



Ninety Percent



Nussbaum Mind

Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18





Chapter 1: The Grade

The history reports come back on Wednesday, and Yisca's has a B+ on the front.

She stares at it between the desks while the room unpacks around her. Three weeks, that report took her. Two library trips. Index cards in a rubber band. An outline Mrs. Halpern herself called thorough when she checked it.

She turns the pages. The margins are kind. There are check marks, and one "good," and at the end, in the same blue pen, the grade that does not match the check marks at all.





Her friend gets an A and does not say anything, which is somehow worse. They walk to the next class together, talking about the weekend, and the report sits in Yisca's bag like a stone in a pocket.

At home, Yisca puts the report on the kitchen table, face down.

"That bad?" Mama asks.

"B+," Yisca says.

Mama waits.

"I want to ask her what it missed," Yisca says. "But I know how that conversation goes. She'll think I'm grade-grubbing. She'll be annoyed. It'll be cold and awful and she'll remember it every time she looks at me."

"You've had this conversation already?"

"I can see it," Yisca says.





Chapter 2: The Number

Her older brother is home from yeshiva for the week, and he is eating soup at the other end of the table.

"How sure are you?" he asks.

"What?"

"That it goes badly. Cold and awful, remembered forever. How sure?"

Yisca considers. "Ninety percent."

"Write it down," he says.

"I just told you."

"On paper. The whole prediction - what she'll say, how she'll look, what it'll cost you - and then the number. Ninety percent." He goes back to his soup. "Then go have the conversation. Then write down what actually happened, and compare."

"That's pointless if I'm right."

"Then it'll be a very short comparison," he says. "And if you're wrong, it'll be the most interesting page in your notebook."

Mama, clearing the soup bowls, does not take sides. "Either way," she says, "you'll know your own mind better on Friday."

That is not comforting. It is also, Yisca suspects, the point.





Chapter 3: The Page

In her room, Yisca opens the notebook she uses for everything, and writes.

Prediction: I ask Mrs. Halpern what my report missed. She is annoyed. She says the grade is the grade, coldly. She thinks I am grade-grubbing. It is awkward forever. How sure: 90%.

She looks at the page. Written down, the prediction looks less like a window and more like a story she is telling.

"Why the number?" she asks her brother later.

"Because memory cheats," he says. "Afterward, if it goes fine, you'll tell yourself you were only a little worried. The written number can't be argued with. I learned this the hard way - I was one hundred percent sure my rebbe would refuse me a retest. One hundred. I nearly didn't ask."

"And?"

"He said yes before I finished the sentence," her brother says. "One hundred percent sure. Completely wrong."





Chapter 4: The Wait

Mrs. Halpern's office hours are Thursday, so Yisca has a day and a half to rehearse the catastrophe.

She rehearses it walking to school, both directions. She rehearses it in the lunch line, standing behind two girls arguing about a skirt length. She rehearses it in bed, which is the worst place for rehearsals, because the midnight versions are always the coldest.

In every version, Mrs. Halpern's face does the same thing - a small, tired frown - and says, The grade is the grade, Yisca. In one midnight version, she adds, I expected better, which is not even a sentence Yisca has ever heard her say to anyone.

The rehearsals are very convincing. They have costumes and lighting. That is what makes them dangerous.

On Thursday morning, Yisca reads her notebook page again.

The dread feels like a fact. It sits in her stomach like one. But there, at the bottom of the page, the number is written like a question:
90%.

Ninety percent isn't a hundred, she thinks. Even in my own story, there's a ten.

At three o'clock, before she can rehearse it one more time, she knocks on the office door.





Chapter 5: The Conversation

Mrs. Halpern looks up and says, "Yisca - the report. Sit down."

No tired frown. Yisca almost forgets her first line.

"I wanted to ask what it missed," she says. "I worked hard on it, and I want the next one to be better."

Mrs. Halpern pulls the rubric, and for ten minutes they go through it, line by line.

Two specific misses. The analysis section summarizes where it should argue - "you tell me what happened, beautifully, and what I asked for was what it meant." And one source is a summary of a summary - "find the original next time, or tell me you couldn't, and we'll look together."

Yisca writes both down. Her hand is a little shaky, but she writes them down, because these are real and the frown was not.

"I thought you'd be annoyed," Yisca admits, at the door.

"Girls who come to argue for points annoy me a little," Mrs. Halpern says. "Girls who come to find out what missed? Never. Come earlier next time - before it's due, if you want the conversation that actually changes the grade."

The grade stays a B+. The conversation was not cold, not awful, and it will not be remembered forever.





Chapter 6: The Comparison

At home, Yisca opens the notebook to the prediction, and underneath writes:

Actual: She was not annoyed. Ten minutes on the rubric. Two real misses to fix. Grade stands. She said come earlier next time.

Then she sits and looks at the two entries, one above the other, same page, same pen.

They do not look like they are about the same event.

The prediction was weather - loud, certain weather. The actual was a normal Thursday, with a rubric and a blue pen. If she had trusted the weather, she would have skipped the Thursday, and the two real fixes would still be sitting in the report, unmissed and unlearned, waiting to cost her again on the next one.

Ninety percent sure, she thinks, and the ten did all the work.

She writes one more line at the bottom: My sure runs hot.

Then, because the page is for honesty, she adds a second line: The asking was worth it even at a B+. Not because the grade moved.

Because the next report now has two fewer ways to lose points, and she only knows what they are because she went on Thursday.





Chapter 7: The Pattern

Over Shabbos, between the meal and her nap, Yisca does the audit. Three old dreads, from memory, as honestly as she can reconstruct them - and she has to be careful, because memory cheats, so she only counts the ones she can still feel the shape of. Telling her lab partner the project needed to be redone - she had been sure it would explode; it took four minutes. Asking to switch carpool days - certain refusal; a shrug and a yes. The dentist - that one was actually as bad as predicted, and she writes that down too, because the record only works if it is honest.

Three hot predictions. One accurate dread.

The skill is not "predict good outcomes." That would be the same mistake, wearing a smile. The skill is the number, written down, checked after - so that next time the dread announces itself as a fact, she has evidence about her own forecasts.

My dreads are real, she thinks. The fear is real. My percents are guesses. The page keeps them separate.





Chapter 8: The Next One

On Monday, the science teacher assigns lab partners for the term, and Yisca is paired with a girl she works badly with - they have done it twice, and both times it was slow and polite and faintly miserable.

The dread starts up on schedule. Asking to switch will be awkward. The teacher will mind. The girl will find out somehow, and be hurt, and the class will take sides. She can feel the certainty rising, warm and confident, same as always, already ninety-plus.

This time she knows the warmth by name. It is her sure, running hot.

At home, before supper, she opens the notebook to a fresh page and writes: Prediction. Then she writes the number.

Then she caps the pen, puts the notebook away, and goes to ask.

