Name: _____ Date: _____

Thistle Counts the Tides

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1167 words

The sea comes in twice a day, and I know exactly when, although I have not touched it since I was six days old. I know by the gulls, because when the tide goes out, the mud flats are uncovered and the gulls descend on them screaming, because there are worms, and when the tide returns they go quiet and sulk. High, low, high, low. It is a remarkably small clock made of noise, and the only one that nobody else is winding. My name is Thistle, and I am a harbor seal who counts the tides.

I live in a tank on the pier, in a seaside town where people come to eat chips and admire things. The tank is nine of my lengths from end to end, which I have measured often. Its water is pumped in from the harbor, so it tastes of the sea the way a photograph of a sandwich tastes of lunch. At eleven, two and four, a keeper named Dina stands on the edge with a bucket of herring, and I clap my flippers and wave. The visitors adore the waving, though I have never explained what it means.

The man who owns the tank is called Mr. Penhallow. He wears a captain's cap, although the largest ship he has ever commanded is a rowboat, and he calls me Princess Thistle in front of customers and plain Thistle in front of nobody. I want to be fair to him, because he built me a heated rock, and when I had an eye infection, he sat up all night on a bucket. I think he is not a bad man but a man with a tank, which is a different thing.

Rosa Quint cleans the pier at night. She is small and gray-haired and wears yellow gloves that reach her elbows, and she hums the same four notes, a little flat. She started talking to me in my second winter, and she never said "who's a good girl" the way the others do. She said, "Evening, Thistle. They have left a great deal of ketchup." While she mops, she reads the bus timetable aloud to me in the voice of somebody reciting a poem, and nothing is quite so soothing as the 7:42 to Penzance.

Old Squint is the gull with one eye. He perches on the rail beside the pump and delivers the news, which is mostly about chips. It was Squint who first told me what the sea was. "It is loud," he said. "It is cold. It has no walls, which sounds lovely until you try to find one at three in the morning, and there is a great deal of lunch, but it moves." I asked whether it was better than the tank, and he considered me with his good eye. "I never said better," said Squint. "I said bigger."

Rosa noticed the thing I do, which I had not known I did. On evenings when the tide was rising, I always ended up at the harbor end of the tank with my nose against the glass, facing a wall I could not see through. "You do that every night," she said, "as if you were waiting for somebody." I said nothing, because I am a seal, but I let her watch me. She stood a long

while with the water draining out of her bucket, and then she asked, very quietly, "What can't this tank give you, love?"

In the weeks that followed, she asked a great many questions of people who were not me. A visitor came with a clipboard and looked in my mouth and under my flippers. "She will not go back to the wild," he said. "She was rescued too young, and she never learned to hunt, and some animals cannot learn it after a tank." My heart, which is a good one, sank like a stone. Then he said, "But there is a sanctuary. A bay, with a net across the mouth. It is the real sea. It just has a fence."

I want to be honest about the next part. It was not a good week, because they tipped a bucket of live sprats into the tank, small and silver and quick, and told me to eat them, and I did not know how. I chased them in circles for twenty minutes. A seal can feel a swimming fish in the dark through her whiskers alone, the vet said, though I had always assumed mine were decorative. I caught one on the eleventh day by accident, and it tasted so surprised that I nearly let it go.

On the last evening, Mr. Penhallow came out in his cap. "The council says the pumps are finished at the end of the season," he told Rosa, in a voice that was not for customers. "I should have said sooner. I was not sure." He looked at me for a long moment, and I looked back. "I have been very fond of this seal," he said. "Tell me honestly, Rosa. Is it right to let her go, or only to let her go somewhere else?" "I don't know," said Rosa. "I truly don't. But she is asking."

They came with a van and wet sheets and a sling, and the whole pier turned out, which was unfair, because I get nervous. Dina cried, and Mr. Penhallow saluted a seal. Old Squint sat on the rail and refused to look, though as the doors closed I heard him say, to nobody, "Bigger." Rosa climbed into the back of the van and held my flipper, and read me the 7:42 to Penzance. Then the road became a long straight smell of salt that I had not smelled since I was six days old. I knew before the doors opened.

The bay was gray and wide and enormous, with floats across the mouth like beads. It was not the open ocean, and I want that to be clear. There was a net, and a hut, and a woman in waders who knew my name. But the water came in. I felt it first at my whiskers, then my belly, a cold, slow heave, as if the whole world were breathing in. Rosa sat on the shingle with her boots off, and she was not humming. She was crying a little, I think, although she would deny it.

I swam out slowly that first evening, and I counted. Nine of my lengths, and then thirty, and then I lost count, which I had never done before. I turned and found the shingle, and a small figure on it, and a lopsided hum, four notes, a little flat. Overhead a gull cried, a stranger, not Squint, and I did not need it. I knew the tide was rising by the water alone. Then I stopped counting for a while and let it carry me out as far as the net, and a little past what I could see.

Questions

1. How does Thistle tell the tides, living in a tank?

A. By the gulls' noise
B. By a clock on the pier
C. By the pump's sound

2. What did Old Squint say about the sea compared to the tank?

A. It was warmer
B. It was better
C. It was bigger

3. Why couldn't Thistle simply be released into the open ocean?

A. She was too old
B. She was rescued so young she never learned to hunt
C. The harbor was closed

4. When Mr. Penhallow asks if it is right to let her go "or only somewhere else," he is

A. unsure whether the sanctuary was truly better
B. angry with Rosa
C. planning to keep her

5. Thistle says the tank water tastes of the sea "in the way a photograph of a sandwich tastes of lunch." That means it

A. tasted very strong
B. was only a faint imitation
C. tasted of food

6. Why do you think Old Squint refused to look when Thistle left, and then said "Bigger"?

A. He was cross about the chips
B. He was sad to see her go, but glad she was going somewhere bigger
C. He wanted to ride in the van

Words to know

descend: swoop down
soothing: calming
sanctuary: safe place
shingle: pebbly beach
honestly: truthfully

Answer key: Thistle Counts the Tides

1. A. By the gulls' noise
2. C. It was bigger
3. B. She was rescued so young she never learned to hunt
4. A. unsure whether the sanctuary was truly better
5. B. was only a faint imitation
6. B. He was sad to see her go, but glad she was going somewhere bigger