

Section A: 40 marks

This passage is about Justo Ansoltegui. He is a young man of eighteen who has inherited his family farm near the town of Guernica in Spain.

- 1 Justo Ansoltegui's reputation rose from Guernica uphill to the village of Lumo where Maria Onati heard that he was a defender of causes and a wit, although some suggested he was too eager to create his own mythology. Most often she'd heard that he was the one to watch during the strength events on feast days. One friend claimed that he had carried an ox into town across his shoulder and celebrated the feat by throwing the beast across the river.
- 5 'Yes', said Justo when asked about the story. 'But it was only a small ox and downhill most of the way into town. And the wind was with me when I threw it.'
- Maria came to dance at one of the festivals with her sisters. She also decided to watch the men's competitions, which she usually avoided.
- 10 Justo, the largest man standing beside a log at the start of the wood-chopping event, joked with the crowd as he removed his boots and grey socks. Going barefoot seemed foolhardy to Maria for one who would be flailing an axe so near his feet.
- 'After all these years of competitions I still have nine toes,' he said, proudly wiggling the four remaining toes on one of his bare feet. 'But this is my only pair of boots and I can't afford to damage them.'
- 15 He bent at the waist and tore into the pine log between his feet. The log split beneath him well before any others in the competition. Justo was seated, nine toes intact, and replacing his boots before the runner-up broke through his log.
- In the wine-drinking event, Justo was less impressive but in the 'farmer's walk' contest he was unmatched. This event tested strength and endurance as the competitors carried 110lb weights in each hand along a measured course until they dropped. For most competitors the collapse followed a familiar pattern. On the second lap, the knees began to bend dramatically. On the third, the shoulders pulled the spine into a dangerous curve and finally gravity yanked the weights and the man to the turf.
- 20 Maria stood near the starting point when Justo was called. He grasped the weights, his face straining as if he'd never get them off the ground. It was false drama for the benefit of the audience because he easily hoisted them and marched without a struggle, his back rigid. Past the marks where others had fallen in exhaustion, Justo nodded to the little ones who would praise him to future generations.
- 25 'Doesn't it hurt?' a young boy asked.
- 'Of course, how do you think my arms got so long?' Justo answered and at that moment he straightened his arms against his sides, a move that caused the sleeves of his shirt to ride up, making his arms appear to grow in length.
- The boy gasped.
- 35 It so happened that Maria discovered the need to visit friends near the finishing line. And who could have imagined that just as Justo walked past a friend would say something so amusing that Maria unleashed her most feminine laugh which caused Justo to turn in her direction? And because it was so amusing, it was natural that she would be smiling her broadest smile when he looked her way.
- 40 Justo glanced at her and walked on.
- This must be the most arrogant man in Guernica, she thought.
- Behind the scenes, Maria quickly arranged to present the prize, a lamb, to the winner. 'Congratulations,' she said to Justo. She handed him the lamb and moved in for the ceremonial kiss on his cheek.
- 45 'Thank you,' Justo said and announced to the crowd, 'I am going to fill the valley with my flock from winning these events.'
- Justo waved and accepted congratulations as he walked through the crowd and Maria skirted the gathering so that he would have to pass her again.
- 'Would you like to dance?' she asked.

- 50 Justo stopped. He looked at himself in his dirty overalls. He looked back at her.
- 'Did somebody tell you to do this? Justo asked.
- 'No, I just thought you might like to dance, if you're not too worn out from all the chopping and lifting.' But they didn't dance. They sat and talked. Her sisters watched them, and on the walk home, they unanimously voted against her seeing this boy.
- 55 She agreed he was not the most handsome man. He was frighteningly powerful and, despite his boasting in front of the crowd, he had been without confidence when they were alone.
- 'He's homely,' a sister said.
- 'He has character,' Maria argued.
- 'He's ugly,' a less generous sister offered.
- 60 'He has his own farm,' Maria's mother commented from behind the group of girls and Maria looked thoughtful.
- Maria was almost twenty, the eldest of a family of six girls. Her father had injured both legs in a fall at the farm, leaving him fixed to his wooden chair. Maria returned home in silence as her sisters debated Justo's many inadequacies.
- 65 Others interested in Maria presented flowers or sweets when they arrived at her home. Justo arrived empty-handed but wearing his work clothes. He gave her mother a vigorous handshake, patted the father on his shoulder and asked a question that instantly won over Mrs Onati and the sisters.
- 'What can I do to help?'
- 70 'To help?' the mother asked.
- 'Help. Heavy lifting, woodcutting, repairs ... whatever is hardest for you ladies.'
- Maria's mother sat down and wrote out a list. Justo nodded.
- 'Come on, Maria, put your work clothes on and we'll be done before dinner.'
- 75 Justo was already part of the family. The sisters, who would not now have to repair the roof, agreed that Justo was more appealing than they first thought. Not handsome, to be sure, but a good catch. And looks? Well, they're not everything.
- A month later at the next fair, Maria stood in the front row as Justo went through his preparation for the 'farmer's walk'. He set off along the path and then he took a sharp left turn and walked directly towards Maria. He held both weights in his massive left hand and with his right hand retrieved a gold ring from his trouser pocket.
- 80 'Will you marry me?' he asked the stunned Maria.
- 'Yes, of course.' They kissed. He readjusted the weights and went back to the competition.
- As Justo walked, a man overseeing the event walked beside him.
- 85 'Justo, you went off the path, you're disqualified,' the judge said.
- Justo continued past the mark of the winner, just to show he could have done it anyway, and rejoined his future bride, apologising for not adding another lamb to their flock.