Name: _____ Date: _____

# The Empty Birdcage

Reading level 13 · 2079 words

The canary was gone. The cage was locked. We solved it before the nine o'clock bell, entirely by reasoning and without disturbing anything, and here is how. I am writing this in strict order, because order is the one thing in life I have never found to be unreliable. There are five of us in the Locked Room Club: Ravi, who has theories; Tobias, who has a ruler; Ngozi, who keeps a notebook of secret writing; Jun, who has the sharpest ears in the school; and myself, Elspeth, who keeps the minutes, because somebody must. Our teacher, Ms. Fairweather, says that the minutes are the reason we have never solved anything wrong twice.

The canary's name is Folio, and he lives in the library at Ashgrove School, on an iron stand against the north wall, in a brass cage roughly the size of a bread bin. Every Thursday from four o'clock until five, Mr. Abernathy, the librarian, opens the small brass door and allows Folio to fly loose among the shelves. At five exactly, he taps a teaspoon on the bars, and Folio, who has never once failed to obey, hops back inside for his seed, which is his reward for punctuality. Mr. Abernathy then turns the key in the brass lock, because some Year Eights once let Folio out to discover whether he could talk, and finally he drops the green cover over the cage. Folio answers with one small peep, which is his way of saying goodnight, and the whole library settles into silence.

There is one further fact, which I mention only because it later proved important. Hanging inside the cage is a yellow wool pom-pom on a string, knitted by the Year Sevens as a present, and from across the room it resembles Folio so closely that visitors regularly say hello to it. Folio has never objected; he sits on the perch beside it and sings at it, which Jun maintains is the nearest that canaries ever come to an argument. During his hour of freedom on Thursdays, Folio's favorite place is the top of the tall north bookcase, where the heating pipe runs behind the plaster and the air stays warm. Mr. Abernathy leaves a saucer of seed up there for him, out of reach of everyone except a person with the library ladder.

Last Thursday, the Club met at half past four, as usual, around the long table beneath the gallery. Mr. Abernathy was not himself. He had a streaming cold, and that very morning he had snapped his glasses in a door, so that he squinted at everything, mistook the globe for a pumpkin, and sneezed into a handkerchief the size of a pillowcase. A note had arrived from Matron, ordering him to spend the night in the infirmary, and he kept announcing that he would go at five, as soon as Folio was safely in. At five minutes to five, the Club left for supper. I remember the moment precisely, because I wrote it down. Folio was singing on the gallery rail, as loudly as a kettle. "Five o'clock, you scoundrel," Mr. Abernathy told him, and blew his nose.

At twenty to eight on Friday morning, Ms. Fairweather woke us herself and walked us across the frosty quad, with Mr. Dunmore, the caretaker, jingling along behind. He unlocked the library door, and we went in, and the first thing we saw was the green cover still draped over the cage, with the little brass lock still fastened beneath it. Ms. Fairweather lifted the cover with two fingers, as though it might be hot, and the yellow pom-pom swung gently on its string above an empty perch. The seed dish was full, and the water had not been touched. Mr. Dunmore said a word that Ms. Fairweather pretended not to hear, and Jun, standing perfectly still in the doorway, said, "The pipe is whistling funny, like a bird near it."

We did what the Club always does, which is to examine the room before anybody is permitted an opinion. The tall windows were latched from the inside, and the dust on every sill lay smooth as flour. The library door had been locked throughout the night; Mr. Dunmore had turned the key himself at six on Thursday and again at half past seven on Friday, and he keeps a logbook to prove it. There were no feathers anywhere, which Ngozi called good news and Tobias called merely news. And there was exactly one key to the cage. Mr. Dunmore said so twice. It had been made by a locksmith in 1998 and never copied, and it lived on Mr. Abernathy's watch chain, which had hung from a bedpost in the infirmary all night, with Matron asleep in a chair beside it.

At breakfast, which none of us was able to eat, each member of the Club offered a theory, and I took them down in order. Ravi's was the most thrilling. Somebody had stolen Folio, he said, using a copy of the key, and was at that moment composing a ransom note demanding seed cake. Tobias disagreed; in his view, Folio had simply slipped out between the bars. He had measured them on the way past, with the ruler he keeps in his sock, and they were one centimeter apart. But Folio, he admitted, is three centimeters wide, because Tobias had measured him for the science fair. "I am only saying what a canary could do," said Tobias, who then turned slightly pink and put his ruler away.

Ngozi's theory was Duchess, the cook's tabby, who is forbidden to enter the library but is extremely clever, Ngozi said. Jun pointed out that Duchess had spent the night asleep on the kitchen bread bin, as the cook had personally informed him, and that the kitchen door had been shut. A cat cannot turn a key in any case, I added, and there had been no feathers. Jun's own theory was quieter. Mr. Abernathy had been worried about Folio, he suggested, and had carried him to the infirmary in his pocket for company. We asked Matron on the way to the dining hall, and she replied that Mr. Abernathy had slept with a cold and a hot-water bottle and nothing else. "And if he had owned a canary in his pocket, young man, I would have noticed," she said.

That left me, and I had no theory at all, only a notebook. This is the point at which Ngozi's notebook becomes relevant. Ngozi writes in cipher, so that nobody can read over her shoulder, and the rule is simple: for every letter she means, she writes the letter that follows it in the alphabet. If she means A, she writes B; if she means B, she writes C. On Thursday

evening, she told us, she had forgotten her scarf and had run back to the library door at about twenty-five minutes past five. She had looked through the glass, and had written down in cipher whatever she saw. She read it out to us now, running her finger under the letters. "OP TQPPO PS CJSE."

Take a minute, if you like, and move every letter back by one place, and read what is left. When Ngozi did it aloud, in the middle of the dining hall, the rest of us fell silent. The message said: NO SPOON OR BIRD. She had seen Mr. Abernathy, sneezing and squinting, hurry across the library and drop the green cover over the cage. He had turned the key. He had hurried out. There had been no tapping of a teaspoon and no little peep of goodnight from inside, and she had thought nothing of it, because he was ill. "I only wrote it down because it was odd," she said. Ms. Fairweather, passing with a tray of toast, stopped. "Is that evidence?" she asked. I told her that I would inform her presently.

Here is everything we knew at half past eight, in the order we learned it. There are ten clues, five on this page and five on the next, and the tenth is the quietest. If you would like to solve the case yourself, stop after the tenth; the answer begins on the page after. First: every Thursday, Folio is let out from four until five, and always returns to the cage when the spoon is tapped. Second: at five minutes to five on Thursday, he was still out, singing on the gallery rail. Third: Mr. Abernathy had a heavy cold and broken glasses. Fourth: at twenty-five past five, he covered the cage and locked it, with no spoon and no peep. Fifth: the only key stayed on his chain, beside Matron, all night.

Sixth: the bars are one centimeter apart, and Folio is three centimeters wide. Seventh: the windows were latched, the dust on the sills was unbroken, the kitchen door was shut, and there were no feathers. Eighth: the yellow pom-pom looks exactly like Folio from across the room. Ninth: on Thursdays, Folio roosts on top of the north bookcase, near the warm pipe, where there is a saucer of seed. And tenth, which I am embarrassed to report that I had written down without reading: on Friday morning the pipe was whistling, and Jun said that it was whistling funny, like a bird near it. That was everything. Nobody in the Club had yet said it aloud, but all of it was on the page.

Here is what I said, standing on a chair so that everyone could hear. A locked room is ordinarily a puzzle about a door, but this case was a puzzle about a bird. All of us had asked the same question, which was how Folio had escaped from a locked cage, and it was the wrong question, because there had never been a moment when Folio was inside a locked cage. At five minutes to five he was singing on the rail. At twenty-five past five, Mr. Abernathy, with no glasses and a heavy cold, glimpsed a yellow shape in the cage, which was the pom-pom, and covered it and locked it without tapping the spoon. Nobody had stolen Folio, and nobody had let him out. We had been staring at the lock. We should have been consulting the clock.

Ravi wanted to know where Folio was, then. I said that he was exactly where the clues said he would be: somewhere warm, with a saucer of seed, and not locked in anything. Jun said, "The pipe has been whistling all morning, and it is not the pipe." We ran back across the quad. Tobias carried the library ladder to the north wall and climbed it, with Mr. Dunmore holding the bottom and saying the word again. At the top, between the seed saucer and a stack of encyclopedias, with his feathers fluffed up like a small yellow cushion, sat Folio. He looked at us as though we were late. Then he opened his beak and sang, and we understood that the whistling had been Folio all along, singing beside the pipe.

Mr. Abernathy came across the quad at ten minutes to nine, in his dressing gown and slippers, with Matron two steps behind him giving instructions that he was not following. He saw the cage first, then the cover, then the lock, and I watched him work it out. He had covered an empty cage. He had locked a pom-pom in it. He had gone to bed with a cold and left a canary to spend the night alone in a library, on a bookcase, in the warm. He sat down on the nearest chair and laughed until he had to blow his nose. Then Tobias came down the ladder with Folio on his finger, and Mr. Abernathy stopped laughing, and held out both hands.

The record shows the case closed at 8:52, eight minutes before the bell. Ravi maintains that it should read 8:50, but Ravi has never once been right about a minute, and I have the minutes. On Thursdays, Mr. Abernathy now taps the teaspoon, then counts to ten aloud, then looks inside the cage through a new pair of glasses, and then, as an additional precaution, looks again. Folio finds this procedure insulting, and sits on the pom-pom's side of the perch to show it, and goes in at the last possible moment, with the air of a bird doing everybody a favor.

## Questions

**1. What did Folio always do when Mr. Abernathy tapped the spoon?**

A. Hop back into his cage
B. Fly to the gallery rail
C. Hide behind the pom-pom

**2. What did Ngozi's cipher say?**

A. No key or lock
B. No spoon or bird
C. No cat or cover

**3. Why could Ravi's theory, that someone with a copy of the key took Folio, not be right?**

A. Folio was too heavy to carry
B. The library had no door
C. There was only one key, and it stayed on Mr. Abernathy's chain all night

**4. In the story, a theory is**

A. a reasoned guess
B. a kind of lock
C. a school rule

**5. Why did Elspeth say they had been asking the wrong question?**

A. Folio was never inside the locked cage
B. Folio had learned to open locks
C. The cage had been too small for Folio

**6. Where did the Club find Folio?**

A. In the infirmary
B. On top of the north bookcase
C. Under the cook's bread bin

## Words to know

theory: reasoned guess
cipher: secret code
infirmary: school sickroom
gallery: raised walkway
squinted: peered, eyes narrowed

# Answer key: The Empty Birdcage

1. A. Hop back into his cage
2. B. No spoon or bird
3. C. There was only one key, and it stayed on Mr. Abernathy's chain all night
4. A. a reasoned guess
5. A. Folio was never inside the locked cage
6. B. On top of the north bookcase