

SECTION A

Read the following passage carefully before you attempt any questions.

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, Coming for to Take Me to Cat Island

Whenever Papa, my grandfather, appeared at our doorstep, the words of the spiritual "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" would immediately begin to echo in my head. To my older sister Nellie and me, this dear man, Lemuel Smith, was the grim reaper coming to harvest my parents' only two darling buds from their garden of love. My parents were both shift workers; this kept them away from home at odd hours. My father was a policeman and my mother held two jobs, at night as an overseas operator and during the day as a chef's assistant in a hotel pantry. Therefore, my parents were unable to give us the attention they thought we deserved. 5

It was actually a series of distressing events that brought my sister and me to grief. I developed my annual case of bronchitis, elevating Dr. P's bill to an all-time high. Then, a few weeks before the Christmas of 1955, our neighbour, Mr. Dorsett, held a death grip on his wife's sparse hair while using a piece of two by four to rearrange the architecture of her body. They fought their way onto our porch, and like horses that have smelled smoke, my sister and I fell over each other trying to get away. We were terrified by violence and the deformity it brought to Mrs. Dorsett's face and body every Saturday. 10 15

The latest Dorsett incident made real my parents' belief that Lucky Heart Corner was not a suitable environment for us. My mother's distress at my illness was made worse by the fact that she could find no one she could trust to mind us while she was at work. For a while, she had hired a neighbourhood girl to serve as a nanny. Trouble was, it appeared that the girl needed watching herself. The answer to that problem: send the children and the nanny to the grandparents on the farm about 130 miles away in Port Howe, Cat Island. 20

So, each year, Papa came for us over navy-blue ocean water and across Nassau Harbour on a fragile mailboat the adults called MV "Alice Mabel". He bore the gifts of the earth to residents of New Providence who ate the imported plastic called food by companies in the United States. He brought green corn cut just before he got on the boat and left in their husks, so as to preserve their sweetness. Among his many string-tied parcels were my grandmother's coconut and pineapple tarts, cornbread, potato and cassava bread, bottles of stewed tomatoes and okras, little packets of beans and peas and highly prized cornflour and yellow "island grits". 25 30

To my mother's delight, Papa also brought dozens of crabs sewn into close-weave, flexible straw baskets. She would immediately select a dozen or so, angry at being imprisoned in maximum security, for a "boil". In a short time, my mother would have her crabs caught, disarmed of legs and claws, scrubbed, placed in an inch of water in a large pot, lightly salted and placed on the fire for steaming and making crab and dough. 35

My mother's eyes would always grow moist when her precious father stepped into the house, and she would weep openly when he left. She confessed in later years that she always felt her burdens lighten in her father's presence. The first order of 40

business for Papa was always to go about doing the things one could not do on Cat Island, a sleepy island which had been forgotten by time and avoided by development. He went first to his bank, which for his whole life was Royal in the heart of Bay Street. He next went to Asa H. Prichard's to pay on his account and order more provisions to be put on the boat which would carry him back to Cat Island. From the commission merchants, he bought only those foodstuffs which he could not provide by his own great industry. 45

Papa had sharpened his skills in agriculture and animal husbandry at Tuskegee University in the 1930s. He and several other teachers had been sent before the war on a special programme to do just that. *The government of the day planned that they would come back to preach the gospel of the land to young out-islanders, in hopes of tying them to it forever.* 50

Papa would make a stop at the Ironmonger for pots, pans, knives, machetes, strong sail needles for stitching sails, nets and straw. There he also bought parts for the few machines they possessed, such as my grandmother's precious sewing machine and the hand-cranked meat-grinder. For my grandmother's sewing, he went to the Stop N Shop and G.R. Sweeting and Son for needles, threads, thimbles, chambray for shirts, gaberdine for trousers, and dotted swiss, organdy, netting and lace for Sunday clothes. 55

They worked tirelessly, my grandparents, in an age that made few provisions for such as they. That they accomplished anything at all – feeding their family, sending four of their many offspring to high school – was a result of hard work and an unshakeable belief in a God who is Father and provider. 60

With skin as brown and smooth as polished mahogany, Papa was completely bald on top and kept the remaining hair encircling his head very closely trimmed. Born in 1895 at Bluff, Eleuthera, he kept his head covered out of doors and would raise his hat when he met a lady or another gentleman. On most days, he wore khaki or gaberdine trousers and cotton shirts, which were starched and pressed to a high gloss. How he managed the feat, we'll never know, but the pleats in his trousers always kept their edge. 65

The only non-standard word or phrase Papa ever used was "ain't" and "T'ain't so". He had had the opportunity to attend the prestigious Boys' Central School, and was trained as teacher before the Great War, and he continued to learn throughout life by reading avidly. One of his first postings was to Long Island where he met and married his first wife, who produced four sons but did not survive their early boyhood. She died in childbirth on Cat Island in 1924 or 25. Being an out-islander, a woman, black and very young, her passing went unrecorded, except in the hearts of those who had loved her. 70

In a very practical age when death was a well-known and accepted part of life, my grandfather remarried very quickly. He took Alean, who became my grandmother, as his companion and new mother of his young sons. She came to be called "Sister" by her new sons, the oldest of whom, at the age of eleven, thought her too young and pretty to be called "Mother". To her occasional vexation, she became "Sister" to all of the children of her own womb, (seven of whom survived infancy) and their children. Some of the boys fell into the habit of calling her "Mother" now and again to soothe her. 80

When Papa had completed his business on those rare visits to Nassau, he could relax and the good times could begin in earnest. His visits were an occasion for the 85

[Turn over

gathering of the Smith family. Thrilled with this temporary reproduction of her girlhood life, my mother would cook up great quantities of what my grandfather had brought for her, laughing, talking and light-hearted. It was seldom our good fortune to see her like this. She was at heart an island girl, who never quite got over her nostalgia for the warm and loving nest her parents had woven for their children on Cat Island. If my dear father had not been so devastatingly attractive to other women, my mother's sense of isolation would not have been so strong. Daddy was often at work, and when he was not, he did not seem to hurry home. When he returned from a night out, the shirts Mommy had laboured over lovingly would bear witness of his outing, and make her weep quietly. 90 95

But when Papa came he brought light with him into our city lives. If Papa valued his peace of mind on his return to Cat Island, he would first distribute "Sister's" letters, her packets of bush medicine, and various encouragements to let her children know that they might be out of sight, but certainly not of mind (or reach).

He would bring news of Island friends and events. The big news of the first visit I can recall was that Mrs. Lily Williams had had a telephone installed in her petty shop. Hers was the only retail or commercial outlet in Port Howe, apart from Mr. Arthur Bain's bar. Papa told of goats and pigs that had given birth, and of the struggle he had had to get one of his horses out of the well into which it had fallen. And often, he told stories that kept my parents so captivated we were allowed to stay up way beyond our bedtime. 100 105

All too soon, the curtain would begin to close over this golden interlude. My mother would begin repairing tears in dresses, letting hems out on others. She would go to town to buy nightdresses, underwear, ribbons and socks, and would pack boxes of groceries. Then our hearts would tighten to suffocation when we at last caught sight of the signs of our forthcoming departure. One evening my mother would shut and lock our little suitcases and at this point my sister and I would begin to weep inconsolably. 110

The following day always dawned grey and chill. Amid heart-rending pleas and promises to be good, my mother bathed and dressed us, she herself openly weeping at this point. We were taken to the docks. Mommy never accompanied us on this journey. At the dock, Papa would get onto the dock, and stand close to the rails to receive packages and little girls with long plaits flying, as my strong, tall father handed them over. When we and our goods were safely on board, our father came aboard himself allegedly to see us to our cabin. The truth was, he could no more bear the final parting than we could. Seated on a narrow lower berth, Daddy cuddled, rocked and wept, until Papa gently but firmly separated us. 115 120

"Come now, Carl. Don't take on so. It's time to go."

Nettie and I went to sleep clutching our suitcases, which our parents had handled. As is nearly always the case, sleep dulled the sharpest edges of the pain in our young hearts. 125

Adapted from a story by Patricia Ginton - Meicholas

Answer **ALL** the questions.

Unless otherwise indicated, **ALL** answers must be based on the information presented in the passage.

In answering questions 1–4, write down the letter A, B, C or D to indicate the most appropriate answer.

1. Which **ONE** of the following best describes the Dorsetts as neighbours?
- A irritating, spreading gossip about people in the community
 - B caring, helping to settle disputes in the neighbourhood
 - C distant, always staying within the boundaries of their yard
 - D troublesome, often involving others in their physical conflicts [1]
2. What did Papa use to transport the crabs he brought from Cat Island?
- A strong crab pens
 - B close-weave crocus sacks
 - C tightly woven baskets
 - D string-tied bags [1]
3. Some of the skills the narrator's mother had were:
- A cooking crab and dough and sewing
 - B making bush medicine and stitching sails
 - C baking tarts and story-telling
 - D milling corn and making overseas calls [1]
4. The boys who were Grandmother Alean's stepchildren:
- A resented but respected her
 - B accepted and admired her
 - C scorned and made fun of her
 - D feared and complained about her [1]
5. Quote the seven words from the first paragraph that reveal both the narrator's *love for her grandfather* and *fear of his arrival*. [2]