Name: _____ Date: _____

The Girl Who Checked the Arithmetic

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 1197 words

Agnes Tuckett-Bray was nine years old, less a month, and she had never once been wrong about a number. Her family treated this the way people treat weather: you could not argue with it, and you were wise to bring a coat. She knew how many steps led from the front gate to the kitchen door (nineteen, or twenty if you counted the cat), and she knew that the clock in the hall lost forty seconds a week. So when she walked into the cake tent at the Plumbury Summer Fair on Saturday and read the scoreboard, a small, cold, accurate feeling went right through her.

The scoreboard was a great black slate on wheels, and it listed what each judge had given each cake out of ten, with the total beside it in white chalk. Most of the totals were perfectly honest. But beside the name BARNABY BRAY, WALNUT-AND-ZUCCHINI LOAF, the slate said 9, 8, 9, and then, in large and confident writing, TOTAL: 29. Agnes read it three times. Then she tugged her mother's sleeve. "Mom," she said, in a voice that had never been taught to whisper, "nine and eight and nine is twenty-six."

Her mother's smile did something peculiar. It stayed exactly where it was, but it went stiff, like a cake left out overnight. "Aggie, love," she murmured, "we don't mention it." "Mention what?" "Your uncle's cake." Uncle Barnaby was the fair's treasurer, a round, pink, watchful man in a green vest, and he had won Best in Show eleven years running. Agnes asked Mrs. Lumley, the head cake judge, who sighed through her nose. "The scoreboard," said Mrs. Lumley, "is the scoreboard, dear." And she moved off with great speed for a woman wearing a hat the size of a wheel.

She did not shout, because shouting had never produced a correct sum in the history of the world. Instead she took out her notebook and her stopwatch and said "Come on, Total" to the goat tied outside the tent, who followed her only because she had a leaf. Together they went to the Wall of Winners, where the fair pinned up its old scoreboards. There were eleven years of them, pinned in rows and curling at the corners in the sun. It took her four minutes and a pencil.

In every single year, Barnaby's total was exactly three points higher than his marks added up to. Eleven years, eleven times, always plus three. "Not a mistake," said Agnes to the goat, whose name was Total because he had once eaten a column of figures off a bill, "because a mistake is different every time, and this is a habit." Total chewed thoughtfully on the corner of the Wall of Winners. "Somebody," said Agnes, "is adding three, and does not want it checked." She wrote the word habit, underlined it twice, and put the pencil behind her ear like a person who means business.

She went straight to her uncle, who was counting coins behind the raffle table like a man who is always being watched. "Uncle Barnaby," she said, "your loaf has three extra points." He did not blink, which she knew was a sign. "Aggie," he said, very gently, "at a fair, a total is a matter of opinion." "A total is never a matter of opinion. It is a matter of adding." "And you are eight." "Eight years and eleven months," said Agnes. "And a number does not know how old I am." Then she went away to make a plan, and Uncle Barnaby ate a cookie he had not meant to eat.

The plan was a booth. She built it from a cake tin turned upside down, a plank, a bedsheet, and a sign she lettered on the back of a cereal box: NUMBERS CHECKED. 1 PENNY. WRONG ANSWER, FREE. Total, who was good at looking trustworthy, stood beside it in her mother's second-best sun hat. By two o'clock there was a line. A man from the ring-toss booth wanted his takings added, and a lady from the jam stand had a bill she felt had been sneaky. Three boys wanted to know how many seconds were in a week, which Agnes told them with relish: 604,800.

She was right about everything, and people were enjoying it. The ring-toss man had been two dollars too lucky, and the jam lady had been charged for six jars instead of five. Agnes's own mother, who handed over her scone money, had undercharged herself by one dollar ten. The line grew until it wound past the ring toss and into the cake tent itself, where it found, as lines often do, the scoreboard. A small boy in a dinosaur sweater, waiting his turn, looked up at the slate and read it out loud, as children will. "Nine plus eight plus nine," he said. "That's twenty-six. Why does it say twenty-nine?"

The tent became quiet in the particular way a tent can, all at once, like a cloth being lifted from a birdcage. Somebody dropped a spoon. In the back, Mrs. Lumley's hat swiveled slowly toward the doorway, and underneath it her face turned pink. Behind the raffle table, Uncle Barnaby stood very still with a handful of coins. "Show your work, Uncle Barnaby," said Agnes, kindly, because it was the thing her teacher always said, and she held out the chalk. "It's worth marks."

There is nothing in the world so loud as a man writing a sum on a slate in front of three hundred people. He went up to the board. He wrote nine, and then eight, and then nine, and then a plus sign, and then his hand wandered off and wrote a small three. "Ah," said Uncle Barnaby. "Yes. Well. The three is for atmosphere." "Atmosphere is not a number," said Agnes. "It is, in a way," he said, and the whole tent was very quiet until somebody at the back began to laugh, and then somebody else, and then the entire fair, including Mrs. Lumley, whose hat shook.

Total, who had been listening very attentively, chose that moment to walk in, step up to the slate, and eat the three. He ate it all the way down to the board with a long, slow, satisfied chewing sound, and when he had finished the slate said only 26. Nobody could say that he

had done it on purpose, which, said Agnes later, was the great beauty of goats. Uncle Barnaby bowed to him. "Twenty-six," he said, "is a very respectable number, and I should like it known that I have been greatly relieved."

The next summer, the scoreboard in the cake tent had a small sign hanging from its frame, in careful cereal-box lettering: ADDING CHECKED BY A. TUCKETT-BRAY AND TOTAL. Uncle Barnaby's walnut-and-zucchini loaf came in third with an honest, ordinary twenty-six, and he was so cheerful about it that people checked his sum twice, just to be sure. At the gate, a very small notice said that children were free. A goat in a sun hat stood guard over it, looking at the crowd, adding quietly, and apparently getting the same answer every time.

Questions

1. What was wrong with the scoreboard?

A. Barnaby's total was three points too high
B. The slate was cracked
C. The judges forgot a cake

2. How did Agnes know it was a habit and not a mistake?

A. Mrs. Lumley told her
B. It was exactly three too high in all eleven years
C. Her uncle admitted it

3. Why did Agnes open the Numbers Checked booth?

A. To let the whole town see numbers checked fairly
B. To earn money for goat food
C. To hide from her uncle

4. What does "a cake left out overnight" suggest about her mother's smile?

A. It was sweet
B. It was stiff and hard
C. It was crumbly and sad

5. How did the whole tent learn the scoreboard was wrong?

A. A small boy added the numbers out loud
B. Agnes shouted it
C. The goat knocked it over

6. What did Total the goat do to the scoreboard?

A. Pushed it over
B. Ate the extra three
C. Rubbed out every total

Words to know

relish: great enjoyment
accurate: exactly right
habit: repeated action
takings: money earned
honest: truthful, fair

Answer key: The Girl Who Checked the Arithmetic

1. A. Barnaby's total was three points too high
2. B. It was exactly three too high in all eleven years
3. A. To let the whole town see numbers checked fairly
4. B. It was stiff and hard
5. A. A small boy added the numbers out loud
6. B. Ate the extra three