Name: _____ Date: _____

Urashima Taro

Reading level 10 (6th grade) · 1191 words

Long ago, in a little fishing village on the coast of Japan, there lived a young man named Urashima Taro. He was the cleverest fisherman on the whole shore, and he could fill his boat with silver fish while the others were still untangling their lines. But the people of the village loved him for something else. Urashima had the kindest heart of anyone they knew, and he had never hurt a living thing on purpose in his life.

One summer evening, as he walked home along the beach with his rod on his shoulder, he heard shouting. A crowd of children had found a turtle on the sand. One boy flipped it over, another poked it with a stick, and the rest laughed as its little legs waved in the air. "Stop that," said Urashima, "and think how you would feel if somebody turned you upside down." The children only giggled and poked it again.

So Urashima tried another way. He smiled and held up a string of copper coins. "I would very much like to have that turtle," he said. "Will you sell it to me?" The children looked at the coins, and then at one another, and then they handed the turtle over and ran off to the sweet shop. Urashima stroked its shell. "Poor thing," he said. "Go home to the sea, and be more careful next time." He carried it out onto the rocks and let it slip into the waves.

Early the next morning, Urashima rowed far out to sea, past all the other boats, until the shore was only a thin blue line. The water was calm and the sun was warm, and he was dreaming in his boat when he heard someone call his name. "Urashima! Urashima!" There was nobody in sight, but when he looked over the side, and there in the water was the very same turtle, nodding its head at him.

"You saved my life yesterday," said the turtle, "and I have come to thank you. Would you like to visit the Dragon King, whose palace lies deep down on the floor of the ocean?" Urashima laughed and shook his head. "I have only heard stories about it," he said. "And I cannot swim down that far." "You do not need to swim," said the turtle. "Climb on my back." As it spoke, the turtle grew and grew, until its shell was as wide as a table.

Urashima climbed on, and down they went, deeper and deeper through the green water. Strange to say, he never felt wet and he never ran out of breath. Bright fish swam beside them, and at last a great gate rose out of the sand, red as a sunset, with sloping roofs of coral behind it. Fish in fine robes bowed at the gate. "Welcome, Urashima Taro," they said. "The Dragon King and all his court are glad you have come."

Inside, a princess came to meet him, dressed in robes the color of waves, with long black hair that drifted around her shoulders. "I am Otohime, the Dragon King's daughter," she said. "Yesterday I was the turtle you saved. Stay with us here, where nobody ever grows old."

Urashima could hardly speak, for he had never imagined anyone so lovely. That night there was a feast on coral plates, and silver fish danced while the music played.

The princess showed him the palace garden, and it was the most wonderful thing of all. On the eastern side, the cherry trees were pink with spring blossoms. To the south, the trees were green and the crickets sang their summer songs. To the west, the maple leaves blazed red and gold for autumn. And to the north, the ground was white with snow and the pond was frozen hard. All four seasons were there at once, side by side.

Urashima was so happy that the days slipped by like bubbles, and he forgot about everything else. Then one morning he woke up and remembered his old mother and father in the village. "They will be so worried," he said to the princess. "I must go home and see them. Please let me go, just for a little while." Otohime's eyes filled with tears, but she did not try to stop him.

Instead, she gave him a small black box, shining like a beetle's wing and tied with a red silk cord. "Take this with you," she said, "but promise me one thing. Never, ever open it, whatever happens." Urashima promised. He climbed onto the turtle's back once more, and they rose up through the water toward the light. He kept looking back and waving until the red gate and the coral roofs had disappeared below him.

The turtle left him on his own beach, and at first everything looked the same. The hills and the rocks and the curve of the bay were all exactly as he remembered them. But the faces of the people were all strangers' faces, and they stared at him as he passed. Where his parents' little house had stood, there was a different house, and a man he had never met came out of the door. "I am looking for the family of Urashima Taro," said Urashima. "I am Urashima Taro."

The man stared at him. "Urashima Taro?" he said. "There is an old story about a fisherman with that name. He rowed out to sea one morning and never came back. But that was three hundred years ago!" Urashima's heart went cold. Under the sea, time had run in a different way. Each happy day down there had been a whole lifetime up here, and everyone he had known was long gone.

Urashima walked slowly back down to the beach and sat on the sand, holding the little black box in his lap. He had no home here anymore, and no matter how hard he stared at the waves, he could not remember the way back to the palace. "Perhaps the box will show me the way," he thought, and in his sadness he forgot all about his promise to the princess. With shaking fingers he pulled the red silk cord loose, and slowly he lifted the lid.

There was nothing inside but a little purple cloud. It rose up in three soft wisps, drifted around his face for a moment, and floated away over the sea. And as it went, Urashima changed. His black hair turned as white as the foam, his face filled with wrinkles, and his straight back bent like an old pine tree. All three hundred years had been folded up in that box, and now they had come out at once.

Urashima sat on the beach for a long time, a very old man now, looking out at the waves. Somewhere far below them was the red gate, and the garden with its four seasons, and the princess who had trusted him. The children of the village still tell his story, and they still say it to one another when someone is about to break a promise: "Remember Urashima, and leave the box closed."

Questions

1. How did Urashima get the turtle away from the children?

A. He chased them off the beach
B. He gave them coins for it
C. He told their parents

2. Who was the turtle really?

A. The princess Otohime
B. The Dragon King himself
C. A fish from the palace gate

3. What was strange about the palace garden?

A. It was made of gold
B. It grew upside down
C. All four seasons were there at once

4. Why did no one in the village know Urashima?

A. He had grown a long beard
B. Three hundred years had passed
C. They were angry with him

5. What does the story suggest about promises?

A. A promise to a princess does not count
B. Promises matter, even when we are sad
C. Boxes are always full of treasure

6. The cloud rose up "in three soft wisps." What are wisps?

A. Thin strands
B. Loud bangs
C. Bright colors

Words to know

coral: sea rock
blossoms: flowers
maple: a tree
wisps: thin strands

wrinkles: skin lines

Answer key: Urashima Taro

1. B. He gave them coins for it
2. A. The princess Otohime
3. C. All four seasons were there at once
4. B. Three hundred years had passed
5. B. Promises matter, even when we are sad
6. A. Thin strands