

The Dock

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Grade: 12

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I don't sleep well at night. I haven't for a very long time. Five years, one month, three weeks, two days – no, it's three o'clock, make that three days – three days and eight hours. That's how long it's been. That's how long it's been since – since – The sun should be rising in three hours and forty-five minutes. I'm lucky tonight. I'm tired enough to sleep till then.

It's six-thirty. I dozed off from about ten-thirty to midnight and three to now, collectively five hours – one of my better nights. I used to watch the sun when I was up this early, but now I don't. Too painful. Now I set Nettie's journal beside me and fill my own with my dreams. It's easier to focus on describing nightmares than trying not to think of them at all; I was never the kind of person who could just sit and stare at the sun.

"Jake? Jake? Jacob Renaldi! Are you even listening to me, or am I talking to an empty chair?" That's Mr. Phillips, my high school guidance counselor. I've been watching him pace for about ten minutes now while he goes on and on about my grades, stopping every once in a while to ask me what's wrong and do I need a study partner and is there something going on at home? But it looks like he's done pacing for now, which is too bad because, in profile, he looks just like a taco with a cheap, green bowtie.

I don't answer him, of course. He hasn't been talking to an empty chair, but he hasn't really said anything worth answering to, either. I look behind him at the clock. Two-thirty. I look at Mr. Taco Phillips, who's looking right back at him, hoping for some sign of...well, something anyway. I don't give it to him. "Can I go back to class now?" I ask. He slumps, defeated, and waves me out of his office without looking at me. It's been five years, one month, three weeks, twenty-one and a half hours. I leave.

It's amazing how a tiny dock on a little river in a nowhere town, the most peaceful scene almost anyone could ever think of, can hold such a terrible memory. I have to cross the bridge every day to go home, and the dock is just over there on my right, only a hundred yards or so away. I try not to look to the right.

I really can't help today, though. I don't just look – I go over and sit on the dock. I put Nettie's journal beside me and open mine on my lap, full of neat rows of perfect handwriting. I see I'm going to need a new journal soon, because mine has only two empty pages left.

I sit on the dock with my journal on my lap, open to the second to last page, and stare out at the water. I know that the water comes up to only two feet below my feet, and that it flows fast and strong and cold beneath the surface, but the surface looks so peaceful. It ripples gently, and the sunlight skips from path to empty mini-path. I can see ghostly boats and hear echo-y laughter and almost—almost—smell the pumpkins and apple cider we had that night, and, if I turn my head, I almost think that Nettie will be right here, standing right where I put her journal. I look. She isn't there. Five years, one month, three weeks, three days – my watch – four o'clock – three days and twenty-three hours.

"Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday to you! Happy Birthday, dear Jaaa-aaake! Haaapy Biiiirthdaaaay Tooo Yoooooou!" Thirteen at last – I'm finally a teenager! Mom made me this *huge* square cake with chocolate frosting and my name is big, loopy, white letters; it has thirteen candles, two in every color but yellow, and one in white. Absolutely perfect. I grin at my family across the table.

"Presents! Presents! Presents!" Nettie squeals. "Mine first!" She pushes a little box across the table at me, and I laugh, ripping it open. Inside is a green book wrapped in sparkly pink tissue paper – a journal. I open it up and have to smile; there's a dedication scrawled on the first page in true Nettie style:

This is a special book for a special bruther. You better rite special things in it for me!

--Nettie

"Wow, sis," I say. "This is perfect – just what I needed." Nettie beams. I open up Mom and Dad's presents next: a watch and a tackle box complete with jigs, pliers, weights, and fish string. I put those by my chair, but I keep my new green journal with me all night.

"Jake? Some Ryan kid's here! He says you're helping him study!" My mom's voice is tiny and distant through my door so that, at first, I can't understand her. I shut my journal – it was full anyway – and open the door.

"What? Oh." Mom has materialized at the end of the hallway with Ryan right behind her.

"Hey," he says, waving a little. Ryan's this scrawny kid in my grade who has glasses and spiky blond hair and has somehow roped me into helping him with his chemistry. This is the first time he's been to my house, and he kind of shifts from foot to foot when Mom leaves.

"Well," I say, opening my door a little wider, "you can come in, I guess." He starts to follow me into my room but stops in the doorway.

"Dude!" He says, "where'd you get so many green books?"

"They're my journals," I snap, and he leaves it alone. Well, he leaves it alone for an hour and a half while I help him study the one subject I'm not failing. Mom brings us two bowls of grapes after about an hour – she doesn't back cookies anymore – and then we're finally done. I walk Ryan to the front door, but he kind of lingers in the doorway, looking like he wants to ask me something but doesn't quite trust himself not to screw it up.

"Spit it out," say. He spits it out.

"Why do you have so many journals? And why are they all green?" I think of my room with all those green journals stacked up on my nightstand, but my nightstand, but my desk, on my desk, under my desk, on my shelves, in the corners, the journals full of dreams and nightmares, all in my carefully perfect handwriting.

"Green is the best color – and I go through them pretty fast."

"Is that why you always carry two with you?"

"Yeah," I say, startled. He noticed?

"Then how come you never write in one of them?" I frown at him – now he's noticed too much.

"I just haven't found anything worth writing in it yet. Don't you have other homework to do? Go home already!" He leaves. I stomp to my room, muttering. Stupid Ryan – mind your own business. I have a good reason for not writing in Nettie's journal, and I don't want to think about it. I slam my door.

It's three o'clock in the morning. I can't sleep. It's been five years, one month, three weeks, four days and eight hours, and I dreamed about it. I remember I dreamed about it every night for a month after it happened, and then I didn't dream about it anymore. I wouldn't. I refused.

It's three o'clock in the morning, still dark outside, and I know there's not a chance of me sleeping again tonight. I can't write either; the only empty journal I have left is Nettie's, and I never write in it, not after what I did to her. The only thing left to do is sit and remember.

I relive the night full of browns and reds and centennial dresses – the night that smelled of pumpkins and apple cider – the night that echoed with laughter and ended in rushing water. I remember the leaves crunching underfoot, the dock, the boat-race on the river with my new friends saying, "Come on, Jake! Come on!" Me, only thirteen and new and just glad to be included.

I remember the boat rocking and pulling away from the dock and hearing, "Wait! I wanna come too – Jake!" and looking over and seeing Nettie there on the dock, only eight years old, in her green homemade centennial dress that matched her eyes and the ribbon in her hair. I remember her waving desperately and bouncing up and down, on the very edge of the dock, and me yelling, "No, you can't come. No—Nettie—get off the dock. Get off the dock, Nettie. Nettie!" She bounced just a little too much, and the dock didn't catch her, just kind of spilled her into the river. She was gone.

I jumped in after her, swam with the river as fast as I could, and it was cold, so cold, and I couldn't see and my lungs burned. I came up for air. Nettie wasn't there. I dove again and finally found her. She was tumbling along the bottom, limp, a rag-doll, and I pulled her up as best I could. Then we were on the bank, just a little past our house, and she wasn't breathing, cold, so cold, her little dress all plastered, almost black from water, and her hair all matted and her ribbon gone.

I remember I couldn't go to the funeral. I tried, and my parents tried to make me, but I left before it even started. I went down to the riverbank instead and just stood there, holding Nettie's journal, the last thing she ever gave me.

I sit and remember and realize that now the sky outside my window is going gray; I have sat and remembered for three hours. After five years, one month three weeks, four days, and eleven hours, I have to write about it. I dreamed about the dock every night for a month and then no more – I wouldn't; I couldn't; I refused. But, I dreamed about other things and wrote them down, and now I have to write, but the only journal is Nettie's. The only journal is Nettie's. I could never...I couldn't possibly...

I take out her journal, sit down again, and dig out my pen. I trace my fingers over the little dedication she wrote, turn the page, hold my shaking pen to the paper. I write.

Poetry Collection

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Do the Leaves Play?

Scitter scatter, scritch scratch,
hop 'n skip 'n jump down the
street with the breeze.
Stumble and tumble,
leap and roll,
slither and slide down the
slippery sloping road.
The breeze rushes by
and shushes by and
leaves are grabbed and dragged,
sliding and gliding by the church.
They scimper and scamper
and twist and leap
and floaty fall, passing
quickly and fast.
Red and yellow, scarlet and gold,
orange and brown, twisting round.
Hundreds of leaves, passing and tapping,
crustily rapping the street by the church.
Scitter and scatter, scritch and scratch,
wuthering winding and windy.
Whirling and twirling and dancing down
the road by the church by the bush.
Spinning and skipping and
blowing and showing the colors all golden
and reddish and orange and brown.
Blowing and slowing until the wind stops
and shows the leaves' new crumbly tops—
yes, I'd say the leaves play.

Haiku #1

wet clay spins
glides warm and smooth through still fingers
unseen but gently felt

Haiku #2

Frozen, the world,
covered in cold fire,
a thousand small suns in the ice.

Haiku #3

wind dances through leaves
rustle and sigh – perhaps they
soft sing a love song.

Haiku #4

creature-cloud in sky glides,
looms vaguely left, blocks moon
blackens sky moves on

Haiku #5

Rain falls on lonely
band, pummels eye fingers horns,
leaves when band is gone.

Ode to a Sunrise

What a lovely, fragile wonder it is
to watch the sky turn to water above the trees
and mist creep about underneath,
rising in some stray clearing like a serpent-dragon
luxuriating in the cool morning air;
to hear a lone bird chirp a soft, shy greeting in the
dew-silvered meadows; to see
the sky white at a single point direct ahead,
stealing the moon's luminescence
and giving it to the sun; to see the sun hover,
glistening, uncertainly behind a tree,
then – rise, slowly, shyly, carefully, looking about
for some hint of what to do, then
throwing wide its cloak and announcing to the
world – "Here I am! Look at me!" –
as if it hadn't just made the world wait with
bated breath while it pretended it wasn't rising.