Name: _____ Date: _____

The Last Bus

Reading level 8 (4th grade) · 565 words

Maya and her gran had been to a late film, and now they waited at the bus stop. The street lamps hummed. A cold wind pushed paper cups along the curb. At last the number nine bus rolled around the corner, its windows glowing yellow.

The driver was a woman called Dolores, and she nodded a friendly hello. The bus was almost empty. Maya and Gran sat near the front, where it was warm. A little brass clock ticked above the driver's wheel. Rain tapped softly on the roof.

Maya noticed a framed photograph beside the clock. It was old and faded, the color of weak tea. A smiling man in a driver's cap stood proudly in front of a bus just like this one. Small gold letters read, Forty Years on Route Nine.

Maya turned to look behind her. In the very last seat, a man sat quietly by the window. He wore a flat cap and a gray coat, and he was gazing out at the dark streets. She had not seen him get on.

“Gran,” whispered Maya, “who is that?” Gran looked back and took a long moment. Then she squeezed Maya's hand. “Just a rider, I think,” she said softly. “Someone who likes the last bus.” Her voice sounded calm, not scared. Maya nodded slowly.

The bus rolled on through the sleeping town. At every stop, the doors sighed open, and nobody got on. The man in the back never moved. Strangely, Maya did not feel afraid. The silence inside the bus felt peaceful and kind, like the hush of a library.

Maya looked again at the photograph. The man in the cap had the same flat cap and the same gentle eyes. Her heart gave a little jump. She leaned toward the front and asked, “Who is the man in the picture?”

Dolores smiled at her in the mirror. “That is Walter,” she said. “He drove this very bus for forty years and never missed a stop. Folks say he still likes to ride it home on the late runs.” Maya listened without moving.

“He never bothers anyone,” said Dolores. “He rides along, as quiet as falling snow, checking that everything is well.” Then she tipped her own cap toward the mirror. “Good evening, Walter,” she said. “Thank you for the company.” The bus hummed along the empty road.

Maya looked over her shoulder. For one moment, the man in the back seat seemed to touch the brim of his cap. A small smile crossed his face. Then the bus turned a corner, and a streak of light slid across the seat.

The bus stopped outside Maya's building. Gran stood up and thanked Dolores. Maya looked

back one last time. The seat at the back was empty now, with a faint dent in the cushion, as if somebody had just gotten up.

“Good night, Walter,” Maya whispered. The doors sighed shut behind them. As the bus pulled away, its tail lights glowed red in the dark. Then they grew small and were gone. Behind them, the street was quiet, and the whole night felt peaceful.

Maya took Gran's hand and climbed the steps. “Will he ride again?” she asked. Gran smiled. “Only on nights when the bus needs company,” she said. Maya fell asleep thinking of the quiet rider, and she slept without a single worry or a bad dream.

Questions

1. Where are Maya and her gran going?

A. To school
B. Home
C. To the park

2. What hangs beside the clock?

A. A map
B. A bell
C. A photograph

3. Who is Walter?

A. A driver who drove this bus for forty years
B. A new rider
C. The bus mechanic

4. Why does Maya stop feeling afraid?

A. Gran leaves
B. The quiet in the bus feels kind
C. She falls asleep

5. What does gazing mean?

A. Running quickly
B. Talking softly
C. Looking for a long time

Words to know

photograph: a picture taken by camera
faded: lost its bright color
route: the path a bus follows
gazing: looking for a long time

Answer key: The Last Bus

1. B. Home
2. C. A photograph
3. A. A driver who drove this bus for forty years
4. B. The quiet in the bus feels kind
5. C. Looking for a long time