Name: _____ Date: _____

The School on the 7:15

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1511 words

Every morning at 7:15, a train leaves Pebblebrook Station with fourteen classrooms on board, one in each car. Nobody remembers exactly who decided this. The school used to be an ordinary building, but one night it grew tired of standing in the same place and quietly rolled itself onto the rails. Mrs. Abernathy-Plume, who is both the head teacher and the guard of the train, says that the great advantage is that field trips are very short.

There is only one rule about the 7:15, and it is that the train leaves when Wally Dobbs gets on. Wally has never been on time in his entire life. On Monday he arrived on the back of a bread van, and on Tuesday he came in a canoe on a trailer, and on Wednesday a man on stilts carried him over the fence. Mrs. Abernathy-Plume waited patiently with the whistle between her teeth. The 7:15 left at 7:19.

Car 4. Car 4 is always upside down, and nobody minds, except the coats. The children walk across the ceiling, which is where the floor is, and the desks hang down from the floor, which is where the ceiling is. The lamps shine up from underneath their feet, so every September the new children are told, very kindly, to mind the lamps. When it rains, the water on the windows falls the wrong way, and puddles gather above the door.

One day a girl named Thea came in from Car 5 with a message, walked in very briskly, and then stopped, looking pale. "Your whole car," she said, "is upside down." The children of Car 4 looked at each other for a while. "No," said a boy named Hugh. "Yours is." They wrote a note about it and sent it down the train, and by the time it reached Car 6, the answer was waiting. We are sideways, it said. Please stop asking. The 7:15 left at 7:22.

Car 7. Mr. Ostrander is the teacher who speaks only in questions. Nobody knows exactly why, and he will not say, although it would be easy enough to ask him. Is it time to open our books? Would anyone care to sit down? Isn't this a fine morning? Over the years the children of Car 7 have become so good at answering questions that their parents find it slightly alarming at dinner.

One morning at Pebblebrook, a baggage cart rolled off the platform and began to coast toward the open door of Car 7. "Is anybody going to stop that?" asked Mr. Ostrander. "Wouldn't somebody like to run?" "Yes!" shouted a small girl named Bea, and she ran down the aisle as fast as she could, because it was an excellent question, and caught the cart by its handle before it reached the step. "Wasn't that wonderful?" cried Mr. Ostrander. It was. The 7:15 left at 7:16.

Little Dunnock is the stop where nobody gets off. The 7:15 pulls in at 7:36 and waits four minutes with its doors wide open, and the stationmaster, Mr. Quigg, stands on the platform

with a tray of fourteen cups of tea. He has done this every day for thirty-one years. Nobody has ever taken a cup, and nobody has ever stepped down. Mr. Quigg waves politely, the doors close, and the tea goes back to the kitchen, where he drinks it all himself, very slowly.

Car 11. The Boy With the Hat has worn the same hat every day, indoors and out, for as long as anybody can remember. Nobody asks about it, because on the 7:15 it is thought rude to ask about hats. His real name is Cyril, but nobody uses it, since they are all too busy not asking. Then, on one March morning, the hat began to cheep. The entire car went silent, and fourteen pencils stopped moving at exactly the same moment.

A robin had built her nest in the hat while he was mending a fence, and Cyril had been far too polite to disturb her. Three eggs had hatched under his hat without his saying a word about it. By the end of the month, the chicks were hopping up and down his shoulders. At Little Dunnock, Cyril opened the window, and all three of them hopped onto the sill and flew away. They were the first passengers ever to get off. Mr. Quigg dropped his tray. The 7:15 left at 7:38.

Wally Dobbs owns eleven alarm clocks, and no two of them agree. One is ten minutes slow, one is an hour fast, and one runs backward on Thursdays. Not one has ever managed to wake him. So Wally, being a fair-minded boy who trusts no single clock, believes in the average. Every morning he adds up all the times and divides by eleven, and that takes eleven minutes. The 7:15 left at 7:44.

Car 14. Odette collects the tickets, and in eleven years she has never lost a single one. Every ticket is punched with a hole in the shape of a star, and every afternoon she pastes it onto the wall of Car 14, in tidy rows, with the date written underneath. By now the walls are covered from the floor to the ceiling, and from the back of the car they glitter like the night sky. The 7:15 left at 7:20.

Car 9. Car 9 has a ghost, and he is the politest ghost on the whole railway. His name is Mr. Pomfret, and he says sorry before he floats through a wall, and he rattles his chains only when asked. His difficulty is that he cannot remember what he is haunting for. Each morning he asks the class to remind him, and each morning the class gives him a different answer, none of which he finds entirely convincing.

Today, a girl named Nell thought of a new one. "Maybe you didn't get a seat," she said. The ghost went very still. Then, slowly, he nodded. On the very first school train, in 1907, a boy had stood the whole way, and nobody had ever offered him a chair. Nell dragged a desk over to the window. Mr. Pomfret sat down on it, solid enough to hold a pencil, and he said thank you eleven times. The 7:15 left at 7:23.

Car 12 has a map of the train on its wall, and the map says, in red letters, YOU ARE HERE. Mrs. Abernathy-Plume stood in front of it one morning and asked the class where they were. "Here," said a boy, pointing to the red dot. "Look closer," said Mrs. Abernathy-Plume. The

map showed Car 12, and in Car 12 there was a small map on a small wall, and it showed a smaller train with a smaller Car 12 inside it.

They fetched a magnifying glass. The maps went on getting smaller and smaller, each one with a still smaller map inside it, until the last was no bigger than a pinhead. On the pinhead there was a tiny train, and beside the tiny train there was a speck, running, and underneath the speck, in letters nobody could read without the glass, were the words W. DOBBS, LATE. The 7:15 left at 7:25.

On Friday a visitor arrived. Inspector Fusk-Lowell had come to inspect the school, and he had been told that it left Pebblebrook at 7:15 sharp. He stood on the platform at 7:14 with a clipboard and a very sharp pencil, and he looked at the train for some time, from the front to the back and then again from the back to the front. "I do not see a school," he said. "I see a railway." "Come aboard," said Mrs. Abernathy-Plume, "and have a look around."

He stepped into Car 4, fell upward, and had to be helped down from the ceiling. In Car 7, Mr. Ostrander asked him seven questions, and he answered every single one of them. In Car 9 he shook hands with the ghost. At Little Dunnock he drank a cup of tea that Mr. Quigg had been hoping to hand somebody for thirty-one years, and he said it was the best he had ever tasted.

In Car 14 he stood among the glittering walls. "Eleven years of attendance," said Odette, "and every day of it a star. I can show you any morning you like." She could, too. The Inspector said nothing for a long time. Then he wrote a single word on his clipboard, and Mrs. Abernathy-Plume leaned over to read it. The word was Irregular. Underneath, in smaller writing, he had added, Highly recommended.

And Wally Dobbs? He had slept on the platform in his pajamas, with a pillow, because he had a feeling about Friday, and he had never had a feeling before. At exactly 7:15 he opened his eyes and found himself beside the train, in front of the whole school, with the Inspector watching. Mrs. Abernathy-Plume blew the whistle. The 7:15 left at 7:15. Three clocks stopped, and Mrs. Abernathy-Plume had to sit down.

Questions

1. When does the 7:15 leave Pebblebrook Station?

A. When Wally Dobbs gets on
B. When the bell rings
C. When the sun comes up

2. Why is Car 4 a funny place to visit?

A. It is always upside down
B. It is always empty
C. It has no windows

3. What does irregular mean in this story?

A. Not what is usual

B. Very small

C. Exactly on time

4. Why did nobody ever get off at Little Dunnock before the robins?

A. The stop was too far to walk

B. Nobody had a reason or a ticket to get off

C. The doors were locked

5. What did the Inspector think of the school in the end?

A. He thought it was a mistake

B. He thought it was unusual but wonderful

C. He closed it down

6. Why was the last 7:15 the only one that left on time?

A. Wally slept on the platform

B. The conductor changed the time

C. The train went faster

Words to know

inspect: check carefully

irregular: not usual

platform: station landing

stationmaster: station boss

average: middle number

Answer key: The School on the 7:15

1. A. When Wally Dobbs gets on
2. A. It is always upside down
3. A. Not what is usual
4. B. Nobody had a reason or a ticket to get off
5. B. He thought it was unusual but wonderful
6. A. Wally slept on the platform