Not To Scale

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(1703 words)

Albert’s parents ran the only Bed and Breakfast in the village. The old coaching inn was always bustling with guests and housekeeping, so, after tea, Albert went to the museum to do his homework.

The village stood on the rise above the harbour, the houses and shops huddled round the church. The old manse had once housed the county offices: the museum still occupied the stables. From the oriole windows, Albert could see the lighthouse at the end of the mole. And across the hall, he could see the lighthouse in miniature, inside the large glass case that housed the diorama of the village.

Albert was very fond of the diorama, which was extraordinarily detailed. He fancied that if he could peek in through the tiny windows of the tiny museum building, he would see himself peering back out.

As in most rural museums, the collection was as variegated as its donors’ enthusiasms. Dusty chests of seashells and butterflies and birds’ eggs ran round the hall. Dark oil portraits of long forgotten dignitaries contended with fading water colours of the fishing fleet by a once celebrated local artist. A player piano stood under the mounted head of the last stag to be caught on the Ness.

The diorama itself had been constructed by Albert’s grandfather to commemorate the 1953 Coronation. He had based the model village on photographs of the village and harbour, all taken in a single day. The photographs now lived in a drawer at the front of the diorama, under the push button panel that illuminated selected buildings.

The diorama was unpopulated but had minute mementos of its inhabitants: the postman’s bicycle outside the inn; the window cleaner’s ladder against the side wall of the county offices; the half painted door of the village school; rows of washing in the back yards of the fisher folk’s cottages; the fish truck on the quay, its back flap lowered for the wooden boxes of herring on the decks of the fishing boats. One Sunday afternoon, Albert systematically compared the photos with the diorama, delighting in these precise matches between simulacrum and reality.

Neglected for many years, the museum finally faced closure when the local authority voted to withdraw its funding. Albert’s mother goaded the community council into action, promoting the diorama as the centrepiece of a revived museum. After a fractious campaign in the district press, the museum finally gained Heritage Lottery support to celebrate the 2012 Diamond Jubilee. This greatly amused Albert’s aunt, a pronounced Republican. “Needs must,” said Albert’s mother. “The tourists have got to go somewhere when it rains.”

Albert’s father steadily cleaned and repaired the diorama. He augmented the push buttons with a touch screen, to play explanatory video sequences on a large overhead display. The system also controlled the tiny street lamps. Albert’s father’s current project was to light up the model lighthouse with the original characteristic: one long and two short flashes every ten seconds.

The lighthouse on the mole, long abandoned, was used by the village teenagers for a smoke and a snog. Albert knew them all from school but he rarely joined them. They weren’t interested in how things were and how things might be. Soon enough they’d be working in their families’ shops and crofts and fishing boats, just like their parents before them. Albert’s father had never really left the village. Nor had his grandfather. But Albert wanted to see the world, like his aunt.

Albert’s aunt had been the clever one, said Albert’s father. She had won a bursary to the High School and was the first in the family to go to College. Starting as a book keeper in the steel fabrication yard, the North Sea oil boom took her to Aberdeen and thence to Norway, the Emirates, Texas, Azerbaijan, Alaska. Albert collected the stamps from her postcards. Albert’s father made bedside lamps from the duty free bottles.

Albert’s aunt was a raconteur; at least she thought she was. She brought back tales from the places she visited. All of them featured herself as the heroine: most were as fabricated as the steel she sold. Albert’s brothers and sisters feigned polite interest but Albert was entranced. “And I was just a wee girl from the village,” she finished each story. “Just a wee girl.”

Albert’s aunt brought Albert presents from the places she visited: seal skin slippers from Stavanger; a corral of leather camels from Qatar; a Stetson hat from San Antonio; an Astrakhan waistcoat from Baku; snow shoes from Anchorage. “You spoil that boy,” said Albert’s mother. “Someone needs to,” said Albert’s aunt.

Albert’s aunt knew all the local legends. Tales of ship wrecks and wreckers. Tales of lords and serving maids. Tales of sailors and silkies. Sometimes lights danced from the top of the lighthouse. Albert’s aunt said it was haunted: on stormy nights, the ghost of the first lighthouse keeper still lit the lamp to warn ships away from the rocky shoals of the Ness. “Not for much longer I trust,” said Albert’s mother, who was trying to raise funds to move the massive Fresnel lens and Argand burner into the museum.

Everybody in the family knew Albert’s aunt was an alcoholic; everybody pretended they didn’t. On her final trip, to Riyadh, she drank far too much arak, knocked over a hubble-bubble pipe and set fire to her hotel room.

When Albert’s aunt came back from the clinic, Albert’s parents declared the house dry. Barely managing the first of the ten point plan, she took to drinking in the lighthouse, oblivious to the taunts of the smokers and snoggers. One summer’s evening, she fell down the spiral staircase and drowned in her own vomit.

The Harbour Board installed a padlock on the lighthouse door, so the village teenagers took to climbing the rungs running up the tower wall to the wrought iron landing that surrounded the lantern room. One wet night, they smashed the window panes so they could shelter beneath the lamp.

The next day, Albert was puzzled by the broken windows in the model lighthouse. “Mice,” said Albert’s father, and set traps under the diorama. Albert carefully monitored the traps but they never caught anything.

Albert’s father replaced the model windows with scraps of plastic and finished rewiring the model lamp. Now, at dusk, when the diorama street lights lit up, the tiny lighthouse began to flash: one long and two short, every ten seconds.

Determined to escape from the village, Albert spent more and more time studying in the museum. But, as his exams approached, he found himself increasingly distracted: by faint scrabbling noises from the model village; by darting shadows across the far side of the diorama case; by broken snatches of speech from the display speakers, as if from an imperfectly tuned radio.

Albert asked his father if he could study in the museum office. “What’s wrong with the museum hall?” said Albert’s father. Albert told his father that he feared the diorama was haunted. “Did your aunt tell you that?” said Albert’s father.

Albert’s father ran tests on the diorama. After a week, he still couldn’t find anything untoward.

“You must be imagining things,” said Albert’s father. “Maybe you’re spending too much time on your own. Why don’t you hang out with the other kids?”

Deep in revision on the night before his first exam, Albert suddenly realised that the model lighthouse characteristic had changed: three short, three long, three short, every five seconds. Utterly disconcerted, like a cat disturbed mid-wash, he went over to the diorama and lowered the side of the case nearest to the lighthouse. Then he squatted down and peered directly into the lantern room. Behind the window panes, he could make out a tiny figure waving its arms over its head, gesturing towards the display.

Albert went round to the touch screen and turned up the volume: “There’s a big wave coming, Albert!” cried his aunt. “Run to the lighthouse! Run!”

Albert fled from the museum and hurried home. Albert’s father listened patiently to his son’s agitated account. Then he moused up the Meteorological Office web site on the lobby computer. The forecast for the Ness was dead calm for the next forty eight hours.

“We all miss my sister,” said Albert’s father, sadly. “But she’s dead. You know that. You really are imagining things. Maybe it’s the strain of the exams. Anyway, more studying can’t help you now. Go out and get some exercise. Go on!”

Reluctantly, Albert trailed down the boat ramp to the harbour. On the horizon, black clouds obscured the sun.

The quay side was deserted. Seagulls huddled on the harbour wall. Albert wandered out along the mole, past empty stacks of plastic fish boxes. The wind gathered fresh as he approached the lighthouse.

Albert tried the lighthouse door but it was firmly padlocked. As he climbed the rungs up the side of the lighthouse, the wind picked up and the sky darkened, As he hauled himself onto the landing, the rising sea broke over the mole, scattering the sea gulls and washing fish boxes into the harbour.

Looking into the lantern room, Albert caught a vague shape edging round the far side of the lamp. He stepped through the broken window: the shape disappeared down the spiral staircase. Albert followed round one turn but the shape was swallowed by the gathering gloom.

Albert returned upstairs and gazed out across the Ness. A bank of cloud was fast approaching, its top flecked white in the setting sun. Wrapt by the cloud, almost too late, he realised it was a vast wall of water, heading towards him: straight for the village.

On the ledge by the windows, on top of a pile of tattered pornographic magazines, sat a tobacco tin and a book of matches. Below the ledge hung a red fire bucket full of sand. Albert upended and righted the bucket. Then he furiously filled it with crumpled pages which he lit with a match. Back out on the landing, Albert placed the flaming bucket towards the village and wafted the remaining magazine up and down in front of it: three short, three long, three short.