Name: _____ Date: _____

Nobody Calls It Luck

Reading level 12 (8th grade) · 2426 words

I keep a list of everything that goes wrong near me, and by the summer I turned twelve it had four hundred and eleven entries. Number nine is the school trombone, which was not my fault, although I was holding it. Number ninety-two is a wedding cake, and number three hundred and six is a lifeguard's chair, which I would prefer not to discuss. People say that I have bad luck, but I say that I have a notebook, because luck cannot be counted and my notebook can, and it has never been wrong. That June, my parents sent me to my great-aunt's lake inn for the summer, which they described as peaceful, and I wrote it down as number four hundred and twelve, in advance.

The inn was called the Wren Lake Inn, and it stood at the end of a gravel lane, behind a hedge of blackberries so thick that it had swallowed half of a wooden sign beside the road. I managed to read the words NOTICE and WATER before a thorn took my sleeve. My great-aunt, Bridie Pike, met me at the door, a tall, slow woman in a cardigan the color of oatmeal, and she looked at my suitcase and my torn sleeve and the whole of me without appearing to hurry at any of it. "Breakfast is whenever," she said. "Tuesdays and Fridays, the lake is sulky, so we keep quiet in the mornings. Come in, because you look like a boy with a list."

I should explain the lake, for the benefit of anyone who has not been unlucky enough to arrive at it. Wren Lake is long and narrow, with the inn at the northern end and the village of Tern Landing across the water, a ten-minute ferry ride away. The ferry belongs to Mr. Calloway Thorne, who also owns the largest boathouse on the shore, with a varnished mahogany motorboat inside it that he polishes every Sunday. On the inn's kitchen wall hung the ferry timetable. It said that the first boat left at 7:10, and beneath that, in smaller type: TUESDAY AND FRIDAY, LOW WATER, FIRST BOAT 7:50. I told my aunt that it was a misprint. She said, "Is it?" and went on slicing a pear.

On Tuesday morning, Aunt Bridie sent me across the lake to collect a parcel from the post office at Tern Landing, so I woke at six, dressed in the dark, and went down to the inn's dock to catch the first ferry. Somebody was already there, a girl about my age in rubber boots and a man's flannel shirt, kneeling at the very end of the dock and writing numbers in a damp notebook, with a narrow skiff rocking on its rope beside her. "Fenn Adeyemi," she said, without looking up. "I row at dawn. You're the nephew. Your aunt says you have bad luck." "I have a notebook," I said. She finally lifted her eyes to mine, and said, "Me too."

The ferry was due at ten past seven, so I waited, and at ten past seven the ferry did not come. I stood at the end of the dock, staring across the gray water at a boat that was not there, and

at a quarter past, the dock began to lean. The end plank, where I was standing, sank slowly beneath my sneakers, as though the whole structure were sighing, and a stream of silver bubbles rose out of the black barrel underneath me. Then the plank tipped, and I stepped sideways into the lake. It was only up to my knees. I am nevertheless obliged, as a matter of principle, to record it in the notebook, in capital letters, as number four hundred and thirteen: THE DOCK IS LEAKING.

I waded ashore with my shoes in my hand and went to rescue the inn's rowboat, which was lying on the mud nowhere near the water, fifteen feet from where I remembered leaving it. I tied a rope around its nose and pulled until the rope snapped, and sat down on the shore with the end of it in my lap, which is how Mr. Thorne found me at ten minutes to eight. He was tall and silver-haired, in a navy coat with brass buttons, and he surveyed my wet jeans, the broken rope and the boat as if he had expected all three. "You're early," he said. "You're late," I said. "I am exactly on time," said Mr. Thorne. "It's Tuesday."

Nothing went wrong on Wednesday, and I will say that again, because it troubled me more profoundly than anything that had gone wrong on Tuesday. I spent the whole day at the inn, weeding the herb bed and polishing spoons, and nothing fell, nothing broke and nobody screamed. I did not trip on anything, and the tea was hot, and at supper I wrote in my notebook: NOTHING HAPPENED. SUSPICIOUS. Aunt Bridie asked what I was writing, and I told her, and she said, "Hm," in the way of a woman who has just been handed the end of a very long string and means to leave it exactly where it is.

On Thursday, Aunt Bridie asked me to wash the oars. They were her best pair, long and pale and heavy, with a blue ring painted near each handle, and they had turned green with a month of damp. I scrubbed them on the dock in the afternoon sun, and when they were clean she said that they had better dry overnight where the air could get at them, so I laid them flat on the end of the dock, side by side. I would like it clearly understood that this was her idea, and that I am merely recording that I did what I was told, which is a rare event for me, and that it ended as such events usually do.

By ten to seven on Friday morning, the oars were gone. The dock was tilted, the lake had pulled back from the shore like a tablecloth, and the rowboat sat on the mud again, nowhere near the water. I stood at the end of the dock and shouted, in the sort of voice that makes herons reconsider the neighborhood. Fenn came out of the fog in her skiff, with her pencil behind her ear. I told her about the oars, and she took the notebook out of her mouth, where it had been held between her teeth, and said, "Where did you put them?" "Right there," I said, and we both looked at the gap between two planks, and then at the mud beneath them.

I decided that Mr. Thorne had taken them, which seemed obvious. He was rich, he was our nearest neighbor, he owned a larger boathouse than any one man requires, and he had never smiled at me once. At seven o'clock, I crossed the shingle to the Thorne boathouse, and

slipped inside to look for a pair of pale oars with blue rings. The mahogany boat lay in its slip, gleaming, with its nose in the air. I had just reached the stern when the slip began to drain. The water slid out from under the hull with a long, sad sucking sound, and the boat groaned and leaned and settled onto its wooden cradle, with me standing beside it. "Marlow Pike," said a voice from the doorway.

Mr. Thorne had the look of a man whose Friday has been spoiled by a very small child. "Where you stand," he said, "things go wrong. I have it from your aunt. A broken dock on Tuesday, a broken rope, and now my keel on the blocks." "It was already draining when I came in," I said. "It does that," said Mr. Thorne, and then he stopped, as though he had said too much, and walked out into the sun. I followed him as far as the door, and across the shingle I could see the ferry sitting motionless at the landing with its engine silent, with a long iron ramp hanging from its bow, half in and half out of the lake.

That night, I sat on my bed with the notebook on my knees, and I did something I had never done in four hundred and sixteen entries. I read the times. The dock, Tuesday at a quarter past seven; the boat in the mud, Tuesday at twenty to eight; the oars and the motorboat, Friday morning; the ferry that did not come on Tuesday and sat silent on Friday. All of it on two days, and every bit of it in the first hour or two after sunrise. I had never in my life drawn a straight line through anything of mine.

I put the notebook down and went to the kitchen, where Aunt Bridie was sitting in the dark with a cup of tea, and I did not ask her anything but only read her the times. She listened to the whole list without interrupting, and then she looked at the wall, where the ferry timetable hung, with its little line about low water, and she said, "What do the days tell you?" "Tuesday and Friday," I said. "Everything is on the days the lake is sulky." "And what is a sulky lake?" "A lake that is lower in the morning," I said, slowly, and I could feel the string in my hand, and she nodded and drank her tea and said that Fenn would be waiting.

Fenn was waiting at the dock at first light, with the skiff, her notebook, and a long wooden pole she called a sounding stick. We rowed to the Thorne boathouse together, and on one of its pilings, near the water, somebody had painted a ladder of black marks, rising like the lines on a ruler. "The gauge," said Fenn. "The red mark is the usual level, and the numbers count down from it." She opened her notebook and showed me a page of neat columns, written every dawn since the spring. On most mornings, the water had sat exactly on the red mark, but on Tuesdays and Fridays it was fourteen inches down, or thirteen. "It comes back up by evening," she said.

She told me that the pale oars were in the reeds on the south shore. When the lake rose again on Friday afternoon, it had lifted them off the mud beneath the dock, where they had slid between the planks, and carried them away. She had seen them from the skiff that evening, bobbing against the reeds like a pair of pale fish, and had meant to tell me and had

not. We found them where she said, with their blue rings gleaming, and I held them across my knees as we rowed home, and I said nothing, because the lake was plainly in the middle of making a point.

"Why does it go down?" I said. Fenn rowed for a while in silence and then pointed with her chin at the south end of the lake, where a long gray line of concrete stood against the sky. It was Hatch Dam, she said, and on Tuesday and Friday mornings the County Water Authority opened its gates for a few hours, to feed the mill stream and the fish run below. It had done so for thirty years, and nothing about it was a secret, since the Authority had put up a notice, in white paint, on a wooden board at the end of the lane. "That is behind the blackberries," I said. "It has always been behind the blackberries," said Fenn.

We went to the lane at nine and cut the brambles back with the sounding stick, and I read the notice. I will give it exactly. COUNTY WATER AUTHORITY. HATCH DAM. WATER IS RELEASED AT 5 A.M. EVERY TUESDAY AND FRIDAY. WREN LAKE MAY FALL BY UP TO FOURTEEN INCHES BY 8 A.M. DOCKS, BOATS AND FERRIES SHOULD BE SET ACCORDINGLY. I read it twice, and then I sat down on the gravel, because it was the plainest English I had ever encountered, and it explained every item on the list. The ferry waited because its ramp had to be lowered by hand, forty minutes' work, to meet the lowered water. The dock leaked because, at fourteen inches down, its barrel came to rest on a rock.

The dock had leaked, the oars had floated away, and Mr. Thorne's boat had drained in its slip on a Friday, with me standing next to it, which is the only thing I did. The rowboat had stayed exactly where I left it, and the water had simply departed from beneath it. "He didn't tell me," I said, "because he thought I knew." Fenn said that nobody on the lake had ever needed to be told. "You're the first person," she said, "to put it in a list." I thought of four hundred and sixteen entries in my notebook, and wondered how many more of them had a board behind a hedge.

When we got back, Aunt Bridie was waiting on the porch with two cups of tea and a plate of toast. She said that she had wondered how long it would take, and when I asked why she had not simply told me on Monday night, standing in the hall, she gave me a long, mild look. "You would have said it was luck," she said. "A person will believe a great deal about luck, before they will look at a board behind a hedge." Then she took the notebook out of my hands, turned to a fresh page, and wrote at the top, in her small oatmeal handwriting: TUESDAYS AND FRIDAYS. "Nobody calls it luck here, Marlow," she said. "We call it Tuesday."

On the following Tuesday, I was on the inn's dock at six in the morning, in my boots, with the oars in the boathouse and the rowboat pulled up where the water could not leave it. I had read the gauge, and the dock, and the sky. Fenn waved from her skiff. At ten past seven, I watched Mr. Thorne lowering his ramp by hand, one slow turn at a time, and I did not move, and nothing at all went wrong. Mr. Thorne, at the wheel, lifted two fingers from the brass, which is

the nearest he comes to a smile. At ten to eight, the ferry came in across the water, forty minutes late and exactly on time.

Questions

1. What does Marlow keep in his notebook?

A. A list of everything that goes wrong near him
B. The ferry timetable
C. A map of the lake

2. Why is the first ferry at 7:50 on Tuesdays and Fridays?

A. Mr. Thorne likes to sleep late
B. The ramp has to be lowered by hand to meet the lowered water
C. The village post office opens late

3. What did Marlow notice when he read the times in his list?

A. Everything happened at night
B. Everything happened on a Monday
C. Everything happened in the first hours of Tuesday and Friday mornings

4. In the story, a sulky lake is one that is

A. frozen over
B. lower and in a mood
C. full of fish

5. Why did Aunt Bridie not simply tell Marlow about the dam on his first night?

A. She forgot
B. She had never heard of it
C. She knew he would have called it luck until he saw it himself

6. Where did Marlow and Fenn find the missing oars?

A. In the reeds on the south shore
B. In Mr. Thorne's boathouse
C. Under the inn's porch

Words to know

sulky: in a mood
gauge: measuring marks
shingle: pebbly beach
mahogany: reddish-brown wood
obliged: had to

Answer key: Nobody Calls It Luck

1. A. A list of everything that goes wrong near him
2. B. The ramp has to be lowered by hand to meet the lowered water
3. C. Everything happened in the first hours of Tuesday and Friday mornings
4. B. lower and in a mood
5. C. She knew he would have called it luck until he saw it himself
6. A. In the reeds on the south shore