Name: _____ Date: _____

Tam and the Wind-Up Tractor

Reading level 9 (5th grade) · 1148 words

Tam the cricket had lived behind the bookcase for the whole of his life, which was nine months, and in nine months he had never gone farther than four hops from home. He liked it that way. Behind the bookcase there was dust to sit in, and crumbs to eat, and a crack in the baseboard that made a very good door. Then, one Tuesday, a tractor rolled up to it.

A boy had knocked over a toy box, and out of it the tractor had come rolling across the floor, all the way to the crack. It was small and green and shiny, with four fat wheels, and a key sticking out of its back. Tam crept out and walked all the way round it, twice. Then he climbed up into the seat.

It was a wind-up tractor, and it fit him as if somebody had made it for a cricket. Tam took hold of the key with both front legs and turned it carefully, twelve times, tick, tick, tick. When he let go, the tractor rolled forward all by itself, straight across the dusty floor, and Tam held on tightly while his heart pounded like a drum.

The boy was named Desmond, and he was seven, and he was bored. He was lying on the sofa with his left leg stuck out in a heavy white cast, resting on three cushions. He had watched four films and had counted the cracks on the ceiling, which came to eleven. That night, in the dark, he heard an unusual noise. Tick, tick, tick. He looked down.

There was a cricket on the rug, driving a tractor. Desmond did not scream, and he did not even sit up. He whispered, "Hello," and the cricket stopped and looked at him and chirped once. Desmond was certain that it meant hello. By morning they had worked out a code. One chirp meant yes, two meant no, and three meant stop, please stop.

Desmond had a problem, and it was green. His favorite marble, the one with a tiny comet inside, had rolled underneath the cabinet at the far end of the room two days ago. His mother could not reach it, and his leg would not bend. He had stared at that cabinet for so long that he could see it with his eyes shut. "Could you possibly get it?" he whispered.

Tam considered this. The far end of the room was four hundred hops away, which meant crossing a rug, a slipper, a forest of chair legs, and a wide, shiny stretch of floorboards. And then there was the window. On the other side of the glass lived the cat from next door, whom Tam had never actually seen but knew a great deal about. He chirped once. It meant, Probably fine.

It was not probably fine. But Desmond drew him a map with the flashlight, shining a thin yellow beam from the sofa and pointing it slowly along the route. Over the rug, the beam said. Around the slipper. Through the chair legs. It made a bright little road across the carpet, and

Tam's tractor sat at the front of it like a tiny, determined parade.

Tam wound the key twelve times and set off. The tractor made a sound like a very small bicycle. Across the rug it went, where every thread of wool was as thick as a rope and every bit of fluff was a bush. The wheels sank in a little and then came up again. Thirty ticks later the tractor stopped, so Tam climbed out and wound it again.

The slipper was a mountain. It sat in the middle of the floor, dark and furry and enormous, and the beam of the flashlight went straight up its side. Tam drove at it bravely. The tractor climbed the toe with its wheels clicking, slowed, and slowed again, and stopped at the very top. Tam wound the key as fast as he possibly could.

Then something moved at the window. The flashlight jumped. Two round green lights had come up in the glass, one on each side of the curtain, like small moons. A shadow stretched across the floor, as long as a bus. Tam did not chirp. He did not even breathe. Desmond clicked the flashlight off, and the whole room went dark. They waited.

It took eleven minutes, and Tam counted every one of them by the clock on the wall. Then came a tap on the window, tap, tap, tap, a soft and polite one, as if the cat were knocking on somebody's door. After that there was nothing, and the green lights sank down, one after the other. Desmond turned the flashlight back on. His hand was shaking, and so were all six of Tam's legs.

After that the rest of the journey was almost easy, if a long drive with a cat behind you can be called easy. The chair legs were as tall as trees, and the shiny floorboards were a frozen lake. The tractor slid across it with its wheels spinning, and Tam leaned left and then right to keep it straight. At the far end of the lake stood the cabinet, and beneath it was a gleam of green.

The marble lay in the dark under the cabinet, about as big as the tractor itself. Tam drove up behind it and pushed. He had been afraid that it would be too heavy, but a wheel is a wheel, and it rolled, bump, bump, bump, out from under the cabinet and into the light. The comet inside it flashed like a firework.

Pushing the marble back was the hardest part of the whole expedition. It wanted to roll off sideways, and the tractor wanted to go straight, and every thirty ticks Tam had to let go and wind the key. Desmond could not help at all. He could only hold the flashlight perfectly still, which is difficult for a boy, and say nothing, which is even harder.

When Tam finally reached the foot of the sofa, Desmond slid down onto the floor on his bottom, with his cast sticking out in front of him like a bridge. He had not been on the floor for nine days, and it hurt a little. He picked up the marble in two fingers and held it up to the light. Then he put his other hand down flat on the rug, palm up.

Tam drove the tractor onto the hand, and Desmond lifted it, very carefully, all the way up to the pillow. They stayed awake until the window turned gray. In the morning Mrs. Pell found

them both fast asleep, and she smiled and put the tractor on the shelf by his bed. That night Tam wound the key and chirped once. Probably fine, he thought. And this time, it was.

Questions

1. Where did Tam live before he found the tractor?

A. Behind the bookcase
B. Under the sofa
C. In the toy box

2. Why couldn't Desmond get his marble himself?

A. He was asleep
B. His leg was in a cast
C. The cabinet was locked

3. What did Desmond's flashlight do on the journey?

A. It made a bright road for Tam to follow
B. It scared the cricket away
C. It woke up Mrs. Pell

4. Why did Desmond switch the flashlight off when the green lights appeared in the window?

A. The battery had died
B. He did not want the cat to see them
C. He wanted to look at the stars

5. What does route mean in this story?

A. A loud noise
B. The way you go
C. A kind of toy

6. How did Tam push the marble back across the floor?

A. With the front of the tractor
B. He rolled it with his legs
C. Desmond tied a string to it

Words to know

baseboard: wall edge strip
cast: leg plaster
flashlight: hand lamp
route: way to go
gleam: bright shine

Answer key: Tam and the Wind-Up Tractor

1. A. Behind the bookcase
2. B. His leg was in a cast
3. A. It made a bright road for Tam to follow
4. B. He did not want the cat to see them
5. B. The way you go
6. A. With the front of the tractor