Name: _____ Date: _____

Salt and Syllables

Reading level 13 · 1893 words

Pop Alcide, my mother's father, taught me the weather before he taught me my letters. I think now that he considered the two the same sort of reading. We sat on the back step of the gray house, with the harbor spread out below us like a plate of beaten tin and the boats lying on it like small, patient, sleeping animals, and he held up one brown finger to the wind. "Mackerel sky," he would say, when the clouds lay in rows like the scales of a fish, and mares' tails, when they were drawn out high and thin as hair, and sundogs when the sun had two pale cousins, one on either side. Each was a word, and each word was a promise about tomorrow. I learned them the way I learned my own name.

My mother, Maman Colette, had no use for the weather, only for what it permitted. She stood in the kitchen with a stub of pencil behind her ear and a list pinned beside the stove, and every morning she wrote another, in her small, upright hand, bread, nets, stamps, Josse's boots, call Remi. A list, she told me, was a way of loving the day in advance. She wrote them for everything, for a funeral and for a picnic and for the order in which to put on our coats, and it seemed to me that she was holding the island steady with them, one line at a time, the way you hold down a tablecloth in the wind.

I was seven years old, and I was not sure which of them I was going to be. Pop played the fiddle in the evenings, tunes that had crossed the sea from France three hundred years ago and been worn smooth by generations of hands, and his bow wandered over the strings like a man walking home. Maman wrote lists. I could not tell if I was a fiddle or a pencil, if I was meant to pour out or to put in order. I only knew that I loved them both, and that when I was alone I made up small tunes of my own that were made entirely out of weather words, and nobody was told.

Miss Cardwell arrived at the island school in the autumn that I turned nine, in a long green coat that she did not take off for a week, and with a crate of notebooks that she carried in herself. She was young, and thin, and from Halifax, and everybody agreed that she would not survive the winter. On the first day she gave each of us a notebook, and mine was green, the color of the sea under the wharf, with a ribbon sewn into the spine. "Write what you saw," said Miss Cardwell. "Not what you think you ought to have seen. What was actually there." And she looked at me, for no reason I could tell, for slightly longer than at the others.

I wrote a great deal. I wrote that the harbor was gray and silver and pewter, luminous, that the boats were nodding like sleepy cows, that a gull stood on the wharf-post with an expression of deep disappointment, and that the wind smelled of tar and bread and the inside of a shell, until I had filled eleven pages. I handed them in with enormous pride, and Miss Cardwell read

the first, and then the second, and then the third, with her chin on her hand, and gave them back. "These are remarkably good," she said, "and now you must cross out half."

I did not speak to her for two days. Then, grudgingly, with a pencil held like a weapon, I began to cross out. Out went the pewter. Out went the cows. Out went, with some agony, a whole line about the smell of bread. And what remained after all that, in the middle of the page, was a small bare sentence that said, A gull stood on the wharf-post. It frightened me, how much it sounded like the gull, and I understood that something had happened which I could not yet have explained, though somewhere under my ribs, like a barnacle on a keel, I already knew it.

My cousin Josse was a year older than I was, and he talked the way that rivers run, without any reason to stop. His father, my uncle Remi, was Maman's brother, and the captain of the Marguerite, the biggest boat in the harbor, and Josse had inherited from him a voice that could carry across the water in a gale. He told me everything, what he had eaten, and what he had dreamed, and what the dog was thinking, and the names of the seven girls in his class that he intended to marry. I loved him so much that it was a physical ache, like a tooth, and I did not say a single word of it, because I did not know how.

"Tell me what you think," Josse would demand, hanging upside-down from the rail of the wharf. "Tell me anything, because you never say." I would say, "The tide is turning," and he would shout with laughter, "That is all you ever say, you and your weather!" But he came to find me, every time, and he sat on the wall next to me, quiet for four whole minutes at a time, which was a record, and I knew, because I had learned to see it, that those four minutes were the biggest thing he gave anyone. He swung his boots against the stone and looked at the water, and I looked at the water, and the harbor went on being exactly what it was.

Pop was teaching me the fiddle by then, one note at a time, on a half-size instrument that had been his sister's. He put my fingers where they belonged, and then, instead of the next note, he lifted the bow and held it in the air, and we both sat in the silence. "There," said Pop, "hear that? That is the music." "There is nothing there," I said, and "No," he said, "and that is what makes it so hard to play." He lowered the bow, and began again, and I listened for the space between the notes, and for the first time I heard it.

The winter the boats did not come home on time began on a Thursday with a mackerel sky. Pop looked at it for a long time from the back step, and said nothing, and went inside, and got out the glass, the old brass barometer on its hook by the door, and tapped it with one finger. It was falling steadily, and by noon the wind had gone round to the north-east, and the whole harbor was leaden, and by dark the first squall came down off the headland with a sound like somebody ripping a sail. The fleet had been out since four in the morning. Maman put on her coat and went down to the wharf, and I did not see her again until the early hours of the morning, when she came in with her hair full of salt.

It lasted three days. The boats were overdue, all eleven of them, and the whole island lived at

the window, and Maman made lists. She wrote them on the backs of envelopes and the margins of the newspaper and the flyleaf of the Bible, flares, blankets, soup, the names of every man aboard, the telephone numbers of every neighbor, and she wrote them without once raising her head, and I understood at last what they were for. They were not for the days. They were for her hands. Pop did not make lists, and he sat at the kitchen window with the fiddle on his knee, and he played, over and over, the same slow tune, with the rests left in.

I wrote too, with the green notebook open on my knee, and I wrote weather words, the way that other people say prayers, mackerel sky, mares' tails, the glass is falling, la brume, squall, nor'easter. I wrote them in rows, and I crossed out every other one. On the third night, a little after two in the morning, the wind dropped, quite suddenly, and a thin, citron light came up in the east. They came in one by one past the headland, with their lamps lit, small and slow and low in the water, and ten of the eleven boats came home. We counted them twice.

The Marguerite did not, and my uncle Remi had gone out in her with two other men, and the harbor was a very long time quiet, and nobody said a thing. Josse stood on the end of the wharf in his father's old sweater with his hands hanging at his sides, and for the first time in his life he did not say anything at all. I went and stood beside him. I did not say that I was sorry, because I did not have the words, and because the words were too small, and I put my hand in his, and we stood there until the light was fully up, two children, with nothing said.

Josse came to live with us at the close of that winter, and the whole house filled with his clamour, and for a while the noise had a hole in it. He slept in the room above mine and I heard him through the floor. Maman wrote lists for him too, Josse's boots, Josse's tea, Josse's birthday, and one day, quite unexpectedly, she wrote in the middle of the page, in her small neat hand, Remi, and nothing after, and left it pinned beside the stove all spring, where we could all observe it. Nobody mentioned it, and nobody took it down.

I wrote my first real poem in the first week of spring, at the kitchen table, in the green notebook, with Pop's fiddle going softly in the next room. It had seven lines, and I wrote about the harbor, and the gull on the wharf-post, and the glass, and the light coming up lemon over the headland, and the boats coming in, low in the water, one and two and three. I wrote about the end of the wharf, and I did not write about my uncle, and I did not write about Josse's hand, and I did not write the word sorry, and I crossed out everything else that was not true, and what was left, when I read it back, was as dense as a closed fist.

Miss Cardwell read it at her desk after the others had gone. She read it twice, and then she took off her glasses, and I saw that she was crying a little, which I had not expected, and she said, "Tamar, you cut out the thing itself, and you left the shape of it." She handed the notebook back with both hands, the way you carry a brimming bowl of chowder across a pitching deck, and her spectacles were still folded in her palm. Outside, the tide was turning. I walked home along the shore with the notebook under my arm, and in the kitchen Pop was

playing, with the rests left in.

Questions

1. What did Pop Alcide teach Tamar when she was seven?

A. How to build a boat
B. Words for the weather
C. How to read music

2. What did Miss Cardwell ask Tamar to do with her long pages?

A. Read them aloud
B. Cross out half
C. Throw them away

3. Why did Tamar's mother make lists in the winter of the storm?

A. She was bored
B. It was her way of staying steady while she waited
C. The teacher asked her to

4. What did Tamar learn from her grandfather's tune?

A. The silences between notes matter as much as the notes
B. Songs should be loud
C. You must never stop playing

5. In this story, a boat that is overdue is

A. very old
B. late coming home
C. painted red

6. Why does Tamar leave out the most important thing in her last poem?

A. She forgot it
B. The things left out carry the weight
C. It was too long

Words to know

sundogs: bright sky spots
barometer: pressure gauge
overdue: late
squall: sudden storm
notebook: writing book

Answer key: Salt and Syllables

1. B. Words for the weather
2. B. Cross out half
3. B. It was her way of staying steady while she waited
4. A. The silences between notes matter as much as the notes
5. B. late coming home
6. B. The things left out carry the weight