Name: _____ Date: _____

The Haunting of Bench Seven

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 1355 words

The lie began, as most of the best ones do, because somebody was being annoying. It was a Monday in October, and Imogen Salt, the girl who knew everything, had just informed the entire lunch table that ghosts could not exist, for four separate reasons she had ready in alphabetical order. Wesley Wu, who was eleven and loved puns and could not leave a silence alone, looked across the schoolyard at the old green bench by the fence and said, "Bench Seven is haunted." Imogen raised one eyebrow. "By who?" "By Mr. Pennywhistle," said Wesley. He had no idea where the name had come from.

"He only talks to people who leave him notes," Wesley went on, because the eyebrow was still up, and the only way out of a lie is generally further in. "You write him a question, you leave it under the seat, and in the morning he answers you." Imogen narrowed her eyes. "That is the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard," she said, and went on to ask three clarifying questions, which is how Wesley knew he had her. "He's shy," said Wesley. "And a little formal. He likes it if you say please." He felt, for about six seconds, wonderful. Then he remembered that somebody would have to write the answers.

That somebody was Wesley. On Tuesday he crept into the yard at seven-fifteen with a flashlight and a pencil held in his left hand, which is the hand he cannot write with, so that the letters came out wobbling like an old man's. Under the seat of Bench Seven he found one folded note from Imogen. It said: Dear Mr. Pennywhistle, what is the capital of Mongolia? Wesley looked it up, which felt like cheating, and wrote back, in wobbly capitals, ULAANBAATAR. I AM NOT A GEOGRAPHY GHOST, BUT I GET AROUND. He left it and ran. At lunch, Imogen would not look at him, which Wesley chose to take as a compliment.

By Friday, there were twenty-six notes. Somehow, the news had spread the way news does in a school, with exaggeration and without any adults. A girl in fourth grade wanted to know if Mr. Pennywhistle could help with her spelling test, and Wesley wrote back, STUDY. A boy asked whether the cafeteria meatloaf was alive, and he wrote, NOT ANYMORE. By the end of the second week, the bench had sixty notes a night, a waiting list, and a hand-lettered sign that someone had taped to the back that said PLEASE DO NOT MOB MR. P. Wesley had not made the sign. He started to feel the weight of his own invention.

Then the teachers joined. The new teacher, Mr. Lockhart, was a tall man with a bow tie and an expression of permanent mild interest. He left a note that said, in tidy handwriting: Dear Mr. Pennywhistle, what is your opinion of the passive voice? Wesley stared at it for a full minute. He wrote, AVOID IT, and added, in smaller letters, IT WAS AVOIDED BY ME. In the morning there was another note from Mr. Lockhart, which said, Very good, and underneath, P.S. I

know a bench worth writing to. Wesley read this three times, trying to work out whether he had just been congratulated by a teacher or caught by one.

It would have been a harmless joke, but jokes grow when you feed them. A lady from the office left a note asking about her lost ring, and Wesley, not knowing what else to do, took the note to Imogen. She had been secretly helping since the second Wednesday, and she proposed they treat it like a case. They checked the lost-property box, which was where the ring had been the entire time, underneath a mitten. When Mr. Pennywhistle's answer appeared on the bench, the office lady cried a little and brought in a plate of cookies. Wesley ate four of them, and each one tasted slightly of fraud.

On the Monday after that, Principal Haddad put yellow tape round Bench Seven. She was a brisk woman with a clipboard and a voice like a tidy drawer, and she announced over the loudspeaker that "no student is to loiter near the bench, interact with the bench, or encourage the bench." This had precisely the effect you would expect. Notes now arrived through the fence, in kites, in paper airplanes, and in one case in a very small boat on a very small stream of rain. A first-grader in a dinosaur raincoat stood outside the tape every morning, looking at the seat with a serious face.

On Thursday, Wesley found her note. It was written in large, careful pencil, and it said: Dear Mr. Pennywhistle, please tell my Pop-Pop Ike I got the cat. Nothing else. Wesley sat on the cold ground next to the tape for a very long time. He did not write back. He took the note to Imogen, and he said, "I have to stop," in a voice that did not sound like his own, and Imogen, for once in her life, did not say anything clever.

Instead, she said, "Wait. Say that name again." "Pennywhistle?" "Where did you get it?" "I don't know. I made it up." Imogen frowned, which in her case was a kind of sneeze for the brain. "Nobody makes up Pennywhistle," she said. "It's too specific." That afternoon, while the principal was at a meeting, she crawled under the yellow tape with a bucket, a wire brush, and a bottle of vinegar. She scrubbed the underside of the bench until a small brass plate, hidden under almost fifty years of moss, showed through. Wesley read it aloud.

The plate said, IN MEMORY OF EUSTACE PENNYWHISTLE, CARETAKER OF THIS SCHOOL, 1951–1978. HE FED THE SPARROWS HERE. Wesley sat down very slowly on the grass. He remembered then, as plainly as if it were happening, a day when he was seven. He had been hiding from a game of tag under Bench Seven, lying on his back, and he had looked up at the underside and read something brass. He had forgotten it completely. It had been waiting, apparently, for four years, in the back of his head, for a good moment to be funny.

He told Principal Haddad that afternoon, every word, with Imogen standing beside him like a witness for the defense. The principal listened with her clipboard on her knee. When he finished, she was quiet for a long time, and then she said, "My predecessor's predecessor

knew Eustace Pennywhistle. He used to keep a drawer of birdseed in the boiler room." She took off her glasses. "I think," said Principal Haddad, "that you will be writing a very long apology. In the school newsletter. And I think it had better be funny."

By the end of the month, the tape was gone, and Bench Seven wore a small white sign with a mailbox bolted underneath: FOR MR. P. The first-grader in the dinosaur raincoat got an answer. It was from Mr. Lockhart, who had stood up in assembly and admitted that he had been writing to the bench too. It said, in his tidy handwriting, that her grandfather would have been very proud of the cat. On a cold, bright Friday, Wesley left one more note, in his own writing this time, with his right hand: Dear Mr. Pennywhistle, sorry I made you up. It turns out I didn't. He left it under the seat.

In the morning there was an answer. It was in pencil, in a tall, upright, old-fashioned hand that did not look like Mr. Lockhart's, or Imogen's, or the principal's, or anybody's that Wesley knew. It was four words long. It said: Thank you. Feed sparrows. Imogen held it up to the light and checked for watermarks, the secret code, and a second layer of ink, and found nothing. "It could be anyone," she said. "It could," said Wesley, and he went to the cafeteria and came back with the end of a bread roll, which he crumbled, very carefully, along the back of the bench.

Questions

1. Why did Wesley first say Bench Seven was haunted?

A. He wanted to scare the teacher
B. He was teasing Imogen, who said ghosts could not exist
C. He had read a ghost story

2. Why did Wesley write in his left hand?

A. His right hand was hurt
B. So the writing would look old and wobbly
C. He was left-handed

3. What made Wesley decide he had to stop?

A. Principal Haddad's tape
B. A first-grader's note about her grandfather
C. Mr. Lockhart's question

4. What did the brass plate show?

A. Mr. Pennywhistle had been a real caretaker
B. The bench was a hundred years old
C. The principal had put it there

5. When Imogen's frown is "a kind of sneeze for the brain," it suggests she was

A. catching a cold

B. thinking hard and suddenly noticing something

C. feeling angry

6. Why does the story end with Wesley crumbling bread on the bench?

A. He was hungry

B. He took the mysterious note's four words seriously

C. He wanted to feed the principal

Words to know

loiter: hang about

clarifying: making clear

predecessor: person before

exaggeration: stretching the truth

fraud: pretending, cheating

Answer key: The Haunting of Bench Seven

1. B. He was teasing Imogen, who said ghosts could not exist
2. B. So the writing would look old and wobbly
3. B. A first-grader's note about her grandfather
4. A. Mr. Pennywhistle had been a real caretaker
5. B. thinking hard and suddenly noticing something
6. B. He took the mysterious note's four words seriously