Name: _____ Date: _____

The Stamp of the North Wind

Reading level 9 (5th grade) · 1117 words

The stamp would not stay on. On the coldest night of that winter, Ana licked it, pressed it to the corner of a letter, and counted to ten. On eleven it lifted at one edge and fluttered off the envelope like a leaf. It was a small blue stamp with a fish on it, and by now she had stuck it down nine separate times.

She tried paste, and she tried tape, and she tried the white of an egg, which Oma Rue said was the oldest glue in the world. Pip-Pip, the post office owl, watched from the sorting shelf. Then she laid the heaviest book in the whole post office on top of the stamp and turned her back. When she looked again, the book was sitting there all alone. The stamp was gone.

Ana found it on the floor beside the north window, although the window was shut tight. She picked it up with tweezers, because something about it made her careful. The back was wet and as cold as a spoon in winter, and it smelled of snow and pine needles and iron. On the paper was the smear of a fingerprint, wider than her whole hand.

Oma Rue put on her spectacles and studied the stamp for a long time. "That stamp has been licked," she said at last, "by the North Wind himself." Pip-Pip fluffed up all his feathers at once. The envelope was addressed to Captain Dill, The Last Lighthouse, End of the World, and the note inside said, The supply ships come tonight. Keep your lamp lit.

Ana read the note twice. "If this letter does not get there tonight, the ships will come into the harbor in the dark," she said, and Oma Rue nodded. The Night Post Office had one rule that mattered more than all the others: every letter gets there. Neither of them needed to say it out loud. Oma Rue only slipped a spare stamp and a good pencil into the bag. "You never know," she said.

The road north was a line of lanterns, one on every post, and Ana followed them all the way up the long hill. The wind began small, a tug at her sleeve. By the village of Hush it was shoving her down the street. Washing lines stood out as flat as flags, and a man in a doorway was holding his hat on with both hands. A hen went past at head height, looking deeply offended.

Ana had to lean forward until her nose almost touched the road. Pip-Pip tried to fly beside her and was blown backward over a garden wall, and after that he rode inside her scarf with only his eyes showing. The wind made a low, long note as it went by, the same sound you hear when you blow across the top of an empty bottle.

At the last lantern the road simply stopped. Ahead of Ana was a cliff of gray ice, and far below it a black sea heaved up and down like something breathing. On a point of rock, very small

and very far away, stood a lighthouse with no light in it. A roar came off the ice, and Ana knew that she had found him.

She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, "PLEASE STOP BLOWING!" The wind snatched the words right out of her mouth and flung them away behind her, and it took her hat as well. She tried again, much louder, and the wind answered by being louder still. It was like trying to talk to a waterfall.

Then a voice came out of the storm, so enormous that it seemed to come from every side at once. "WHO IS THAT? SPEAK UP!" Ana opened her mouth, closed it, and thought hard. The voice went on, grumbling. "Nobody ever talks to me. They only duck. So I take their stamps. STAMPS ARE THE ONLY BITS OF POST THAT EVER COME NEAR ME."

Ana stood very still while a thought came to her, slowly, the way snow comes down. The North Wind stole stamps because he had never once been sent a letter. Everyone in the world was afraid of him, and not a single person had thought to write. She took out her spare stamp and her good pencil, and although her fingers were stiff, she made the pencil go.

Dear North Wind, she wrote. Please would you be still tonight, just until the ships are in? Yours truly, Ana. P.S. This is your first letter. Then she licked the spare stamp and stuck it on, and it lay down flat and stayed, because it was her own stamp and not his. She held the envelope up high. "This one is yours," she said.

The wind dropped as if somebody had shut a door. There was no roar and no whistle anymore, and Ana could hear the sea, and the creak of her own coat, and the ice ticking as it settled. The letter lifted out of her hand and hung in the air in front of her face, quite still. A great cold breath moved slowly over the page, one word at a time.

He read slowly, because he had never had any practice. He read it once, and then again, and then a third time, and a drift of tiny snowflakes fell on the paper and melted there. On the far black point of rock, a small gold light flickered into life inside the lighthouse. It grew steady, and it did not go out.

Ana ran along the cliff path with her scarf flapping loose and Pip-Pip wide awake, and she knocked on the lighthouse door. Captain Dill, who was very old and very surprised, took the letter in both hands. "Nine nights I have lit that lamp," she said, "and nine nights it was blown out. Tonight it stays. Look!" Out on the water, a row of little lights was coming in.

All the way home, a gentle push followed Ana, like a hand on the back of a swing. It carried her down the road of lanterns and through the village of Hush, where the washing hung straight and the hen sat down again. She was asleep before she had finished her cocoa, and Pip-Pip was asleep before she had begun.

The next night a letter lay on the mat of the Night Post Office, stiff with frost, with its stamp stuck on perfectly straight. It was addressed in white swirls to Miss Ana. Inside there was a

single word, and it was already melting as she read it. Please, it said. Then, a moment later, it said, Again.

Questions

1. Why did Ana think the stamp kept leaving the letter?

A. It was too old to stick
B. Someone with a huge cold fingerprint had licked it
C. The window was open

2. Why did the letter to Captain Dill matter so much that night?

A. It held her birthday card
B. Ships were coming in and needed her lamp lit
C. It told her to leave her post

3. What did the wind take from Ana when she first shouted?

A. Her hat
B. Her pencil
C. Her lantern

4. In this story, what does the word supply mean?

A. Goods that are brought
B. A kind of lamp
C. A very old map

5. Why did the North Wind go still?

A. Ana threw a stone at him
B. He wanted to read his first letter
C. Captain Dill asked him to

6. What did the last letter say?

A. Please. Again.
B. Dear Ana, thank you.
C. The ships are late.

Words to know

spectacles: eye glasses
supply: goods brought
tweezers: tiny pincers
lighthouse: tower with lamp
drift: heap blown up

Answer key: The Stamp of the North Wind

1. B. Someone with a huge cold fingerprint had licked it
2. B. Ships were coming in and needed her lamp lit
3. A. Her hat
4. A. Goods that are brought
5. B. He wanted to read his first letter
6. A. Please. Again.