

The Last Lamp

By Jacob A. SanSoucie

The fog tastes like coal smoke and the Thames at low tide—which is to say, it tastes like London in November, thick enough to chew and twice as uninviting.

I hoist my ladder over my shoulder and start my route. Forty-seven lamps from the embankment to Clerkenwell, two hours at dusk to light them, two hours at dawn to snuff them out. Been doing this for three years now. Good work. Steady work. The kind that keeps your hands busy and your mind blessedly empty.

First lamp: corner of Drury Lane. I prop the ladder, climb, twist the key to open the gas line. The hiss is familiar as breathing. Strike a match, touch it to the mantle, and—*whoosh*—light blooms like a small sun pushing back the grey.

One down. Forty-six to go.

I used to love this moment. The way the lamp catches, the circle of gold spreading on wet cobblestones, the sense that I was doing something that *mattered*. Bringing light to dark streets. Keeping people safe.

But that was before.

Before my mother died with a prayer on her lips and peace in her eyes, believing things I'm not sure I believe anymore.

Now it's just routine. Light the lamp. Move to the next. Keep your head down and your thoughts quieter still.

I'm on my eighth lamp—narrow alley off Cheapside, always smells like cabbage and regret—when I first see it.

Just for a second. A flicker at the edge of my vision, in the space between this lamp and the last.

I turn my head. Nothing there.

Just fog and shadow and the distant clatter of a hansom cab on the next street over.

I blink, rub my eyes. Long day. Tired.

I light the lamp and move on.

But it happens again.

Twelfth lamp. Fifteenth. Nineteenth. Thirty-second.

Always the same: a *something* in the gaps between lights. A shape that doesn't quite fit. A shadow that feels too solid, too deliberate.

And each time, a whisper of cold that shouldn't be there.

"You're losing it, Thomas," I mutter, shouldering my ladder. "Seeing ghosts in the fog."

But my hands aren't quite steady as I move to the next lamp.

By the time I reach the forty-sixth lamp, I've almost convinced myself it's nothing. Just tired eyes and fog playing tricks.

One more lamp. The last one.

The forty-seventh lamp sits directly outside Old Calvary Church.

It's an old building, stone and stained glass, squatting at the junction where three streets meet. My route always ends here. I've passed it a thousand times, lit this final lamp without much thought.

Tonight, as I'm finishing, the church door opens.

The vicar steps out, locking up for the evening. Older man, kind face, white collar stark against his black coat.

"Evening, Reverend," I say, tipping my cap.

He pauses, looks at me. Really looks, like he's seeing past my face into somewhere deeper.

Then he speaks, quiet and clear as a bell:

"A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."

I blink. "Sir?"

He smiles, but it's distant, like he's listening to something I can't hear. "Isaiah. Just came to mind, seeing you with your lamp there. Funny how the Scriptures work, isn't it?" He steps closer, pats my shoulder—his hand is warm, solid, real. "Keep the lights burning, son."

And he walks off into the fog, humming a hymn I half-remember from childhood.

I stand there, ladder over my shoulder, staring after him.

Vicars and their Bible verses. My mother used to quote Isaiah at me too, back when I still listened. Back when I thought the words meant something.

I shake my head and finish lighting the lamp.

Forty-seven. Done for the night.

The *something* I thought I saw doesn't reappear. Or if it does, I'm too focused on finishing to notice.

I return to the yard, report to Old Samuel that all forty-seven are lit, and head home through streets golden with gaslight.

But that night, in my narrow bed in the tenement, I dream of shadows that don't move right.

And I wake with the taste of cold in my mouth.

The Second Night

The next evening starts the same.

Fog rolling in off the Thames, thick and yellow. Ladder over my shoulder. First lamp at Drury Lane.

Strike, light, move.

Everything normal. Everything fine.

I tell myself last night was nothing. Imagination. A trick of the fog and a long day and a vicar's odd words rattling around in my head.

I'm fine.

The lamps need lighting. That's all that matters.

But by the tenth lamp, I know I'm lying to myself.

It's back.

Not subtle this time. Not a flicker at the edge of vision.

It's *there*, in the space between the ninth and tenth lamps, and it's *watching*.

I can feel it. Cold radiating off it like winter off a frozen lake. A wrongness that makes my skin crawl and my gut clench.

I don't look directly. Some animal instinct screams at me not to.

I light the tenth lamp with shaking hands and move on.

It follows.

Lamp after lamp, it's there. Staying in the gaps, the shadows my lights can't reach. And it's getting *closer*.

By the twentieth lamp, I can hear it. Not footsteps—something else. A rustling, a breath, a presence that presses against the edges of the light like a hand testing a locked door.

My heart hammers. My mouth is dry.

"Just finish," I whisper to myself. "Light the lamps. Get home. Don't think about it."

But I can't stop thinking about it.

If the darkness is *real*—if there are things in it that watch and wait and hunger—then what does that mean about everything else?

What does it mean about the Light?

Twenty-third lamp. Thirtieth.

The thing never stops following. Never gives up.

I can do this. Just keep moving. Keep lighting.

Thirty-first lamp. Thirty-fifth. Fortieth.

I'm sweating despite the cold. My breath comes in ragged gasps. The thing is so close now I can feel it at my back, a presence that makes the air thick and hard to breathe.

"Not real," I whisper, climbing the ladder to the forty-third lamp. "Not real. Just fog. Just—"

But I don't believe it.

It's real. I know it's real.

And it's hungry.

Forty-fourth lamp. Forty-fifth. Forty-sixth.

One more.

Just one more, and I'm done.

The last lamp—forty-seven—sits directly outside Old Calvary Church, where my route always ends.

The church is lit from within now—evensong still going, voices raised in hymn. But the street is dark, the fog pressing close, swallowing sound.

I prop my ladder against the lamppost.

My hands shake so badly I nearly drop it.

The thing is *right there*. I can't see it—my eyes won't let me—but I can feel it, massive and cold and patient, filling the space between the forty-sixth lamp and this one.

Waiting.

I climb the ladder. One rung. Two. Three.

The cold is unbearable. My teeth chatter. My vision swims.

I reach the lamp. Twist the key. Gas hisses out, sharp and bitter.

I strike a match.

It flares—then dies, snuffed by a wind that isn't there.

I strike another.

Same.

Again.

Again.

The matches won't stay lit. Something is *killing* them, blowing them out, refusing to let the light catch.

And the thing—

I can feel it moving closer. Inching forward. Testing.

Panic claws up my throat. I'm trapped. Ten feet up, no light, the thing *right there*, and I can't—

I can't—

"I don't know if You're there."

The words rip out of me, raw and desperate.

I didn't mean to say them. Didn't mean to pray. Haven't prayed in two years, not since my mother died whispering psalms, still believing.

But they come anyway.

"I don't know if I believe anymore," I whisper into the cold. "I don't know if any of it's real. The prayers, the verses, the *promises*—"

My voice cracks.

"But she did. My mother—she believed. Even dying, even afraid, she wasn't—she had something I don't have. Something I *lost*."

The cold presses closer. I can barely breathe.

"And if You're real—if You keep even *one* of Your promises—"

I'm shaking so hard I nearly fall.

"—then don't let me go out. Not here. Not like this."

Silence.

Just me and the fog and the cold and the thing, so close I can feel its breath on the back of my neck.

"I'm barely holding on," I whisper.

And then—

The church bells ring.

The doors of Old Calvary burst open, spilling light across the street—warm, golden, *real*.

The congregation files out, voices lifting in song:

*"The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?"*

The light reaches me. Touches the ladder, the lamppost, the space where the thing stands.

And the thing—

—recoils.

Just slightly. Just enough.

I remember.

Not my own faith. I don't have that.

But my mother's voice, years ago, when I was small and afraid of the dark pressing against our window:

"You're a little candle, Thomas. And the Maker doesn't waste candles. Even when they flicker. Even when they're small. He keeps them burning."

And the vicar's words, from last night:

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.

I look down at my trembling hands. At the bent, half-broken match I'm clutching.

I'm the wick.

Bruised. Barely there. One breath from going out entirely.

But not yet.

Not tonight.

I strike the match.

It catches.

I hold it to the lamp—steady now, somehow—and whisper:

"The light shines in the darkness. And the darkness has not overcome it."

The lamp ignites.

Not just lights—*roars* to life, fierce and bright, joining with the light from the church, pushing back the fog, the cold, the *wrong*.

And inside me—

Inside me, something catches too.

Not faith. Not yet. Not the certainty my mother had.

But a spark. A flicker. The smallest warmth, like a coal banked all winter suddenly given air.

I'm still burning.

The thing retreats. Not gone—I can still feel it out there, in the alleys where light doesn't reach—but *back*. Held.

I climb down the ladder, legs shaking, and lean against the lamppost.

The hymn fades. The congregation disperses into the fog.

But the vicar remains, standing in the church doorway, watching me.

I meet his eyes across the street.

He nods. Once. Slow. Knowing.

"The wick held," he calls softly.

I swallow hard. "Barely."

"But it held." He smiles, and it's sad and kind and sure all at once. "And tomorrow night, it'll hold again. Faith doesn't have to be a bonfire, son. Sometimes it's just... not going out. The Maker knows how to tend a flame."

I don't have words.

So I just nod.

The vicar lifts a hand in blessing, then closes the door. The candlelight inside dims but doesn't vanish. Someone's still praying.

I'm not alone.

I shoulder my ladder and walk back through the fog.

Behind me, forty-seven lamps burn steady—islands of gold in the grey.

And inside me, smaller than a candle but just as real, something burns too.

I don't know if it's faith yet. Don't know if I believe all the things my mother believed.

But I whisper it anyway, to whoever might be listening:

"Help me. Keep me burning."

The cold doesn't answer.

But the warmth stays.

And tomorrow night, I'll light the lamps again.