Name: _____ Date: _____

The Lost and Found Desk

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 1289 words

SEPTEMBER. The lost-and-found at Harlan Middle was not a room. It was a gray metal desk under the back stairs, with a shelf of orphaned things behind it and a custodian named Mr. Obuya, who whistled the same four notes whenever he was thinking. Nico Ruiz found it on the third day of sixth grade, because he wanted the one place in the building where nobody would ask him anything out loud. His words stuck at the front, like a coat on a hook, so he carried a notebook of questions and kept his mouth shut.

OCTOBER. On the first of the month, Mr. Obuya looked up from a tangle of shoelaces and said that every month he borrowed one student, and that Ms. Linden had told him Nico asked good questions. Nico's face went hot, and he took out a card and wrote, I don't talk much. Mr. Obuya read it and turned it over, and on the back he wrote, Neither does the lost-and-found. It just waits. Then he handed Nico a clipboard and a rule. "Every lost thing has a person at the other end," he said, "and finding the person is easy. The hard part is asking the next question."

The first thing that came in was a retainer, wrapped in a lunchroom napkin with a crumb of pizza stuck to it. Nobody had written a name on it, and nobody came to claim it, and by Thursday Nico had run out of questions. So he watched lunch for a week to see who ate with a hand over their mouth, and he found a boy named Theo, who had been doing it for eight days. Nico did not say a word to him. He left a card in Theo's locker that said, I found something, and I am not telling, so check the desk, and the next morning the napkin was gone.

NOVEMBER. A trumpet mouthpiece turned up in the stairwell, silver and polished and too good to be a spare, with two initials scratched into the rim. The band director said it was not one of his. The initials were P.V., and the only P.V. in sixth grade was Priscilla Vance, who had a crowd of friends who laughed like a flock of birds taking off, and who had quit band in September. Nico wrote a note and crumpled it, and at lunch he stood outside the stairwell and listened, and from three flights up came a long, sweet, cracked sound that echoed down the concrete.

She stopped when she saw him, and Priscilla looked at the mouthpiece in his hand, and her face did a number of complicated things. "Please don't tell anyone," she said, very fast, "because they would think I was a band nerd." Nico opened his mouth, and the first word got stuck, and stuck again, and he stood there with his tongue pressed against his teeth. Priscilla did not finish his sentence for him, and she did not look away. She waited, which was something that no popular person had ever done for him. "Q-q-questions don't tell," he said at

last, and it was the longest sentence he had spoken all fall.

DECEMBER. In December a pair of heavy blue glasses came to the desk, and the owner turned out to be Lin Tran, who had arrived in October with a mouth like a motorcycle and a thousand stories. Lin talked through every class, and Nico finally noticed that he talked loudest whenever the teacher wrote something on the board. "I can see fine," said Lin, patting his pockets. "I can see everything. I am a very visual person." Nico slid the glasses across the counter. Lin looked at them for a while, and then he put them on, and his voice came down to normal, as if somebody had turned a dial.

JANUARY. A gray sweatshirt had hung on the back hook for so long that nobody remembered it. Inside the collar a name was sewn in red stitches, R. DEMETRIOU, and Mr. Obuya said that Ruth had left two years ago, when her family moved, and that nobody had ever known where. So Nico asked the next question, and then the one after that, and spent three weeks bothering the office and the librarian and a retired gym teacher, until he had an address in another state. He wrapped the sweatshirt in brown paper, and Mr. Obuya whistled his four notes all the way to the post office, and for once they sounded like a song.

FEBRUARY. Nico lost his notebook. He knew it by second period, the way you know about a missing tooth, with his tongue going to the place where it ought to be. Every question he had ever written was in that notebook, and some of them were about himself. He checked the desk and the bus and the gym, and he found nothing, and on Thursday he found a note on the clipboard in loopy handwriting. I FOUND IT, it said. I did not read it. I swear. (I read two pages.) P.V. Nico laughed so hard that he started to hiccup, and he had to hold on to the desk.

MARCH. A postcard came in the mail, addressed to the lost-and-found, with a picture of a covered bridge on the front. Hi, wrote Ruth Demetriou. I wondered where it went. I thought it had just disappeared. Thank you for asking. Mr. Obuya read it aloud twice, because Nico asked him to, and then he tacked it above the desk with a red pin, and the two of them stood and looked at it for a good while. It had taken two years to arrive, but it had come, and it was the first thing on that wall that anyone had answered.

APRIL. Ms. Linden's class had to give a talk about a person they admired, and Nico wrote his about Mr. Obuya and practiced until he knew every word. At the front of the room, the first word was the worst one, because it began with a vowel, and the vowel did not come. He stood there for what felt like a month, with his face burning and the clock ticking, and nobody laughed. Lin, who never stopped talking, said nothing at all, and Priscilla gave him one small nod. "Oh," Nico said, and then, "Ob-b-buya," and the rest of the talk came after it, the way a train follows its engine.

MAY. The shelf behind the desk held thirty-one things that nobody had come for, among them a left glove, a calculator, and a drawing of a green dragon signed only J. Nico asked everyone

he could think of, and the dragon belonged to no one. "Some things don't get found," said Mr. Obuya. "I used to hate that." He did not say what had changed his mind, and Nico did not ask him. In June the leftovers would go to the shelter on Larch Street, and until then Nico propped the dragon against the wall, where it could look out at the hall.

JUNE. On the last Friday, Mr. Obuya's next student came down the stairs, a small fifth grader with her backpack strapped to her chest. "Where do I s-s-start?" she asked, and her voice caught on the first sound, just as his did. Nico looked at her, and he looked at the man behind the desk, who was bent over a pile of shoelaces. Then he took a breath and said, "You ask where it was l-l-last seen." The word stuck, and he let it stick. Behind him, Mr. Obuya began to whistle his four quiet notes, slowly, and let each one wait for the next.

Questions

1. What did Mr. Obuya write on the back of Nico's card?

A. Neither does the lost-and-found. It just waits.
B. Come back tomorrow.
C. Please speak up.

2. How did Nico find the owner of the retainer without saying anything out loud?

A. He asked every student in the cafeteria
B. He noticed a boy who had stopped smiling and left him a private card
C. He gave it to the principal

3. What did Priscilla do when Nico's first word got stuck?

A. She finished the sentence for him
B. She walked away
C. She waited and did not look away

4. Why did Lin Tran talk loudest when the teacher wrote on the board?

A. He was bored
B. He could not see the board and was covering it up
C. He wanted to be funny

5. What happened to the gray sweatshirt in January?

A. Nico threw it away
B. He tracked down Ruth's new address and mailed it to her
C. Mr. Obuya wore it home

6. In this story, the word orphaned describes things that

A. were broken
B. were brand new
C. have no owner there to take them

Words to know

orphaned: left without owner
retainer: tooth holder
claim: say it's yours
mouthpiece: horn part
stairwell: shaft of stairs

Answer key: The Lost and Found Desk

1. A. Neither does the lost-and-found. It just waits.
2. B. He noticed a boy who had stopped smiling and left him a private card
3. C. She waited and did not look away
4. B. He could not see the board and was covering it up
5. B. He tracked down Ruth's new address and mailed it to her
6. C. have no owner there to take them