

What the Bog Kept

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.

Grandad cut turf the way other people did the crossword — slowly, in the same spot every year, and with no real intention of finishing. The bank he worked ran along the back of the field, a brown wall of peat about the height of my shoulder, and he had been taking it down one slice at a time since before I was born.

The tool is called a *sléan*. It has a long handle and a blade with a wing on one side, and in the right hands it lifts a sod out clean, like a brick cut from a damp chocolate cake. My job was to catch each sod as he swung it up, and lay it on the heather to dry. Three weeks of west wind turns a wet brick into a light one that burns.

On the second morning the blade struck something that was neither peat nor stone. Grandad stopped mid-swing. Then he went down on one knee and began scraping with his hands, which in fourteen years I had never once seen him do.

What came out was a vessel made of wood, blackened and slightly squashed, about the size of a bucket, with a lid still sitting more or less where a lid ought to sit. It was heavier than it looked. Inside was a pale grey substance, waxy and packed solid, smelling faintly of cheese and wet grass.

“Butter,” Grandad said, in the tone you would use for the name of a neighbour. “Bog butter. There was one found below Tullamore when I was a lad. My father wouldn't let me put a finger near it.”

People buried butter in Irish bogs for a very long time, he told me, and nobody is entirely certain why. A bog is cold, airless and sour, and food left down in one does not rot so much as pause. Some of it was probably stored there to keep through a warm summer and simply never collected. Some of it may have been put down deliberately, as a gift to something, and was never meant to come back up.

We did not open it any further. He sent me to the house for a bucket of bog water and a bin bag, and he wrapped the thing wet, because wood that has been soaked for centuries will crack apart within a day of drying out. Then he telephoned the museum in Dublin,

standing very straight in the hall and giving our address twice, slowly, as though the second time might be the one that counted.

A woman arrived the following Thursday in a car full of foam padding. She measured how deep the hole was and photographed the cut face of the bank from four angles. She wrote the date in a notebook, asked Grandad exactly where he had been standing, and told us the wood would be tested and the butter with it. The answer might come back two hundred years, she said, or two thousand. The bog kept that as carefully as it kept everything else.

Grandad went back to the turf on Friday morning. He cut more carefully after that — I watched him pause and probe with the blade before each swing — and he never once said that we had been lucky.

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 what the pair found in the bog and what they did with it. Order does not matter. Keep writing until you run out.

PART B 6 questions

- 1 What is the turf-cutting tool called, and what was inside the wooden vessel?

- ② Why did the narrator notice Grandad kneeling down and scraping with his hands?

- 3 Grandad wrapped the vessel while it was still wet and sent for bog water. What does that tell you about him?

- 4 The narrator says that food left in a bog “does not rot so much as pause”. What does that comparison tell you about conditions in a bog?

- 5 The story ends with Grandad probing before each swing and never saying they had been lucky. Why does the writer end there?

- 6 The woman from the museum could not say whether the butter was two hundred or two thousand years old. Weigh up whether that makes the find more interesting or less, using details from the story.

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 • The tool is a sléan. Inside the vessel was a pale grey, waxy substance packed solid — bog butter.
- ☐ 2 • Because he never did it. He had cut that bank for years with the blade alone, so dropping to his knees to dig by hand showed he already suspected what he had struck and did not want to damage it.
- ☐ 3 • That he knew something about how finds from a bog behave — wood soaked for centuries splits as soon as it dries — so he was protecting it rather than showing it off. He had clearly heard about such discoveries long before this one.
- ☐ 4 • Rotting needs air, warmth and bacteria, and a bog is cold, airless and acidic, so decay almost stops instead of running its course. Pausing suggests the food is held still rather than preserved forever — it could continue once conditions change.
- ☐ 5 • It shows the find changing how he works without anyone announcing a lesson. Refusing to call it luck suggests he thinks the bog is full of such things and that care, not chance, is what brings them up — and leaving it unsaid keeps the ending quiet rather than preachy.
- ☐ 6 • Less, in one sense: without a date you cannot say who buried it or why, so the two explanations Grandad offers — summer storage or a deliberate gift — stay guesses. More, in another: the uncertainty is the point of a bog, which holds things without labelling them, and an object that could be either is stranger than one safely dated. A reasonable answer argues either way as long as it uses the two explanations and the bog's preserving conditions as evidence.

FACTS RECALLED IN PART A

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QUESTIONS CORRECT

— / 6

DATE

THE STRATEGY Spaced retrieval

Come back to this passage tomorrow, then at the weekend, then next week — from memory each time, before you look. Leaving a gap feels worse than going over it straight away, because by then you have half forgotten it, and that hard pull is exactly what makes the memory stick. Three short tests spread across a week beat one long session tonight.

WHERE YOU ALREADY DO THIS

Think of a phone number or a song you learned months ago and can still produce. How often did you come back to it, and how long were the gaps between?

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, purpose and analysis questions are one good response each, not the only one.