Name: _____ Date: _____

The Boxcar Children

Reading level 9 (5th grade) · 1395 words

Once there were four children who had no mother or father to take care of them. Henry was the oldest, and Jess was twelve, and Violet was a quiet, clever girl. The youngest was Benny, who was five years old and always hungry. They had heard that their grandfather was a hard man who would not want them. So they made up their minds to look after themselves.

One night in a little village, a baker's wife who had been asking questions sat up in the dark, talking to her husband through an open window. Jess listened, and she heard the woman say that tomorrow they would make the children tell their grandfather's name. "We must run away," Jess whispered to Henry. "We must be far from here before morning."

Jess worked fast and quietly. She slipped two loaves of bread into a laundry bag, with a cake of soap and two clean towels. She counted the money in her pocket, which was nearly four dollars. Violet carried her workbag and a box of matches. Henry lifted sleepy Benny in his arms. They tiptoed out and shut the door without a sound.

They walked along the country road in the moonlight. Henry carried Benny as far as he could. When Benny woke up he did not want to walk, so Violet had an idea. "Play you're Cinnamon Bear," she said, "who ran away to find a warm bed for the winter." Benny loved her stories about Cinnamon Bear. He marched along, yawning, between his brother and sister.

When the first light came, all four were nearly asleep on their feet. Violet pointed to a big haystack far away from any farmhouse. The children climbed over two stone walls and a brook to reach it. Jess dug a round nest for each of them in the hay. She pulled wisps over the openings so that nobody could see. Just then a milk wagon rumbled by, and none of them knew it.

They slept all day, and it was nearly seven o'clock in the evening when they woke. Henry gave Benny a serious talking-to. "When I say keep still," he said, "you must stop crying or laughing and be as quiet as a mouse." Jess cut a loaf into four pieces. She and Henry took the hard crusts, because crusts make you strong. Violet knew the real reason, but she said nothing.

At dark they crept to a brook and lay down to drink. After that they walked on. Soon they heard a wagon on the road behind them. They dropped behind some bushes like frightened rabbits. It was the baker and his wife, looking for them! "We will go on to Townsend tonight," they heard the baker say, "but they could never walk as far as Intervale." So the children went to Intervale.

All night long they trudged on, picking up hay they found on the road to make a bed for Benny.

At a fork a white signpost shone in the moonlight, and Henry read it out. Then the road turned into a cart path in the woods. The children found a mossy place between two stones, spread the hay, tucked Benny in, and fell asleep with hardly a thought of fear.

When Jess woke, the sky was black, and thunder was rumbling. She searched the woods for shelter. There, half hidden among the trees, she saw an old freight car standing on rusty rails. She ran back for the others, and they raced through the rain. They stood on a tree stump to roll the heavy door open. Henry struck a match to see that nobody was inside. Then they climbed in and shut the door before the storm broke.

Afterward the sun came out, and they opened the door on a green and golden wood, with ferns as high as a boy and a small waterfall dancing down some stones. "Henry," said Jess, "let's live here!" There was a brook for water. The car was dry, and a town was near enough to buy things. "I'd like to live here too," said Benny, "unless I can't have my dinner."

Henry went to town for milk, and Jess promised a surprise for when he came back. While she was busy with Benny and Violet, the bushes began to rustle. They all kept as still as stones. Out of the leaves crawled a big dog, hurt and whimpering. He was pulling himself along on three legs, and his tail was giving one weak wag.

Jess remembered what her mother had taught her, that you may help a dog if he wags his tail. She saw a long thorn stuck right through his paw. She gave him a crust to eat, held the paw firmly, and pulled the thorn out in one go. Then Violet wet a handkerchief in the brook, and Jess wrapped it round the sore foot. "Now we've got a dog!" Benny cried.

Henry came home with two bottles of milk, a loaf of brown bread and some golden cheese. He stared at the dog in Jess's lap. Jess spread the laundry bag on the ground for a tablecloth. They ate bread and cheese with a handful of blueberries, and drank from the two bottles, one for each pair. "This is the best supper ever," said Benny. And everyone felt that he was right.

Then they made beds of dry pine needles, and Jess cut the laundry bag into sheets. "This side is the bedroom," she said, "and the other is the sitting room, and sometimes the kitchen." "Couldn't it be the parlor?" begged Benny. "Certainly, the parlor!" After a wash in the brook, they fell asleep at six o'clock, with the door open and the dog beside them, and without any fear at all.

Next morning Jess was up first, as usual, and she looked up and down the brook. "This will be the well," she said, pointing to a deep pool below the falls. The big flat basin would be the washtub. And behind the waterfall was a small cool place where the milk bottles had sat all night, as cold as ice, for a refrigerator. Henry went off to town to look for work.

"Now we shall find a dump," said Jess, "and see what people have thrown away." The children walked down the rusty track, with the dog hopping behind on three legs, until Benny cried, "There's a wheel!" And there it was, a dump at the foot of the hill, full of old cups and

cans and wheels. Jess hugged him, wheel and all, and began to dig.

They found a white pitcher with a tiny chip, two cups, a bowl, five iron spoons and a big blue teapot without a handle. Benny found four wheels that matched, and he refused to leave them behind. Then he found his own treasure, a pink cup with a gold handle and a little shepherdess painted on it, giving a drink to her lamb. There was a crack, but he did not mind.

All the dishes were scrubbed in the brook. Jess scoured the rust from the spoons with sand. Then Violet showed her two thick blocks of wood nailed to the wall inside the car. Jess laid a board across them, and there was a shelf! They set the shining dishes on it, and Violet put a jar of wildflowers in the middle. "There!" said Jess. She said it three times, and Benny counted.

When Henry came home he had parcels in his arms and good news. A young doctor had let him mow the lawn and wash the car. The doctor paid him a dollar and offered him a steady job. The doctor's cook had even given him twelve ginger cookies. "His name is Watch," said Jess, pointing to the dog. Henry agreed, and he went off to get the dog a bone.

That night they ate bread and butter and dried beef at the shelf. They used spoons upside down for knives. Henry wrote their money on the wall with chalk. Violet hemmed a new tablecloth, and Benny fell asleep with Watch for a pillow. In the dark Watch growled at a noise outside, but it was only a rabbit. By morning it seemed as if they had always lived in the old freight car in the woods.

Questions

1. Why did the children run away at night?

A. They wanted to see the moon
B. They did not want to be sent to their grandfather
C. They were lost in the woods

2. Where did they sleep the first day?

A. In a haystack
B. In a barn
C. In a cave

3. Why did Jess say, "Let's live here!" about the freight car?

A. It was fancy
B. It had a stove
C. It was dry and near water

4. In the story, "shelter" means --

A. a place that keeps you safe from the weather
B. a kind of food

C. a loud noise

5. How did Jess help the dog?

A. She gave him a bath
B. She took the thorn out of his paw
C. She carried him to town

6. What does the story show about the four children?

A. They work together and make a home from very little
B. They are afraid to try anything
C. They are always arguing

Words to know

freight: carried goods
haystack: big hay pile
shelter: a safe place
thorn: sharp prickle
dump: place for junk
hemmed: sewed the edge

Answer key: The Boxcar Children

1. B. They did not want to be sent to their grandfather
2. A. In a haystack
3. C. It was dry and near water
4. A. a place that keeps you safe from the weather
5. B. She took the thorn out of his paw
6. A. They work together and make a home from very little