

Cambridge Lower Secondary Checkpoint

ENGLISH

0861/02

Paper 2 Fiction

May 2026

INSERT

1 hour 10 minutes

INFORMATION

- This insert contains the reading text.
- You may annotate this insert and use the blank spaces for planning. **Do not write your answers** on the insert.



This document has **4** pages. Any blank pages are indicated.

Text for **Section A**, an extract from *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern

They sit in the oak tree in the afternoon sun, the five of them. His sister Caroline on the highest branch, because she always climbs the highest. Her best friend Millie perches below. The Mackenzie brothers, throwing acorns at the squirrels, are somewhat lower than that, but not low enough to be considered anything but high. He is always on the low branches. Not for fear of heights but for where he ranks in the group, when he is even allowed to be a part of it. Being Caroline's younger brother is both a blessing and a curse that way. Bailey is sometimes allowed to join them, but always kept in his place. 5

'Truth or dare,' Caroline calls from the upper branches. She receives no reply, so she drops an acorn directly on her brother's head. 'Truth. Or. Dare. Bailey,' she repeats. 10

Bailey rubs his head through his hat. 'Truth' is a resigned response, a yielding to Caroline's abusive, nut-throwing version of the game. 'Dare' is marginally more defiant.

It seems like the right thing to say, and he feels rather proud of himself when it takes Caroline a moment to respond. She sits on her branch some fifteen feet above him, swinging her leg and looking off over the field while she formulates the dare. Then Caroline smiles, and clears her throat to make her proclamation. 15

'Bailey's dare,' she starts, making it his own and no one else's, binding him to it. He begins to feel uneasy before she even says what the dare actually consists of. She pauses dramatically before declaring: 'Bailey's dare is to break into the Night Circus.'

Millie gasps. The Mackenzie brothers stop their acorn throwing and look up at her, squirrels abruptly forgotten. A huge smile spreads across Caroline's face as she stares down at Bailey. 'And bring something back as proof,' she adds, unable to keep the hint of triumph out of her voice. 20

Bailey looks out across the field to where the circus tents sit like mountains in the middle of the valley. It is so still in the daytime, with no lights and no music and no crowds of people. Just a bunch of striped tents, looking more yellow and grey than black and white in the afternoon sun. It looks odd, and perhaps a bit mysterious, but not extraordinary. Not in the middle of the day. And not terribly scary, Bailey thinks. 25

'I'll do it,' he says. He jumps down from his low branch and starts across the field, not waiting to hear their replies, not wanting Caroline to retract the dare. He is certain she expected him to say no. An acorn whizzes by his ear, but nothing else. 30

And for reasons Bailey cannot quite put words to, he is walking toward the circus with a considerable amount of determination.

It looks just as it did the first time he saw it, when he was not quite six years old.

It materialized in the same spot then, and now it looks like it never left. As though it were merely invisible for the five-year period when the field sat empty. 35

At the age of not quite six, he was not allowed to visit the circus. His parents deemed him too young, so he could only stare from afar, enchanted, at the tents and the lights.

He had hoped it would stay long enough for him to age properly into old enough, but it vanished without notice after two weeks, leaving too-young Bailey heartbroken. 40

But now it has returned.

It arrived only a few days ago and is still a novelty. Had it been present for longer, Caroline likely would have chosen a different dare, but the circus is currently the talk of the town, and Caroline likes to keep her dares *en vogue*.

The night before had been Bailey's first proper introduction to the circus.

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It was like nothing he had ever seen. The lights, the costumes, it was all so different. As though he had escaped his everyday life and wandered into another world.

He had expected it to be a show. Something to sit in a chair and watch.

He realized quickly how wrong he was.

It was something to be explored.

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He investigated it as best he could, though he felt woefully unprepared. He did not know what tents to choose out of dozens of options, each with tantalizing signs hinting at the contents. And every turn he took through the twisting striped pathways led to more tents, more signs, more mysteries.

Everything was magical.

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He could not properly describe it afterward. He could only nod when his mother asked if he had enjoyed himself. He ached to go back almost the moment he walked away.

It takes Bailey ten minutes to walk all the way across the field, and the closer he gets, the larger and more intimidating the tents look, and the more his conviction fades. He looks back across the field. The others are still in the tree, undoubtedly watching...

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