

## **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.**

### **The Best Possible Light**

1. Write a summary of the short story in no more than 150 words.
2. Characterize Barney and his relationship to his family.
3. Comment on the narrator's thoughts *I am the one who taught him to regard himself as a blessing* (lines 152-153).
4. In a short essay (150-200 words) discuss what you think is important for a good relationship between family members.

## The Best Possible Light

*(An American short story.)*

Out of nowhere, my son, Barney, shows up. As ever, he has brought a woman with him.

Barney is thirty-four but looks twenty-one. He's short and muscular, and he has a great nose. I see his face for only a second  
5 before he's hugging me. I'm saying, "What are you doing here? I can't believe you're here."

He takes his girlfriend's arm and, in a put-on British accent, he says, "Meet me sainted mum."

"Call me Nina," I say.

10 "How do you do?" she says, and shakes my hand. "I'm Laurel." She's taller than he is, and handsome.

Barney lives in Chicago and I'm waiting for him to tell me what he's doing here in New York, and why the surprise.

I lead them out to my terrace. Barney and Laurel sit close to-  
15 gether; he has his arm around her, his fingers on her neck.

"How long can you stay?" I ask.

Barney says they're going to Laurel's parents' tomorrow. "They're marine biologists," he says. "A family of scientists."

Now I remember Barney talking about a woman who worked in  
20 a lab. I don't listen as closely as I used to; since his divorce, he always has a girlfriend.

"Laurel's an entomologist."

She says, "I study bugs."

"So, Nina," Barney says. "What about a dinner party? I'll round  
25 up the usual suspects," meaning his sisters.

He gets the phone from the kitchen and brings it outside to us. He calls Isabelle and makes his voice raspy and says, "Babe. Meet me at the tracks." We can hear Isabelle laughing. He clowns around with her, but he means to entertain us, too. Barney is  
30 always making everyone fall in love with him.

Then he calls P. K. at the office. She's the youngest, a civil-rights lawyer. With her, Barney turns serious. "Hey, Peanut," he says. He smiles at Laurel, and takes the phone inside.

So I'm out on the terrace alone with Laurel. She looks right at  
35 me while I talk, and I can tell she is really listening.

Barney comes back out and stands behind Laurel's chair. "We've got P. K., Isabelle and her beau – what's his name?"

I'm not sure. "Giancarlo?"

Very lightly he touches Laurel's neck and jaw and cheeks. "You  
40 need a nap, Bugsy?" He kisses the top of her head, and it occurs  
to me that I have not seen him this gentle with anyone since Julie,  
his ex-wife.

I sit down with my shopping list for the party. Barney comes  
back out. I'd like to ask about Julie. I start to and stop. It feels  
45 strange with Laurel lying down in my room. But Julie was a part  
of this family; you don't just forget. Finally, I say, "Have you seen  
Julie at all?"

"I have." He smiles, and it's insolent or sexual or mischievous,  
a bad-boy smile.

50 "How is she?"

"Great."

I give him a look.

He says, "Laurel and I had dinner with her Thursday."

P. K. is the first to arrive. Her eyes are expectant. She kisses me  
55 and whispers, "Is Julie here?"

I say no and she sighs. "It was the way he said 'we'. I don't  
know."

"He's brought Laurel," I say. "She's very nice."

"Great," she says with zero enthusiasm. "Where is he?"

60 "Liquor store."

P. K. follows me into the kitchen. I put her to work on the salad.

Laurel joins us. "How can I help?" she asks, and P. K. hands her  
the lettuce.,

Barney comes back. When he sees P. K. he puts the bags down  
65 right where he is and hugs her. "Well, Counselor," he says, rub-  
bing her back.

Isabelle and Giancarlo arrive. Isabelle is the great beauty of the  
family. "Hey, you," she says, hugging Barney. She introduces  
Giancarlo all around. He's very handsome, very Italian.

70 Isabelle says. "I've got a surprise." She turns to Laurel. "Has  
' Barney told you anything about Water Mill?"

"A little."

"That's where Barney and I spent our formative years. It was a  
cooperative farm." She describes the apple orchards, the other  
75 families, and how we used to cross the river to hear folk concerts.

Isabelle looks away from me, to Barney and then to P. K. and  
says, "Dad and I went up there last weekend." She pauses.

"Remember we heard it was leveled?"

Barney nods.

80 "It was," she says. "Except for one thing." She takes photographs out of her bag. "Voila!"

They are pictures of the tiny village Barney built behind our house. He made hills and valleys, even a river, and dozens of bricksize houses out of his "secret formula" – a cement-and-stone  
85 mixture.

P. K. says, "It looks so real."

Isabelle says, "Because everything's gone. There's no scale."

I look at the picture. The place where our house once stood is smooth orange dirt, crisscrossed with bulldozer tracks. "It's a  
90 ghost town," I say.

Barney nods. "Yup," he says.

Isabelle says, "Your Topia."

Barney's expression is dreamy, and I can tell he is remembering.

98 Isabelle says to Laurel, "Barney overheard the grown-ups talking about Utopia."

Now Laurel asks Barney, "How old were you?"

He looks at me. "Eight?"

"That's about right," I say.

100 P. K. says, "I love that they left it standing."

I go to the kitchen to check on dinner, and I overhear Barney say, "You see Dad a lot, Isabelle?"

We sit down to dinner and I get this good feeling. We're all here.

Giancarlo says, "Why did you leave the farm?"

105 I tell him that the schools weren't great, and we were losing money on the apples. "It wasn't realistic."

At dessert, I bring out champagne. P. K. makes the first toast: "To our honored guests from the Windy City!" and everyone clinks glasses. Barney stands up and taps his spoon against his  
110 glass.

"I have something to announce," he says. "A major announcement." He smiles all around, and then pulls Laurel to her feet. "We're pregnant," he says.

They sit down. It takes a second for it to sink in, and then  
115 Isabelle jumps up and hugs them. "That's great," she says. Then we're all hugging one another.

Laurel half rises again, and says, "We're also getting married." Everyone laughs; I have to admit I'm relieved. The details cir-

cle the table – she saw the doctor last week, the wedding will be  
120 very soon, she's due in April.

Then Barney stands again, still beaming.

Everyone thinks he's joking. "Sit down!" P. K. calls out.

Barney says, "There's something else." Very slowly, Barney  
says, "Julie is pregnant, too."

125 Now we are all hushed.

Barney's voice is steady. "I'm the father."

No one moves.

I watch my son. I don't think I've ever seen him look so seri-  
ous, but it doesn't seem real; it's as though he's imitating how  
130 someone responsible speaks. He says, "We're going to help as  
much as we can."

P. K. is studying her brother. Out of all of us, she expects the  
most from him, and I can tell she wants to see this whatever way  
he does. She will put it in the best possible light. For a second, her  
135 face clouds over with confusion or disappointment, but then she  
looks at Barney, straight and clear, and her voice is earnest when  
she says, "Why are you doing this?"

Now Laurel speaks. "We decided together," she says. "It's the  
only thing to do."

140 We're all quiet again. Giancarlo leans forward and reaches his  
hand out to Barney. "Congratulations."

Isabelle says, "This is a soap opera."

It is time for me to say, *Who wants coffee?* and when I do it's  
like dubbing.

145 Barney gives me a grateful look, but I shake my head and he  
knows to follow me into the kitchen.

I cannot bring myself to look at him. I pour milk into a pitcher  
and say, "Do you have a date for the wedding?"

He says, "I think I should bring Laurel, don't you?"

150 I turn and face him.

For a long moment I see this man.

I see him and I think, *I am the one who taught him to regard  
himself as a blessing.*

"Jesus," he says, "I was just kidding." He backs away from me  
155 - almost into Isabelle.

She says, "May I have a word with you?"

They go out to the terrace, and we can all hear Isabelle say,  
"What the hell are you doing?" Her voice carries through the  
glass doors – "... bullshit ... responsibility ... child ..."

160 They walk inside. "Come on," Isabelle says to Giancarlo.  
He shakes hands with Barney. Isabelle kisses everyone all  
around, and embraces Laurel. She gives Barney a quick hug and  
says, "I'll be talking to you, bud."

"Walk me to the door?" she says to me.

165 As soon as we're out, she says, "Don't tell me to go easy on  
him, Nina." She looks right into my eyes. "He comes flying in  
here like Supersperm. And we're all supposed to congratulate  
him."

Giancarlo stands with his hands in his jacket pockets. "Thank  
170 you for dinner," he says. "I think," he continues, "you are a good  
family."

Barney and Laurel are in the kitchen doing the dishes.

P. K. says good night to them. At the door, she says, "I don't  
think it's so bad."

175 I nod, not exactly in agreement. Her devotion to her brother, to  
all of us, takes my breath away.

*(Adapted from "The Best Possible Light" by Melissa Bank. The story was first published in  
Other Voices, 1999, and appeared in The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing, Viking, 1999)*