Name: _____ Date: _____

The Night Bus

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 773 words

Every evening, when the last dish was dried, a bus rolled through Sleepy Town. It was long and low and blue, with one round headlamp and a sign on its front that said WORRIES ONLY. Nobody ever rode it, and nobody ever heard it coming, because the driver was an owl, and Owl did not believe in hurrying.

Her job was simple. At every window in town sat a child, and on every windowsill sat a worry. They were not enormous worries. Some were the size of a plum, and some were the size of a mitten. But at bedtime even a small worry feels heavy, and Owl understood that perfectly.

The bus stopped on Pudding Lane first. Tomas had a loose tooth. It had wobbled all day, and now he was sure it would fall out while he slept and roll under the bed forever. His worry sat on the sill like a small white pebble, wiggling. "Evening, Tomas," said Owl, and she dropped it into her bag. It wiggled twice and went still.

Next came Marigold Street. Bea had left her stuffed rabbit on the school bus, and she was certain he was cold. Her worry looked like a gray dandelion puff, and it trembled in the breeze. Owl scooped it up with both wings, as if it might blow away. "Low and slow," she said softly, and one light on Marigold Street went out.

On Orchard Row, Anil had called his teacher "Mum" in front of the whole class. His worry was hot pink, and it blushed whenever anyone looked at it. "I once called a bus a nest," said Owl. "Twice." She tucked the worry in beside the others, and the lights on Orchard Row went out, low and slow.

Ruth, on the corner, had a spelling test in the morning. Her worry was a long tangle of letters, and she had been stuck on the word necessary all evening. Owl untied it with one claw. "One collar and two sleeves," she said. "One C, two S's." The letters sat up straight, and then they curled into the bag with the rest.

By now the bag was round and soft, and it hummed a little, like a kettle that had given up. The bus turned off the last street and began to climb. Behind it, the town went dark in rows, roof by roof and window by window. At the top of Sleepy Hill, the Moon was waiting.

Owl set the bag down in the long grass and loosened the string. One by one the worries climbed out. The tooth curled up like a cat. The dandelion puff spread itself flat. The pink one hid under a leaf, still a little red, and the tangle of letters rolled itself into a scroll. Within a minute, every one of them was asleep.

"They will be here in the morning," said Owl. "You can come and fetch yours, if you like. Some children do, and most do not." The Moon shone down on them, kindly and not too brightly,

and the grass bent over them like a blanket.

Then Owl looked down the hill. One window at the very bottom was still lit. Isla was sitting at it with her chin on her arms, and her windowsill was bare. "I looked everywhere," said Isla, when the bus stopped. "I have not got one. But I cannot sleep."

Owl did not say that was silly. She only opened the door, which sighed. "Come up the hill with me," she said, "and bring nothing." Isla climbed in. The seats were soft and smelled of warm hay. They rolled up the hill without a sound, and nobody in the whole town heard them go.

On the hilltop the worries were snoring gently in the grass. Isla sat down among them. "I do not know what mine is," she said. "It has not got a shape." The Moon leaned down a little. "The ones without shapes can sleep, too," she said.

Isla breathed out, a long breath, much longer than she had meant to. Something small and gray, no bigger than a thumbprint, drifted out of her and settled in the grass beside the tooth. It had no name. It turned around twice and lay down. Isla yawned. She had not known she could yawn that wide.

Owl drove down the hill very slowly, with Isla asleep on the front seat. Behind them, the town lay dark and still, and up on the hill a few small things slept in the grass. The Moon kept watch. Owl did not hurry. The bus knew the way.

Questions

1. Who drives the bus through Sleepy Town?

A. The Moon
B. An owl
C. Isla

2. What was Tomas worried about?

A. A spelling test
B. A lost rabbit
C. A loose tooth

3. What does "tangle" mean in "a long tangle of letters"?

A. A knot
B. A song
C. A list

4. Why did Owl tell Isla to "bring nothing"?

A. Isla had no worry she could carry out
B. The bus was full
C. Owl did not like bags

5. What happens to the worries on Sleepy Hill?

A. They fly away forever
B. They sleep in the grass
C. They turn into stars

6. What does Owl say about the worries in the morning?

A. They will be gone
B. They will be bigger
C. They will be here if you want them

Words to know

windowsill: window's ledge
tangle: a knot
trembled: shook a little
headlamp: front light
scooped: lifted up

Answer key: The Night Bus

1. B. An owl
2. C. A loose tooth
3. A. A knot
4. A. Isla had no worry she could carry out
5. B. They sleep in the grass
6. C. They will be here if you want them