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NATIONAL
QUALIFICATIONS
2009

FRIDAY, 8 MAY
2.30 PM – 3.20 PM

ENGLISH
STANDARD GRADE
Credit 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.



In the following passage, taken from a novel, the narrator, Christopher, has a frightening experience.

1 It was a sunny, windy morning. I remember watching from the playroom windows the leaves blowing in the front yard over the carriage track. Uncle Philip had been downstairs with my mother since shortly after breakfast, and I had been able to relax for a while, believing as I did that nothing could happen to her while he was with her.

2 Then midway through the morning I heard Uncle Philip calling me. I went out on to the landing and, looking down over the balcony rail, saw my mother and Uncle Philip standing in the hall, gazing up at me. For the first time in weeks I sensed something cheerful about them, as though they had just been enjoying a joke. The front door was ajar and a long streak of sunlight was falling across the hall. Uncle Philip said:

3 “Look here, Christopher. You’re always saying you want a piano accordion. Well, I intend to buy you one. I spotted an excellent one in a window in Hankow Road yesterday. I propose the two of us go and look it over. If it takes your fancy, then it’s yours. Good plan?”

4 This brought me down the staircase at great speed. I jumped the last four steps and circled round the adults, flapping my arms in impersonation of a bird of prey. As I did so, to my delight, I heard my mother laughing; laughing in a way I had not heard her laugh for a while. In fact it is possible it was this very atmosphere—this feeling that things were perhaps starting to return to what they had been—which played a significant part in causing me to “lower my guard”. I asked Uncle Philip when we could go, to which he shrugged and said:

5 “Why not now? If we leave it, someone else might spot it. Perhaps someone’s buying it at this moment, even as we speak!”

6 I rushed to the doorway and again my mother laughed. Then she told me I would have to put on proper shoes and a jacket. I remember thinking of protesting about the jacket, but then deciding not to in case the adults changed their minds, not only about the accordion, but also about this whole light-hearted mood we were enjoying.

7 I waved casually to my mother as Uncle Philip and I set off across the front courtyard. Then several steps on, as I was hurrying towards the waiting carriage, Uncle Philip grasped me by the shoulder, saying: “Look! Wave to your mother!” despite my already having done so. But I thought nothing of it at the time, and turning as bidden, waved once more to my mother’s figure, elegantly upright in the doorway.

8 For much of the way, the carriage followed the route my mother and I usually took to the city centre. Uncle Philip was quiet, which surprised me a little, but I assumed this was perhaps his normal custom on a journey. Whenever I pointed out to him anything we were passing, he would reply cheerfully enough; but the next moment he would be staring silently once more out at the view. The leafy boulevards gave way to the narrow crowded streets, and our driver began to shout at the rickshaws and pedestrians in our path. As we approached the vegetable market, Uncle Philip suddenly rapped his cane to make the carriage stop.

9 “From here, we’ll go on foot,” he said to me. “I know a good short cut. It’ll be much quicker.”

10 This made perfectly good sense. I knew from experience how the little streets off Nanking Road could become so clogged with people that a carriage or motor car would often not move for five, even ten minutes at a time. I thus allowed him to help me down from the carriage with no argument. But it was then, I recall, that I had my

first presentiment that something was wrong. Perhaps it was something in Uncle Philip's manner. But then he smiled and made some remark I did not catch in the noise around us. He pointed towards a nearby alley and I stayed close behind him as we pushed our way through the good-humoured throng. We moved from bright sun to shade, and then he stopped and turned to me, right there in the midst of the jostling crowd. Placing a hand on my shoulder, he asked:

11 "Christopher, do you know where we are now? Can you guess?"

12 I looked around me. Then pointing towards a stone arch under which crowds were pressing around the vegetable stalls, I replied: "Yes. That's Kiukiang Road through there."

13 "Ah. So you know exactly where we are." He gave an odd laugh. "You know your way around here very well."

14 I nodded and waited, the feeling rising from the pit of my stomach that something of great horror was about to unfold. Perhaps Uncle Philip was about to say something else—perhaps he had planned the whole thing quite differently—but at that moment, as we stood there jostled on all sides, I believe he saw in my face that the game was up. A terrible confusion passed across his features, then he said, barely audibly in the din:

15 "Good boy."

16 He grasped my shoulder again and let his gaze wander about him. Then he appeared to come to a decision I had already anticipated.

17 "Good boy!" he said, this time more loudly, his voice trembling with emotion. Then he added: "I didn't want you hurt. You understand that? I didn't want you hurt."

18 With that he spun round and vanished into the crowd. I made a half-hearted effort to follow, and after a moment caught sight of his white jacket hurrying through the people. Then he had passed under the arch and out of my view.

19 For the next few moments I remained standing there in the crowd, trying not to pursue the logic of what had just occurred. Then suddenly I began to move, back in the direction we had just come, to the street in which we had left the carriage. Abandoning all sense of decorum, I forced my way through the crowds, sometimes pushing violently, sometimes squeezing myself through gaps, so that people laughed or called angrily after me. I reached the street to discover of course that the carriage had long since gone on its way. For a few confused seconds I stood in the middle of the street, trying to form in my head a map of my route back home. I then began to run as fast as I could.

20 I set off at a run down that long road, and even though I soon began to pant pathetically, even though the heat and exhaustion reduced me at times to little more than walking pace, I believe I did not stop at all.

21 I knew as soon as I turned through our gateway—though there was nothing obvious to tell me so—that I was too late. I found the front door bolted. I ran to the back door, which opened for me, and ran through the house shouting.

22 The house appeared to be empty. And I knew, as I had known throughout that punishing run home, that my mother was gone.

Adapted from the novel *When We Were Orphans* by Kazuo Ishiguro

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