Name: _____ Date: _____

Blue Wall, Yellow Wall

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 872 words

Ines had two bedrooms, and she had worked out that this was one more than most people. The one at Mom's had blue walls, the blue of a swimming pool seen from underneath, and a bed under the window where she could watch the early bus go by. The one at Dad's had yellow walls, because Dad had painted them himself the very first weekend, and he had gotten more paint on the floor than on the wall. Both bedrooms were hers, and everybody kept reminding her of that, as if it were a prize.

The week went like this. From Sunday night until Wednesday morning, Ines lived at Mom's. On Wednesday after school, Dad picked up her and her brother Mateo, who was six, and they stayed at his apartment until the next Sunday. Mateo carried nothing at all. He had a stuffed seal named Gus, who went wherever Mateo's fist went, and that was his entire system. Ines carried a backpack, a library bag, and, nearly always, the feeling that she had left something behind.

On the first Wednesday, it was her toothbrush. She knew it before they had even left the school parking lot, the way you know about a stove you forgot to turn off, a cold drop falling through her stomach. Dad had a spare in the bathroom drawer, a big, hard, green one from the dentist. Brushing with it felt like brushing her teeth with a hairbrush. The next Wednesday she forgot her charger. The Wednesday after that, it was her retainer, and Mom had to bring it over in an envelope.

On the fourth Wednesday, the library book was missing, and Ines stood in Dad's hallway and said, "It's always me." Dad looked up from the bags. "Mateo just walks in with Gus in his hand," she said, "and I'm the one who has to remember everything for two houses, every single week, forever." Dad did not tell her she was being dramatic. He crouched down so that his face was level with hers. "That's true," he said. "It is a lot to carry. I wish it weren't, and I can't make it lighter by wishing."

She had been saving the other question, so she asked it. "Are you and Mom ever going to live in the same house again?" Dad took a long time, and she watched him choose between the easy answer and the true one. "No," he said. "I wish I had a different answer for you. I know you've wished for one." "Okay," said Ines. It came out small, and it was not really okay, and Dad did not pretend that it was.

That Sunday, at Mom's kitchen table, Ines made a plan. Dad had offered to buy a second toothbrush and a second charger, so that she would not have to carry them at all, but she had said no. Two of everything felt like being cut in half. She wanted one bag that was hers and one list that she could trust. Mom did not argue, because she could see that this was

something Ines had thought about carefully; she found a red duffel with a zipper pocket and an index card, and she let Ines write the list herself.

TOOTHBRUSH. CHARGER. RETAINER. LIBRARY BOOK. BLUE PILLOWCASE. Ines stripped the pillowcase off her bed because it smelled like Mom's laundry soap, and soap was a thing that could travel. She taped the card inside the lid of the duffel, and on Wednesday, in the back seat of Dad's car, she checked off each line with a pencil stub, and nothing was missing. The bag was heavy, but it was her heavy, and she knew exactly what was in it.

At Dad's, she started to notice things she had stopped seeing. By the door hung a hook with INES painted on it in Dad's crooked letters, though she had never once hung anything there. It had been waiting, bare and ready, since the very first weekend. In the kitchen there was a green mug with a chip in the rim, which Dad had bought at a flea market because she had once said that green was her favorite for drinking things.

That night, she could not sleep. The streetlight came through the window, and the yellow wall looked gray in it, the color of nothing. She thought about the blue wall at Mom's and the bus that went by at dawn. When Dad opened the door to check on her, she said into the dark, "Whichever house I'm in, I miss the other one." Dad did not say that it would stop. He sat on the edge of the bed, and the mattress tipped him toward her. "Yeah," he said. After a while he added, "I miss you on Sundays."

He went back to the kitchen, and she heard the dishwasher start up, a long, low, ordinary sound. He left her door open a hand's width, with the hall light behind it, the way he had every night since the first Wednesday. Across the room, Mateo slept with his fist closed around Gus. Ines turned over. The blue pillowcase lay under her cheek, and it still smelled like Mom's soap.

Questions

1. What did Ines forget on the first Wednesday?

A. Her charger
B. Her toothbrush
C. Her retainer

2. Why did Ines say "It's always me" in Dad's hallway?

A. She was the one who had to remember everything for both houses
B. She did not like Dad's apartment
C. Mateo had taken her library book

3. How did Dad answer when Ines asked if the family would live together again?

A. He said maybe next year
B. He said that no, they would not

C. He changed the subject

4. Why did Ines say no to a second toothbrush and charger?

A. They cost too much

B. Two of everything felt like being cut in half

C. Mom had already bought them

5. In this story, the hook with INES painted on it shows that

A. Dad had a place ready for her

B. Dad was a good painter

C. Ines hung her coat there every day

6. In this story, the word carry is used to mean

A. to hold and move things, and also to keep a feeling

B. to drive a car

C. to wash dishes

Words to know

retainer: tooth holder
dramatic: making a fuss
duffel: soft travel bag
crouched: bent down low
carry: hold and move

Answer key: Blue Wall, Yellow Wall

1. B. Her toothbrush
2. A. She was the one who had to remember everything for both houses
3. B. He said that no, they would not
4. B. Two of everything felt like being cut in half
5. A. Dad had a place ready for her
6. A. to hold and move things, and also to keep a feeling