

The Half She Didn't Do

Chapter 1: The Split

The exhibition is the eleventh grade's December institution: every pair gets a section of the lobby wall, one everyday mechanism, one board. A zipper. A water tower. A door closer. The pairs build a demonstration for the shelf below the board and write six short paragraphs for the board itself, and for two weeks the lobby becomes a museum of things nobody knew they didn't understand.

Mussia and Yitti get the water tower - why a tank on stilts keeps the taps steady - and the split decides itself. Mussia builds: her demonstrations always work on the first try; she is the one Morah trusts with the good plywood. Yitti writes: she is careful and unhurried and her sentences come out the way dough comes out, needing time.

"Six paragraphs by Thursday of the week after next," Morah says. "Both names on the board. I will know whose work is whose - that is the point of the exercise, not a detail of it."

They shake on it the way you do when nothing has ever gone wrong.

The first sessions go exactly to plan, which is to say Mussia is happy. She spends them in the workshop corner with the good plywood and a borrowed hand pump, building the demonstration: a bottle on a stool, a tube, a tap at desk height. When the tap runs strong at desk height and weaker as she raises it - height is pressure, in one small working model - she feels the deep builder's contentment of a thing that works. Yitti, across the room, fills pages and crosses them out. Mussia registers it the way you register weather in another city - vaguely, and with confidence it will clear.

Chapter 2: The Draft

Yitti's draft arrives Wednesday, in the shared notebook, six paragraphs in her round slow handwriting.

It is uneven. The first paragraph spends four lines saying the water tower is tall. The third buries the one lovely sentence in the whole draft - the water waits up there so the street doesn't have to - under a pile of connector words. The fifth explains the pressure twice, two different ways, neither quite finished.

Mussia reads it at the kitchen table after supper and feels the itch she knows well, the builder's itch: this could be so much better with an hour of work. She starts in the margin, the way you're supposed to. By the fifth margin note she has run out of patience and margin at the same time. The questions are all the same question, and the same question is: why don't you just let me write it?

So she answers it. She takes a fresh sheet and writes it.

She does not decide to, not in so many words. That is the part she will have trouble explaining later: there was no moment where she weighed Yitti's ownership and chose herself. There was only the itch, the hour, and the smooth feeling of sentences behaving. It is easy to replace a person when you tell yourself you are only replacing their adjectives. A partner is not a set of adjectives on loan.

Chapter 3: The Tidy

It takes her an hour and a half, and it is, she has to admit, good.

Her six paragraphs are smooth. The first one starts with the tap in your kitchen instead of the tower's height. The lovely sentence - she keeps it, of course; she is not a monster - gets polished until it sits up straight: the water waits up high so the street doesn't have to wait at all. Better, honestly. Tighter. She is careful to keep it in the third paragraph, where Yitti put it. She is careful about everything. That is what she tells herself the care is.

First she moves Yitti's six pages to the back of the notebook - she almost tears them out and throws them away, and doesn't, and files that under tidiness too, though later she will understand it was the one honest thing she did all evening: some part of her knew a discarded draft is evidence, and she kept the evidence against herself, where it could be found. She does not erase a word of them - erase is just one more kind of replacing. Then she copies the new text onto the front pages, in pencil, neatly.

Chapter 4: The Quiet

Yitti reads the notebook at their Thursday work session, standing at the lobby wall, and Mussia watches her read it, and it is the reading that tells on her.

Yitti reads the first paragraph and nods, politely, the way you nod at someone else's good news. She reads the third and does not stop at the lovely sentence - her own sentence, the one she was proudest of - because it isn't hers anymore; it went to finishing school and came back a stranger. She reads all six, and closes the notebook, and says, in the most level voice Mussia has ever heard her use: "I can't find myself in it."

Not: how could you. Not: you had no right. Just that - the flat report of a girl looking for her own work and not finding it.

The session does not explode. That would almost be easier. They finish the hour like professionals - Yitti measures the shelf space, Mussia mounts the bottle - and the whole time the notebook sits between them on the table like a third person nobody introduced. When they pack up, Yitti says, "See you tomorrow," in the same level voice, and Mussia understands that the level voice is not peace. It is a girl deciding whether this is worth a fight, which means it is already a loss.

Mussia says the things that were true at midnight: it's so much better now, the deadline, the margin was too small, I kept your good sentence, see, third paragraph. Yitti listens to all of it

and asks the question the whole next week turns on: "If my name goes on the board - what is it on?"

Chapter 5: The Audit

Mussia takes the question home, because it will not fit anywhere else.

She audits the tidy the way her father audits the store's books, and the books do not balance. She lays the two drafts side by side on the kitchen table and reads them like an auditor, not an author. Yitti's version is uneven, yes. It is also alive in places hers is not - the lovely sentence, unpolished, has a person's pulse in it. What was the hour and a half FOR? She has three answers and she makes herself rank them honestly. For the board - partly. For the deadline - a little. And the big one, the one the other two were covering for: for the feeling of six paragraphs that behaved. Yitti's uneven draft was not a problem Yitti had. It was an itch Mussia had. She did not fix Yitti's work. She relocated it, from Yitti's hands to hers, and called the relocation help.

The test she finds, late that night, is simple enough to write on an index card: editing leaves the person's sentences standing and asks them questions. Replacing removes the person and keeps their topic. The first is help. The second is annexation with good manners.

And the worst line in the audit: Morah had said it on day one, plain as plywood. I will know whose work is whose. That is the point of the exercise, not a detail of it. Mussia had heard a rule about honesty. She now hears what it actually was: a rule about ownership. The exercise was never the water tower. It was whether two girls could make one board and both still exist on it. Every sentence on a board has an owner - the person who can stand next to it and say why it is there. Mussia's version has one owner, and it is not Yitti.

Chapter 6: The Draft from the Back

The repair starts with the one honest thing she did: the original draft, in the back of the notebook, round slow handwriting and all.

She brings it to Yitti on Friday with a plan that is not an apology, because an apology is a paragraph and this needs a procedure. "Your draft," she says. "Every sentence of it. Here's what I want to do instead of what I did: we go paragraph by paragraph. Your sentences stand. I get to ask questions in the margin - real ones. You decide what changes. The lovely sentence goes back to your version, word for word, even though mine was tighter, because tight is not the point of the exercise. And the board gets both our names, and this time it will be true."

Yitti looks at her for a long moment, and then at the notebook, and flips to the back and reads her own first paragraph like someone greeting a relative. Mussia watches her read and learns the last piece: a returned draft is not a small thing. It is the difference between being wrong and being replaceable, and only one of those can be repaired with questions. "Four lines saying it's tall," she says, and almost smiles. "It IS tall. But all right. Ask me your questions."

Chapter 7: The Slower Way

It takes three sessions, not one hour and a half, and it is the best work Mussia has ever done badly.

Badly, because the builder's itch never goes away - she watches Yitti's pencil hover and has to sit on her hands, literally, twice. Best, because she learns what the questions are actually for. They are not a slower path to her version. They are a lamp. "What do you mean, the water waits?" she asks, and Yitti says, "I mean - the street uses water whenever it wants, and the tower doesn't mind, because the water's already up there," and Mussia writes nothing, because the sentence needs nothing; it only needed to be asked after.

The first paragraph gets cut to one line about the tap, because Yitti, asked "what do you want the reader to feel first?", says "surprised that it's already waiting," and cuts the four lines herself. The third paragraph gets its lovely sentence back, unpolished, slightly crooked, and better, because it sounds like a girl noticed something true instead of a brochure announcing it.

Chapter 8: Both Names

The exhibition opens, and the water tower board is not the smoothest board in the lobby, and Mussia stops noticing by the second day.

What she notices instead: people stop at it. The tap-first opening makes third-graders blink. The demonstration works on the first try, because she built it, and the paragraphs hold the ones who stay, because they sound like someone talking. Morah does the rounds, stops at their wall, reads all six paragraphs - Mussia stands there watching a teacher do the exact audit she failed - and looks up and says, "Both of you are on this board," and moves on, and it is the best grade Mussia has ever gotten.

At home, the index card goes on the inside of her notebook cover, where she will see it every time she helps anyone with anything: editing leaves the person's sentences standing and asks them questions. Replacing removes the person and keeps their topic. Under it she adds one more line, the one she learned at the lobby wall, watching Yitti read: if their name goes on it, something of them has to be in it.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The itch and the problem

Mussia's audit finds that Yitti's uneven draft "was not a problem Yitti had. It was an itch Mussia had." In your own words, what is the difference? Why does the difference decide whether the help is real? Two or three sentences.

Activity 2: The index card test

Copy the test from the index card, then use it: which of these is editing and which is replacing - (a) "This sentence is long; what do you most want it to say?" (b) rewriting the sentence yourself and handing it back; (c) "the pressure is explained twice - which version do you want to keep?" Explain your calls. Short answers.

Activity 3: Order the repair

Put these in the story's order, and say why the order matters: (a) the audit and the index card; (b) the tidy - the rewritten six paragraphs; (c) the original draft comes back out of the notebook's back; (d) "I can't find myself in it"; (e) three slower sessions. One sentence on why the order matters.

Activity 4: The session math - a made-up set of numbers

The numbers in this activity are made up for practice. Replacing a partner's 6-paragraph draft takes 1.5 hours, one person working alone. Editing it together takes 3 sessions of 1 hour each, both people in the room. (a) In person-hours, what does each path cost? (b) If the replaced path produces a board 1 person can explain at the exhibition, and the edited path a board 2 people can explain, what is the person-hour cost per person-who-owns-the-board, each way? What does the arithmetic leave out? Show your steps.

Activity 5: "Tight is not the point of the exercise."

Mussia gives back the lovely sentence in Yitti's original version "even though mine was tighter, because tight is not the point of the exercise." What WAS the point of the exercise, per Morah's day-one warning? Why does the crooked original end up better on the board? Two or three sentences.

Activity 6: Draw the notebook

Draw the shared notebook as Chapters 2-6 give it: the replaced pages in front, the original moved to the back, and the margin questions. Only what the story tells you. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Kaila's poster - a fictional case

A girl named Kaila offers to "fix" her little sister's poster for the school fair and realizes, marker in hand, that she is about to redo the whole thing herself. Write the sentence she says to her sister instead, the one question she asks about the weakest part, and the rule she writes on an index card for her pencil case. 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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D R A F T V W F G H
E R A S E W F G H U
M A R G I N G H U P
P A R T N E R U P M
S M O O T H U P M N
R E P A I R P M N O
S E N T E N C E O R
O W N E R M N O R S
G H U P M N O R S T
H U P M N O R S T D

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The eight words: DRAFT, ERASE, MARGIN, PARTNER, SMOOTH, REPAIR, SENTENCE, OWNER.
Which word names where the real help happens, and which word names what the board's second name has to belong to?