Name: _____ Date: _____

Alone on Harrow Rock

Reading level 12 (8th grade) · 1723 words

Her father went down the boat steps on a stretcher made from the door of the oil room, cursing in a low and steady murmur that Tamsin Hale had never heard him use. It was the fourteenth of October, 1893, and the Hales had kept the light on Harrow Rock for six years, nine miles out from the coast of Maine. Captain Josiah Hale had never missed a single night until a wet stair on the gallery rail laid him on his back with the bone of his left leg broken below the knee. Mr. Dyer, who delivered the mail and the flour, steered his dory in and gave Tamsin a look that was meant to be encouraging. "Three days," he said. "The doctor sets the bone, and I row back."

Her father caught her wrist from the stretcher, and although his face was the color of putty, his voice was perfectly level. "Three things," he said. "Keep the light. Keep the log. Keep yourself, in that order, and do not argue." She was thirteen, and she had trimmed the wick a hundred times with him standing behind her, and she knew how to wind the bell and polish the lens and read the barometer, but none of it had ever been done while he was out of the house. She nodded and watched the dory shrink, and then she turned around to face the rock.

Harrow Rock was one acre of gray granite with a tower on its back like a candle on a cake. It held the keeper's house, low and square, with walls two feet thick, and a boathouse, a hen yard, and a garden in crates of carried soil. Sixty steps led up inside the tower to the lantern room, where the lens stood like an enormous glass beehive taller than a man. At sunset she drew back the curtains that kept the sun from burning through the glass. She trimmed the wick square, wiped the chimney, and lit the flame, and watched it swell until the whole dark sea was striped with white. Somewhere out there, nine miles off, a sailor was searching for exactly that.

On the third day the wind went northeast and stayed there, and the sea turned the color of slate while the waves came heavy and long across the channel. When Mr. Dyer's dory appeared at noon on the sixth day, it could come no nearer than hailing distance. He could not land, so he stood in the boat and shouted, and the wind tore each word to pieces before it reached her, but she caught enough. The bone was set, her father was in bed swearing, and the Inspector had been told, but the tender was not due until late November. Tamsin held up the slate on which she had chalked ALL WELL, and the dory turned back, and she understood that she would be alone for a long time.

On the seventh morning she counted the oil. Nine cans stood in the oil room, and by her father's reckoning each can fed the lamp for four nights, which made thirty-six nights, which would have been plenty if the tender were not likely to take forty. She did the sum three times,

and the answer did not improve. The lamp would burn at full strength from sunset to sunrise whatever the weather, for that was the rule, and it was the only rule that Tamsin had no intention of bending. So she bent every other one. The kitchen lamps went dark that night. She cooked by the red glow of the stove, read by the fire, and went to bed at seven like a child half her age.

The water was the next worry. Her father had always covered the rain barrels before a storm with boards and tarred canvas, because salt spray from a gale could spoil a month's supply in an hour, and she remembered the boards only after the first wave had thrown itself over the landing. She raced out into the wind and dragged the lids across the barrels one by one, soaked to the skin, and she lay awake and tasted her sleeve and could not tell whether the salt was the sea or her own fright. In the morning she dipped a cup into each barrel, and two were sweet, but one was brackish, and she emptied it onto the garden and said a word that her father would not have approved.

The seal arrived on a Tuesday, hauling itself onto the ledge below the boat landing in the gray hour before dawn. It was a grizzled animal as long as her bed, and it lay with its head up and watched her with eyes like wet black stones. One front flipper was torn, the edge ragged and half healed, as though a net or a propeller had caught it. Tamsin did not go near, but she was fishing for cunners off the rocks that week, and she tossed the smallest one down to the ledge, and the seal swallowed it in a single gulp and did not look away. She called it Tuesday, since it had not volunteered another name.

By the second week the fog had come, thick and white and cold, and with it the bell. The bell was driven by a clockwork weight in the tower that had to be wound every three hours, day and night, for as long as the fog lasted, or the ships offshore would hear nothing at all. Tamsin set the alarm clock beside her pillow, wound the weight in the dark with burning arms, and slept in fragments no longer than a cat's naps. The log from those days says it best: "Oct. 21. Wind southeast, thick fog. Bell struck thirty-one hours. Light burned. Oil, seven cans. Tuesday on the ledge." It was identical every day, so that she began to find a strange comfort in the repetition.

On the night of the twenty-fifth the glass fell. Tamsin noticed it at noon, a slow drop on the barometer like a stone sinking in a pond, and she spent the afternoon doing every sensible thing her father would have done. She carried the hens into the cellar, doubled the lines on the boats, and filled the lamp to the brim. By sunset the sea was lifting itself into black hills and the wind was coming at the tower in great shoves, so that the whole rock hummed like a struck bell. She lit the lamp a little after five, with hands that were perfectly steady. It was only when she stood back to look at the flame that she realized she was holding her breath.

At twenty minutes to midnight a gust hit the lantern room so hard that she felt the floor tremble through her boots. There was a small, bright sound like a plate breaking, and the chimney of

the lamp split from top to bottom in one clean line, and the flame guttered and ran sideways. A spare chimney lay in the cupboard wrapped in flannel, and she knew exactly how to change it: turn the wick down until the light goes out, lift the broken glass away, set the new glass on, and light it again. It took two minutes, and she had never been so terrified as she was during that time, standing in the dark in a tower in a gale, with the whole sea waiting.

The lamp flared up, and the beam leaped out across the water, and she leaned against the cold glass, trembling, until her knees stopped. Then she went down the sixty steps and wrote the entry in the log. "Oct. 25. Wind northeast, gale. Lamp chimney broke 11.40 p.m. Light out two minutes. Spare chimney fitted. Light burned until sunrise." She considered the words *two minutes* for a long time. She could have left them out, since nobody on the sea had been looking at that exact moment, and nobody on the land would ever know. She left them in.

The wind dropped on the thirtieth, and Tamsin woke to a silence so complete that she thought she had gone deaf, and went to the window and saw a pale, scrubbed sea as flat as a plate, with the sun lying on it in long gold bars. She harvested the last potatoes before the frost and mended the hen yard fence, and then she walked down to the landing and found the ledge empty, with a dark wet patch where Tuesday had lain, and a lump rose in her throat that astonished her. She told herself that a seal was not a pet and had never been hers to lose, and she stood there for a long time anyway, looking at the water.

On the first of November a boat came out from the mainland under a clear sky, with Mr. Dyer at the oars and her father in the stern, his leg in splints and his face full of questions. Tamsin met them at the landing, but she had not realized how many words she had been saving until she saw him, and then she could not say any of them. "A Gloucester skipper came into harbor on the twenty-sixth," said Mr. Dyer, hauling the dory up the slip, "with his rigging torn half off and his crew green as grass. He said that he had steered by Harrow Light the whole night through the gale, and that he had not seen a steadier one in thirty years."

Her father said nothing at all, but climbed the steps on his crutches, one stair at a time, and went to the kitchen table where the log lay open, and he read it from the beginning, all nineteen days, with one finger moving down the margin. At the entry for the twenty-fifth the finger stopped. He looked at the words *Light out two minutes* for what felt like an hour, and then he took the pen and wrote beneath them, "Examined. Entirely correct. J. Hale, Keeper," and held the pen out to her handle first. "Fill in the date," he said. She wrote the second of November and, underneath it, because the log was a true thing, "Wind northwest, light. Father home. Tuesday on the north ledge."

Questions

1. What were Tamsin's father's three instructions, in order?

A. Keep the light, keep the log, keep yourself
B. Keep the hens, keep the garden, keep the boat
C. Keep the log, keep the bell, keep the stove

2. Why did Tamsin keep the house lamps dark?

A. She was afraid of fire
B. She liked the dark
C. To save oil for the lighthouse lamp

3. What does "gale" mean in this story?

A. A kind of bird
B. A very strong wind
C. A boat landing

4. Why did Tamsin write in the log that the light had been out for two minutes?

A. She wanted to blame her father
B. She thought nobody would read it
C. The log was meant to be true

5. What did the Gloucester captain tell Mr. Dyer?

A. He had steered by Harrow Light through the gale
B. He had been lost for three days
C. He wanted to buy the lighthouse

Words to know

keeper: lighthouse watcher
lens: light-bending glass
gale: strong wind
wick: lamp string
brackish: slightly salty
tender: supply ship

Answer key: Alone on Harrow Rock

1. A. Keep the light, keep the log, keep yourself
2. C. To save oil for the lighthouse lamp
3. B. A very strong wind
4. C. The log was meant to be true
5. A. He had steered by Harrow Light through the gale