

Location Entry Codes

As part of CIE's continual commitment to maintaining best practice in assessment, CIE uses different variants of some question papers for our most popular assessments with large and widespread candidature. The question papers are closely related and the relationships between them have been thoroughly established using our assessment expertise. All versions of the paper give assessment of equal standard.

The content assessed by the examination papers and the type of questions is unchanged.

This change means that for this component there are now two variant Question Papers, Mark Schemes and Principal Examiner's Reports where previously there was only one. For any individual country, it is intended that only one variant is used. This document contains both variants which will give all Centres access to even more past examination material than is usually the case.

The diagram shows the relationship between the Question Papers, Mark Schemes and Principal Examiners' Reports that are available.

Question Paper	Mark Scheme	Principal Examiner's Report
Introduction	Introduction	Introduction
First variant Question Paper	First variant Mark Scheme	First variant Principal Examiner's Report
Second variant Question Paper	Second variant Mark Scheme	Second variant Principal Examiner's Report

Who can I contact for further information on these changes?

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The titles for the variant items should correspond with the table above, so that at the top of the first page of the relevant part of the document and on the header, it has the words:

- First variant Question Paper / Mark Scheme / Principal Examiner's Report

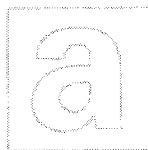
or

- Second variant Question Paper / Mark Scheme / Principal Examiner's Report

as appropriate.

First Variant Paper

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UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL EXAMINATIONS
General Certificate of Education
Advanced Subsidiary Level and Advanced Level

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

8693/01

Paper 1 Passages for Comment

October/November 2008

2 hours

Additional Materials: Answer Booklet/Paper

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

If you have been given an Answer Booklet, follow the instructions on the front cover of the Booklet.
Write your Centre number, candidate number and name on all the work you hand in.
Write in dark blue or black pen.
Do not use staples, paper clips, highlighters, glue or correction fluid.

Answer **two** questions.
You are reminded of the need for good English and clear presentation in your answers.

At the end of the examination, fasten all your work securely together.
The number of marks is given in brackets [] at the end of each question or part question.

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Answer two questions.

1 The passage below describes the writer's secret observation of her great-grandmother one night in her house in Paris.

(a) Comment on the style and language of the passage. [15]

(b) The great-grandmother keeps a journal. In one of the last entries, she recalls having her great-granddaughter to stay in her house. Basing your answer closely on the material of the original extract, write the opening section (between 120-150 words) of the journal entry. [10]

I used to creep on stockinged feet to the end of the long vista, a scared adventurer in the hushed palace of Sleeping Beauty, and it was on such an evening that I saw my great-grandmother, as I most vividly remember her, coming towards me, from the length of that immeasurable distance, tiny, bent, and alone.

She was a rude, despotic old materialist, without an ounce of romance or fantasy in her body, but to me that night she was every malevolent fairy incarnate, more especially that disgruntled one who had so disastrously attended Sleeping Beauty's christening. I had often been frightened of her tongue; that night I was frightened of her magic. I stood transfixed, incapable of the retreat for which I still had ample time. I remember being wildly thankful that I had on, at least, a clean pinafore. Very slowly she advanced, propped upon her stick, all in black beneath the candles, pausing now and then to look about her, as though she welcomed this escape from the aged servants who usually attended her, or from the guests, deferential but inquisitive, who came, as she shrewdly knew, to boast afterwards of their admission into this almost legendary fastness¹.

Very leisurely she was, savouring the wealth of her possessions, stealing out of her room when no one knew that she was abroad; as clandestine, really, as I myself—and suddenly I knew that on no account must she learn the presence of an eavesdropper. It was no longer fear that prompted me to slip behind the curtain looped across the last door; it was a desperate pity; pity of her age, I suppose, pity of her frailty, pity of her as the spirit of that house, stubborn in the preservation of what was already a thing of the past, whose life would go out with hers; it was her will alone that kept the house together, as it was her will alone that kept the breath fluttering in her body.

What thoughts were hers as she lingered in her progress I cannot pretend to tell; I only know that to me she was a phantom, an evocation, a symbol, although, naturally, being but a child, I gave her no such name. To me, at the moment, she was simply a being so old and so fragile that I half expected her to crumble into dust at my feet.

She crossed the dining room and passed me, flattened against the wall and trying to cover the white of my pinafore with a fold of the curtain; so close she passed to me, that I observed the quiver of her fine hands on the knob of her stick and the transparency of the features beneath the shrouding mantilla² of black lace. I wondered what her errand might be, as she stood, so bent and shrunken, beneath the immense height of the ballroom. But it was evident that errand she had none. She stood there quietly surveying, almost as though she took a protracted and contemplative farewell, all unaware of the eyes of youth that spied upon her. Her glance roamed round, with satisfaction, I thought, but whether with satisfaction at the beauty of the room, or at having kept off for so long the tides that threatened to invade it, I could not tell.

Then, as she stood there, the clocks in the room began to strike the hour. There were thirty clocks in the room—I had often counted them—big clocks, little clocks, wall clocks, table clocks, grandfather clocks, and even a clock with a musical box in

its intestines; and it was a point of honour with Baptiste that they should all strike at the same moment. So now they began; first the deep note of the clock in the corner, then the clear ring of a little Cupid hitting a hammer on a bell, then a rumble and a note like a mastiff baying, then a gay trill, then the first bars of a chime, then innumerable others all joining in, till the room was filled with the music of the passing hour, and my great-grandmother standing in the middle, listening, listening....I could see her face, for her head was lifted, and her expression was a thing I shall never forget, so suddenly lighted up was it; so pleased; so gallant; so, even, amused. She had, I think, her private joke and understanding with the clocks. The little flames of the candles quivered in the vibration of the air, but as the last notes died away they steadied again, like a life which has wavered for an instant, only to resume with a strengthened purpose. And as the silence fluttered down once more, my great-grandmother drooped from her strange, humorous ecstasy, and it was as a little figure bent and tired that I saw her retrace her steps down the long vista of the lighted rooms.

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¹fastness – place of seclusion

²mantilla – shawl

2 The extract below describes the writer's experience when he visits Kathmandu in Nepal.

- (a) Comment on the style and language of the passage. [15]
- (b) The local tourist board wishes to promote the area and its attractions to potential visitors and establishes a website for that purpose. Basing your answer closely on the material of the original extract, write the opening section (between 120-150 words) of the website's home page. [10]

I get a cheap room in the centre of town and sleep for hours. The next morning, with Mr Shah's son and nephew, I visit the two temples in Kathmandu that are most sacred to Hindus and Buddhists.

At Pashupatinath (outside which a sign proclaims 'Entrance for the Hindus only') there is an atmosphere of febrile confusion. Hawkers, devotees, tourists, cows, monkeys, pigeons and dogs roam through the grounds. We offer a few flowers. There are so many worshippers that some people trying to get the priest's attention are elbowed aside by others pushing their way to the front. A princess of the Nepalese royal house appears; everyone bows and makes way. By the main gate, a party of saffron-clad Westerners struggle for permission to enter. A fight breaks out between two monkeys. One chases the other, then runs screaming around the temples and down to the river, the holy Bagmati, that flows below. A corpse is being cremated on its banks; washerwomen are at their work and children bathe. From a balcony a basket of flowers and leaves, old offerings now wilted, is dropped into the river. A stone image of a Nandi bull sits firmly between two competing *sadhus*¹, each muttering his mantra, each keeping a careful eye on the passers-by. A small shrine half protrudes from the stone platform on the river bank. When it emerges fully, the goddess inside will escape, and the evil period will end on earth. 5 10 15

At the Baudhnath stupa, the Buddhist shrine of Kathmandu, there is, in contrast, a sense of stillness. Its immense white dome is ringed by a road. Small shops stand on its outer edge: many of these are owned by Tibetan immigrants; felt bags, Tibetan prints and silver jewellery can be bought here. There are no crowds: this is a haven of quietness in the busy streets around. 20

In Kathmandu I wind down after my journey. I luxuriate in my tiredness; drift deliciously along, all energy spent, allowing sight to follow sight, thought to follow thought, for now (apart from the easily fulfillable intention of returning to Delhi) there is nothing, no intermediate step that I must perform: there is no lift to look for, no hill to climb, no load to carry, no town en route. There are no papers that I have to obtain. For a person of fundamentally sedentary habits I have been wandering far too long; a continuously wandering life would drive me crazy. I marvel at those travellers who, out of curiosity or a sense of mission, wander through unfamiliar environments for years on end. It requires an attitude of mind more capable of contentment with the present than my own. My drive to arrive is too strong. At many points in this journey, impatience has displaced enjoyment. This tension is the true cause of my exhaustion. When I am back in Delhi I will not move for a month, just sit at home, talk with family and friends, read, rewind, sleep. 25 30 35

I consider what route I should take back home. If I were propelled by enthusiasm for travel *per se*, I would go by bus and train to Patna, then sail up the Ganges past Benares to Allahabad, then up the Jumna, past Agra to Delhi. But I am too exhausted and homesick; today is the last day of August. Go home, I tell myself: move directly towards home. I enter a Nepal Airlines office and buy a ticket for tomorrow's flight. 40

I look at the fluteseller standing in a corner of the square near the hotel. In his hand is a pole with an attachment at the top from which fifty or sixty instruments protrude in all directions, like the quills of a porcupine. They are of bamboo: there are cross-flutes and recorders. From time to time he stands the pole on the ground, selects a flute and plays for a few minutes. The sound rises clearly above the noise 45

of the traffic and the hawkers' cries. He plays slowly, meditatively, without excessive display. He does not shout out his wares. Occasionally he makes a sale, but in a curiously offhanded way as if this were incidental to his enterprise. Sometimes he breaks off playing to talk to the fruitseller. I imagine that this has been the pattern of his life for years.

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I find it difficult to tear myself away from the square. Flute music always does this to me: it is at once the most universal and most particular of sounds. To hear any flute is, it seems to me, to be drawn into the commonalty of all mankind, to be moved by music closest in its phrases and sentences to the human voice. Its motive force too is living breath: it too needs to pause and breathe before it can go on.

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¹*sadhus* – holy men

3 The extract below is taken from a short story set in Canada.

- (a) Comment on the style and language of the passage. [15]
- (b) Later in life, Annabelle writes her autobiography. In one chapter she looks back at her early life on the farm. Basing your answer closely on the material of the original extract, write the opening (between 120-150 words) of the chapter. [10]

Martha was thirty-seven. She had clinched with the body and substance of life; had loved, borne children—a boy had died—and yet the quickest aches of life, travail, heartbrokenness, they had never wrung as the wheat wrung. For the wheat allowed no respite. Wasting and unending it was struggle, struggle against wind and insects, drought and weeds. Not an heroic struggle to give a man courage and resolve, but a frantic, unavailing one. They were only poor, taunted, driven things; it was the wheat that was invincible. They only dreaded, built bright futures; waited for the first glint of green, watched timorous and eager while it thickened, merged, and at last leaned bravely to a ripple in the wind; then followed every slip of cloud into the horizon, turned to the wheat and away again. And it died tantalizingly sometimes, slowly: there would be a cool day, a pittance of rain. 5

Or perhaps it lived, perhaps the rain came, June, July, even into August, hope climbing, wish-patterns painted on the future. And then one day a clench and tremble to John's hand; his voice faltering, dull. Grasshoppers perhaps, sawflies or rust; no matter, they would grovel for a while, stand back helpless, then go on again. Go on in bitterness and cowardice, because there was nothing else but going-on. 10

She had loved John, for these sixteen years had stood close watching while he died—slowly, tantalizingly, as the parched wheat died. He had grown unkempt, ugly, morose. His voice was gruff, contentious, never broke into the deep, strong laughter that used to make her feel she was living at the heart of things. John was gone, love was gone; there was only wheat. 15

She plucked a blade; her eyes travelled hungrily up and down the field. Serene now, all its sting and torment sheathed. Beautiful, more beautiful than Annabelle's poppies, than her sunsets. Theirs—all of it. Three hundred acres ready to give perhaps a little of what it had taken from her—John, his love, his lips unclenched. 20

Three hundred acres. Bushels, thousands of bushels, she wouldn't even try to think how many. And prices up this year. It would make him young again, lift his head, give him spirit. Maybe he would shave twice a week as he used to when they were first married, buy new clothes, believe in himself again. 25

She walked down the road towards the house, her steps quickening to the pace of her thoughts until the sweat clung to her face like little beads of oil. It was the children now, Joe and Annabelle: this winter perhaps they could send them to school in town and let them take music lessons. Annabelle, anyway. At a pinch Joe could wait a while; he was only eight. It wouldn't take Annabelle long to pick up her notes; already she played hymn tunes by ear on the organ. She was bright, a real little lady for manners; among town people she would learn a lot. The farm was no place to bring her up. Running wild and barefoot, what would she be like in a few years? Who would ever want to marry her but some stupid country lout? 30

John had never been to school himself; he knew what it meant to go through life with nothing but his muscles to depend on; and that was it, dread that Annabelle and Joe would be handicapped as he was, that was what had darkened him, made him harsh and dour. That was why he breasted the sun and dust a frantic, dogged fool, to spare them, to help them to a life that offered more than sweat and debts. Martha knew. He was a slow, inarticulate man, but she knew. Sometimes it even vexed her, brought a wrinkle of jealousy, his anxiety about the children, his sense of responsibility where they were concerned. He never seemed to feel that he owed her anything, never worried about her future. She could sweat, grow flat-footed and 35

shapeless, but that never bothered him.

Her thoughts were on their old, trudging way, the way they always went; but then she halted suddenly, and with her eyes across the wheat again found freshening promise in its quiet expanse. The children must come first, but she and John—mightn't there be a little of life left for them too? A man was young at thirty-nine. And if she didn't have to work so hard, if she could get some new clothes, maybe some of the creams and things that the other women had...

As she passed through the gate, Annabelle raced across the yard to meet her. "Do you know what Joe's done? He's taken off all his clothes and he's in the trough with Nipper¹!" She was a lanky girl, sunburned, barefoot, her face oval and regular, but spoiled by an expression that strained her mouth and brows into a reproachful primness. It was Martha who had taught her the expression, dinning manners and politeness into her, trying to make her better than the other little girls who went to the country school. She went on, her eyes wide and aghast, "And when I told him to come out he stood right up, all bare, and I had to come away."

"Well, you tell him he'd better be out before I get there."

"But how can I tell him? He's all bare."

¹Nipper – the family dog

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Second Variant Paper

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UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL EXAMINATIONS
General Certificate of Education
Advanced Subsidiary Level and Advanced Level

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

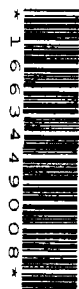
8693/01

Paper 1 Passages for Comment

October/November 2008

2 hours

Additional Materials: Answer Booklet/Paper



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Answer two questions.

1 The passage below describes the writer's experience of going on holiday with his mother and father.

- (a) Comment on the style and language of the passage. [15]
- (b) After one such holiday the mother writes a letter to a relative outlining her experience of the trip with her family. Basing your answer closely on the material of the extract, write the opening (between 120-150 words) of her letter. [10]

In my memory, our vacations were always taken in a big blue Rambler station-wagon. It was a cruddy car – my dad always bought cruddy cars, until he got to the male menopause and started buying zippy red convertibles – but it had the great virtue of space. My brother, sister and I in the back were miles away from my parents up front, in effect another room. We quickly discovered during illicit forays into the picnic hamper that if you stuck a bunch of Ohio Blue Tip matches into an apple or hard-boiled egg, so that it resembled a porcupine, and casually dropped it out the tailgate window, it was like a bomb. It would explode with a small bang and a surprisingly big flash of blue flame, causing cars following behind to veer in an amusing fashion. 5

My dad, miles away up front, never knew what was going on and could not understand why all day long cars would zoom up alongside him with the driver gesticulating furiously, before tearing off into the distance. 'What was that all about?' he would say to my mother in a wounded tone. 10

'I don't know, dear,' my mother would answer mildly. My mother only ever said two things. She said, 'I don't know, dear.' And she said, 'Can I get you a sandwich, honey?' Occasionally on our trips she would volunteer other pieces of intelligence like, 'Should that dashboard light be glowing like that, dear?' or, 'I think you hit that dog/man/blind person back there, honey,' but mostly she wisely kept quiet. This was because on vacations my father was a man obsessed. His principal obsession was with trying to economize. He always took us to the crummiest hotels and motor lodges, and to the kind of roadside eating-houses where they only washed the dishes weekly. You always knew, with a sense of doom, that at some point before finishing you were going to discover someone else's congealed egg-yolk lurking somewhere on your plate or plugged between the tines of your fork. This, of course, meant cooties¹ and a long, painful death. 20

But even that was a relative treat. Usually we were forced to picnic by the side of the road. My father had an instinct for picking bad picnic sites – on the apron of a busy truck stop or in a little park that turned out to be in the heart of some seriously deprived ghetto, so that groups of children would come and stand silently by our table and watch us eating Hostess Cupcakes and crinkle-cut potato chips – and it always became incredibly windy the moment we stopped, so that my mother spent the whole of lunch-time chasing paper plates over an area of about an acre. 30

In 1957 my father invested \$19.98 in a portable gas stove that took an hour to assemble before each use and was so wildly temperamental that we children were always ordered to stand well back when it was being lit. This always proved unnecessary, however, because the stove would flicker to life only for a few seconds before puttering out, and my father would spend many hours turning it this way and that to keep it out of the wind, simultaneously addressing it in a low, agitated tone normally associated with the chronically insane. All the while my brother, sister and I would implore him to take us some place with air-conditioning, linen tablecloths and ice-cubes clinking in glasses of clear water. 'Dad,' we would beg, 'you're a successful man. You make a good living. Take us to a Howard Johnson's.' But 40

he wouldn't have it. He was a child of the Depression and where capital outlays were involved he always wore the haunted look of a fugitive who had just heard bloodhounds in the distance. 45

Eventually, with the sun low in the sky, he would hand us hamburgers that were cold and raw and smelled of butane. We would take one bite and refuse to eat any more. So my father would lose his temper and throw everything into the car and drive us at high speed to some roadside diner where a sweaty man with a floppy hat would sling hash while grease-fires danced on his grill. And afterwards, in a silent car filled with bitterness and unquenched basic needs, we would mistakenly turn off the main highway and get lost and end up in some no-hope hamlet with a name like Drains, Indiana, or Tapwater, Missouri, and get a room in the only hotel in town, the sort of rundown place where if you wanted to watch TV it meant you had to sit in the lobby and share a cracked leatherette sofa with an old man with big sweat circles under his arms. The old man would almost certainly have only one leg and probably one other truly arresting deficiency, like no nose or a caved-in forehead, which meant that although you were sincerely intent on watching *Laramie* or *Our Miss Brooks*, you found your gaze being drawn, ineluctably and sneakily, to the amazing eaten-away body sitting beside you. You couldn't help yourself. Occasionally the man would turn out to have no tongue, in which case he would try to engage you in lively conversation. It was all most unsatisfying. 50
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¹cooties – headlice

2 The passage below describes a European's first experience of visiting Africa.

(a) Comment on the style and language of the passage. [15]

(b) The same traveller later publishes an account of another place (real or imaginary) that he has visited. Basing your answer closely on the style of the original extract, write the opening section (between 120-150 words) of his account. [10]

The sun does not rise here. To describe it thus implies a slow, gradual awakening. It does not ascend gracefully in a heavenly arc. It ambushes the night. Suddenly, leaping out from behind its own shadow, free of its self-imprisoning cloak of darkness, a ready-made ball of solid, triumphantly glaring light. It is a huge glaring Cyclops¹. An immediate challenge to anything under its dominion. It will kill if given a chance. It will deny life, drying anything to dust. The air does not warm then ease its way to a tepid heat. The sun slaps the night aside and is immediately hot. Is suddenly there. Present and material. It lends the air weight, transforming it from its thin invisibility of night to a heavy material substance. Something to be battled against and through. Where every indrawn breath scalds and all exposed flesh burns. 5 10

There is no seemly shading of demure pinks to oranges to yellows then white. None of the politesse of adjustment. No appreciation of the subtleties of temperature. No soft waking to the day, the cool of dawn, the gentle stirring of the land, the shading of the clouds before the clarity of noon. None of the quiet trembling of siesta heat, followed by the kindly decline into the soothing contemplation of the evening. 15

No. It catapults directly, fully formed, from the deep settled velvet dark of the African nightblack. Like some hideous jack-in-the-box it leaps leering into the sky, glaring manically and daring anything to stir.

The sun detests its great enemy – shade. Shade – the sole, great challenger to its sovereign reign. It will do anything to destroy it. It will suck the ground dry of water, dew or damp to deny the tree. It will pound relentlessly on the nomad's tented roof. It will stalk the verandahed pavements and eliminate the shadow of anyone foolhardy enough to challenge it and venture forth. 20

But still trees grow. And still people move. But they do so very slowly. The grace and elegance of human movement in Africa is not accidental. It is environmental. It is learned. The overriding consideration is to conserve energy. Every action must be considered and weighed against the draining torpor of the day. 25

Consider an African walking. You will rarely see one do anything as provocative as run. There is an effortless, upright elegance. A huge poise against the endless whiteness of the sky. There is nothing superfluous in the action. No sudden rushes. No flurries. Rather, a slow, rhythmic steadiness of unhurried ease wholly different from the flustered, busy, jerky, spasmodic rush common to the European. 30

The women, like models or ballerinas, gracefully upright, balance perfectly between sky and earth, their hips propelling them forward in a lullaby sway. On their heads improbable weights of stuff. Sewing machines, car parts, electric kettles, animals, huge bundles of wood or protruding carrots that make them resemble beautiful black Statues of Liberty. 35

And in the pasturelands of the Masai or the deserts of the Tuareg, the salt-flat depressions of the Afar or the highlands of the Amhara, in a landscape of nothing a solitary figure utterly still in this vast empty space standing on a single leg for ever. Motionless and still under the impotent sun and magnificent in his place. There is no need to hurry or move and there is no benefit in doing so. 40

No, this is not the Dark Continent. But many of us can only see Africa from the dark side of our mind. The impenetrable place, the unknowable minds. The hordes of walking skeletons, too weak to swat the flies that cover them in the stinking squalor 45

of the relief camps. Or the disease-stricken people fleeing yet another nameless war between countries, clans, tribes or warlords. And, yes, all of that is true too much of the time, but in refusing to see the many other Africas we bring our own darkneses to bear. Still others fill the romantic space in their imagination with an Africa of 'unspoilt' child-like primitives and wild, beautiful creatures. But the reality is that this continent is all of that and has everything else. Rainforest, jungle, savannah, Mediterranean and coastal climates, with more fish and animals and birds, more peoples, cultures and languages than anywhere else on the planet. It is quite simply the most beautiful place in our world.

No, not the Dark Continent. This is the Luminous Continent.

¹Cyclops – mythical one-eyed giant

- 3 In the extract below the narrator describes her confusion about her surroundings and her uncertainty about the man she meets.
- (a) Later that day the narrator has another meal and meets someone else. Basing your answer closely on the style of the original extract, write the opening section (between 120-150 words) of the narrator's account of this experience. [10]
- (b) Compare the language and style of your piece to those of the original extract. [15]

How it happens is a long story, always.

And I apparently begin with being here: a boxy room that's too wide to be cosy, its dirty ceiling hung just low enough to press down a broad, unmistakable haze of claustrophobia. To my right is an over-large clock of the kind favoured by playschools and homes for the elderly, the kind with bold, black numbers and cartoon-thick hands that shout what time it is whether you're curious or not. It shows 8.42 and counting. Above, there is a generalized sting of yellow light. 5

8.42

But I don't know which one – night or morning. Either way, from what I can already see, I would rather not be involved in all this too far beyond 8.43. 10

In one fist, I notice, I'm holding a key. Its fob is made of viciously green plastic, translucent and moulded to a shape which illustrates what would happen if a long-dead ear was inflated until morbidly obese. I only know that it's actually meant to be a leaf, because it is marked with an effort towards the stem, the ribs and veins that a leaf might have. I presume I'm supposed to like this key and give it the benefit of the doubt because people are fond of trees and, by extension, leaves. But I don't like leaves, not even real ones. 15

I'll tell you what I do like, though: what I adore – I'm looking right at it, right now and it is gorgeous, quite the prettiest thing I've seen since 8.41. It concerns my other hand – the one that is leaf-free. 20

It is a liquid.

I do love liquids.

Rising from the beaker to the jug in that continually-renewing, barely-sugared twist: falling from the jug into the beaker like a muscle perpetually flexed and re-flexed, the honey-coloured heart of some irreversibly specialized animal. It's glimmering and, of course, *pouring* – a drink *pouring*, hurrying in to ease a thirst, just as it should. I put down the jug and I lift up the glass, just as I should. 25

I presume it's filled with some kind of apple juice and, on closer acquaintance, I find this to be so – not very pleasant, but certainly wet and necessary. The air, and therefore my mouth, currently tastes of cheap cleaning products, unhappy people, a hundred years of stubborn cigarette smoke and the urine of young children, left to lie. Which means I need my drink. Besides, I really do have, now I think about it, a terrible thirst. 30

'Terrible weather?'

I'm swallowing ersatz fruit, not even from concentrate, so I can't have said a word – it wasn't me who spoke. 35

Terrible thirst: terrible weather – but the echo is accidental, I would have to be feeling quite paranoid to think it was anything else. Nevertheless, the remark feels intrusive – as if it had access to my skull – and so I turn without even preparing a smile and discover the party responsible tucked behind me: a straggly, gingery man, loitering. He has longish, yellowish, curly hair, which was, perhaps, cute at some time in his youth, but has thinned now into a wispy embarrassment. I can almost picture him, each evening, praying to be struck bald overnight. God has not, so far, been merciful. 40

Mr Wispy's expression attempts to remain enquiring although he says nothing more and I do not meet his eyes or in any way encourage him. He is the type to have hobbies: sad ones that he'll want to talk about. 45

Checking swiftly, I can see there are no windows, which may explain his lack of meteorological certainty. There's no way that either of us can know what the weather is doing outside. Then again, Straggly has the look of a person habitually unsure of things: it may be he's stolen a peek beyond the room and already has prior knowledge of whatever conditions prevail – monsoon, dust storm, sleet – he may simply hope I'll confirm his observations. 50

Of course, I have no prior knowledge, not a trace.

There is a fake cart rigged up, beyond us both – it's clearly made of stainless steel, but is burdened with a feminine canopy and fat little flounces of chintz. Inside, I can make out a seethe of heat lamps and trays of orange, brown, or grey things which ought to be food, I suppose. The whole assembly smells of nothing beyond boredom and possibly old grease. 55

'Really dreadful ... Yes?' He tries again: maybe harping on about the weather, maybe just depressive, I can't say I care. 60

'Appalling.' I nod and angle myself away.

But Straggly has to chip in again. 'Tchsss ...' He seems to be taking the whole thing very personally, whatever it is. And I notice there's something slightly expectant in the scampery little glances he keeps launching across at me. It could be that he will give me a headache soon. 65

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