

The Keeper's Ledger

A short extract for close reading. Every detail here is doing work.

4 min read

Before you read

- **ledger** — a book in which records are kept in order
- **meticulous** — extremely careful about small details
- **austere** — plain and severe, without comfort or decoration
- **omission** — something deliberately or accidentally left out
- **cadence** — the rhythm and fall of language
- **restraint** — in writing, deliberately saying less than might be said



A keeper's lighthouse on the Patagonian coast, southern Chile.

¹ My father kept the light at Punta Delgado for thirty-one years, and he kept the ledger for all of them. Two columns: the hour, and the weather. Nothing else was called for, and he was not a man who did what was not called for.

² I have it here. The handwriting does not change across three decades, which I find more remarkable now than I did then. 0400, cloud, moderate swell. 0800, cloud. 1200, cloud, rain after. He wrote *rain after* a great many times. The coast gave him little else to record.

³ In June of my ninth year the entries continue in the same hand, in the same ink, at the same four-hour intervals, through the eleventh and the twelfth and the thirteenth. On the fourteenth there is a gap of one line. Then: 1600, *clear*.

⁴ My mother was buried on the morning of the fourteenth. The weather, as I remember it, was clear.

⁵ I used to think the gap was grief, and that he had left the line empty the way one leaves a chair empty. I was a sentimental child and I wanted the book to say something. It took me a long time to consider the simpler explanation: that the service required an entry every four hours, that he had been at the graveside at noon, and that a man who did not record what he had not observed would not invent a sky he had not seen.

⁶ Both readings are available. The ledger does not choose between them. It was not built to.

⁷ He died in the winter and left me the lighthouse, which the state had automated eight years before, and the ledger, which the state did not want. The lamp turns now without anyone. It does not know whether the cloud is moderate. It does not know that there was a morning in June when nobody was there to look at the sky, and that this is recorded, in the only language he had, as a single blank line between the thirteenth and the afternoon of the fourteenth.

⁸ I have thought about adding something. I have decided against it. Whatever the gap means, it means it in his hand, and my hand is not the same hand.

Part A Multiple choice

Circle the letter next to the best answer.

1. The narrator's statement that his father "was not a man who did what was not called for" (paragraph 1) prepares the reader to
 - A expect the father to abandon the ledger later in life
 - B read any departure from routine as significant
 - C distrust the narrator's account of events
 - D understand why the lighthouse was eventually automated
2. The repeated weather entries in paragraph 2 primarily establish
 - A that the coast had an unusually varied climate
 - B the father's declining attention to his duties
 - C a monotony against which the blank line will stand out
 - D the narrator's difficulty in reading the handwriting
3. In paragraph 5, the narrator revises his childhood interpretation because he
 - A discovers a later entry that contradicts it
 - B considers an explanation that fits his father's character better
 - C is told the truth by another family member
 - D concludes that the gap was an error of record-keeping
4. The detail that the lighthouse was automated "eight years before" the father's death contributes most to the extract's
 - A sense that his meticulous work had already been made unnecessary
 - B explanation of why the family left the coast
 - C suggestion that the father was dismissed from his post
 - D account of how the ledger came to be damaged

Part B**Written response**

Answer in two or three sentences. Refer to the passage.

5. Paragraph 4 reports the burial and the weather in two short sentences, the second qualified by "as I remember it". Explain the effect of that restraint.
6. Explain the two readings of the blank line that the narrator sets out, and why paragraph 6 refuses to decide between them.
7. Comment on the writer's use of the ledger entries as quoted text. What do they contribute that description alone could not?
8. The narrator calls himself "a sentimental child" who "wanted the book to say something". Explain what this admission tells the reader about the adult narrator's method.
9. Analyse the final sentence: "my hand is not the same hand". Explain both its literal and its figurative meaning in the context of the whole extract.

Part C**Think deeper**

There is no single right answer here. Take a position and support it with evidence.

10. Which reading of the blank line do you find more persuasive, and what in the text supports it? Deal honestly with the evidence that works against you.

11. The extract withholds almost all direct emotion. Does this restraint make the piece more affecting or less? Argue a position using specific details.

12. The narrator decides not to add anything to the ledger. Was that the right decision? Consider what would be gained and lost.

13. The automated lamp "does not know whether the cloud is moderate". Explain what the writer is suggesting about the difference between recording and witnessing, and assess whether the extract earns that suggestion.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — read any departure from routine as significant | 2. C — monotony against which the gap stands out | 3. B — an explanation better fitting his father's character | 4. A — his meticulous work was already unnecessary

Part B

5. The understatement forces the reader to supply the emotion the narrator withholds, and the flat weather report deliberately mirrors the father's ledger entries. Strong answers notice "as I remember it" admits uncertainty about the one fact the ledger does not record, which quietly links the narrator's memory to his father's method.

6. Either the gap is grief marked deliberately, or it is the honest absence of an observation the father could not make because he was at the graveside. Paragraph 6 refuses to decide because the ledger records only weather; the meaning is supplied by the reader, which is the extract's subject.

7. The quoted entries let the reader experience the monotony and the interruption directly rather than being told about them, and they reproduce the father's voice in the only form it survives. Accept answers about authenticity, pacing or the shift from summary to evidence.

8. It shows the adult narrator distrusting interpretations he finds emotionally attractive, and testing them against character and procedure instead. Credit answers noting this makes him a more reliable narrator precisely because he admits an unreliable instinct.

9. Literally, his handwriting differs from his father's, so an addition would be visible as his. Figuratively, the meaning belongs to his father's life and discipline, and to annotate it would replace an ambiguity with his own interpretation. Reward answers connecting this to paragraph 6.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the conclusion.

10. Either reading is fully creditable. The requirement is engagement with contrary evidence — the unchanged hand and strict intervals favour the procedural reading; the single-line gap on that specific day favours the other.

11. Mark the use of specific detail. Strong answers cite particular moments — the four-word weather report, the refusal in paragraph 6 — rather than praising restraint in general.

12. Both conclusions acceptable. Look for recognition that adding to the ledger would resolve an ambiguity the extract treats as valuable, and that preserving it also means preserving uncertainty permanently.

13. The strongest answers separate the two activities: the lamp performs the function while the keeper performed the attention. Reward students who then test whether the extract has shown this rather than asserted it, and who are willing to find it overstated.

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