



Cambridge Lower Secondary Checkpoint

ENGLISH

0861/02

Paper 2 Fiction

October 2024

INSERT

1 hour 10 minutes

INFORMATION

- This insert contains the reading text.
- You may annotate this insert and use the blank spaces for planning. **Do not write your answers** on the insert.



This document has **4** pages. Any blank pages are indicated.

Text for Section A, an extract from *Bewilderment* by Richard Powers

A father and son, Robin (who is called Robbie by his father), have gone to the mountains to stargaze.

BUT WE MIGHT NEVER FIND THEM? We'd set up the scope¹ on the deck, on a clear autumn night, on the edge of one of the last patches of darkness in the east. Darkness this good was hard to come by, and so much darkness in one place lit up the sky. We pointed the tube through a gap in the trees above our cabin. Robin pulled his eye from the eyepiece – my singular, newly turning nine-year-old. 5

'Exactly right,' I said. 'We might never find them.'

I always tried to tell him the truth, if I knew it and it wasn't lethal. He knew when I lied, anyway. 10

But they're all over, right? You guys have proved it.

'Well, not exactly proved.'

Maybe they're too far away. Too much empty space or something.

His arms pinwheeled as they did when words defeated him. We were closing in on bedtime, which didn't help. I put my hand on his wild auburn mop. Her colour – Aly's. 15

'And what if we never heard a peep from out there? What would that say?'

He held up one hand. Alyssa used to say that when he concentrated, you could hear him whirring. His eyes narrowed, staring down into the dark ravine of trees below. His other hand sawed the cleft of his chin – a habit he resorted to when thinking hard. He sawed with such vigour I had to stop him. 20

'Robbie. Hey! Time to land.'

His palm pushed out to reassure me. He was fine. He simply wanted to run with the question for another minute, into the darkness, while still possible.

If we never heard anything, like ever?

I nodded encouragement to my scientist – easy does it. Stargazing was finished for tonight. We'd had the clearest evening, in a place known for rain. A full Hunter's Moon hung fat and red on the horizon. Through the circle of trees, so sharp it seemed within easy reach, the Milky Way spilled out – countless speckled placers in a black streambed. If you held still, you could almost see the stars wheel. 25

Nothing definitive. That's what. 30

I laughed. He made me laugh once a day or more, in good stretches. Such defiance. Such radical scepticism. He was so me. He was so her.

'No,' I agreed. 'Nothing definitive.'

Now, if we did hear a peep. That would say tons!

'Indeed.' There would be time enough another night to say exactly what. For now, it was 35

bedtime. He put his eye up to the barrel of the telescope for a last look at the shining core of the Andromeda Galaxy.

Can we sleep outside tonight, Dad?

I'd pulled him from school for a week and brought him to the woods. I couldn't very well bring him all the way down to the Smokies² only to deny him a night of sleeping outside. 40

We went back in to outfit our expedition. The downstairs was one great panelled room smelling of pine. The kitchen reeked of damp towels and plaster—the scents of a temperate rain forest. Sticky notes clung to the cabinets: *Coffee filters above fridge. Use other dishes, please!* A green spiral folder of instructions spread on the battered oak table: plumbing quirks, fuse box location, emergency numbers. Every switch in the house was labelled: *Overhead, Stairs, Hallway, Kitchen.* 45

Ceiling-high windows opened onto what, tomorrow morning, would be a rolling expanse of mountains beyond mountains. A pair of pilled rustic sofas flanked the flagstone fireplace, emblazoned with parades of elk, canoes, and bears. We raided the cushions, brought them outside, and laid them on the deck. 50

Can we have snacks?

'Bad idea, buddy. *Ursus americanus*, the black bear. Two of them per square mile, and they can smell peanuts from here to North Carolina.'

No way! But that reminds me!

He ran inside again and returned with a compact paperback: *Mammals of the Smokies.* 55

'Really, Robbie? It's pitch-black out here.'

He held up an emergency flashlight, the kind you charge by cranking. It fascinated him when we arrived that morning, and he'd demanded an explanation of how the magic worked. Now he couldn't get enough of making his own electrons.

We settled into our makeshift base camp. He seemed happy, which had been the whole point of this special trip. Lying down on beds spread out on the slats of the sagging deck, we fell asleep under our galaxy's four hundred billion stars. 60

HE WOKE ME IN THE NIGHT. *How many stars did you say there are?*

I couldn't be angry. Even yanked from sleep, I was glad he was still stargazing.

'Multiply every grain of sand on Earth by the number of trees. One hundred octillion.' 65

I made him say twenty-nine zeros. Fifteen zeros in, his laughter turned to groans.

'If you were an ancient astronomer, using Roman numerals, you couldn't have written the number down. Not even in your whole lifetime.'

Then, Dad...?

Glossary

¹scope: telescope

²Smokies: a range of mountains in the United States

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