Name: _____ Date: _____

Finn and the Wise Salmon

Reading level 12 (8th grade) · 1357 words

Long ago in Ireland there lived a boy called Finn, who had grown up deep in the woods of Slieve Bloom under the care of several remarkable old women. They had taught him to run faster than a hare, to swim across a cold river without complaining, and to read the whole forest the way other children read a picture book. Finn could follow a deer by a single bent blade of grass and predict the weather from the behavior of the birds. Yet as he grew older, he noticed that the thing he wanted most was something the woods could never give him. He wanted to understand the great poems and histories of his people.

So Finn set out to find a teacher, and he walked for many days, sleeping under hedges and drinking from streams, until he reached a wide, slow river called the Boyne. On its bank, not far from the place where the village of Slane stands today, there was a small house woven out of branches and reeds. A thin old man sat in front of it, gazing at the water as if he were waiting for an important visitor. His name was Finegas, and he was a poet, and people claimed that nobody in all of Ireland knew more songs or more words for the shape of a wave.

Finn asked politely whether he might stay and learn. Finegas studied him carefully for a long moment, and then he explained that he would be very glad of some help, because his knees disliked the river mud and his back disliked everything else. Finn received a bed of dry rushes and a bowl of porridge, and he fell asleep that night listening to the water slide past the door. He had no idea that the old man had been waiting beside that river for an astonishing length of time, or that the waiting was nearly finished.

In the morning Finegas led his new helper downstream to a spot where the river spread out into an enormous, quiet pool. Green banks sloped gently toward the water, and the water itself was so clear and brown that it looked like tea in a giant cup. The poets of Ireland believed that poetry prefers to live beside water, and this pool was the finest one that Finegas had ever seen. But he had another reason for building his house there. An ancient prophecy declared that whoever ate the first taste of a certain salmon from this pool would become the wisest person in the whole country.

This was no ordinary fish. It was extremely old, and it kept itself at the very bottom of the Pool of Fec, where the water was deepest and darkest. Finegas had spent seven entire years trying to catch it. Every morning he spread his net across the pool, and every evening he hauled it up and found nothing but weeds and a few startled minnows. He never complained about this, not even once. He merely remarked that patience was a different kind of fishing, and that certain things come to the person who is still sitting there when they finally arrive.

Finn helped in every way that he could. He carried water, mended the net, and gathered

firewood, and in the evenings Finegas taught him how to listen to a poem before attempting to recite it. He learned that a well-made line has a rhythm like a walking horse, and that the smallest word in a verse is often the most important one. Finn was a very quick student. But seven years is a tremendously long time, and sometimes he privately wondered whether the great salmon was only a story that the old man told himself, so that he would have a reason to keep sitting beside the river.

Then one gray morning the net felt unusually heavy. Finegas pulled and Finn pulled, and out of the Pool of Fec rose a salmon so enormous and so brilliant that it seemed to carry the entire sky on its scales. Finegas burst into laughter, which was something Finn had never heard him do. For a moment the old man held the fish as carefully as if it were made of glass. "Seven years," he whispered. Then he handed it over to Finn. "Cook it for me, lad, over a gentle fire. But listen to me closely. You must not eat even the smallest bite."

Finn promised, and he absolutely meant it. He built a fire out of dry sticks, laid the salmon on a green spit, and turned it slowly so that the heat would reach every part. The skin began to crackle, and a wonderful smell drifted across the river and through the reeds. Finn had not eaten since the morning, and his stomach rumbled so loudly that a wren flew out of the hedge in alarm. But he kept his eyes on the fish and his hands on the spit, because a promise is still a promise, even when it is extremely hungry.

Then a blister swelled up on the side of the salmon and burst, and a drop of hot juice leaped out and landed on Finn's thumb. It hurt so much that he did exactly what anybody would have done. He popped his thumb straight into his mouth to cool it. In that instant he tasted the salmon, only the tiniest taste, and something wonderful and strange rushed through his mind. It felt like a window flying open in a dark room. Suddenly Finn understood a hundred things that he had never even thought to ask about.

Finn carried the cooked salmon back to the little house on a wooden dish, walking slowly so that nothing would spill. Finegas was standing in the doorway, and the moment he looked at the boy, he stopped smiling. Finn's face appeared exactly the same as it had been before, but his eyes were completely different. Yesterday they had belonged to a clever young person. Now they belonged to somebody who had read the entire world and was not frightened of a single page. "Have you eaten any of the salmon?" asked Finegas quietly.

"No," said Finn, and he told the whole truth at once, which was something he always did. "I did not eat it, I promise. But it burned me while I was turning it, and I put my thumb in my mouth." The old man stood silent for a long time with his hands pressed together. Finn waited, and he could feel his heart thumping. He was certain that he had ruined seven years of work, and he was prepared to be sent away at once. He would not have blamed the old poet for one moment, because seven years of patient work is a very great deal to lose over a single burnt thumb.

But Finegas did not shout. He let out a long breath and looked toward the river, and then he looked at the boy, who had stood beside that tempting fire for an hour and still come to him with an honest answer. "The wisdom was meant for someone who could be trusted with it," he said at last. "I think the pool has chosen well. Take the salmon, Finn, son of Cumhal, and eat the rest of it. Everything that I could teach you, the river has now taught you faster. I can teach you nothing more, and I will not grudge you a single scale."

So Finn ate the salmon of knowledge, and from that day onward he understood things before anyone explained them. Whenever a problem seemed impossible, he only had to put his thumb in his mouth, and the answer arrived as clearly as a bell. He became a famous poet, and a wise leader, and a loyal friend to anyone who needed one. People in Ireland still tell the story of the burnt thumb. They say that wisdom does not always belong to the one who waits the longest, because sometimes it belongs to the one who tells the truth when it would be easier to hide it.

Questions

1. Why did Finegas live beside the Pool of Fec?

A. He wanted to catch the salmon that would make someone wise
B. He liked fishing for minnows
C. He was hiding from a rival poet

2. What does the story suggest about Finn?

A. He could not wait for anything
B. He told the truth even when it might cost him
C. He wanted the salmon to himself

3. Why did Finn put his thumb in his mouth?

A. It was burned by hot juice from the fish
B. He wanted a taste of dinner
C. He was thinking hard

4. In the story, "patience" is called a kind of fishing. What does it mean here?

A. Waiting calmly for the right moment
B. Catching many fish at once
C. Complaining until the fish appear

5. Why did Finegas give Finn the rest of the salmon?

A. He was too tired to eat it
B. He saw Finn was honest and would use the wisdom well
C. He had never really wanted it

Words to know

prophecy: foretold promise
salmon: large river fish
patience: calm waiting
grudge: resent
spit: roasting rod

Answer key: Finn and the Wise Salmon

1. A. He wanted to catch the salmon that would make someone wise
2. B. He told the truth even when it might cost him
3. A. It was burned by hot juice from the fish
4. A. Waiting calmly for the right moment
5. B. He saw Finn was honest and would use the wisdom well