

The Book That Stays Honest

Chapter 1: The Pencil and the Book

Every Sunday morning in the spring, the shul's youth league plays softball in the park across the avenue, and every Sunday morning Chanoch sits on the bench with the scorebook open on his knees.

He is sixteen. He does not play - a bad ankle, two years running - and at first the book was the consolation job, the thing you give the boy who cannot run. That was last season. This season, the book is his because he is good at it, which is a different thing.

He scores in pencil, one page a game, in the league's own book with the shul's name on the cover. Every play becomes marks: a small diamond, the path around it, a number for who fielded the ball. An out is a number in a circle. An error is a small E, and the E is the mark nobody likes.

The league reads the book. That is the part Chanoch carries around like a second spine. The batting title at the end of the season is not voted on, not argued about, not remembered. It is read, out loud, from the book, at the barbecue in June. Whatever Chanoch's pencil writes in April is what the whole park hears in June.

He likes that. He thinks to himself, some Sundays, that the book is the only thing on the field that never has a bad day.

Chapter 2: What the E Is For

He learns the book from the league coordinator, who has run it for eleven years and keeps the rule sheet folded into the back cover.

The rule sheet is one page. Most of scoring is memory: hit, out, walk, steal. The hard corner is one line long - a batted ball is an error when a fielder with ordinary effort should have made the play, and a hit when he could not. Ordinary effort. The whole judgment of the book lives in those two words.

"People will tell you the E is about blame," the coordinator says, back in April, when the book changes hands. "It is not about blame. A boy can play his heart out and get an E, and a boy can jog and get away clean. The E is about the ball. Score the ball."

Chanoch writes it on the inside cover, in pencil: score the ball.

By game seven he has scored six games, given out eleven E's, and taken exactly one complaint - a mother who thinks her son's throw deserves better, and who goes home happy when Chanoch shows her the rule sheet and what he saw. What he saw is the whole job. The book cannot record what anyone wishes. It can only record what one honest boy saw from the bench.

Chapter 3: First Place by a Pencil

Berish is seventeen, the oldest boy in the league, and the best player by a distance that is not polite to say out loud.

He pitches, he catches, he hits. Going into game seven, the book has him first in hitting, a hair ahead of a quiet boy on the other team who hits like a metronome and never says a word about it. A hair. In June, a hair is the difference between one name getting read and two.

Berish's father is the coach. He is a good coach - patient with the little ones, first to arrive, last to leave, the man who carries the bases. He also loves his son the way fathers do, which is to say: entirely, and not always quietly.

Chanoch likes them both. That is worth saying early, because of what happens in the fourth inning.

One more thing about the book: Chanoch knows the standings to the decimal, because the book tells him. He tells no one. That is the book's second rule, the one nobody wrote down: the scorer sees everything first and says nothing until June. A boy who knows the numbers and keeps them to himself is a boy the numbers cannot be bought through.

Feivel is twelve, the youngest on the other team, parked in right field where the league hides its twelve-year-olds. He tries hard, he practices, and he is twelve. In six games, no one has hit a ball to him that mattered.

Chapter 4: The Fourth Inning

Game seven, fourth inning, two outs, bases empty. Berish lofts a high, lazy ball to right field - the kind that seems to hang in the air long enough for everyone to do their arithmetic.

Feivel camps under it. The ball comes down. It hits his glove - squarely, knee-high, no dive, no run, no sun, no wind - and it comes out again, and rolls, and Berish pulls up at second.

From the bench behind Chanoch, the coach's voice, warm and easy: "That's a hit, Chanoch. Double. Nobody catches that ball."

Chanoch's pencil is already moving, and what it writes is E9, because his eyes saw what they saw: the ball hit the glove at knee height, and Feivel's feet never moved, and ordinary effort catches that ball nine times out of ten.

He writes it small, the way he writes everything. He does not look up. The inning ends two batters later, and Berish's team wins by three, and nobody says another word about it until the bags are packed.

Chapter 5: One Mark in a Book

The coach is the last one off the field, as always - the bases over one shoulder, the bag of bats in the other hand. Chanoch watches him go and thinks: this is a man who gives the league two hours every Sunday and asks for nothing back. It does not make the next five minutes easier. It makes them harder, and it makes them necessary.

The coach catches him by the water fountain, friendly, a hand on his shoulder.

"That ball in the fourth," he says. "I've been thinking. Feivel's twelve. The sun was in his eyes, probably. Give Berish the double - he earned it, he hit it to the right place. Keeps him first fair and square. One mark in a book, Chanoch. Who does it hurt?"

Chanoch stands there with the book against his chest like a tray.

Who does it hurt. He can name exactly who it hurts: the metronome boy, second by a hair, who hits and never talks. And it hurts the book, which is the thing nobody is the father of. He thinks to himself: if the E moves when someone asks nicely, then every mark in here is just a favor I haven't been asked for yet.

What he says is: "Can I check the rule sheet tonight and tell you tomorrow?"

The coach squeezes his shoulder. "Sure. It's nothing. It's one mark."

It is not nothing, and they both know it, and the knowing sits between them all the way home.

Chapter 6: The Rule Sheet

That night, at the kitchen table, Chanoch reads the rule sheet twice, and then he does the honest thing that is harder than reading: he replays what he saw, looking for the version where the coach is right.

Was the sun in Feivel's eyes? Ten in the morning, sun behind third base. No. Did Feivel run for it? No - it came to him. Did it tip the glove on the way down, spinning, tricky? It hit the glove square. He closes his eyes and watches the ball come down again, and again it hits the glove at knee height, and again it comes out.

He wants the coach to be right. That is the thing he did not expect - how much he wants to find the hit in his own memory, because the coach carries the bases, and is first to arrive, and loves his son entirely. He thinks to himself: this is how the mark moves. Not with a bribe, not with a threat. With a hand on the shoulder and a reason that almost holds.

Almost is not the rule. Ordinary effort catches that ball. He writes it on a scrap of paper - sun behind third, no run, glove square, knee height - because tomorrow he will need to say what he saw, and saying is easier from paper.

Chapter 7: The Channel

He finds the coach the next afternoon, at the shul, where the league's equipment lives, and he does it the way he planned: what he saw, the rule, and the channel.

"I checked the sheet," Chanoch says. "An error is a ball a fielder should catch with ordinary effort, and I watched it hit his glove at knee height. He didn't run for it, and the sun was behind third. I can't move the E. But the rule sheet says the scorer's call can be reviewed - you can ask the coordinator, and I'll say what I saw in front of both of you, and if he rules it a hit, I'll change it myself and initial it."

The coach looks at him for a long moment. "You'd say it in front of the coordinator."

"I'd say the same thing in front of anyone," Chanoch says. "That's how you can tell it's what I saw."

It is quiet for a second, and then Berish is there, glove under his arm. He does not know the book has him a hair ahead - Chanoch tells no one the standings - but he has heard the last of it, and he says the thing that settles it. "Pa. Leave the book. Mark what you saw, Chanoch - that's the whole point of you." He looks at his father. "If I'm first in June, I want it to be because I hit, not because you carry the bases."

The coach laughs, a short one, surprised, and lets go of the whole thing at once, the way a man puts down a bag he did not know was heavy. "The book stands," he says. "Good for you, Chanoch."

Chapter 8: Game Eight

The coordinator reviews it anyway, on Wednesday, with both of them - because a channel you offer should get used, or it rusts. Chanoch says what he saw, from the paper. The coach says, honestly, that he saw it from farther and wanted it to be a hit. The coordinator reads the rule sheet's one hard line out loud, and initials the page: E9 stands.

Game eight, Berish goes three for three, two doubles and a single he legs out like the season depends on it, because it does. The book has him first, clear, at the end, and in June the book says one name, and nobody in the park can say the title came from anywhere but the hitting.

Feivel, who does not know any of this happened, catches the last out of the inning - a real one, on the run, over his shoulder - and the other bench lifts him off the ground. His team still loses game eight by one, and the bench lifts him anyway, because it was the best catch of the year. On the way out, Feivel pats the scorebook on Chanoch's lap. "You write small," he says, awed, which from a twelve-year-old is a compliment about everything.

Chanoch writes the last line of the last page slowly, the way you write things that have to stay true: game eight, final. E9 in game seven, unchanged. Then he closes the book and hands it to the coordinator, and the season is over, and every mark in it means exactly what it meant on the day it was made.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The three-part answer

In Chapter 7, Chanoch's answer to the coach has three parts: what he saw, the rule, and the channel. Find each part in the text and quote it. Why does the answer need all three? What would be missing if he gave only the first two?

Activity 2: What the E is for

Explain, in your own words, the rule sheet's one hard line: when is a dropped ball an error, and when is it a hit? Then apply it to the fourth inning: list the four facts Chanoch checks on his scrap of paper in Chapter 6. Short answers.

Activity 3: Who the mark hurts

The coach asks, "One mark in a book. Who does it hurt?" Chanoch answers this in his head. Name everyone the moved mark would hurt, in the story's own logic - including two who are not obvious. Explain each in a sentence.

Activity 4: The batting race - a made-up set of numbers

The numbers in this activity are made up for practice. A boy has 40 at-bats and 21 hits. His average is hits divided by at-bats, written as a three-digit decimal. (a) What is his average? (b) In his next at-bat he reaches on a dropped fly. If it is scored an error, he is 21 for 41. If it is scored a hit, he is 22 for 41. What is his average each way? (c) The boy in second place is hitting .520. Which of the two books has the first boy ahead? Show your steps, and say in one sentence why the scorer cannot choose the version he likes.

Activity 5: "That's the whole point of you."

Berish tells Chanoch, "Mark what you saw - that's the whole point of you." What does Berish mean by "the point"? Why does it matter that the person the favor was for is the one who refuses it? Two or three sentences.

Activity 6: Draw the page

Draw Chanoch's scorebook page for game seven as the story describes it: one page, the fourth-inning play, the small E9, and later the coordinator's initials. Only what the story tells you. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Velvel's chess ladder - a fictional case

A boy named Velvel keeps the score sheet for the school's chess ladder - wins, losses, and draws, posted every Friday. A friend loses on Wednesday and asks him to record it as a draw: "It's one line on a sheet. Nobody checks." Write what Velvel says, the channel he offers (the chess club has a faculty advisor), and what he writes on the sheet that Friday. One sentence each, with names.

Activity 8: Word grid

Find the eight words in the grid. They all go left to right, one per row.

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S C O R E B O O K Y
I N N I N G N O R S
E R R O R I Q Z X J
P E N C I L G H U P
L E A G U E T C D E
C O A C H J K V W B
C A T C H P L M N O
C A L L D E A I Q Z
X J K V W B F Y G H
U P L M N O R S T C

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The eight words: SCOREBOOK, INNING, ERROR, PENCIL, LEAGUE, COACH, CATCH, CALL. Which word names the mark nobody likes, and which word names the job the coach cannot overrule?