

The Box That Had to Breathe

PASSAGE · FICTION

SKILLS TRAINED

Working memory

Delayed recall

Inference

HOW TO USE THIS SHEET

About 20 minutes

- 1 Read the passage twice, slowly. Take about six 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.

Omar's uncle kept the speaker boxes under a tarpaulin behind the shop, and for two years Omar had been allowed to carry them and nothing else. Four boxes, each the size of a washing machine, each heavier than it had any right to be. Carrying was not building. Omar wanted to build.

The chance came in March, when the smallest box split along a corner joint and Uncle Dalton looked at it for a long moment and said, "All right. You."

They drove across Kingston to a timber yard near the harbour and came back with three sheets of plywood, eighteen millimetres thick, stacked flat in the van so the rain could not curl them. Omar had expected to talk about sound. Instead Dalton talked about wood for an hour: how thin panels buzz, how a corner with no brace behind it will work itself loose, how a box that flexes steals the bass and gives you nothing back.

"The speaker is not the thing," Dalton said, tapping the dusty black cone of the old driver. "This cost money, yes. But it is a motor. The box tells the motor what to do."

Omar cut the panels on the Saturday and got the first one wrong, four millimetres short, and learned that four millimetres is a gap you can slide a leaf through. They glued and screwed the second attempt, then cut strips of waste plywood and fitted them inside every corner as bracing. Dalton ran his hand around the inside seams afterwards, feeling for air the way a mechanic listens for a knock.

The part Omar did not understand was the hole. A rectangular slot, low on the front panel, with a tunnel of plywood running back from it into the box.

"Why cut a hole in a box you just sealed?"

"Because the back of the cone is pushing air too," Dalton said. "Seal it in and it fights the front. Give it a tunnel the right length and it comes out late — late enough to arrive in step. Then the two pushes agree."

"And if the tunnel is the wrong length?"

“Then they argue. And an argument in a box sounds like a cardboard drum.”

They tuned it by trial. Dalton had a slip of paper with the box volume worked out, and a figure for the port length, but he cut the tunnel long on purpose and shortened it in stages, playing the same bass line each time while Omar lay on the concrete with his palm flat against the front panel. Twice he felt nothing much. The third time the panel went still and the air in his chest did not, and he sat up fast.

“There,” Dalton said, not smiling, which was how he smiled.

The box went out to a street dance in May, bolted into a stack of four, and nobody at that dance knew or cared which one Omar had built. He stood behind the stack for most of the night with his hand resting on the top edge, feeling it hold steady while the music moved out over the road.

He carried it home afterwards too. It did not feel as heavy.

- 6 The story ends with nobody at the dance knowing which box Omar built, and with him carrying it home. Why did the writer choose that ending?

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 · Three sheets of plywood eighteen millimetres thick. He cut the first panel four millimetres short.
- ☐ 2 · By trial. Dalton cut it long on purpose and shortened it in stages, playing the same bass line each time while Omar felt the front panel with his palm.
- ☐ 3 · That the expensive part is not the important part. The driver only moves air; how the box is built decides what that movement actually sounds like, so the building work matters more than the component.
- ☐ 4 · The panel stops vibrating under his hand while he can still feel the bass in his chest. A still panel means the energy is going into the air rather than into shaking the box.
- ☐ 5 · That they work against each other instead of together — arriving out of step so one cancels the other, which is why it ends up sounding thin and hollow like a cardboard drum.
- ☐ 6 · It keeps the reward private. Omar wanted to build rather than carry, and the satisfaction comes from feeling the box hold steady under his hand, not from being recognised — so the same job of carrying it home feels different to him now.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

THE STRATEGY Dual coding

Store a fact twice: once in words and once as a picture or diagram you draw yourself. For this passage, sketch the box in cross-section — the braced corners, the slot low on the front, the tunnel running back inside it — and label the two pushes of air. Words and images are held in different parts of memory, so a fact you have both written and drawn has two routes back to you instead of one.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

When you give someone directions to your house, do you describe it in words or start drawing a map? Why that one?

FOR THE PARENT OR TEACHER · This sheet trains delayed recall, not reading speed. Let your child 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, reward the quality of the reasoning in the inference and purpose answers rather than the exact wording.