

The Part That Did Not Exist

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 22 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about seven minutes.
- 2 Turn to the next page and cover this one. No looking back.
- 3 Write what you remember, then mark it on the last page.

The taxi had been in the family longer than Yaima had. It was a 1953 Chevrolet, painted the turquoise her grandfather called sea-on-a-good-day, and it had, by his own count, fourteen parts left from the original factory line. Everything else had been replaced, repaired, borrowed, swapped or made.

On the Tuesday the water pump failed, Yaima was on the pavement handing him spanners. Steam came up through the bonnet gap in a slow white sheet. Osvaldo did not swear. He looked at the engine for a long time and said, “Bring me the box.”

The box was a cigar box with the lid taped on, and it lived under the front seat. Inside it he kept bolts, washers, three keys to doors that no longer existed, and a folded sheet of squared paper. He unfolded the paper on the wing, licked a pencil, and began to draw.

“Can we not buy one?” Yaima asked.

He laughed without looking up. “There is no shop in this country with a water pump for a car of seventy-three years old. The part does not exist, Yaima. So we will cause it to exist.”

What he drew was not the pump. It was the one piece inside it that had worn through — a brass bushing, a ring narrower than her little finger, with a measurement beside every line. He measured the old one twice with a caliper from a locomotive workshop, wrote the numbers, then measured a third time and changed the last digit.

“Why three times?”

“Because Tito will cut exactly what is on the paper,” he said. “If the paper is wrong, the paper is wrong in brass, and brass is expensive.”

Tito's workshop was behind a blue door on Calle Zanja, up two flights, and it smelled of hot metal and coffee. It had no sign. A lathe stood where a dining table should have been, and the window ledge held rows of small finished objects — gear wheels, a cocktail shaker, a propeller the length of a spoon.

Tito read the squared paper with the expression of a man reading a letter from an old friend. “Your grandfather still writes the tolerance,” he said, which Yaima later learnt meant how much the finished piece was allowed to be wrong by. Osvaldo's answer, written small in the corner, was two hundredths of a millimetre.

It took Tito forty minutes. He did not use the drawing after the first reading; he set the numbers on the lathe's dials and the drawing went into his pocket. The brass came off the tool in a long bright curl and fell into a tin. When he was finished he dropped the ring into a glass of water to cool it, and the water hissed once.

Payment was discussed on the landing, in the low voice adults use for money, and Yaima noticed that no money appeared. What appeared was an agreement. Tito's sister had a refrigerator that hummed and would not cool, and Osvaldo knew about motors, and a Thursday was mentioned.

They walked home with the bushing in Yaima's shirt pocket. Her grandfather was quiet for two streets and then said, as though continuing an argument with somebody absent, “People say we are good at making do. It is not making do. Making do is accepting less. This is the same pump it was in 1953.”

By eight that evening the Chevrolet was idling with its bonnet up, the needle on the temperature gauge sat exactly where it had sat for seventy-three years, and Yaima sat on the kerb writing fifteen inside the cigar box lid, under his count.

Cover the passage before you start.

Looking back turns this into a copying exercise. Getting it slightly wrong from memory is what makes it work.

PART A Tell it back

Write down everything you can remember about how Yaima and her grandfather solved the problem with the taxi. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 6 questions

- 1 What part had actually worn out, and how long did Tito take to make the new one?

- 2 Why did Osvaldo measure the old bushing three times instead of once?

- 3 What does the detail of Tito putting the drawing in his pocket after one reading suggest about him?

- 4 Tito says that Osvaldo “still writes the tolerance”. What does tolerance mean here, and why would it matter to Tito?

- 5 What is the mood of the workshop scene on Calle Zanja, and how does the writer create it?

6 Osvaldo insists that what they did was not “making do”. Weigh up whether the story supports him.

PART C Mark your own work

Now go back to the passage. Tick every answer you got right. You do not need the same words as the answer below — if you wrote the same idea in your own words, it counts.

- ☐ 1 • A small brass bushing from inside the water pump, narrower than Yaima's little finger. Tito took forty minutes to make it.
- ☐ 2 • Because Tito would cut the brass to match the drawing exactly, without checking the original. Any error in the numbers would be copied into the metal, and brass is expensive, so a mistake on paper would waste both the material and the trip.
- ☐ 3 • That he is highly skilled and completely confident. He only needed the numbers long enough to set them on the lathe's dials, which shows he works from measurements rather than from a picture, and that this kind of job is routine for him.
- ☐ 4 • The tolerance is how far the finished piece is allowed to differ from the stated size — in this case two hundredths of a millimetre. It matters because it tells Tito how precisely he must work: a loose tolerance is a quick job, while a tight one decides how carefully he has to cut and whether the part will fit at all.
- ☐ 5 • It is calm, warm and quietly impressive rather than tense. The writer builds it from small physical details — hot metal and coffee, a lathe where a dining table should be, the brass curling into a tin, the single hiss of the water — and from Tito reading the drawing like a letter from an old friend, so skill is shown as something unhurried and familiar.
- ☐ 6 • The story largely supports him. Making do would mean a cheaper pump, a bodged seal or a car that runs cooler than it should; instead they identified the one worn component, specified it to two hundredths of a millimetre and had it cut in brass, and the gauge afterwards reads exactly where it always has. Against that, almost nothing original is left in the car, the part was paid for with a favour rather than bought, and the whole repair depended on an unmarked workshop up two flights of stairs — so it is certainly improvised. The fair conclusion is that the method was improvised while the standard was not, which is close to what Osvaldo claims.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

THE STRATEGY Structure before detail

Before you try to hold on to the details of anything — a story, a chapter, a process — get the shape of it first. Here the shape is simple: the part fails, it is measured, it is drawn, it is cut, it is paid for, it is fitted. Once you have five or six steps in order, every detail you meet has somewhere to live, and loose facts are much harder to lose when they are hanging on a frame.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Think of a task you know well, such as cooking a meal you have made many times. What are its five main steps, and how much of the detail comes back on its own once you have them?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your teenager read the passage once, then cover it completely before Part A — no glancing back and no prompting, because the effort of hauling a half-remembered fact out of memory is what fixes it there. At this level mark the thinking rather than the wording: the answers given for the inference, tone and analysis questions are one good response each, not the only one.