

**Adjudicator's comments.** This is a well-written piece, which captures the pain of the aftermath of a tragic accident. At first, there seems to be a deliberately cliché evocation of the protagonist's "perfect" life, reminiscent of romantic fiction. This sets us up nicely for the contrasting horror of the accident, with its deliberately disgusting images of injury. Another enjoyable aspect of the writing is the attention given to the different senses to capture mood and sensations; for example, how pain is described as "a hot, sharp knife covered with salt" or the autumnal "melancholy smell of damp grass and earthy leaves". More careful proof-reading would be appreciated – "defending" appears twice for "deafening" and there are several punctuation issues, which could easily have been picked up. Overall, though, an impressive piece of work.

**PEN NAME: AURORA**

**SECTION B**

**TITLE: HER FACE WAS EMPTY OF EXPRESSION**

### Just a Face

Her face was empty of expression; the girl was only aware of her stunning features which grasped the attention of strangers who crossed her in the street, her smooth complexion and perfect nose centered between her brilliant, but shallow-blue eyes, focused on the reflection in front of them. She grudgingly tore her eyes away from the pleasant sight, as the sound of her mother's high heels drew nearer, clacking against the polished wood.

'Annalise, the car is waiting!' she spoke in her brisk, no-nonsense manner. 'We're already late!' Anna quickly pulled her hair out of her ponytail, her effortlessly blonde curls spilling over her shoulders and down her back. *Much better*, she thought. She took one last glance at her reflection, smiling at the perfection within it, and walked swiftly down the grand, swirling staircase, thinking about how her life was just so perfect. Her family were wealthy and would buy anything she merely looked at, making her spoiled and vain, although she would never admit it to herself. Anna had inherited her mother's distinctive features of blonde hair, blue eyes - which sparked jealousy in other girls and attracted the attention of her mother's rich, modeling connections. Despite this, she lacked her mother's pleasant down-to-earth, yet classy demeanor. In her mind she was the best and nothing but the best. She climbed into the glossy, black car, the leather seats hot in the July sun, and stared out the window, ignoring the trees and people that blurred past, thinking only of herself.

The next moments were a blur. A deafening sound of metal bending and glass shattering pierced the peaceful summer's morning, and a blood-curdling scream rang out, sending sickening bolts of fear down her spine. She kept her eyes squeezed tight, unable to accept the reality of what was happening, as a pool of sticky, thick blood trickled down her neck, her gut knowing it was not hers. That's when the fire started. She could feel the rippling heat around her like a suffocating blanket, consuming, raging and destroying. She opened her eyes remembering her mother next to her, her body slumped over, unrecognisable, with sheets of skin sloughing off the body, blood bubbling and steaming as it spilled out of her wounds. As the crumpled-up wreck began to fill with smoke, she could hear the distant sirens blaring in the background. Then it all went black.

The ringing in her ears was deafening, her body unable to move. Anna's eyes slowly fluttered open, taking in the scene around her. The smell of disinfectant was overbearing, and she could hear loud chattering and beeping as concerned yet relieved blurry faces looked down at her. She tried to move her arm to get whatever suffocated her off her face, and a pain shot through her, like a hot sharp knife covered with salt. Panicking, she started screaming, confused and scared, for her mother, to get away from this strange place, to wake up from whatever nightmare this was. Suddenly, she felt a stinging prick in the back of her neck, and it hazily drifted away.

It was October. Autumn days fell by as fast as the leaves of gold and scarlet that fell from the trees. The sun was bright, beaming brilliantly in the cloudless sky, rising and setting as if on fast-forward, seemingly in a hurry to reach the winter. Autumn was the time of hugs, of evenings with warm drinks and warmer smiles. Not for Anna. She sat staring out the misty window, watching the raindrops from the night before chasing each other as they scurried down the glass, her tears, salty as they slipped down her rugged face and between her lips. It had been two months since the accident, not too long, but long enough for her whole life to change. She traced the delicate scars that trailed down her neck and arms and then reached back up to her face, wincing at the constant stabbing sensation of a million needles that was under what was left of her skin. Remembering how distraught and full of anguish she was when she first looked in the mirror, after the accident, her face and body ruined, leaving what looked like an unrecognisable, deformed creature, just brought back more tears. She remembered the absolute agony of those first few weeks, unable to walk or move, being trapped in a body she could barely call her own. Her beautiful skin and hair, gone. All her dreams and plans for the future, gone. Anna continued staring out of the window, feeling the persistent, sickening guilt that lived in the pit of her stomach, thinking how she was so selfish, only concerned about herself when there were more important things to care about. If only she could've done something different. If only she wasn't late that morning, too busy worrying about her stupid self. If only she could've been less self-absorbed. If only...

Then her father walked in, his eyes red and twinkling but with a brave smile on his face, his hand outstretched to her. His arms welcomed her fragile but heartfelt hug. 'Let's do this for her, Annalise' he whispered into her now coarse, short hair. He stepped back and looked at her up and down, her fingers awkwardly twirling the button on her black dress. 'You know Anna?' he said softly, 'I don't think I have ever seen you look more beautiful' His words surprised her, knowing that she had lost all of what she thought was beauty. Difficult was an understatement to what the past few months had been like for her. Waking up every morning with the constant reminder of the consequences she must face in her now blistered life. Each day, seeped in guilt, her mind blaming herself for what happened. The picture of her mother's scalded, limp body and glazed eyes never seemed to leave her mind. She sometimes found herself back in the fire, screaming and engulfed in angry flames, only to wake up breathless, in her bed, sweat dripping and soaking the crisp, white sheets.

Maybe one day she would understand what her father's words really meant. Maybe one day she would see that her life matters more than beauty and her scars don't make her any less of a person but make her the person she is. That they tell a story and make her realise that she is lucky to be alive. Maybe one day, she will come to understand that everyone has scars, some even a lot worse than hers. The only difference is that theirs aren't as visible. And as platitudinous as it sounded; life still would go on. Autumn will drift into winter, the sun will set and rise, and people forget and carry on. Maybe one day,

Anna will find it in her heart to do the same, not to forget, but to carry on and wear her scars bravely, with pride, learning to accept herself and who she has become.

Anna clasped tightly to her father's hand as they walked slowly down the willow-lined road, winding through the park. The soft rays of sunlight broke through the gaps in the leaves and branches, creating patterns and shadows that danced across their faces. The cool breeze fluttered gently through Anna's hair, carrying a melancholy smell of damp grass and earthy leaves, whispering promises of hope. They followed the path leading into the distance, where the ivy-hugged gravestones stood strong, between the large drooping clusters of purple flowers blooming from a wisteria tree.