



One Picture Before the Cake



Nussbaum Mind

Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18





Chapter 1: Her Own Smile

Tirzah likes almost everything in the picture.

The cousins are together. Nobody stands behind somebody else's shoulder. The little girl at the end looks toward the camera instead of at the cake.

Tirzah's smile is the problem.

It is not quite a smile. It looks like the moment before she asks a question.

"One more," she says.

Her aunt lowers the small camera.

"Does everyone want another?"

The oldest cousin says yes. Two younger cousins say yes because they want to stand in the middle this time. Mama helps them arrange themselves without blocking the doorway.

Tirzah is seventeen. The women and girls have gathered for her aunt's birthday. Before the cake, the cousins agree to one group picture for a private family album. Her aunt asks each girl about inclusion. Nobody has promised a public display or wider sharing.

Tirzah says yes to that plan.

Now her aunt takes the second picture and shows it to the girls beside her.





Tirzah's smile looks too fixed.

"Maybe once more?"

Behind them, somebody calls that the cake is ready.





Chapter 2: The Moment She Can Hold

The cousins used to appear in family pictures without thinking much about them.

At least, Tirzah did. She remembers crooked paper crowns, a missing tooth, and one picture in which everybody pointed at a bird outside the frame.

She does not remember inspecting each smile afterward.

This photograph is different. She imagines her aunt opening the album next year. Someone might look closely. Someone might say she looks uncomfortable. Then this half-second will become what the whole afternoon looks like.

The cousin beside her says, "I'm ready for cake."

"Just the last one."

The cousin looks at the camera.

"That's what you said before."

"I didn't know it would look like that."

The aunt waits rather than lifting the camera again.

"We can put it away now. The album can wait."

"But we haven't got a good one."

One younger cousin leans toward the screen.

"I like the second."





Tirzah wants to tell her that she is too small to notice. She stops before saying it. The little girl notices her own place in the picture perfectly well.

The cousins go to the table. Tirzah follows, still holding her second smile in her mind.





Chapter 3: Cake She Does Not Taste

Her aunt sits at the head of the table while the family sings a short birthday song.

Tirzah knows the words. She sings them.

She is also calculating how to ask for another photograph after cake.

Perhaps she can stand farther from the camera. Perhaps she should not try to smile until the last second. Perhaps her cousin can tell her when her face looks ordinary.

Her cousin passes her a plate.

"Did you hear the story about the wrong address?"

"Which story?"

The cousin points toward their aunt, who is making the younger girls laugh.

Tirzah hears the ending. Someone delivered a birthday parcel to the house next door. She misses what was in it and why the neighbor carried it over wearing an oven mitt.

Her cousin asks whether she wants more cake.

Tirzah looks at the piece she already has. She does not remember the first bite.

"No, thank you."





A photograph can hold one moment. She is beginning to use that moment to cover every other one.





Chapter 4: One Cousin Is Enough

After cake, Tirzah asks the oldest cousin to come near the empty picture space.

"Could you help me get it right?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Tell me when I'm smiling normally."

The cousin looks at her.

"I don't know what normally means for a photograph."

"Not like the second one."

"I thought the second was fine."

Tirzah feels alone in a problem everyone else seems able to leave.

"You don't have to say that to be nice."

"I wasn't. But you don't have to like it."

Tirzah turns toward the mirror at the end of the hall. She tries a smaller smile.

The cousin waits a moment, then says she wants to hear the rest of their aunt's story.

"Could you stay two minutes?"

"I don't want to practice faces."





The cousin says it without laughing at Tirzah. That makes the refusal harder to argue with.

Tirzah almost asks someone younger. A younger cousin would probably come when called. She would also be missing the same gathering.

Tirzah leaves the mirror and goes to find Mama.





Chapter 5: Two Separate Answers

Mama listens beside the kitchen doorway, where they are not in anyone's way.

"I don't want that picture in the album," Tirzah says.

"Tell your aunt. She asked whether you wanted to be included."

"Then there won't be one with all of us."

"That may be the result today."

Tirzah had hoped Mama would promise a better picture instead.

"Could you make them come for another?"

"No. We can ask once, without making it a duty. They can say no."

"I don't know why I care so much."

Mama does not ask her to come up with a respectable reason.

"You can dislike the picture and choose not to include it. Asking other people to keep retaking it is a different request."

Tirzah looks into the room. Her aunt is showing the younger cousins the card they made for her. Her oldest cousin has found a seat beside them.

"I keep thinking somebody will see the smile and decide I was awkward the whole time."





"We don't know what someone will think. You can decide what you're willing to include. You can't prepare an image that settles every possible opinion."

Mama stays with her for a few quiet minutes. If worries about pictures keep taking over ordinary days, Tirzah can tell her and ask for more help.

For now, there is an aunt waiting to enjoy her birthday.





Chapter 6: The Answer Her Aunt Hears

Tirzah waits until her aunt finishes looking at the card.

"Could I talk about the photographs?"

"Yes."

"I don't want to be included in either one for the album. I'm sorry I kept asking everyone to try again without checking if they still wanted to."

Her aunt nods.

"I won't use either picture with you in it. We didn't agree to any other sharing either."

"I know."

"We can leave the photographs for today."

Tirzah wants to ask whether her aunt thinks she is being silly. Instead, she asks the question that affects the arrangement.

"You're not printing those?"

"No. I'll leave them out. I'll put the camera away now."

The aunt does so.

Tirzah does not stand beside her watching the camera as if she needs to inspect it for the rest of the afternoon. Mama knows the agreement too. If anything about it becomes unclear, they can ask again.





At the table, her cousin looks up.

"Another picture?"

"No. I'd rather leave it."

The cousin makes room beside her.





Chapter 7: What She Has Missed

"What was in the parcel?" Tirzah asks.

"A little cake stand," the cousin says. "The neighbor thought it was for her."

"Did she use it?"

"She was taking something out of the oven when the delivery came. That's why she had the mitt."

The aunt hears them and starts the story again, shorter this time. Tirzah listens to the middle as well as the ending.

Then the younger girls propose a word game. Each person has to describe an ordinary object without saying its name.

Tirzah's aunt gets a spoon.

"Something that spends its life in soup."

"A potato," one cousin guesses.

"A very ambitious potato."

Tirzah laughs before arranging her face. Then she notices the laugh and nearly starts checking how it looked.

"No picture is being taken," Tirzah thinks to herself. "I can listen to the next clue."

She takes her turn. Her object is a chair. She describes it so badly that three cousins guess cupboard.





The round continues. She does not ask whether everybody thinks she is being more natural now.





Chapter 8: A Page With Something Else

Near departure time, her aunt asks each girl for one sentence about the gathering. She plans to put the birthday card and a page of their ordinary recollections in the private album. Anyone who does not want a sentence included can pass.

Tirzah chooses hers.

"The potato who wanted a spoon's job."

Her aunt reads it and laughs.

"May I put that beside your first name?"

"Yes."

That yes concerns these words on this family page. It does not change her answer about the photographs.

Her cousin writes about the cake stand. One younger girl draws a very large spoon without adding a sentence.

Tirzah helps Mama collect their things. She still remembers the fixed smile in the second picture. She does not have to announce that she now likes it.

Before leaving, she returns the pen to her aunt and places the sentence beside the birthday card.

The camera stays in its case.

