

Delprøve 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.

Letter to a Cat

1. Give a summary of the text in no more than 150 words.
2. Characterize Norma and the life she lives.
3. Comment on the title
4. Discuss the ending
5. Write Norma's letter (150-200 words).

Delpøve 2

Letter to a Cat

(An Irish short story published in 1997.)

"Colonel Blimp do you think that fascism is carried in the genes?"

Norma turned over the page of the Sunday supplement article on genetic engineering and looked up. No answer. Her husband, Daragh, and June, their only child, were drawing up a list of invitees to June's forthcoming wedding. The "Colonel Blimp", whose opinion had been sought, was a fat, one-eyed tabby cat.

Over the past few years, and more so since last January when June had joined the family firm of accountants, father and daughter treated Norma with, on good days, condescension and, on bad days, contempt. Most of the time they ignored her.

Norma looked up from the paper. "You're not forgetting your cousins in Naas, June?"

"I'm not asking them." June's tone was stubborn. "But I suppose we'll have to ask Aunt Mary and Uncle Tom. They're no earthly use to us and there's a lot of people who should be asked."

Norma put down the *Sunday Tribune* and looked Colonel Blimp straight in the eye. "Colonel, do you think it acceptable practice to ask only the useful and or decorative to your wedding?"

June swung around in her chair. "Mother, would you stop pretending you're talking to the cat."

With her sixteen stone Norma would have been a success in Egypt, Turkey, Iraq – countries where real women are appreciated. Over the years, as she got fatter and fatter, she had made wider kaftans of wilder and wilder hues. They were works of genius, lovingly created in the lonely hours of a misfit's time. Norma never wore any of these creations. Now she hastily pulled on an old tracksuit.

"I'm going for a walk," she shouted from the hall. "There's shepherd's pie in the fridge." She slammed the door of *number 42* behind her.

A steep hill led down to the beach. It was a cool day although the sun was shining. She was feeling much better now. She took off her shoes and let the water at the edge chill her toes. Suddenly a piercing pain went through her and she toppled over onto the wet sand. She took hold of her foot and felt the hot sticky blood flow through her forgers. She bent over to look: a deep cut was gashed through her big toe.

A shadow fell across her and looking up, she saw a thin gentleman looking over her. With one smooth movement he was sitting by her side. He leaned across and picked up a sharp clam shell tinged with red." That's what did it. Show me the damage." Norma allowed him to take her foot in his bony hand.

"That's deep. Needs to be cleaned. Come back with me. I live up there." He pointed to the scrub grass.

She followed him meekly, limping slightly.

Just ahead was a tin shack, large and brightly painted yellow. "Home," he announced with a wide smile and suddenly he was almost handsome. He was middle-aged, with mousy hair losing its grip on top, so thin that you feared bones would surface but the smile made Norma feel comfortable.

The gentleman ushered her to a very large and battered armchair. "Just a second." He vanished into the darkness of a corner and fussed about. She looked around the room. It was lined with shelves of books – hundreds and hundreds of them. Only philosophy. That was the only fault in this pleasing place. There was no English Lit.

"Let's have a look." He was back with a bowl of water, a towel and a bottle of disinfectant. Norma closed her eyes and smiled; it was nice to be looked after.

"How about a sloe gin to help recovery? I make my own." This is life, she thought. I can't believe my luck.

45 They exchanged their histories. Arthur had owned this hut for years. When he lived in a house with a wife called Ruth it had been a place to make his gin and mend his fishing tackle. One day his wife had run off. Arthur sold the house and had arranged early retirement from the college where he taught philosophy. Life became safe and simple.

50 Fortified by three sloe gins, Norma sobbed out the story of her shrinking world. "It's all I've left, just one room full to the ceiling of refugees – my books, my useless shells, my fantastic kaftans." He walked her home at midnight, up the steep hill, his arm around her shoulders.

At breakfast next morning June gave her mother instructions to empty "her junk room" because it would be just the right place to display the presents. Norma put up no opposition. Her only comment was a throwaway remark to Colonel Blimp. "I hope you're taking this down, Colonel. I
55 may need you as a witness."

The next afternoon at about four Norma strolled down to the beach and headed for the hut. They walked along the water's edge and by the time they got back to the yellow hut, it was getting dark. "I'm being evicted," she said, "me and my refugees." He sat up in his chair. "Bring them to me. There's lots of room".

60 That night in bed Norma thought about his offer. She liked the idea of her belongings being put in his care. The next afternoon she piled high the old Renault and across the roof-rack, carefully covered with plastic, she stretched out her many coloured kaftans.

They unpacked the books and English Lit took its rightful place beside the thinkers on the shelves. Then they embarked on unloading the kaftans. The most beautiful garment, the acid green with the pearls and mirrors, Arthur kept aside and pondered where it should hang to be admired. Eventually they decided on the wall over his bed. It looked magnificent when they'd finished –
65 magnificent sails on a magnificent ship intended to carry the Queen of Sheba to a Promised Land.

Arthur took her hand, "It gives a final touch. Changes this miserable cabin into a temple". When he led her gently to the bed beneath the majestic rigging, she made no protest. Afterwards, she fell
70 asleep in his arms. When she awoke twilight had fallen; the room was dark and she could hear Arthur singing to himself as he prepared their supper.

"That was delicious. Norma put down her knife and fork. Arthur seized the moment to ask her a question. A question that had been playing on his mind since the first time he had seen her. "Come live with me." She was tempted to say yes immediately. But caution is not so easily tossed to the
75 wind at fifty years old.

Over the next few weeks Norma spent many hours with Arthur. In *number 42*, careful planning and scheduling meant that everything was flowing smoothly. Norma was, as usual, redundant. But she wished to give them one more chance.

80 "How do I look?" She whirled into the sitting-room at coffee time, dressed in the one remaining exiled kaftan. June and Daragh did not at first look up from their newspapers. When they did their comments were curt and to the point. "Ridiculous, I hope you're not even thinking of wearing that tomorrow!" As she rustled out of the room, Colonel Blimp gave her a long hard look and closed his eye.

85 The household would be rising early that wedding morn. But Norma was up before the others stirred. It would be a good day for photographs but she would not be featuring in them. She continued to write in her broad, slanting style... "You may miss me a little, especially at meal-times but you'll survive very well without me. Please explain to everyone, why I will not be at the wedding. I'm sure it will be a wonderful success. Yours, Norma." Folding the writing paper she put it carefully into the matching envelope and, with a steady hand, addressed it to Colonel Blimp.
90 Closing the door of *number 42* quietly behind her she headed for the beckoning shore.