

“A Christmas in March”

Reading Comprehension – Short Stories

Directions: Read the story. Then answer the questions below.



Just before Christmas in 1944, a letter arrived at our house in Philadelphia. The postmark was from Tuskegee, Alabama, so we all knew who it was from. We excitedly gathered around Mother as she opened it at the kitchen table.

My Dear Mother,

I did not get the leave I expected for Christmas. I will miss all of you. Please leave the Christmas tree up until I make it back. I hope to be home by March.

Love from your son,

Clifton

I was 17 years old at the time. My heart sank. I felt a profound sadness that my favorite brother would not be home for Christmas. He was one of the Tuskegee Airmen and was responsible for maintaining the airplanes flying off to fight in World War II.

My mother, being the **optimist** she always was, said, “Well, it looks like we’ll get to have two Christmases this year!”

After Christmas, my sister and I worked together to make sure we kept that Christmas tree looking as pretty as possible. This was no easy feat.

By mid-January, the branches drooped so low to the ground that they became a **sliding board** for the decorations. Each day, ornaments would come crashing to the ground and there were brand new sprinklings of pine needles all over the wooden floor. My sister and I took turns sweeping them up. We repositioned the ornaments to the stronger branches on the tree, hoping they would stay on.

Each time we freshened that tree up, my sister and I were full of thoughts about Clifton and how happy we would be to see him again. It made us feel that he was close by, even though he was hundreds of miles away.

On March 5, the doorbell rang. We ran to the door and gave Clifton a big hug. As he hugged Mother, I could see him peek over her head at the Christmas tree.

“It’s beautiful,” he said. “Thank you.” Clifton opened his presents and told us all sorts of stories about his work in Tuskegee.

That night as we slept, we heard a crash in the living room. We all ran to see what had happened. The tree had toppled onto the sofa and there were needles and broken ornaments everywhere. We all had a good laugh. It was **fortuitous** Clifton got home when he did!

Questions:

- 1) After Clifton's letter is read to the family, the narrator's mood shifts from
- A. arrogant to humble
 - B. sad to joyful
 - C. uncertain to clear
 - D. excited to disappointed
- 2) In the middle of the story, we learn that the mother is an **optimist**. This means she
- A. is not easily upset
 - B. upholds high standards
 - C. maintains a positive viewpoint
 - D. considers all outcomes before making a decision
- 3) What can we conclude about Clifton by reading the letter?
- I. He will not be home for Christmas.
 - II. He will be home by March.
 - III. He is one of the Tuskegee Airmen.
- A. I only
 - B. I and II
 - C. II and III
 - D. I, II, and III
- 4) Which of the following words best describes the work the sisters did to help keep the tree looking pretty?
- A. miracle
 - B. disaster
 - C. drudgery
 - D. teamwork
- 5) What is the most likely reason the narrator compared the tree limbs to a "*sliding board*"?
- A. They were so high in the air.
 - B. The ornaments were slipping off.
 - C. The sisters liked to play on them.
 - D. The branches looked ugly without their needles.
- 6) The main reason the narrator found it necessary to maintain the Christmas decorations so carefully was because she
- A. holds a deep respect for Christmas
 - B. needed something to take her mind off Clifton
 - C. wanted the decorations to look good for Clifton
 - D. did not want to disappoint her mother
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Questions (continued):

- 7) *"Each day, there were brand new sprinklings of pine needles all over the wooden floor."*

"My sister and I took turns sweeping them up."

Which of the following is the best way to combine the above sentences while keeping their meaning the same as used in the story?

- A. Each day, there were brand new sprinklings of pine needles all over the wooden floor; despite this, my sister and I took turns sweeping them up.
- B. Each day, there were brand new sprinklings of pine needles all over the wooden floor, and so my sister and I took turns sweeping them up.
- C. Each day, there were brand new sprinklings of pine needles all over the wooden floor because my sister and I took turns sweeping them up.
- D. Each day, there were brand new sprinklings of pine needles all over the wooden floor unless my sister and I took turns sweeping them up.

- 8) For the sisters, caring for the tree came to represent

- A. a continual hardship
- B. a way of being close to their brother
- C. the hope that the war would end soon
- D. an ongoing Christmas celebration

- 9) What other title would best fit this passage?

- A. "Flying Home"
- B. "A Christmas War"
- C. "Granting Clifton's Wish"
- D. "The Disappointing Letter"

- 10) How does Clifton seem to feel when he sees the Christmas tree?

- A. appreciative
- B. disappointed
- C. estranged
- D. remorseful

- 11) Which of the following describe **fortuitous** circumstances?

- I. getting the last seat on the bus
- II. having an umbrella when it unexpectedly begins to rain
- III. receiving a passing grade on a test you studied hard for

- A. I only
 - B. I and II
 - C. II and III
 - D. I, II, and III
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Answers and Explanations

1) **D**

In the first paragraph, a letter arrives at the house. The narrator says, “We excitedly gathered around Mother as she opened it at the kitchen table.” We can understand from this statement that the mood was excited. Then, the family reads the letter and learns that Clifton is not coming home for Christmas. In paragraph 6, the narrator says, “My heart sank. I felt a profound sadness that my favorite brother would not be home for Christmas.” We can understand from these statements that the narrator felt disappointed that Clifton was not coming home. The mood went from excited to disappointed. Therefore **(D)** is correct.

The story does not provide information to support answer choices **(A)**, **(B)**, or **(C)**. Therefore they are incorrect.

2) **C**

optimist (*noun*): someone who is inclined to see the positive side of things or to expect the best outcome.

Near the beginning of the story, we learn that the narrator’s brother is not coming home for Christmas. This makes everyone feel sad. In paragraph 7, the narrator says, “My mother, being the optimist she always was, said, ‘Well, it looks like we’ll get to have two Christmases this year!’” This tells us that the mother saw the positive side to her son being away for Christmas. We can understand from this that an *optimist* is someone who keeps a positive viewpoint. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

While seeing the bright side could make you hard to upset, being positive is different from being hard to upset. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. Upholding high standards is a positive quality, but is not the same as having a positive viewpoint. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. An optimist looks for positive outcomes, not all outcomes. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

3) **A**

Since Clifton did not get leave for Christmas, and asks his family to leave the tree up until he gets back, we can understand that Clifton is not coming home for Christmas. This supports **option (I)**. Near the beginning of the story, the family receives a letter from Clifton. The letter says, “I did not get the leave I expected for Christmas. I will miss all of you. Please leave the Christmas tree up until I make it back. I hope to be home by March.” Clifton hopes he will be home by March. Hoping for something is not the same as being certain about something, so we cannot conclude from the letter that Clifton will be home by March. This eliminates **option (II)**. We learn that Clifton is one of the Tuskegee airmen in paragraph 7, but this information is not in the letter. This eliminates **option (III)**. Therefore **(B)** is correct.

4) **D**

In paragraph 8, the narrator says, "After Christmas, my sister and I worked together to make sure we kept that Christmas tree looking as pretty as possible." *Teamwork* is when people work together to accomplish something. Since the sisters worked together to keep the tree pretty, it was teamwork. Therefore **(D)** is correct.

A *miracle* is something so out of the ordinary it defies reason. Although it was difficult to keep the tree up, the work was not so extraordinary as to be a miracle. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. A *disaster* is a complete wreck or failure. The branches were drooping, the needles were falling out, and the branches grew weaker and weaker, but the sisters kept the tree up. Since they were able to maintain the tree, it was not a disaster. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. *Drudgery* is physically hard, unpleasant work. The work wasn't very physically difficult and the sisters actually enjoyed the work because it made them think of their brother. They did not find the work hard or unpleasant. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect.

5) **B**

sliding board (*noun*): a plaything consisting of an angled chute that children slide down. Also called a slide.

In paragraph 9, the narrator says, "By mid-January, the branches drooped so low to the ground that they became a sliding board for the decorations. Each day, ornaments would come crashing to the ground and there were brand new sprinklings of pine needles all over the wooden floor." We can understand from this information that the ornaments slid down the drooping branches and crashed on the floor. Therefore **(B)** is correct.

A sliding board is not necessarily high in the air. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. The sisters did not play on the branches. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. Slides are not necessarily ugly. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

6) **C**

Near the beginning of the story, Clifton asks the family to leave the Christmas tree up until he returns. The narrator and her sister take care of the tree until he comes back. We can understand from this information that the girls took care of the tree so that it would look good when Clifton returned. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

There is no information in the story to tell us whether the narrator holds a deep respect for Christmas. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. Taking care of the tree did not take the narrator's mind off of Clifton. To the contrary, taking care of the tree made her think of Clifton. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. The narrator's mother did say that they would have two Christmases, but there is nothing in the story that suggests that she would be disappointed if the tree was not cared for. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

7) **B**

The original sentences tell us that the sisters swept up the needles up because they were all over the floor. Therefore, the sentence in **(B)** has the same meaning as the two original sentences, and is correct.

The sisters did not sweep up the needles despite the needles being all over the floor. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. The needles were not on the floor because the sisters swept them up; they were on the floor because they fell off the tree. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. The original sentences tell us that the needles did fall and the sisters did sweep them up. This means **(D)** is incorrect.

8) **B**

In paragraph 10, the narrator says, "Each time we freshened that tree up, my sister and I were full of thoughts about Clifton and how happy we would be to see him again. It made us feel that he was close by, even though he was hundreds of miles away." This information tells us that the sisters were taking care of the tree not only to do as Clifton asked, but also because it helped them feel that Clifton was close to them. Therefore **(B)** is correct.

Although taking care of the tree was daily work, it did not cause the girls to suffer. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. Taking care of the tree made the sisters think of their brother, not the war. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. It is a Christmas tree, but for the sisters it brings thoughts of their brother, not Christmas. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

9) **C**

The story begins with the family finding out that Clifton won't be home for Christmas. They also learn that Clifton wants them to keep the tree up until he comes home. The sisters work hard to keep the tree up and it is waiting for Clifton when he finally arrives home. Viewed this way, we see that the story is about the family working to grant Clifton's wish. Therefore **(C)** is correct.

While Clifton is a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, he does not fly home in the story. Therefore **(A)** is incorrect. The story takes place during World War II, but is not about the war. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. The family was disappointed by the news in the letter, but that is just the beginning of the story. Most of the story was about the family working together to keep the tree up for Clifton. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

10) **A**

Near the end of the story, Clifton returns home and sees the Christmas tree. In paragraph 12, Clifton says, "It's beautiful." Then he says, "Thank you." We can understand from these statements that Clifton is grateful for the work the family put into the Christmas tree. To *appreciate* something is to recognize the value of something or to be thankful for something. Therefore **(A)** is correct.

When people are *disappointed*, they feel sad because something did not work out as they had hoped or expected. Since the family was able to keep the tree up for Clifton, he is not disappointed. Therefore **(B)** is incorrect. To feel *estranged* is to be alienated or to have a close relationship disrupted. Since Clifton's family worked hard to grant Clifton his wish, Clifton does not feel alienated by the tree. Therefore **(C)** is incorrect. To feel *remorseful* is to feel bad about something you have done wrong. Clifton has not done anything wrong, so he has nothing to feel remorseful about. Therefore **(D)** is incorrect.

11)**B**

fortuitous (*adjective*): lucky; happening by chance.

Getting the last seat on the bus is lucky and happens by chance, so it is fortuitous. This supports **option (I)**. Having an umbrella when it starts to rain unexpectedly is also a lucky chance occurrence. This supports **option (II)**. Getting a good grade on a test you studied hard for is the result of work, not chance, so it is not fortuitous. This eliminates **option (III)**. Therefore **(B)** is correct.