

**0860/29/11**

NATIONAL  
QUALIFICATIONS  
2013

MONDAY, 29 APRIL  
1.00 PM – 1.50 PM

ENGLISH  
STANDARD GRADE  
General Level  
Reading  
Text

Read carefully the passage overleaf. It will help if you read it twice. When you have done so, answer the questions. Use the spaces provided in the Question/Answer booklet.



*Evie, the narrator, describes the arrival of a long lost letter.*

- 1 It started with a letter. A letter that had been lost a long time, waiting out half a century in a forgotten postal bag in the dim attic of an ordinary house. I think about it sometimes, that mailbag: of the hundreds of love letters, grocery bills, birthday cards, notes from children to their parents, that lay together, swelling and sighing as their thwarted messages whispered in the dark. Waiting, waiting, for someone to realise they were there. For it is said, you know, that a letter will always seek a reader; that sooner or later, like it or not, words have a way of finding the light, of making their secrets known.
- 2 Forgive me, I'm being romantic—a habit acquired from the years spent reading nineteenth-century novels with a torch when my parents thought I was asleep. What I mean to say is that it's odd to think that if Arthur Tyrell had been a little more responsible, if he hadn't fallen into a slumber that Christmas Eve in 1941 instead of finishing his mail round, if the bag hadn't been tucked in his attic and hidden until his death some fifty years later when one of his daughters unearthed it and called a national newspaper, the whole thing might have turned out differently.
- 3 You probably heard about it when it happened; it was in all the newspapers, and on the TV news. A TV channel even ran a special where they invited some of the recipients to talk about their letter from fifty years ago. There was a woman whose sweetheart had been in the RAF, and the man with the birthday card his evacuated son had sent, the little boy who was killed by a piece of falling shrapnel a week or so later. It was a very good programme, I thought: moving in parts, happy and sad stories mixed with old film of the war. I cried a couple of times, but that's not saying much: I cry rather a lot.
- 4 Mum didn't go on the show, though. The producers contacted her and asked whether there was anything special in her letter that she'd like to share with the nation, but she said no, that it was just an ordinary old clothing order from a shop that had long ago gone out of business. But that wasn't the truth. I know this because I was there when the letter arrived. I saw her reaction to that lost letter and it was anything but ordinary.
- 5 It was a morning in late February, winter still had us by the throat, the flowerbeds were icy, and I'd come over to help with the Sunday roast. I was peeling potatoes in the sink when the letter dropped through the slot in the door. The post doesn't usually come on Sundays so that should have tipped us off, but it didn't.
- 6 "Evie, can you get that?" Evie is me: I'm sorry, I should have said so earlier. My mother gestured towards the hallway.
- 7 I put down the potato, wiped my hands on a tea towel and went to fetch the post. There was only one letter lying on the welcome mat: an official Post Office envelope declaring the contents to be "redirected mail". I read the label to Mum as I brought in into the kitchen.
- 8 She'd finished preparing the roast by then and was drying her own hands. Frowning a little, from habit rather than what she expected to be in the letter, she took it from me and lifted her reading glasses from on top of the pineapple in the fruit bowl. She skimmed the post office notice and with a flicker of her eyebrows began to open the outer envelope.
- 9 I'd turned back to the potatoes by now, a task that was arguably more engaging than watching my mum open mail, so I didn't see her face as she fished the smaller envelope from inside, as she noticed the old stamp, as she turned it over and read the name written on the back.

- 10 I've imagined it many times since, though, the colour draining instantly from her cheeks, her fingers beginning to tremble so that it took minutes before she was able to slit the envelope open. What I don't have to imagine is the sound. The horrid, guttural gasp, followed quickly by a series of rasping sobs that swamped the air and made me slip with the peeler so that I cut my finger.
- 11 "Mum?" I went to her, draping my arm around her shoulders. But she didn't say anything. She couldn't, she told me later, not then. She stood rigidly as tears spilled down her cheeks and she clutched the strange little envelope, its paper so thin I could make out the corner of the folded letter inside, hard against her chest. Then she disappeared upstairs to her bedroom leaving instructions about the roast and the oven and the potatoes.
- 12 The kitchen settled in a bruised silence around her absence and I stayed very quiet, moved very slowly so as not to disturb it further. My mother is not a crier, but this moment—her upset and the shock of it—felt oddly familiar, as if we'd been here before. After fifteen minutes in which I peeled potatoes, turned over possibilities as to whom the letter might be from, and wondered how to proceed, I finally knocked on her door and asked whether she'd like a cup of tea. She'd composed herself by then and we sat opposite one another at the small table in the kitchen. As I pretended not to notice she'd been crying, she began to talk about the envelope's contents.
- 13 "A letter", she said, "from someone I used to know a long time ago. When I was just a girl, twelve, thirteen."

Adapted from "The Distant Hours" by Kate Morton

[END OF QUESTION PAPER]

**[BLANK PAGE]**