Name: _____ Date: _____

Dumpling Takes the Lead

Reading level 9 (5th grade) · 968 words

Dumpling was the most loved tortoise on Elm Row. This is not a boast. It is a fact. He was also the only tortoise on Elm Row, but the Hartleys felt that was beside the point. Dumpling had a velvet cushion, a washed lettuce every morning, and a tiny umbrella for days when it rained.

Mr. and Mrs. Hartley were doting people, and they were always in a tizzy. Mrs. Hartley checked on Dumpling eleven times each evening. Mr. Hartley checked on Mrs. Hartley checking. Between them, they had never once noticed that Dumpling was not on his cushion at lunchtime on weekdays. They were at work. It was a very good system, and nobody had ever looked at it closely.

On Saturday, however, everyone on Elm Row was home. At nine o'clock exactly, Dumpling opened one eye. He stretched out one leg. Then he stepped off the cushion, down the back step, across the lawn and through a gap in the hedge. He did not hurry. Dumpling had never hurried in his life. Nobody saw him go, because everyone was busy with the toast.

"He has gone!" cried Mrs. Hartley, who was watching from the kitchen window with a lettuce. "Gone?" said Mr. Hartley, who was in the shower. He came out in a towel, then in his pants, then in his coat, which was on backwards. He did not notice. He was in a tizzy. Behind him, the toast began to burn.

They found Dumpling on the sidewalk. He had gone eleven feet. Mr. Hartley ran around him in a circle. Mrs. Hartley ran around him in the other direction, which was a mistake, because they met. "Oh!" they said, together. Dumpling stepped politely between their shoes and kept walking. It was only four minutes past nine, and the day had barely started.

Along came Kit, the delivery boy, wobbling on his bicycle with a very large package. "Is that a tortoise?" he said. "That is Dumpling," said Mrs. Hartley. "He is loose." Kit laid his bicycle down across the sidewalk, to block the way. Dumpling looked at it. Then he walked around it. This took four minutes, and nobody breathed.

At number nine, a window flew open. Mr. Fotheringill, who was the grumpiest man on Elm Row, leaned out. "What is all this noise?" he said. "Dumpling is loose!" cried Mr. Hartley. "I do not care for tortoises," said Mr. Fotheringill, and he shut the window. A moment later he opened it again, just a crack. It was a very small crack, and a very interested one.

Mr. Hartley had a plan. He threw a blanket over Dumpling, to catch him. Dumpling did not stop. The blanket began to move up the sidewalk by itself, one slow lump at a time. Everyone agreed this was worse. A blanket with a tortoise inside is very hard to be cross with, and even

harder to catch.

Mrs. Hartley had a plan too. She tied a lettuce to a fishing rod and dangled it in front of Dumpling's nose. Dumpling looked at the lettuce. He had looked at that lettuce, or its cousins, every morning for seven years. He sighed through his nose and walked right under it. The lettuce swung back and forth like a very small green flag.

By now the whole street had come out. There was Mrs. Okonkwo with her twins, and the postman, and an old gentleman in slippers. Somebody brought a folding chair. Somebody else brought sandwiches. Everyone walked at Dumpling's speed, which is surprisingly hard, and every foot of the way, somebody said, "Oh, he is going so well."

The crowd grew. It was forty feet, then ninety, then a hundred and fifty. Somebody counted the steps out loud. Somebody else lost count. Mrs. Hartley said Dumpling must be exhausted. Dumpling was not exhausted. He was a tortoise on a very important walk, and he knew exactly where he was going, which is more than anyone behind him could say.

At number nine, Dumpling turned in at the gate. The whole street froze, and Mr. Fotheringill's front door opened. "No," he said. Dumpling went up the path anyway. He went around the side of the house, past the rosebush and under the hedge, and everybody followed, on tiptoe, which is also hard. Somebody in the crowd whispered, "He knows the way."

On a flat stone, in the shade, sat a saucer. In the saucer sat four raspberries, cut in halves. Beside it, a card in very careful handwriting said, NOT FOR ANYONE. Dumpling climbed the stone and began to eat. It looked like the tidiest picnic in the world. For the first time that morning, he looked absolutely, completely satisfied.

"Those are for the birds," said Mr. Fotheringill. "The birds," said Mrs. Hartley, "do not use a saucer." There was a long silence. Then Mr. Fotheringill said, in a smaller voice, "Every morning at ten past nine, that animal comes through my hedge. Seven years. I assumed you knew." Mr. Fotheringill went the color of a plum.

"We are at work," said Mr. Hartley, faintly. "He prefers raspberries," said Mrs. Hartley. "Of course he prefers raspberries," said Mr. Fotheringill. "He is not a fool. Nobody likes lettuce." Dumpling finished the last raspberry and wiped his mouth on the stone. And that, as it turned out, was how the whole of Elm Row found out about the secret life of its most loved tortoise.

Mr. Fotheringill carried Dumpling home himself, in both hands, with a very grumpy face and very pink ears. On Monday morning, the Hartleys went to work as usual. At ten past nine, the hedge rustled. The saucer was waiting. Behind eleven curtains up and down Elm Row, eleven people watched, and not one of them did a thing.

Questions

1. What did Dumpling have to sleep on?

A. A velvet cushion
B. A straw bed
C. A blanket

2. What did Mr. Hartley throw over Dumpling?

A. A net
B. A blanket
C. A coat

3. What does "dangled" mean in "dangled it in front of Dumpling's nose"?

A. Hid
B. Dropped
C. Held swinging

4. Why did Dumpling walk past the lettuce on the fishing rod?

A. He wanted something he liked better
B. He could not see it
C. He was too tired

5. What was in the saucer at number nine?

A. Lettuce leaves
B. Raspberries
C. Dandelions

6. Why had nobody on Elm Row known about Dumpling's walks?

A. He only went out at night
B. The Hartleys were at work on weekdays
C. He walked too fast to see

Words to know

doting: very loving
tizzy: a fuss
dangled: held swinging
sidewalk: a walking path
faintly: very quietly

Answer key: Dumpling Takes the Lead

1. A. A velvet cushion
2. B. A blanket
3. C. Held swinging
4. A. He wanted something he liked better
5. B. Raspberries
6. B. The Hartleys were at work on weekdays