

# **THE DOCK**

a piece for one performer and drums

**by Tom Smith**

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*Drums.*

She remembered her first memory. She remembered her first memory so it could be remembered. She remembered her first memory of breathing, of being alive, of gasping, then choking, then spitting up, spitting out. Then, the burning came. Terrifying. Scorching her lungs. She screamed. Screamed for dear life. For. Dear. Life.

*Drums.*

Summer at the cabin was fun. It was always fun. It was designed to be so: Mama made sure of it. There was a green woven picnic basket filled with plates and utensils and thermoses that only came out during the summer. There were napkins with faint brown stains, reminders of meals long before and long forgotten. There were flaps atop the basket made of balsa wood. Such a thin, light wood to protect so much. There was a stone fireplace, and floors with dust in the corners that no one ever seemed to mind. There was a wooden picnic table out front, with carvings from other families from other times. There was history. And there was me. Ten and tall and pretty. And knowing that the world held something special for me, if I could just get old enough fast enough. There were long lazy naps, sometimes on the couch but mostly on the dock. There were lapping waves and the cry of gulls and the sun which was both too hot and not hot enough—not enough to erase the memory of winter that still hid deep within the bones, hidden within the marrow. There were mosquitoes, at dusk, then lightning bugs, at dark, then crickets until dawn. There were squirrels climbing trees, birds calling overhead, and snakes underfoot, although I never saw them. And there was Mama, whose family had been coming to the same cabin on the same shore for as long as she could remember. And John, with his face like mine, only fuller and with a small scar over his eyebrow, which made him look tougher than he truly was at 7 years old. And there was Uncle Beau that summer. Beautiful Uncle Beau.

*Drums.*

On the dock, everything feels different. A feeling you're somewhere else. Not on land, not on sea: somewhere in-between. On the dock, the boards sometime sway underneath your feet, not much, but enough to make the lumber creak and moan. On the dock, you lay down and you feel your shoulders and back and buttocks and thighs and heels and the back of your head absorb the heat from the wood, warmer and warmer, while the spray from the water sends small droplets to your face and stomach and breasts and legs and ankles, making your toes shiver, but just for a moment. On the dock, you can do your best thinking. You can think of school, and who might be in your 5<sup>th</sup> grade class when summer is done, and who your teacher will be, and whether or not this is the last year you'll be allowed to wear your Halloween costume at school. On the dock, you think of the lunch you just ate: the way grape jelly stays in larger gobs on the bread than strawberry jelly does, and how you will never, ever tire of peanut

butter or potato chips. You think of how boring it is to fish, even if John says it's not, and how any day now, any moment now, any second now your body will change before your eyes, like the pictures in the filmstrip you saw at school. And on the dock, you dream and you wonder and you laugh and you sleep and you wake and you in-between. You exist in-between on the dock.

*Drums.*

Uncle Beau says he wants to be a second father to you. He says since your dad left and your mom won't date you have no male influence in your life. You ask what that means. He says it means he wants to be a second father to you. And to John. You say you need time to think it over. He says you have all summer.

*Drums.*

You dream one night. You dream of space, of floating amongst the stars. You float by Saturn and Mars. Comets spin by you, burning their way through all of space and time. You float by creatures no one's ever imagined, by worlds no one's ever seen before. And then you float by Earth. You...float...by. And then decide to just keep on floating.

*Drums.*

Swimming in the sea is different than swimming in a pool. In the sea, there are no edges to hang on to if you get tired. There are no lifeguards or ropes that float along the surface, held up by white foam in the shape of footballs. There is danger in the sea if you are not a strong swimmer.

"I'm going to teach you to swim," said Uncle Beau. "I'm going to teach you to survive in the water. Show me how you swim."

I swim out into the waves, tearing through the water as if to rip open a pocket of air.

"Relax. You're fighting the waves. It's much easier if you just relax. Now, try again."

I swim out, continuing to slash through the water with violent stabs of my arms.

"I said, relax! Longer strides. Slow down! Relax!"

I continue to swim. Longer strides. Reach further. More graceful. Slow down. Take your time. Longer breaths. Relax. Relax. Relax.

*Drums.*

Oneandtwoandoneandtwoandoneandtwoandoneandtwoand— Relax. Relax. Relax.

*Drums.*

Oneandtwoandoneandtwoandoneandtwoand— Relax. Relax. Relax. Oneand two and Oneand two and Oneand two and— Relax. Relax.

*Drums.*

One and two and one and two and one and two and—

*Drums.*

In the sea, there are creatures. Fish. Eels maybe. Definitely fish. And if you stop for a moment, tread water just for three seconds to catch your breath, to take in how far you've swam and how much easier it feels...if you tread for just three seconds fish can come and nibble at your legs. You swat them away, but they come back. And you wonder if they are hurting you, infecting you with some kind of poison, killing you. So you scream. And you use your arms to protect your legs. And your body tenses. And you go down.

*Drums.*

First time! I'll just go under for a minute, to shoo away the fish. Just for a minute. I'll just... Back up! (*gasps*)

*Drums.*

Second time! I need to focus, formulate a plan. I'll float down to the bottom, like at the pool, and I'll sit there for a moment to get my energy back, and then shoot back to the surface. Down I go. Further. Further. Further... There is no bottom! I keep going but nothing else is there. Up! Back up! Up and up and up and up and— (*long gasp*)

*Drums.*

He's coming for me, but it will be too late: I'm too far out. Third time! You never come up from the third time. You drown. You let go. You die. Down. Downdowndowndown. But this time, relaxed. No more fighting. This is the end. Mama will be so sad. They'll be a funeral. My friends will attend in newly bought dresses: afterall, what ten year old owns a black dress? Someone will have to choose a song for me, and a choir will sing it for the whole church. It will be so sad that everyone will cry, but not so sad that they won't be able to speak afterwards and tell Mama how sorry they are for her loss. I wonder who will read my eulogy. Will Mama? Will John? Will...will... Uncle Beau!

*Drums.*

She remembered her first memory. She remembered her first memory so it could be remembered. She remembered her first memory of breathing, of being alive, of gasping, then choking, then spitting up, spitting out. Then, the burning came. Terrifying. Scorching her lungs. She screamed. Screamed for dear life. For. Dear. Life.

*Drums.*

There is a thread that attaches things that need to stay together. Sometimes its visible, like the thread on a pair of jeans. Sometimes it is invisible, like the thread that connects a family. Or a thread that connects one generation to the next.

Today is Uncle Beau's funeral. He was 68 years old. He was a father, a brother, a son, a grandfather.

John is here, with his family. I am here. And Mama is here, mostly. Her thoughts are somewhere else...

I tell the story about the lake in his eulogy. I tell the story about the man who saved my life. I tell the story about the man who was a second father to my brother and me, not just for a summer but for our whole lives. And as I tell the story, I see everyone cry. Salty tears, streaming down, falling onto their programs like drops of water splashing up on me on the dock by the cabin that held our family history and still does.

Everyone cries, but not so much they can't speak afterwards. They are in that space—between sadness and joy, celebrating the life of a man they loved so much, yet heartbroken to say goodbye. It's that in-between place. The dock. In summer.

*Drums.*

**END**