He scanned the horizon and at first saw only darkness until, after a minute or so he was sure he could spy some very small lights in the distance. The fleet was coming. The strong beam of light swept past, a safe beacon guiding the ships, but on its next sweep it went out. Jim gasped. With no warning light this spelled disaster for the fleet. Although only a short walk to the lighthouse from where he was standing, considering the urgency it seemed to be taking forever. Reaching the door, he flung it open and plunged in to climb the stairs to the top where the light was, or should have been. Jock McCandall the lighthouse keeper was there fiddling with something and the unexpected visitor startled him. "It's only me, Jock," said Jim, shining the torch-beam on his face so that the man could recognise him. "What's happened to the light?"

"No idea," replied Jock, breathless from his panic to find the problem. "I've tried all I can think of but it's no use, and the fleet will be here soon."

"I know," said Jim. "I spotted it a few minutes ago. How about we shine our torches on the mirror – would that be enough light?"

Jock doubted it but they tried anyway. "Didn't figure it would work," he said and sounded defeated. When Jim failed to respond and went very quiet it unnerved Jock even more. "What?" Jim had already turned and was hurrying out. "Where are you going?" asked Jock.

"Back soon," was all Jim said; then he had gone.

A hurried walk took him back down the hill to the wood. The fireflies were still there, skipping and cavorting as usual, and when they saw him many came down to hover around him. "My friends, I have a favour to ask," he said. "The fleet will be here soon, but the light in the lighthouse has gone out. Jock can't fix it before the fleet gets here, and without it they won't know where the reef is; and if they hit that they'll sink." The fireflies became jittery again. Jim tried to calm them. "I believe there's something that can be done, but I'll need your help. Here's what I think we can do to prevent a disaster..."

Back in the lighthouse, between fiddling with his equipment Jock was peering through his binoculars towards the distant horizon. All was black except for the small lights of the approaching ships. They were still a way off, but time was running out to get the light back on and working again. As he was turning away from the window he happened to notice something unusual moving up the hill from the wood. It was like nothing he had ever seen before, a huge fireball of shimmering light, and it was coming closer. The peculiar sight disappeared from Jock's viewpoint high above as it reached the foot of the lighthouse. In moments the dark at the top of the tower grew lighter as the fireball came up the steps. Then it was in the doorway and so bright that Jock had to shield his eyes.

Jim's voice came from inside the fireball: "How's this for a good light, Jock?" Then he spoke to the fireflies: "Now, what I need is for you to group together really tightly and hover just in front of the mirror there." Jim pointed. Next, he addressed the lighthouse keeper: "What about the motor to turn it, does that still work?"

"It didn't before," replied Jock, "But I got it going a couple of minutes ago." He operated a switch and the mirror started to swing leaving the fireflies behind.

"My friends," said Jim, "Do you think you can stay in front of the mirror as it turns?"

There was no reply that Jock could hear and Jim didn't need one. Somehow he could feel what the fireflies were saying; and they had obviously understood his request because the tight group of blazing lights moved quickly to position itself in front of the mirror again and kept pace as it turned. The beam that shone out into the darkness from the lighthouse now might have been the strongest ever. It was certainly seen by the fleet as it approached and the renewed lighthouse beam guided it safely into port. Jim had a thought and said to the fireflies: "Would you mind staying here until Jock fixes the original light?" The tight ball of lights kind-of shimmered. Jim knew what that meant and nodded. "Thank you, my friends."

He stayed while Jock fiddled and adjusted, finally succeeding in getting the light back on. As soon as it was, Jim said: "Move away, my friends. Your job is done." Then to Jock: "You mustn't tell anyone about this, otherwise there'll be a flood of inquisitive people coming to see the fireflies and I doubt they'd be happy with that. Now I have to get them back to their wood."

Down the steps he trudged with the fireflies dancing around him. Once out through the door at the bottom, Jim was continuing his walk down the hill; or at least he started until he realised he was on his own. Turning back to see why, he was totally surprised. The fireflies had risen in the air and spread themselves around the outside of the lighthouse right to the top where they shimmered and sparkled for a full minute. It was an amazing sight – Nighthawk's very own giant Christmas tree. It was truly beautiful. Jim stood gazing, a tear in his eye as he whispered a heartfelt: "Thank you so much, my friends. I can honestly say you have given me a Christmas I will never ever forget."