

Everything Blue

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 thefts began in the second week of Tess's stay, and Nan kept a record of them on the back of a seed catalogue, because Nan recorded everything.

Eleven blue pegs from the line. A blue bottle top from the windowsill. The blue plastic ring off a skipping rope, left on the back step by a neighbour's grandson and gone within an hour. Two drinking straws. A biro lid. A length of blue baling twine that had been holding up a tomato stake, which now held nothing.

“Only blue,” Tess said, reading the list. “Nothing red, nothing green.”

“Not one green thing,” said Nan, with satisfaction. “The red pegs are untouched. I counted.”

Tess was fifteen and had come up from the coast for the winter holidays, to a house at the edge of a gully where the garden ran out and the rainforest began. The first week she had been bored. By the second she had a notebook of her own.

They ruled out the possibilities one by one, which took four days. A person was unlikely; nobody steals a biro lid. The neighbour's dog was ruled out because the dog was ruled out of everything. Wind was the best candidate for a while, until Nan pointed out that wind does not untie baling twine, and that things had gone on two completely still mornings.

It was Tess who thought of watching instead of reasoning. She set a blue peg on the fence post nearest the gully at eight in the morning, and sat on the back step twelve metres away with a tea going cold.

At twenty past eight something came along the fence line in short flights, so dark she read it as black until it turned its head and the light moved across it. It was a deep glossy violet-blue, the colour of ink on wet paper, and its eye was a startling pale blue. It took the peg and dropped off the post into the gully.

She followed badly and loudly, and found it anyway, because she was not looking for a bird. She was looking for the pegs.

What she found, in a cleared patch of forest floor the size of a doormat, was two parallel walls of upright twigs the height of her hand, a few centimetres apart like a little avenue with no roof. And arranged at either end of it was the inventory from the seed catalogue. Eleven pegs. The skipping rope ring. The straws. The biro lid. The twine, coiled. Blue feathers and two blue-black berries. Nothing of any other colour anywhere on the cleared ground.

Tess crouched a long time without touching it. The arrangement was not a nest — nothing to hold an egg, no cup, no lining. It was a display, with an obvious front and a clear view down the avenue, built by something with a very definite opinion.

She went back up for Nan, who came down the slope in gumboots, looked at it in silence, and then said the one sentence that made the whole fortnight make sense: “Well. He's been shopping in my yard.”

They agreed on terms. The pegs stayed. The twine stayed. Nan would buy red pegs from then on, and Tess was given the job of not telling the neighbour's grandson where his ring had gone, because he was six and would want it back.

On her last morning Tess put a new blue peg on the post as a leaving present, went inside, and did not watch. When she checked at ten the post was bare, and she wrote the time in her notebook under all the other times, and closed it.

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 the thefts and what Tess found in the gully. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 6 questions

- ① How many blue pegs went missing, and where did Nan keep the record of the thefts?

- 2 Why did Tess and Nan rule out the wind as an explanation?

- 3 How does Tess work out that the structure in the gully is not a nest?

- 4 Tess finds “the inventory from the back of the seed catalogue” laid out on the forest floor. What does inventory mean, and why is it the right word here?

- 5 What is the mood of this story, and how does the writer create it?

- 6 Tess spends four days reasoning and twenty minutes watching. Weigh up how useful each approach was to solving the mystery.

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 • Eleven blue pegs went missing. Nan kept the record on the back of a seed catalogue.
- ☐ 2 • Because wind cannot untie baling twine from a tomato stake, and because things kept disappearing on two mornings that were completely still. The explanation did not fit either the kind of theft or the weather.
- ☐ 3 • She notices it has no cup, no lining and nothing that could hold an egg. Instead it is two straight walls of twigs with an open avenue between them and the blue objects laid out at the ends, which makes it a display built to be looked at along rather than a container for eggs.
- ☐ 4 • An inventory is a full itemised list of things held in one place. It is the right word because Nan's record was exactly that kind of list, and because everything on it turned up together in the gully — so the missing items were not scattered losses but a collection, counted and kept.
- ☐ 5 • It is light, dry and quietly delighted rather than mysterious or alarming. The humour comes from understatement — a tomato stake holding up nothing, a dog ruled out of everything, Nan's remark about being shopped in — and the delight comes from the one burst of colour in the writing, where the bird turns its head and is suddenly violet-blue with a pale blue eye.
- ☐ 6 • Watching produced the answer, and did it quickly, which makes the reasoning look wasted. It was not. The four days of ruling out people, the dog and the wind are what told Tess that no ordinary explanation would do, and the list told her the thief wanted blue and nothing else — without that she would not have known to bait a fence post with a blue peg at eight in the morning, or where to point her attention. Reasoning narrowed the problem until a single simple observation could settle it; on its own, though, it was never going to produce a bird.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

THE STRATEGY Spaced retrieval

Come back to what you have learnt after a gap — later today, tomorrow, next week — and each time try to recall it before you look. The forgetting that happens in between is not the enemy; it is what makes the second attempt hard enough to be worth something. Four short sessions spread over a fortnight will hold far better than the same time spent in one evening.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Think of something you learnt a long time ago and still cannot forget — a phone number, a song, a route. How often did you have to bring it back before it stuck?

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.