

# The Letters in Her Mouth

## Chapter 1: The Hand

Nachama's handwriting has been famous since she was eleven - the letters lean exactly six degrees, the capitals have small, sure feet, and every certificate the school has hand-lettered for two years has come off her desk.

She learned it from Bubby, the winter she was ten, at the kitchen table with a pad of practice paper and a cup of cocoa going cold. Bubby lettered for a print shop for thirty years - the certificates of half the shuls in the neighborhood passed through her hand before the shops all went to type. She taught the letters the way she taught everything: hands first, reasons later, cocoa always. Nachama has never once asked her why a stroke works. It never occurred to her there was a why to ask for. The hand learned, and the hand was quiet about it, the way hands are.

The office asks on a Monday. The school dinner is in four weeks; the lettering club - twelve ninth-graders - is doing the certificates this year, and the club needs one session on the capitals, because the honorees' names are capital-heavy and last year's certificates looked, in the office's careful phrase, uneven.

"One session," the secretary says. "Forty minutes. You're the best hand in the school."

Nachama says yes before the sentence lands, the way you say yes to a compliment. It is only in the stairwell that she hears what she agreed to. Teach. Not letter - teach. Out loud, to twelve girls, with reasons.

## Chapter 2: The Bluff

She prepares the way she knows how: she practices.

All week, after homework, she fills practice sheets - the capital alphabet, over and over, A with its sure feet, B with its two bellies, the hard ones, G and R and S. Tuesday she does the whole alphabet twice. Wednesday she does only the hard ones, twenty each, until her wrist aches the good ache. Her letters get better, the way they always do with miles. By Thursday night she has a stack of beautiful sheets an inch thick, each one more useless to a ninth-grader than the last, though she does not know that yet. She brings them to the club advisor, Morah, the way you bring an offering.

"They're beautiful," Morah says, and means it. "Now - what will you say?"

Nachama says the things she has ready. Hold the pen at six degrees. Keep the strokes even. Practice the hard letters more.

Morah listens kindly, the way you listen to someone recite. Then she asks the question a ninth-grader will ask in the first four minutes, guaranteed: "A girl's B shakes. Every time. What do you tell her?"

Nachama opens her mouth, and finds that nothing in the beautiful stack answers it. She knows how HER B doesn't shake. She has no idea why anyone's does. She thinks to herself: I have been practicing the letters. The letters are not the lesson. I am the lesson, and I don't know how I work.

### Chapter 3: The Honest Sentence

For one stairwell flight, she considers the two easy exits.

Exit one: memorize harder. Learn the club's instruction book by heart, recite it, survive forty minutes on someone else's reasons. Exit two: decline. Tell the office the truth-shaped excuse - too busy, exam season - and let Morah muddle through alone.

Neither survives the walk home. The first is a performance of teaching, and twelve girls will bring real questions to it, and the recitation will run out exactly where the questions begin - and a performance that runs out mid-session is worse than no session, because it teaches twelve girls that lettering is a thing you either have or you don't. The second leaves the certificates uneven and Bubby's letters unhonored - and besides, she WANTS the session. She has wanted, for two years, to know why her own hand works. It is strange to be seventeen and the best hand in the school and not be able to say one true sentence about how you do it.

So it is the third sentence, the honest one, which she says to Morah the next morning: "I can do the letters and I don't yet know how to teach them. Give me until Thursday week. I'm going to learn the why, and then I'll teach the why, and if the why isn't ready, I'll tell you a week early instead of forty minutes late."

Morah nods, unhurried. "That's the first teacher-sounding thing you've said all week."

### Chapter 4: Bubby's Table

Sunday, she goes to Bubby's with the stack of practice sheets and the question.

"Teach me the why," Nachama says. "My hand knows. My mouth doesn't."

Bubby looks at her for a long moment, and then she does something she has never done in seven years of letters: she laughs, delighted, and pulls out two pens.

"Thirty years at the print shop," Bubby says, "and the apprentices always asked the why first, and I always made them wait a year for it. You waited seven. You get the whole lecture."

"Watch my hand, not the paper," Bubby says. She letters a B, slow. "The shake is not in the letter. It's in the hold. Watch the angle - when it drops below four degrees, the nib drags, and the drag wobbles. Watch the pressure - beginners press like they're angry at the paper, and the hand tires, and tired hands shake. And the breath -" she letters another B, and Nachama sees it, the small pause, the exhale on the downstroke - "you breathe out on the pull. Everyone steady breathes out on the pull. You do it. You've done it since you were ten. Nobody told you, because nobody had to."

They go through the whole alphabet that way, B and then the rest, the hard letters last. The S, Bubby says, is a breath problem wearing a letter's clothes. The G fails at the join, always at the join, and the join fails because the hand hurries the turn. Nachama fills three pages with notes, and underneath the notes she finds, to her surprise, that she has opinions - which why to teach first, which one the ninth-graders will resist, which demonstration belongs on the board and which belongs on a practice sheet in twelve hands. Her hand knew all of it. Her mouth is learning it the way her hand once did: slowly, with practice, with cocoa.

## Chapter 5: The One-Girl Rehearsal

Wednesday, Morah sends her a rehearsal audience of one: Tilley, a ninth-grader whose B shakes like a leaf in October, exactly the question in the hallway.

Nachama does not recite. She watches Tilley letter one line, the way Bubby watched her - hand, not paper - and she sees it in thirty seconds: the angle drops on the curve, and the grip is white-knuckled. A week ago she would have said "practice more," because that is what people say when they cannot see. Now she can see, and seeing turns out to be the whole job.

"Three things," Nachama says. "The angle is dropping on the curve - tilt the pen back up toward six degrees. You're pressing like the paper insulted you - lighter, let the pen be heavy instead of you. And breathe out on the downstroke. Out loud, first few times, so you can hear it."

Tilley breathes out, audible and embarrassed, and letters a B. It does not shake. She stares at it like it owes her money.

"That's the whole session," Morah says from the doorway, later. "Do that twelve times."

## Chapter 6: Forty Minutes

The session, when it comes, is not beautiful, and Nachama lets it not be.

She teaches three whys and only three: the angle, the pressure, the breath. She letters one B, slow, and shows the pause where the exhale goes. She passes around one of her bluff-week sheets, the inch-thick stack having found its use at last - not as an offering but as evidence, one beautiful page under twelve hands, so they can feel that a finished letter is a calm thing, not a squeezed one. She says, in the first minute, the sentence she prepared: "I'm learning to teach. When I go too fast or too foggy, stop me - you'll be doing me the favor."

They stop her twice. Both times she is glad - once because she said "six degrees" and a girl reasonably asks six degrees from WHAT, which sends her to the board with a chalk line and a better answer than her planned one, and once because a girl asks why the club bothers at all when a print shop can letter a certificate in an afternoon, and Nachama hears Bubby's kitchen answer come out of her own mouth: because a hand-lettered name was looked at. She writes both on her notes, mid-session, because the mouth learns in miles too.

At the end, twelve girls letter one B each, breathing out like a small, embarrassed wind section, and nine of the twelve do not shake, and the other three know, for the first time, exactly what

to practice - which is a different thing from failing, and everyone in the room can feel the difference.

## Chapter 7: The Certificates

The club does the certificates over the next two weeks, and Morah keeps Nachama in the loop the way you keep the person who fixed something: a note when the first sheet comes off the desk, even. The note says the girls correct each other now, in the club's new shorthand - angle, pressure, breath, said like a count-off - and that the shorthand is annoying and the certificates are not.

The honorees' names are capital-heavy, as promised. The B in one name wobbles on the first attempt - Nachama is there that Thursday, by invitation, and she watches the girl catch it herself: "I dropped the angle," the girl says, before anyone else speaks, and does it again, and it holds. A wobble you can name is a wobble you can fix.

Nachama thinks to herself: that is the whole test, right there. Not that they letter well while I watch. That they can name what broke when I'm not the one watching. The why travels. The beautiful stack of practice sheets never could.

## Chapter 8: What the Mouth Learned

The dinner happens; the certificates are, in the office's new phrase, lovely, and nobody asks who lettered what, which is how Nachama knows the club did it right - twelve hands, one evenness. Bubby gets one photograph of the club at work, which Nachama delivers in person, with cocoa.

"My mouth learned," Nachama tells her. "It took three pages of notes and twelve ninth-graders."

"And one old woman," Bubby says.

"And one old woman," Nachama agrees, "who made me wait seven years for the why, and was right to, because I never would have asked at ten - and asking turns out to be the whole thing."

"Your mouth learned because your hand was honest about what it didn't know," Bubby says, and frames the photograph herself, crooked, and laughs.

Back at her desk, Nachama opens a fresh practice sheet and writes one line across the top, in her famous hand, six degrees exactly: things my mouth still has to learn. Under it she writes the first item - the capital S, whose why she felt, mid-session, go thin - and then the second - how to answer "why does it matter" without a speech - and she leaves the rest of the page blank, on purpose, in pencil, for the miles.

## Eight activities

### Activity 1: The hand and the mouth

The story splits knowing into the hand and the mouth. In your own words, what does each one know at the start of the story? What does Bubby mean that the mouth learns "the way her hand once did: slowly, with practice"? Two or three sentences.

### Activity 2: The three whys

List Bubby's three whys, and for each, the mechanical chain from cause to shake (angle -> drag -> wobble, and so on). Which why does Tilley's rehearsal fix first? Short answers.

### Activity 3: Order the repair

Put these in the story's order, and say why the order matters: (a) the honest sentence to Morah; (b) the bluff-prep collapses at a hypothetical question; (c) the one-girl rehearsal; (d) Bubby's table; (e) the forty-minute session. One sentence on why the order matters.

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

The numbers in this activity are made up for practice. A bluff-prep week is 7 hours of solo practice. Learning the why costs 3 hours at an expert's table plus 1 rehearsal hour. A session taught from recitation reaches about 4 of 12 students; a session taught from the why reaches about 9 of 12. (a) What is the cost-per-student-reached, in prep hours, each way? (b) The honest path costs 4 hours and the bluff path costs 7 - so why isn't the answer "always take the honest path because it's cheaper"? Name what the hours do not count. Show your steps.

### Activity 5: "The letters are not the lesson. I am the lesson."

Nachama thinks, "I have been practicing the letters. The letters are not the lesson. I am the lesson, and I don't know how I work." What does she mean that SHE is the lesson? Why can't a stack of beautiful sheets answer "why does mine shake"? Two or three sentences.

### Activity 6: Draw Bubby's table

Draw the Sunday lesson at Bubby's table: the two pens, the watch-the-hand instruction, and the three whys with their chains. Only what the story tells you. Caption it with one line from the story.

### Activity 7: Michael's bike lesson - a fictional case

A boy named Michael is the best cyclist on his block and is asked to teach two younger boys to ride without training wheels. He has ridden for years and never once thought about how. Write the question that collapses his bluff, the person he learns the why from, and the sentence he says to the two boys before the first lesson. One sentence each; names or roles are fine.



## Activity 8: Word grid

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

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

The eight words: LETTERS, STROKE, ANGLE, PRACTICE, TEACH, PRESSURE, BREATH, WOBBLE.  
Which word names what Nachama was asked to do, and which word names the symptom that only the why could fix?