

The Mark on the Bread

Forty families. One oven. A hundred loaves that all look the same.

6 min read

Before you read

- **dough** — a soft mixture of flour and water before it is baked
- **alley** — a very narrow street between buildings
- **tray** — a flat board for carrying things
- **communal** — shared by everybody in a group
- **errand** — a short job you do for someone else
- **batch** — a group of things made at the same time



Yassine carrying the bread tray through the narrow alleys of the medina

¹ Every morning before school, Yassine carries his family's bread to the oven. His grandmother makes the dough at dawn and shapes it into four flat rounds. Yassine lays them on a wooden tray, balances the tray on his shoulder, and walks through the alleys of the old city of Marrakesh.

² The oven is communal, which means it belongs to the whole neighbourhood. It is a low room with a fire at the back, hotter than any kitchen, run by a man everyone calls the ferran. Forty families send their bread here every day. It is cheaper than each family heating its own oven, and the bread is better.

³ This raises an obvious problem. A hundred loaves of flat bread, made from the same flour, going into the same fire, all come out looking almost exactly the same.

⁴ So each family presses a mark into its dough before it leaves the house. Some press a line of finger holes. Some use the end of a spoon, or a fork, or a bottle cap. Yassine's family makes three dents in a triangle, always in the same corner.



Four families, four marks. Yassine's three dents are on the nearest loaf.

⁵ The ferran remembers the marks. He does not write anything down. He has run the oven for nineteen years, and he knows which mark belongs to which door.

⁶ One Tuesday, Yassine was late and ran the whole way. He handed over the tray, did his errands and came back at noon. The ferran gave him four warm loaves, and Yassine was halfway home before he stopped in the middle of the alley.

⁷ He had not made the marks. He had been in such a hurry that he had forgotten, and his grandmother had been busy with his baby cousin and had not checked.

⁸ He ran back. The ferran was sweeping. Yassine explained, and waited to be told off.

⁹ Instead the ferran laughed. "Unmarked bread," he said. "Only one tray came in unmarked all morning. That made it the easiest batch of the day to find."

¹⁰ Yassine walked home more slowly, carrying bread that was still his, and thought about that for a long time.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. Why does the neighbourhood use one shared oven?
 - A The fire is safer there
 - B It is cheaper than each family heating its own, and the bread is better
 - C There is no flour in the houses
 - D The ferran owns all the bread
2. What problem does the shared oven create?
 - A The bread burns
 - B The oven is too small
 - C All the loaves look the same
 - D The alleys are too narrow
3. What mark does Yassine's family use?
 - A A line of fork holes
 - B A bottle cap circle
 - C Three dents in a triangle
 - D A spoon pressed in the middle
4. How does the ferran keep track of whose bread is whose?
 - A He writes it in a book
 - B He remembers the marks
 - C Each family waits by the oven
 - D He numbers the trays

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three full sentences.

5. Explain why the marks matter more at a communal oven than they would at home.
6. Yassine expected to be told off, but the ferran laughed. Why was the unmarked tray easy rather than difficult to find?

Part C

Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

7. At the end, Yassine walks home slowly and thinks for a long time. What do you think he is thinking about? What in the story makes you say that?

8. The ferran remembers forty families' marks without writing anything down. What is something you can remember without writing it down, and why do you think that one sticks in your head?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — it is cheaper than each family heating its own, and the bread is better | 2. C — all the loaves look the same | 3. C — three dents in a triangle | 4. B — he remembers the marks

Part B

5. At home only your own bread is baking, so there is nothing to confuse it with. At the communal oven a hundred similar loaves are baking together, so without a mark nobody could tell which four belong to which family. Accept any answer built on the number of loaves.

6. Every other family had marked their dough, so the one unmarked tray stood out from all the rest. Accept: being the only one different made it obvious.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

7. A strong answer suggests something specific — that his mistake turned out not to matter, that being the only one different can help you, that the ferran was kinder than expected — and points to the ferran's words. A weaker answer says only that he was relieved. Prompt with: what surprised him?

8. Any honest personal answer counts, as long as the child offers a reason why that thing is memorable — repetition, importance, a pattern, a feeling attached to it.

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