

Written, Not Painted

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 25 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 kitchen smelled of beeswax and vinegar before Oksana was properly awake. Her great-aunt Hanna had been up since five, and on the table lay forty goose eggs, blown empty through two pinholes, set out in rows on a folded towel.

“Forty?” Oksana said.

“Thirty-eight for the basket, two for your mistakes,” Hanna said. “Sit. Light the candle.”

What they were about to do is not painting. The word for these eggs, *pysanky*, comes from a verb meaning to write, and the tool is a *kistka* — a tiny brass funnel on a wooden handle, no wider than a grain of rice at the tip. You hold the funnel in the candle flame until the brass is hot, scoop up a bead of beeswax, and the heat keeps the wax running as you draw. The line goes on black and glossy and stays exactly where you put it.

The order is everything, and the order cannot be undone. Wherever the wax goes, no dye can follow. So the first lines you draw are the lines you want white, because white is the colour of the shell underneath. Then the egg goes into yellow. Everything you now cover in wax stays yellow for ever. Then orange, and more wax; then red, and more wax; then, last of all, the deepest dye in the house, a brown-black that Hanna made from alder bark and rusted nails steeped since February. Nothing can be lifted off and nothing can be lightened; the egg only ever gets darker, in one direction, until it stops.

By the end the egg is a lump of dirty wax with nothing visible on it at all. Oksana hated this part when she was nine. You cannot see what you have made. You have to remember it.

Hanna worked the old pattern from Kosmach — a band of eight-pointed stars round the middle, ram's horns above, a running line of wheat below. Her hand never stopped to think. Oksana drew two stars, then stopped.

“I want to do the bridge,” she said. “The one at the bottom of the village. With the planks.”

Hanna set her egg down in its cup. She did not say that the stars were four hundred years old, or that nobody put bridges on eggs. She said, “Where does the water go?”

“Under it. Left to right.”

“Then you draw the water first, in wax, and the water will be white,” Hanna said. “And if you want the planks dark you draw them nowhere, and let them wait for the last dye. Think the whole egg through before the candle gets hot. Backwards.”

It took Oksana most of the morning. She drew the river, dyed yellow, waxed the sky, dyed orange, waxed the hills, dyed red, waxed the rail of the bridge, and then stood the egg in the black-brown dye for twenty minutes with her hands flat on the table, not looking at it.

Then the melting. You hold the egg to the side of the candle flame, never in it, until the wax goes soft and dark, and you wipe it away with a cloth, a thumb's width at a time. Everything appears at once and in the wrong order — a red hill, a white curl of river, a line of planks so dark they looked wet. Her thumb went slowly, because wax that is wiped while still hard will take a line of colour with it.

“The bridge is crooked,” Oksana said.

“The bridge is crooked,” Hanna said, and did not add anything to that.

Hanna turned it under the window for a long time. Then she put it in the middle of the basket, among the stars.

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 morning in Hanna's kitchen — the tools, the order of the dyes, what Oksana wanted to draw, and how it ended. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 7 questions

- 1 How many eggs were on the table, and what were the two spare ones for?

- ② Why must a pysanka be planned backwards, starting with the parts that will end up lightest?

- 3 Hanna does not argue about the bridge. What does her question “Where does the water go?” tell you about how she teaches?

- 4 The passage says that *pysanky* comes from a verb meaning to write, and that what they are doing “is not painting”. What does the distinction between writing and painting capture about the craft?

- 5 What is the mood of the kitchen scene, and how does the writer create it?

- 6 Oksana cannot see her design while she is making it. Weigh up whether that is a flaw in the craft or part of what makes it demanding.

- 7 Hanna places the bridge egg in the middle of the basket, among the stars. Evaluate what that ending achieves, and what the writer avoids doing.

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 • There were forty goose eggs. Thirty-eight were for the basket and two were for Oksana's mistakes.
- ☐ 2 • Because wax blocks dye permanently and the egg is dyed from light to dark. Whatever you cover in wax keeps the colour it has at that moment, so the white lines must be waxed before any dye at all, and anything meant to be darkest must be left bare until the final dye.
- ☐ 3 • That she accepts the new design and immediately turns it into a technical problem instead of a matter of permission. By asking which way the water runs she makes Oksana work out the order of waxing for herself, which teaches the method rather than the pattern.
- ☐ 4 • Writing is making deliberate lines in a fixed order that cannot be gone over or blended, which is exactly how the hot wax behaves. Painting suggests covering a surface with colour and adjusting as you go, whereas here each line is committed the moment it is drawn and the colours arrive underneath in a planned sequence.
- ☐ 5 • It is calm, warm and matter-of-fact, with the difficulty treated as ordinary rather than dramatic. The writer builds it from small physical details — beeswax and vinegar, a towel of eggs, alder bark and rusted nails steeping since February — and from Hanna's short practical sentences, so skill comes across as something unhurried and shared rather than tense.
- ☐ 6 • Read as a flaw, it means the maker gets no feedback until the work is finished, so an error discovered during the melting cannot be fixed and the whole morning is wasted — which is presumably why Hanna sets aside two eggs for mistakes. Read the other way, it is the discipline the craft is built on: because nothing can be checked, the whole image has to be held in the head in reverse order before the candle is lit, and the finished egg is a record of that planning. The passage leans towards the second reading, since the only thing Oksana was taught was how to think the egg through, not how to draw better.
- ☐ 7 • It gives the story its judgement through an action rather than a statement: the new design is not merely tolerated but set at the centre of the inherited ones, which says the tradition is a method that can take new subjects. What the writer avoids is any speech about change or respect — nobody praises Oksana, nobody declares a lesson learnt, and the four-hundred-year-old pattern is never defended out loud. The restraint makes the gesture carry more weight, and leaves open the question of whether Hanna approves of the bridge or simply of the thinking behind it.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 7

DATE

THE STRATEGY Structure before detail

Before you try to hold on to any single fact, get the shape of the whole thing clear: here it is one sequence — wax, dye, wax, dye, melt. Fix that skeleton first, then hang the details on it, because a fact with a place to sit is far easier to retrieve than a fact floating on its own. If you cannot say the shape of a passage in one sentence, you are not ready to memorise its details.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Think of something you can do in the right order without being told — getting ready for school, warming up for a sport, cooking one meal. How did you learn the shape of it before you learned the fiddly parts?

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.