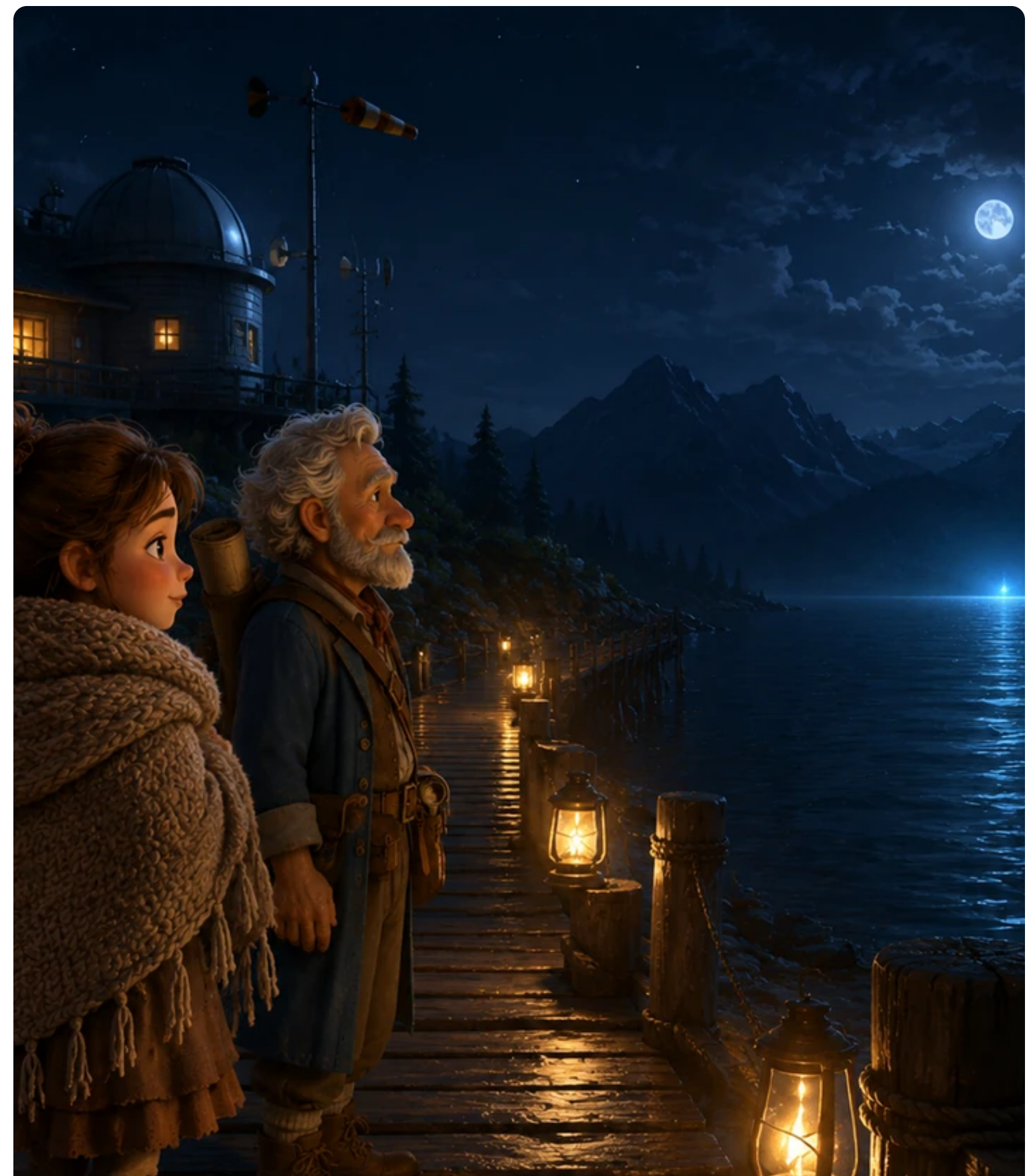




The Lake That Listened

Grace White



One by one, tiny amber lights flickered awake along the edge of the old weathered boardwalk beside the quiet water. The dark glass around each lantern had softened from years of salt air and rain. Below them, the mirror-like lake reflected every glowing light twice as the sleeping town grew silent.



At the very end of the boardwalk stood a cozy little weather station that once belonged to a storm-loving mapmaker. Clara, a tired traveler wrapped in a thick knitted blanket, sat on the porch holding a warm cup between her hands. She had intended to rest for only an hour, but the peaceful place invited her to stay longer.



Clara leaned back into the wooden chair and listened to the floorboard creak gently beneath her weight. The old weather station asked nothing of her, offering a rare sanctuary free from decisions, worries, or expectations. An old clock inside ticked with a soft, steady rhythm, reminding her that time moved gently here.



Far out across the lake, a small boat appeared through the swirling mist near the tall reeds. A single pale lantern hung from its bow, casting a soft glow across the water as it drifted without the sound of oars. Clara watched the light move as if carried entirely by the lake itself.



As Clara observed the distant light, she noticed something extraordinary happening on the water. Whenever her breathing slowed and her mind settled, the lantern's reflection became completely still on the surface. When her thoughts raced, tiny ripples trembled across the lake, revealing how the water listened to her calm.



Above the station doorway, Clara noticed a line written in faded chalk by the old mapmaker: 'The water listens to what the body forgets to say.' She smiled gently into the rim of her warm cup, letting the peaceful words linger before drifting away into the night.



Clouds drifted slowly across the moon, turning the surface of the lake into a sheet of silver-black velvet. In the nearby reeds, frogs hummed soft, uneven melodies like sleepy musicians forgetting the end of a song. The heavy blanket around Clara's shoulders grew warmer, signaling that it was finally safe to rest.



Looking through the open doorway, Clara saw a simple, inviting bed nestled beneath a round window. Generous folded quilts and a tiny golden lantern burned softly beside the bed, prepared by thoughtful hands for a weary traveler arriving in the dark.



Clara stood up slowly, her cool feet treading softly on the smooth wooden floorboards as she carried her cup inside. She paused at the round window for one last look across the water. The tiny boat had drifted further into the mist, remaining a steady, gentle beacon floating safely in the quiet night.



Slipping beneath the warm quilt, Clara listened to the soft symphony of the night settling around the weather station. The rustle of reeds, the humming frogs, and the gentle lapping of water lulled her into deep rest. Outside, the amber lanterns continued to float across the dark lake like threads of gold stitched into the night.