

English Comprehension: Hard Practice Paper

Read this passage carefully, then answer the questions that follow.

The Last Bus

The narrator is looking back at his own childhood. His mother drove the 41, the last bus of the night, across the city, and once a year he was allowed to ride the whole route with her. He was eleven, and at that age he had not yet decided whether his mother's job was something to be proud of.

1 My mother drove the 41, the last bus of the night, and once a
year – on the last evening of the winter term – I was allowed to
ride the whole route with her, from the depot at Barrow Street to
the terminus at Wells Hill and back. I had looked forward to it
5 for eleven weeks, and I would not have admitted that to anybody.

At school I said as little about it as I could. When people asked
what my mother did I said she worked for the buses, which was
true, and let them picture an office. None of them had ever seen
the city at half past eleven at night. I had, and I said nothing
10 about that either.

The depot smelled of diesel and wet coats. The buses stood in
rows with their engines off, patient as cattle, and my mother
walked down the line to hers with her keys already out. She did
not hurry. In nine years she had never missed the start of a
15 shift, and she had never once run for anything.

For the first half hour the 41 belonged to people going home from
work. A chef came aboard still in his checked trousers. Two women
from the hospital fell asleep sitting upright, five minutes apart
and in exactly the same way. A man thanked my mother in a
20 whisper, as though the bus were a library.

After midnight it changed. The bus emptied and filled again with
people the daytime city never sees: night cleaners, a baker going
in to work rather than home from it, students arguing about
nothing at all with tremendous seriousness. My mother knew a
25 surprising number of them by name.

At the stop outside the shut-up market a young woman got on with
a violin case and a card that would not work. She tried it four
times. The machine made its small refusing noise each time, and

the queue behind her began to shuffle and sigh. My mother said,
30 'Sit down, love, that card's tired,' and pulled away before
anybody could think of anything else to say.

I asked her about it at the terminus, while the engine ticked and
cooled. I meant it as a criticism, I am sorry to say. I had
picked up somewhere the idea that keeping to the rules was what
35 made a job a job, and I wanted her to know that I had noticed.

She said that on any other bus she would have shrugged and told
the woman to wait for the next one. Then she said the thing I
have never forgotten: that there is no next one. The 41 is the
last bus. After it there is a four-mile walk, or a taxi she
40 cannot afford, or a bench until six in the morning.

We came back down the hill through cold, empty, shining streets,
past shuttered shops that stood minding their own business. At
the Wells Hill stores my mother stopped where there was no stop
at all, because a man in a security uniform was running for us.
45 She opened the doors and then looked straight ahead while he got
his breath back, so that he would not have to be embarrassed in
front of anybody.

In January a boy in my form asked me again what my mother did. I
said she drove the last bus of the night. I said it slowly, so
50 that it took up as much room as it deserved.

Please answer these questions. (Look at the passage again if you need to.) You
should choose the best answer and mark its letter on your answer sheet.

Q1. How often was the narrator allowed to ride the whole
route with his mother? (lines 1-3)

- A. once a year
- B. every night of the winter term
- C. once a week, on a Friday
- D. twice a year, in summer and in winter
- E. whenever the 41 was short of passengers

Q2. 'I had looked forward to it for eleven weeks, and I would not have admitted that to anybody.' (lines 4-5)

What does this tell us about the narrator?

- A. He had been dreading the ride for most of the term.
- B. He was excited about the night but kept his excitement secret.
- C. He had been counting the weeks until the term ended.
- D. He had promised his mother that he would tell nobody about it.
- E. He had forgotten how long he had been waiting.

Q3. 'let them picture an office' (line 8)

Why did the narrator answer his schoolfriends in this way?

- A. He was not sure what his mother really did all day.
- B. His mother had asked him not to discuss her work.
- C. He thought the true answer would take too long to explain.
- D. He was hoping to be asked more questions about it.
- E. He wanted them to imagine something grander than driving a bus.

Q4. 'None of them had ever seen the city at half past eleven at night. I had, and I said nothing about that either.' (lines 8-10)

What do these two sentences suggest?

- A. The narrator was frightened of the city late at night.
- B. The narrator's friends were not allowed out after dark.
- C. The narrator had something his friends did not have, and hid that too.
- D. The narrator wished he could stay awake as late as his friends did.
- E. The narrator had been told to keep the route a secret.

Q5. 'patient as cattle' (line 12)

This is an example of...

- A. a metaphor
- B. onomatopoeia
- C. a simile
- D. alliteration
- E. a rhetorical question

Q6. 'she had never once run for anything' (line 15)

What does this tell us about the narrator's mother?

- A. She was too old to move quickly any more.
- B. She was calm and unhurried, and always left herself enough time.
- C. She was often late for the start of her shift.
- D. She disliked being hurried by her passengers.
- E. She had no interest in sport of any kind.

Q7. What type of word is 'checked' (line 17)?

- A. a verb
- B. an adverb
- C. a noun
- D. an adjective
- E. a preposition

Q8. 'as though the bus were a library' (line 20)

Why has the author included this comparison?

- A. to show that many of the passengers were reading
- B. to show how hushed and orderly the bus had become
- C. to suggest that the man had just come from the library
- D. to suggest that the bus was uncomfortably crowded
- E. to show that the narrator was bored by the journey

Q9. 'people the daytime city never sees' (line 22)

What does the author mean by this?

- A. people who are ignored and looked down on by everybody
- B. people who have nowhere at all to go
- C. people who have travelled in from outside the city
- D. people who work and travel at night, while everyone else sleeps
- E. people who are strangers to the narrator's mother

Q10. 'arguing about nothing at all with tremendous seriousness' (lines 23-24)

What is the author suggesting about the students?

- A. They were treating something unimportant as though it mattered enormously.
- B. They were quarrelling so fiercely that other passengers were frightened.
- C. They were pretending to argue in order to amuse the narrator.
- D. They were too tired to know what they were saying.
- E. They were arguing about something nobody else could understand.

Q11. What went wrong when the young woman with the violin case tried to pay? (lines 26-28)

- A. She found that she had left her purse at home.
- B. The machine on the bus had broken down completely.
- C. The queue behind her paid her fare before she could.
- D. She was told to get off and wait for the next bus.
- E. Her card would not work, however many times she tried it.

Q12. 'the queue behind her began to shuffle and sigh' (line 29)

What does this show?

- A. The passengers behind her were growing impatient.
- B. The passengers were feeling sorry for the young woman.
- C. The passengers were cold and were trying to keep warm.
- D. The bus had set off before everybody was seated.
- E. The passengers were falling asleep where they stood.

Q13. 'Sit down, love, that card's tired,' (line 30)

Why does the narrator's mother put it like this?

- A. She truly believed the card would start working again later.
- B. She wanted the queue to know whose fault the delay was.
- C. She was too tired herself to explain the rules properly.
- D. She blames the card so that the woman can travel without being shamed.
- E. She was warning the woman not to try to pay again.

Q14. 'I meant it as a criticism, I am sorry to say.' (line 33)

What does this sentence tell us?

- A. The narrator apologised to his mother at the terminus.
- B. The narrator was sorry that his mother had let the woman travel free.
- C. The narrator had been told off for speaking rudely.
- D. The narrator, looking back as an adult, is ashamed of how he judged his mother.
- E. The narrator did not really understand what he was asking.

Q15. 'keeping to the rules was what made a job a job' (lines 34-35)

Where does the narrator say this idea came from?

- A. from his mother, who had explained the rules to him
- B. from a teacher at his school
- C. from the other drivers at the Barrow Street depot
- D. from watching the passengers on the 41
- E. from somewhere he cannot name – he had simply picked it up

Q16. Why did the narrator's mother treat the last bus differently from any other bus? (lines 36-40)

- A. The last bus carried fewer passengers, so one free fare cost very little.
- B. There was no later bus, so anybody left behind had no way of getting home.
- C. The rules did not apply to buses running after midnight.
- D. She was near the end of her shift and wanted to get home herself.
- E. The company had told its drivers to use their own judgement at night.

Q17. 'shuttered shops that stood minding their own business' (line 42)

This is an example of...

- A. personification
- B. a simile
- C. onomatopoeia
- D. alliteration
- E. a metaphor

Q18. What do the actions of the narrator's mother at the Wells Hill stores show about her? (lines 43-47)

- A. She enjoyed breaking the rules whenever nobody was watching.
- B. She was in a hurry to finish the route and get back to the depot.
- C. She thought about people's feelings as well as their journeys.
- D. She knew the running man and had arranged to collect him there.
- E. She had grown careless towards the end of a long shift.

Q19. How many adjectives are there in the phrase 'through cold, empty, shining streets'? (line 41)

- A. 1
- B. 2
- C. 3
- D. 4
- E. 5

Q20. Which of these would make the best alternative title for the passage?

- A. The Woman with the Violin
- B. A Night at Barrow Street Depot
- C. Trouble on the 41
- D. Learning to Drive a Bus
- E. There Is No Next One