Patrick and the Great Molasses Explosion

Patrick McGonnagal O’Brien lives in Boston with his family. Patrick loves molasses more than anything in the world. He can never get enough of the sweet, sticky syrup. Whenever he can, he sneaks a lick from his family’s molasses pitcher—and gets a good scolding from his mother!

Read the story, and then answer the questions that follow.

Every Sunday afternoon Papa took Patrick for a walk down along the harbor to see all the wonderful sights. Horses and buggies clattered over the cobblestones. Newfangled automobiles tooted their horns. Overhead, a train clacked along the raised tracks.

In the harbor they saw all kinds of boats—freighters, steamboats, tugboats, and sailboats. Together they stood on a freight-loading platform where Papa worked on weekdays. Patrick liked to brag that Papa could load and unload boxes and barrels as fast as the fastest man there, and maybe a wee bit faster.

They always stopped in the stable to see the big Belgian work horses that pulled the heavy freight wagons. Now and then Patrick slipped a sugar lump to one of the horses. Papa teased Patrick that the horses liked sugar as much as Patrick liked molasses.

The most wonderful sight of all, however, was a huge, enormous tank as tall as a four-story building. The tank was made of big sheets of metal fastened together with rivets. Patrick could see the large, round heads of the rivets pounded in neat rows along the seams. Painted in big letters on the round sides of the tank were the words, PURITY DISTILLING COMPANY. This giant tank was filled with molasses. Papa had said so.
The very thought of so much molasses made Patrick’s mouth water. Sometimes Patrick dreamed that he was seated on the edge of the tank with a giant straw just sucking, sucking, sucking molasses all day long.

One winter day when Patrick arrived home from school for lunch, Mama said, “Eat your soup and crackers, and don’t delay. I’ve a fancy to make oatmeal molasses cookies this afternoon, but the molasses pail is empty. If you hurry, you can get it filled at the corner store before you go back to school.”

At the thought of molasses cookies, Patrick’s green eyes twinkled. He slurped down his soup as fast as he could. He pulled on his cap, buttoned his jacket, and hooked the wire handle of the empty pail over his fingers.

“How mind,” said Mama, “don’t you dare stick your finger in for a lick, or not a single molasses cookie will you have.”

The sun was shining, and it was not a very cold day for the middle of January. Patrick ran as fast as he could to Mr. O’Connor’s store.

When the storekeeper saw Patrick swinging the molasses pail, he shook his bald head. “Sorry I am to disappoint you, lad, but the molasses barrel is empty. I’m getting a new barrel this afternoon. Come back after school, and I’ll fill your pail.”

Patrick walked slowly out of the store. His mouth was watering for molasses cookies hot from the oven. Then he had an idea. A few blocks farther on was another store—a bigger store. He had never gone there by himself, but he and Papa often passed it on their Sunday walks. The store was near the corner where they turned onto Commercial Street.

He did not have time to go home and ask Mama, but Patrick was sure he could get the molasses and not be late for school. Holding tight to the wire handle, Patrick ran lickety-split. He ran so hard that when he reached the store, he stopped on the doorstep to catch his breath.

At that very moment a heavy rumbling sound filled the air. BANG! BANG! BANG! BOOM! BOOM! WH-O-O-O-O-O-SH!

Patrick rushed to the corner. What he saw made his eyes bulge. A great, towering wave of smooth, shiny brown rolled toward him. It looked like … it looked like … IT WAS MOLASSES!
The Purity Distilling Company’s huge, enormous tank had E-X-P-L-O-D-E-D!

People covered with molasses ran in all directions. People with their feet stuck fast screamed for help. Horses struggled in the sticky mess. Above all the noise and chaos, three long alarms sounded loudly through the streets.

All the while the river of molasses rolled toward Patrick. Without stopping to think, he bent down by the corner of the building. Grabbing the lid off his pail, he held it out. The molasses poured into the pail, nearly jerking it from Patrick’s hands. He pulled it back and clapped on the lid. The molasses spread up the side street and lapped around Patrick’s shoes.

Patrick turned to run, but he lost his footing in the gooey river. Down he went, his hand held tightly onto the pail. As he rolled over, a hand grabbed him.

"Are you all right, boy?" A man with hair as red as Patrick’s smiled down at him. Strong hands pulled him to his feet.

Patrick nodded as he wiped his sticky face with a sticky hand. Before he could even say thank you, the man was gone. Patrick’s shoes, his pants, his jacket, and his cap dripped with molasses. Patrick stamped off, stick—unstick, stick—unstick.
Name ________________________________

Read the questions, and write your answers on the lines. You may look back at the story to help you with your answers.

1. How do you know this story happens a long time ago?

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2. Why does Patrick think the Purity Distilling Company’s tank is the most wonderful sight in Boston?

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3. What causes the loud sound that Patrick hears?

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Go On
4. What happens to the people in the street?

5. How does Patrick finally get the molasses to fill his pail?

Go On
Read the questions, and fill in the circle next to your answer. You may look back at the story to help you with your answers.

6. How big is the Purity Distilling Company's tank?
   - a. as big as a horse
   - b. as big as a four-story building
   - c. as big as a car
   - d. as big as a freight wagon

7. Why does Mama want molasses?
   - a. to make a sandwich
   - b. to cook pancakes for breakfast
   - c. to make cookies
   - d. to feed the cat

8. What does Mama tell Patrick not to do?
   - a. play near the horses
   - b. take a lick of molasses
   - c. get his clothes dirty
   - d. run as fast as he can

9. Why does Patrick have to hurry?
   - a. so he won't be late for school
   - b. so he can help Mama
   - c. so he can have lunch with Papa
   - d. so he can finish his homework

10. Why does Patrick go to the bigger store?
    - a. He gets lost.
    - b. Mr. O'Connor is out of molasses.
    - c. Mr. O'Connor tells him to.
    - d. He wants to be late for school.
Self-Assessment

★ How much did you like the story? Mark an X in one of the spaces on the line.

I did not like it.  I liked it fairly well.  I liked it very much.

★ How well did you understand the story? Mark an X in one of the spaces on the line.

I did not understand it.  I understood it fairly well.  I understood it very well.
Patrick McGonnigal O’Brien lives in Boston with his family. Patrick loves molasses more than anything in the world. He can never get enough of the sweet, sticky syrup. Whenever he can, he sneaks a lick from his family’s molasses pitcher—and gets a good scolding from his mother!

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Every Sunday afternoon Papa took Patrick for a walk down along the harbor to see all the wonderful sights. Horses and buggies clattered over the cobbledstones. Newfangled automobiles tooted their horns. Overhead, a train clacked along the raised tracks.

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The most wonderful sight of all, however, was a huge, enormous tank as tall as a four-story building. The tank was made of big sheets of metal fastened together with rivets. Patrick could see the large, round heads of the rivets pounded in neat rows along the seams. Painted in big letters on the round sides of the tank were the words, PURITY DISTILLING COMPANY. This giant tank was filled with molasses. Papa had said so.
The very thought of so much molasses made Patrick’s mouth water. Sometimes Patrick dreamed that he was seated on the edge of the tank with a giant straw just sucking, sucking, sucking molasses all day long.

One winter day when Patrick arrived home from school for lunch, Mama said, “Eat your soup and crackers, and don’t delay. I’ve a fancy to make oatmeal molasses cookies this afternoon, but the molasses pail is empty. If you hurry, you can get it filled at the corner store before you go back to school.”

At the thought of molasses cookies, Patrick’s green eyes twinkled. He slurped down his soup as fast as he could. He pulled on his cap, buttoned his jacket, and hooked the wire handle of the empty pail over his fingers.

“Now mind,” said Mama, “don’t you dare stick your finger in for a lick, or not a single molasses cookie will you have.”

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When the storekeeper saw Patrick swinging the molasses pail, he shook his bald head. “Sorry I am to disappoint you, lad, but the molasses barrel is empty. I'm getting a new barrel this afternoon. Come back after school, and I’ll fill your pail.”

Patrick walked slowly out of the store. His mouth was watering for molasses cookies hot from the oven. Then he had an idea. A few blocks farther on was another store—a bigger store. He had never gone there by himself, but he and Papa often passed it on their Sunday walks. The store was near the corner where they turned onto Commercial Street.

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At that very moment a heavy rumbling sound filled the air. BANG! BANG! BANG! BOOM! BOOM! WH-O-O-O-O-O-SH!

Patrick rushed to the corner. What he saw made his eyes bulge. A great, towering wave of smooth, shiny brown rolled toward him. It looked like … it looked like … IT WAS MOLASSES!
The Purity Distilling Company’s huge, enormous tank had EXPLODED!

People covered with molasses ran in all directions. People with their feet stuck fast screamed for help. Horses struggled in the sticky mess. Above all the noise and chaos, three long alarms sounded loudly through the streets.

All the while the river of molasses rolled toward Patrick. Without stopping to think, he bent down by the corner of the building. Grabbing the lid off his pail, he held it out. The molasses poured into the pail, nearly jerking it from Patrick’s hands. He pulled it back and clapped on the lid. The molasses spread up the side street and lapped around Patrick’s shoes.

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<tr>
<th>Score</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criterion</td>
<td>No response or completely inaccurate.</td>
<td>Partially correct. May say there are horses.</td>
<td>Substantially complete and correct. States one or more of the following: there are horses and buggies; cars are called “new-fangled”; there are molasses pails or barrels; horses are used to pull wagons.</td>
</tr>
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2. Why does Patrick think the Purity Distilling Company’s tank is the most wonderful sight in Boston?

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<td>Criterion</td>
<td>No response or completely inaccurate.</td>
<td>Partially correct. May say he likes molasses.</td>
<td>Substantially complete and correct. States that the tank is filled with molasses (which Patrick loves).</td>
</tr>
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3. What causes the loud sound that Patrick hears?

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<td>Partially correct. May say an explosion or the tank.</td>
<td>Substantially complete and correct. States that the sound is caused by the Purity Distilling Company’s big tank exploding.</td>
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4. What happens to the people in the street?

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<td>Substantially complete and correct. States that they get covered with molasses, and some can’t move because their feet are stuck.</td>
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5. How does Patrick finally get the molasses to fill his pail?

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<td>No response or completely inaccurate.</td>
<td>Partially correct. May say he gets it from the tank.</td>
<td>Substantially complete and correct. States that he holds the pail out into the flood of molasses coming down the street.</td>
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