

Delprove 2 B

General instructions

1. Answer all the questions in this section. The answer to each question must be given separately.
2. The total length of your paper must be about 600-900 words.

Absent

Opgaveformulering:

1. Give a summary of the text in no more than 150 words.
 2. Characterize the two main characters.
 3. Comment on the title.
 4. Discuss the ending.
 5. Write a newspaper article about the son's accident (150-200 words).
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Delprøve 2 B

Absent

(An English short story from 1990.)

A wave of nausea swept over him. He scrambled to his feet, his mind still asleep, his body cocooned in his own staleness. He stumbled into the bathroom.

5 He studied his face in the cracked, brown-splattered mirror before him. His pupils were large and clouded. He pulled a face. He wasn't actually quite sure, he thought, he wasn't quite sure how he got to be standing in a strange, dirty bathroom somewhere in North London, with a sprinkling of people he had never seen before, and probably would never see again. The night before was a blank. Snatches were still clear, the small, plastic square, the key to the undiscovered labyrinths of his mind. He rooted in his jeans for a cigarette and found none. Sighing, he left the bathroom.

10 Out in the unfamiliar hall, the floor was scattered with comatose bodies, contorted with sleep and alcohol. A face jerked into life; a cough, a yawn, dry-tongued and scarlet-eyed. Picking his feet over the semi-living figures around him, he made his way back to the living room.

15 The scent hit him immediately. His head began to rise, and spin slowly, as he sat down on the floor, quietly blending into the surroundings again. A small, thin, white object was shoved into his hand. Automatically, he raised it to his lips, and drew in his breath deeply, swallowing and filling the base of his throat with the sweet heavy smoke. Almost immediately, his body began to tingle; his limbs became heavy, liquid; his perception clouded and hazed.

It was Tuesday morning, similar to any other.

She woke with a start. The room was icy cold. Outside the grey, dull light of early morning gone, the newly fallen snow a chilling brightness. She shuddered.

20 He hadn't come home.

In vain, she attempted to push the thought to the back of her mind. But to no avail. It was the third time this month. He would stumble in some time in the afternoon, silent and bitter, and disappear to his room. Helpless and sad, she would long for a link, the breaking of the barriers. But, just when she had worked up enough courage to approach him, enough resolution to work up some optimism, he would dart out of the door again calling, "Off out, Mum", and she would be alone, alone while she cried bitter tears over him, the small, happy baby with the bluest eyes.

25 She didn't really want to know what he did with his time; ignored the enlarged pupils, the empty whisky bottles in his room, the scars on his wrists. She was consumed with the fear of him. The guilt of fearing him. The guilt of her weakness, the all-destroying guilt that weighted her down, stifled them both. What had gone wrong? she thought to herself. Why did they not seem able to communicate any more? He was a stranger, encased in an impenetrable block of ice. She was helpless.

35 And then there was the school. She knew he didn't go in much. But there was nothing she could do, she reasoned with herself. "After all, he's nearly old enough to leave, and it is his decision entirely." But when the official-headed letters came through the door at regular intervals, her heart sank. When she went for meetings with the Headmaster - the conspicuous click of her shoes echoing down the corridors, the young eyes whispering, smirking, the hot rush that flooded her head when a sympathetic, smiling face told her gently that her son was a failure, a bully, a bad

influence - all fed on her conscience, until she would run out, her face in her hands, as far away as possible. Then the shame would descend on her, partly on his behalf, but mostly because she had not been strong enough for him.

After all, she was on his side. Wasn't she?

He felt a twinge of guilt as he looked at the clock. School would be preparing for the insanity of the lunch-hour row. He had always hated that part of the day, and consequently would stroll out of the building instead, secure in his own company, with a joint in his hand and the open sky in his eyes.

Then, unable to face the hordes again in the afternoon, he would wander away, all resolutions dulled by the fragrant smoke, and return home much, much later, guilty and tired. Sometimes he felt as if his life was spiralling down, to an unknown, unimaginable destination. The distance from his mother was by now so far that a reconciliation appeared impossible. He smiled to himself. The distance was safe.

The soothing, warm liquid spilled down his throat. He cupped his hands around the filthy mug, warming his fingers from its heat. Outside, the whiteness had turned grey-brown, distorted by the trampling of people's feet and the sick, yellow light that thudded down from the thick storm-clouds. The small, shabby kitchen was bare, the only food available being a very old tin of tuna and some crispbread, or at least crumbs of crispbread. With a sigh, he set about the tiresome task of getting some sort of meal for himself.

It didn't really bother him much, food. He was used to going without, more often than not living on cigarettes and four-packs for days at a time. Involuntarily, the memory of his mother's food crossed his mind. She had been proud of her cooking, and it had probably been the deciding element in her marriage to his father. And with him, as he grew up, she had introduced him to the love of food. She hadn't usually had much money, but she always managed to conjure up something; rich, thick, aromatic stews, flavoured with the cheap bones the butcher rejected, the huge bowls of porridge, thick, steaming and filling.

Out in the hall, the majority of people were awake, propped up against the decaying walls as if the survival of the house's structure depended on it. He sat down amongst them. Looking about he studied the faces that surrounded him: the greed that lit up their features, the coldness of their laughter and their smiles. They resembled a crowd of sleepy, yet money-hungry vultures around a roulette wheel. But the stakes were high, and the chips small squares of treated plastic that would unleash your mind and send your senses soaring. As, one by one, they placed the tabs in their mouths, one by one they seemed to disappear from reach. He felt alone.

The bitterness descended on him, with the memories and the hope that died so young. The sadness of his existence penetrated his core, desperate and helpless. But what could he do? Was he in fact able to pick up where he left off? Go back to school, and his mother, return to the mundaneness of suburbia? He was no longer sure. But could he stay as he was? Neither was an option really.

He looked at a young girl lying motionless beside him. Her eyes, the only part of her that seemed alive, were inside, staring at some indetermined spot on the opposite wall. She was young, too young to be capable of such a look. His mind was made up for him. He could not continue *as* he was, to become no more than a body, a mass of flesh that was totally reliant on the artificiality of drugs.

He stood, and before he had a chance to wonder what he was doing, walked out the door.

She felt a surge of hope each time the phone rang.

But *as* the hours passed she felt the hopelessness returning, the feeling of him being out of reach. Was she going about this in the wrong way? She didn't know. There was simply the block he'd set up between them. But she wanted him back so badly she felt *as* if her heart would be eaten away with the pain.

Absently she began preparing the supper. As she chopped the vegetables, she reasoned with herself. He needed her too, he must do.

90 But first they needed to get to know each other again. And they could do. Her train of thought was broken on the door. Silhouetted in the glass were the outlines of two tall men. The silver sheen of a policeman's badge penetrated the darkness of the hall. Hesitatingly, she peered round the door.

"Mrs Pearson?"

95 "Yes."

"We regret to inform you that a boy identified as your son has been killed in a motorbike accident. Apparently, according to the autopsy, he was under the influence of LSD. We are sincerely sorry."

Their faces were totally expressionless. And inwardly, she let a note of pure pain pierce the air.

(Adapted from a short story by Tui De Hann. "Absent" was first published in Short Story Workshop, edited by Jeffrey and Lynn Wood, Cambridge University Press 1990.)