



The Box That Closes at Four



Nussbaum Mind

Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18





Chapter 1: The Last Better Title

The collection box is still open when Neriya walks past it. He has the essay in his bag. Every paragraph is finished. His teacher has answered his question about length. There is room for one more student piece in the class booklet, and all eligible submissions will be read before the editor chooses.

Neriya does not put his in.

The title is wrong.

Not misspelled. Not confusing. He simply cannot bear to let Near the End of the Shelf stand above a page he has worked on for two weeks.

The essay describes finding a penciled note in a secondhand dictionary. It is his own fictional scene, not a real person's private note. He likes the ending. He likes the moment when the character decides to leave the dictionary's question unanswered.

The title sounds like directions for finding a soup bowl.

Neriya is seventeen. This is his first chance to submit writing to a booklet read by more than his own class.

The notice beside the box says: Friday, four o'clock. No later entries.

It is Thursday afternoon.

One evening should be enough for a better title.





Chapter 2: The Page on the Table

At home, Neriya writes twelve titles on a separate sheet.

The Dictionary's Last Question sounds as if the dictionary will disappear.

A Word in the Margin sounds as if the essay concerns only one word. The note is a sentence.

He crosses out both.

His younger brother sits opposite him with a school worksheet.

"Can you help with this question?"

"In a minute."

Neriya tries Between the Pages. Too ordinary. He has heard that title before, though he cannot remember where.

His brother takes the worksheet to Tatty.

A little later, Tatty comes to the table.

"How much remains?"

"The title."

"When do you have to deliver it?"

"Tomorrow before four."

"Do you have the final copy?"





Neriya shows him the clean essay. The title is written on a small slip resting above it.

"This is readable," Tatty says.

"Readable isn't what I want."

"What would make it ready to hand in?"

Neriya looks at the crossed-out list.

"When I stop finding something wrong with it."

Tatty does not answer for the title. He asks whether that condition has an end Neriya can recognize before four.

Neriya says he will finish it during lunch.

He puts the essay in his bag with the separate title sheet.





Chapter 3: Time He Still Has

On Friday, a classmate puts a piece into the box before morning lessons.

"Did you submit yours?"

"At lunch."

"I'll look for it in the booklet."

"They might not choose it."

"I know. I'd still like to read it."

Neriya feels pleased, then worried. Now someone expects a page worth looking for.

At lunch, he reads the essay again. One sentence near the beginning seems too long. He can improve it without changing the rest.

He copies the paragraph.

The new paragraph is shorter. It also makes the next sentence repeat the word shelf. He changes that sentence too.

The bell rings.

The title sheet is still blank at the top.

There is time after the last lesson. The classroom is on the same floor as the box. He does not need a journey, a stamp, or anybody's help to deliver a page.





He folds his lunch wrapping and puts it away. The essay remains on his desk until the teacher asks everyone to clear their tables.

Neriya puts it back in his bag.





Chapter 4: Four Oh Three

The last lesson ends at three-forty.

Neriya takes out the essay before the room empties. His classmate asks whether he is coming to the supervised study room with the others.

"I have to hand this in. I'll come afterward."

"Then do that first."

"I'm doing one thing."

He writes *The Unanswered Word*. The note asks a question, but word sounds better. Does a title have to be exact? Perhaps *The Unanswered Line*.

He holds the two titles beside each other.

Then he looks at the opening paragraph once more.

A staff member comes to close the classroom and directs the remaining students to the study room. Neriya checks the clock.

Four oh three.

He gathers his pages and walks quickly to the collection box. Its lid is locked. The teacher is carrying the entries to the office.

"I have mine," he says.

"The cutoff was four."

"It's only three minutes."





"I know. We aren't taking later entries."

Neriya looks at the essay in his hand.

"It was finished."

The teacher stops beside the office door.

"It wasn't submitted."

She says it quietly. There are no other boys beside them.

He goes to the study room with the page still in his hand.





Chapter 5: The Exception He Wants

After the study period, Neriya asks whether he may speak to the teacher.

She listens while he explains the title, the paragraph, and the three minutes.

"Could you make an exception? Nobody has read the entries yet."

"No. The same cutoff applies to the other students. You can keep the piece, but it won't be considered for this booklet."

"Even if it was ready before four?"

"An entry has to reach the box by four."

Neriya wants to explain the title again. He can feel the explanation becoming a way to ask the same question until it gets another answer.

"All right," he says.

He does not feel all right.

At home, Tatty sees the page on top of his bag.

"You didn't hand it in?"

Neriya tells him what happened.

"Will you ask her?"

"You already asked for an exception?"

"Yes."





"Then I won't ask her to change the answer for me. We can look at what happened."

Neriya pushes the title sheet away.

"Three minutes."

"And the evening before, and lunchtime, and the twenty minutes after class," Tatty says.

Neriya looks down. Those are the minutes he leaves out when he tells it as three.





Chapter 6: Not a Worthless Page

On Sunday, Neriya takes the essay from his bag.

He nearly tears off the first page.

If he cannot submit it, he does not want to keep seeing it. He thinks about calling the whole thing foolish. That would be easier than admitting he likes a piece that will not be in the booklet.

His younger brother comes to the doorway.

"Is that the dictionary story?"

"Yes."

"Can I read it?"

Neriya almost says it is no good.

"I missed the submission time," he says instead.

"So can I read it?"

His brother's question does not fix anything. It does separate two things Neriya has tied together.

He passes over the page.

The younger boy sits on the floor and reads slowly. At the ending, he looks up.

"Why doesn't he find who wrote the note?"

"He can't know from what's there."





"I wanted him to."

"I wanted that too, at first."

They talk about the ending. Neriya does not tell his brother he is the only reader who matters. He still wants the booklet.

When the page comes back, he puts it in a folder rather than the wastepaper basket.





Chapter 7: A Different Kind of Ready

Tatty helps him draw the actual Friday sequence on a scrap.

Finished draft. Revision. More revision. Locked box.

"Where was the hand-in step?" Tatty asks.

Neriya adds an empty space between the revisions and the box.

He has been treating delivery as the thing that will happen by itself once he feels satisfied. There is no delivery on the page because there is no moment when the title feels beyond improvement.

They look at the next ordinary writing assignment. It is for his teacher, not the booklet. The instructions ask for a clear heading, a complete page, and delivery at the start of Thursday's lesson.

"How will you tell when it's ready?" Tatty asks.

Neriya copies those three requirements. Then he adds a spelling check.

"I can change it until Wednesday evening. Then I put it in the folder."

"What if you still dislike something?"

"If it doesn't meet the instructions, I need to fix that or ask the teacher. If it just might sound better, that can't keep moving the hand-in."

He reads his answer again.





"I won't feel certain."

Tatty leaves room beside the delivery step.

"What will you do then?"

Neriya writes: Bring the folder. Take out the page. Hand it in.





Chapter 8: In the Teacher's Hand

Thursday morning, Neriya reaches school with the assigned page.

Its title is A Door Left Open.

On the way upstairs, he thinks of A Door Still Open. Still suggests something he likes. He can change one word quickly.

He stops beside the classroom.

"The title is clear, and the work meets the instructions," Neriya thinks to himself. "I can hand it in while I want a different word."

He leaves the page alone.

At the start of the lesson, the teacher asks for the work. Neriya takes it out and places it in her hand.

Later, the class booklet arrives. His friend's piece is there. The dictionary story is not.

Neriya reads the friend's page and tells him which part he likes. He does not say his own would have been better. He does not know which entries the editor would have chosen.

At home, he puts the booklet on his shelf. The dictionary essay stays in its separate folder.

On his weekly page, beside Thursday's ordinary assignment, he writes HANDED IN.

