Name: _____ Date: _____

Ilya Rises from the Stove

Reading level 12 (8th grade) · 1318 words

In a village near the old town of Murom in Russia, there lived a farmer's son called Ilya. He had been born with legs that would not carry him, and for thirty years he had spent his days on the enormous brick stove in the corner of the family cottage. A Russian stove is warm and immense, large enough for a whole family to sleep on, and Ilya had grown thoroughly familiar with every crack in its bricks. He observed the weather through the small window, and he listened to the neighbors talk, and he could identify every neighbor in the village by the sound of their footsteps.

His mother and father never treated him as a burden or an inconvenience. They set a place for him at every meal, and in the evenings they described all the news from the fields and the market. But Ilya sometimes wished that he could do more than listen. He would look at the golden wheat rippling outside the window, and at his father coming home tired from the morning's work, and he would imagine what it might feel like to lift an axe or to lead a horse across the grass. The possibility seemed so enormous and so distant that he rarely mentioned it to anybody.

Then one summer, when the hay was ready for cutting, his parents went out early to clear a meadow at the edge of the forest, and Ilya was left alone in the cottage. The morning was unusually hot and silent. Suddenly there was a knock at the window, and three travelers stood outside in the dusty road. They were thin and sunburned, with dusty clothing, and they carried walking sticks and worn bags, and they looked like singers who had walked a long way from some distant place. "Good friend," they called, "would you give us something to drink?"

"Gladly," said Ilya, and his heart sank, because the water jug was across the room and he had not crossed that room in thirty years. "I am sorry, wanderers. I would like to be of help, but I cannot rise. My parents are in the fields, and there is nobody here to fetch it." The three travelers looked at one another for a moment, and then the eldest of them said something surprisingly simple. "Stand up, Ilya," he said. "Wash your face, and walk across the room, and bring us the water yourself."

Ilya wanted to say that this was completely impossible. But there was something in the traveler's voice that was so calm and so confident that he stopped before the words came out. He put his hands flat on the warm bricks. He pushed, and then he swung his legs over the edge, and slowly, to his own complete astonishment, he set his feet on the floor. They held. He stood up, and the whole cottage seemed to grow smaller around him. He walked across the room as lightly as a boy, filled a cup with cold water from the jug, and carried it to the window.

The travelers drank gratefully and thanked him politely and handed the cup back. "How is your strength now, Ilya?" asked the eldest. Ilya listened to his own body for a moment. "I feel remarkably powerful," he said slowly. "I believe I could lift the earth itself." The travelers laughed and said that he should drink once more. When he had finished the second cup, they asked again, and he replied that the feeling was still very great but only about half of what it had been. "That is exactly right," said the eldest. "Any more, and the ground itself could not hold you up. Now go and use it well."

When Ilya looked up, the three travelers had gone, and the road was empty. He stood for a long moment in the quiet cottage, feeling the most extraordinary sensation of all, which was the floor under his own feet. Then he took a deep breath, stepped through the door into the bright sunshine, and began to walk. He walked across the yard, and through the gate, and along the dusty track to the meadow where his parents were working. His legs seemed to remember an ability that Ilya himself had forgotten.

His mother and father were resting in the shade at the edge of the clearing, because the day was hot and the trees were thick. Their axes lay in the grass beside them. Ilya picked up the axes, and he began to swing. Branches flew, trunks fell, and the forest echoed with the steady rhythm of his tremendous work. What would have taken his father and all the neighbors three full days, he finished in a single hour. He cleared the whole field of timber, and then, because he was not sure what to do with the axes, he drove them into a stump so deeply that nobody could ever have pulled them out.

When his parents woke, they stared in amazement at the open meadow and the neat stacks of enormous logs. "Who has done this?" cried his father. Then a tall figure came striding out of the trees with a broad smile, and they saw that it was Ilya, standing on his own two feet. His mother dropped her bundle. His father reached out to touch his shoulder, as if the boy might disappear. Then Ilya walked over to the stump, pulled out the axes with two fingers, and handed them back as if nothing unusual had happened.

After that, Ilya could not stay still. He walked across the open plain, and on the road he came upon a farmer leading a rough brown foal, the first that he had ever seen up close. The foal was shaggy and skinny and rather mysterious around the eyes, and for some reason Ilya loved it at once. He paid whatever price the farmer asked and led the foal home. For three whole months he kept it in his own stable and fed it the finest white wheat, and he brought it water from the clearest spring in the entire district.

At the end of the three months he left the foal out in the garden for three nights, so that it could drink the morning dew from the grass, and when the dawn came it was a different animal altogether. Its coat shone like polished mahogany, and its legs were long and strong. Ilya led it to the garden fence, which was higher than a tall man, and the horse leaped over it from side to side with ease. It was strong enough now to carry him, and he named it Cloudfall.

On a bright morning, Ilya saddled Cloudfall, and his mother and father came out to the gate to see him off. His mother hugged him for a very long time, and his father laid a hand on his shoulder and said that he was extremely proud. Ilya promised to come back. Then he swung up into the saddle, and the horse tossed its head and began to trot. They rode out across the open plain, with the village shrinking behind them and the wide road opening before them like a ribbon.

The road was long, and the world beyond the village was considerably larger than anything Ilya had ever imagined from the top of his stove. He rode all day with the wind in his face, and he laughed out loud for the pure delight of traveling. The people of Russia have sung this story for hundreds of years. They remember that his parents loved him long before he could stand, and they say that Ilya never forgot the three travelers or the cup of water. They say that his strength was a gift, and that the best use he could make of it was to help the people who genuinely needed him.

Questions

1. Why was Ilya alone in the cottage when the travelers came?

A. His parents had gone out to clear a meadow
B. He had sent everyone away
C. His parents were at the market

2. Why did the travelers stop Ilya after two cups of water?

A. The water ran out
B. Too much strength would be more than the ground could hold
C. They wanted him to be weak

3. What was the first thing Ilya did with his new strength?

A. He raced a horse
B. He cleared a whole field of trees for his parents
C. He walked to the capital

4. In the story, what does "burden" mean?

A. A heavy load that someone must carry
B. A fast horse
C. A warm blanket

5. What does the ending suggest about Ilya's strength?

A. It was meant to be shown off
B. It was a gift that is best used to help others
C. It would last only a day

Words to know

timber: cut trees
foal: baby horse
burden: heavy load
clearing: open space
astonishment: great surprise

Answer key: Ilya Rises from the Stove

1. A. His parents had gone out to clear a meadow
2. B. Too much strength would be more than the ground could hold
3. B. He cleared a whole field of trees for his parents
4. A. A heavy load that someone must carry
5. B. It was a gift that is best used to help others