Name: _____ Date: _____

The Year of the Split Friendship

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 1153 words

SEPTEMBER. Nora and Beth had been best friends since they were five, when Beth bit Nora on the arm over the last green marker, which they both agreed was how it had started. They sat in the third seat of Bus 14, and they spoke in a language of signals, an eyebrow, a cough, a very small nod. Every Saturday they ate cinnamon toast at Beth's counter and drew their comic. In it, Nora was Inspector Ringo and Beth was Detective Bandit, two raccoons who had been trying to solve the Case of the Missing Mittens since third grade. Nobody else on earth knew about the raccoons, and that was most of the point of them.

OCTOBER. Beth was put in a science group with a girl named Cleo, who laughed with her whole head thrown back and wore a different pair of earrings every single day. "I told her I'd save her a seat," Beth said on the bus, "just for today." By the following Monday it was just for Mondays, and by Halloween it was every day, so that the third seat became a seat for three, with Nora pressed against the window. She put her backpack in the space where Beth used to sit, and then she took it off again, because it looked too much like a sign.

NOVEMBER. The Saturday toast turned into rain checks, and Nora kept the rain checks in her head, like a stack of tickets that nobody was ever going to cash in. Choir, said Beth, and then a birthday, and then a thing with Cleo. Nobody was being cruel, and nobody was to blame. There was only a long, soft drifting apart, like a boat that has slipped its rope, and on the cafeteria stairs she caught herself counting the steps between them, which kept getting bigger.

DECEMBER. For the holiday swap, Beth gave her a book of stickers, a very good one, with foil and glitter and exactly the kind of pandas that Nora liked. That was what was wrong with it. It was a present for somebody Beth was fond of, but it was not a present for somebody Beth knew, because Nora had once spent forty minutes explaining to her why pandas were overrated. "Thank you," she said, and she smiled so carefully that her cheeks ached. At home she put the stickers away in her desk drawer, where they stayed, still shiny, for the rest of the year.

JANUARY. Beth had a dentist appointment, so Nora ate lunch with Cleo's group for the first time, because Beth had waved her over before she left. Everyone was friendly, and Cleo leaned in and said, "Okay, you've known Beth forever, so what was she like as a kid?" Nora felt like a museum guide, and something hot rose in her throat. "She still draws raccoons," she heard herself say. "Detective Bandit, with a little hat." She did the voice, and they laughed. It took thirty seconds, and it was the smallest mean thing Nora had ever done, about the size of a pencil, and she knew at once that it could not be taken back.

FEBRUARY. Nobody told her that Cleo had told Beth, and nobody had to. On the bus, Beth moved up to the sixth seat and sat with her forehead against the glass. In the library, Nora watched her push a battered green notebook all the way to the bottom of her bag, under her gym clothes, the way you bury something you are not ready to look at. Beth no longer said hello, but she did not say anything cold either, and simply went politely past, like a person who is walking by a house where someone is sick and does not want to knock.

MARCH. Nora wrote the message fourteen times, and each time she deleted it: first Hey, about the raccoons, and then I did something stupid, which she deleted too, because it sounded as if the stupid thing had happened to her. At last she caught up with Beth by the lockers and said, "Hey. I'm sorry about, you know." "It's fine," said Beth, and she smiled and went on down the hall. It was the worst word in the English language, Nora decided, because it was not even true, and they both knew it.

APRIL. On Saturdays now she drew by herself, and she finally solved the Case of the Missing Mittens, which turned out to be a very simple case. The mittens were not missing at all, because Inspector Ringo had been wearing them the entire time, and Detective Bandit had been too polite to mention it. Nora laughed out loud in her room, and then the laugh went quiet, because there was nobody to show. Downstairs her grandmother asked where Beth had gone. "She's around," said Nora. "I'm the one who went somewhere." She had not known that she was going to say it until it was out.

MAY. She drafted the letter eleven times, on lined paper, with the sort of pen you use when you want to be taken seriously. Dear Beth, I am sorry if I hurt your feelings. She crossed out the if and tried again: Dear Beth, I am sorry that I told people your private thing, and I am not going to explain why, because there was no good reason. Then she crossed out the second half. In the end she put the pen down, because a letter, she realized, was a way of saying something when you were not in the room, and she had spent four months not being in the room.

JUNE. On the last day of school she was at the bus stop a full ten minutes before Bus 14 was due, and when Beth arrived with her backpack hanging off one shoulder, Nora said all of it before she could think. "I told Cleo's group about the raccoons. I did the voice. I made it a joke, and it was not one, and I am sorry." Beth looked at her for a long time. "I know," she said. "Cleo told me in January." "You knew for five months?" "I was waiting to see if you would say it." The bus turned the corner, and neither of them moved.

They let it go by, and the driver honked once, shrugged, and rolled away, leaving them standing in the sudden, enormous quiet on the curb. "I'm still mad," said Beth. "That's fair," said Nora. Beth took a pen out of her bag and drew two small round ears on the back of her own hand, and then a mask, and then a very small hat. She looked at Nora, and she held out the pen without saying anything at all. Nora put out her hand, and the ink was cold, and they

stood there until the next bus came, nine minutes later.

Questions

1. What were Inspector Ringo and Detective Bandit?

A. Raccoon detectives in Nora and Beth's comic
B. Two characters in a school play
C. The names of their pet cats

2. Why did the book of stickers feel wrong to Nora?

A. It was too expensive
B. It was a gift for someone Beth liked, not someone Beth really knew
C. It was a gift she had already received

3. What was the mean thing Nora did in January?

A. She told Cleo's group about the raccoon drawings and did the voice
B. She hid Beth's notebook
C. She told a teacher a lie

4. Why did Nora decide that "It's fine" was the worst word in English?

A. She did not like the way it sounded
B. It was not true, and they both knew it
C. Beth said it in a loud voice

5. Why did Nora choose to say it out loud instead of mailing the letter?

A. A letter lets you say it when you are not in the room
B. Beth could not read her handwriting
C. The paper had run out

6. In this story, the word drifting is used to mean

A. a snowy bank
B. slowly moving apart
C. a loud argument

Words to know

inspector: chief detective
drifting: slowly moving apart
battered: worn and dented
draft: first try
overrated: praised too much

Answer key: The Year of the Split Friendship

1. A. Raccoon detectives in Nora and Beth's comic
2. B. It was a gift for someone Beth liked, not someone Beth really knew
3. A. She told Cleo's group about the raccoon drawings and did the voice
4. B. It was not true, and they both knew it
5. A. A letter lets you say it when you are not in the room
6. B. slowly moving apart