



The Other Half of the Compliment



Nussbaum Mind

Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18





Chapter 1: The Sentence She Keeps

"At least one of you finishes what she starts," Aunt says.

Efrata hears the finishes part first.

Her family-history page is on the table. There is a carefully checked memory from Bubby, a little drawing of a cupboard, and a caption Bubby agrees may be included in the private family album.

Efrata is seventeen. She has worked on the page for three afternoons. She asks Bubby about one detail rather than completing it from a guess. The finished caption is shorter than the first one because Bubby does not want a particular family anecdote included.

Efrata likes the page. She likes her aunt noticing it.

Then she hears the other half of the sentence.

Her older sister stands beside the bookcase. She chooses not to make an album page this time. The family request is optional. She has not promised a page and failed to deliver it.

The aunt looks from one sister to the other.

"You could learn a little from this."

Efrata touches the straight edge of her page.

Her sister leaves the room to get a glass of water.





Chapter 2: The Space at the Table

Without her sister beside them, the aunt asks how Efrata arranges the caption.

Efrata explains the separate scrap she used for checking. She tells the aunt why one date was left out when Bubby could not establish it.

These are things she wants to talk about. The page has real work in it.

"You're becoming the dependable one," the aunt says.

Efrata has often been the younger sister in a conversation about achievements. Her older sister chooses courses, answers questions, and seems to know which things she wants.





Today, somebody calls Efrata dependable while the older sister is out getting water.

"I like to get things done," Efrata says.

That is true.

Then she adds, "She tends to leave things halfway."

The aunt nods as if Efrata supplies an observation they both know.

Efrata can name one unfinished paper project from two years ago.

She can also name things her sister finishes, including a course assignment completed last week. She does not name those now.

Her sister returns. The aunt asks Efrata another question about the page. Efrata answers without looking toward the bookcase.





Chapter 3: Not a Better Page

After the aunt goes home, Efrata takes the page upstairs.

Her sister is at the desk.

"I heard what you said when I came back," the older girl says.

Efrata stops beside the shelf.

"Which part?"

"Halfway."

"I didn't say you never finish."

"You said it as if that was why I didn't make a page."

Efrata looks at the cupboard drawing.

"You could have made one."





"I could. I chose not to. Mama said the pages were optional."

"I spent a lot of time on mine."

"I know. I'm not saying you didn't."

Efrata realizes she has been waiting for her sister to say the page is ordinary, or anyone can make it. Then she can defend herself instead of answering about the sentence.

The sister does not give her that argument.

"I like your drawing," she says. "I don't like being the unfinished project beside it."

She returns to the desk.

Efrata puts the page on the shelf without the careful little turn that usually lets her see the whole drawing.





Chapter 4: The Praise She Wants Back

At supper, Efrata asks Mama whether the aunt is right that she is dependable.

Mama asks what happened.

Efrata describes the first compliment, her sister leaving, and the halfway sentence she adds.

"I did finish mine," she says.

"Yes."

"So it wasn't false praise."

Mama puts down her cup.

"The praise of your page can be accurate. The comparison can still be unfair."

Efrata wants the two parts to come apart without either losing its sound.





"I don't usually get talked about like that."

"You liked having your work noticed."

"Very much."

Mama does not ask her to pretend otherwise.

"Your sister didn't miss a promise. She chose not to join an optional activity. What did your added sentence tell your aunt?"

Efrata thinks of the unfinished old paper project she uses as evidence. It is not the whole sister who brings water back into the room.

"That it was a habit."

"Is that what you actually know?"

Efrata shakes her head.

"I wanted the dependable part to stay with me."





Chapter 5: A Page She Doesn't Hide

The next morning, Efrata turns the page facedown.

Her sister sees it while looking for a book.

"What are you doing?"

"Maybe I shouldn't put it in the album."

"Why?"

"After yesterday."

The older girl looks at the paper.

"Leaving it out won't change what you said."

"I don't want it to look as if I'm showing off."

"I didn't ask you to stop making things."





Efrata turns it over again.

The caption has not grown longer. Bubby's chosen details are still there. The cupboard drawing is still worth looking at.

"I'm sorry I said you leave things halfway," Efrata says. "I wanted Aunt to keep thinking of me as dependable. You didn't owe an album page."

Her sister listens.

"I don't want you explaining my choices to people. If you don't know why I choose something, you don't have to invent a reason."

"I won't tell her a different reason. I'll correct what I said."

"Good."

The answer is not warm, but it tells Efrata what needs repairing.

She places the page upright on the shelf.





Chapter 6: The Aunt's Next Visit

The aunt comes the next afternoon to return a serving dish to Mama.

Efrata asks whether they can speak for a minute. Mama remains nearby, without answering for her.

"I want to correct what I said about my sister leaving things halfway. She chose not to make this album page. She hadn't promised one. I shouldn't have described that as a habit of not finishing."

The aunt looks surprised.

"I only meant your page was lovely."

"Thank you. I like you saying that. But the comparison wasn't about the page."





"You don't need to be so serious about a compliment."

Efrata feels the quick urge to laugh and leave it.

Then Mama joins the conversation.

"The pages were optional. We can enjoy Efrata's work without making her sister's choice a fault."

The aunt looks toward the page.

"All right. I liked how carefully you checked the caption."

Efrata thanks her for that specific sentence. She does not ask the aunt to call the older sister dependable instead.

They return to the ordinary business of the dish.





Chapter 7: No Evidence Needed

Later, Efrata wants to tell her sister what Mama says.

She finds her at the table with a book.

"I corrected the halfway comment. Mama also said the page was optional."

"Thank you."

Efrata sits nearby.

"You do finish things. I could have told Aunt about your assignment."

"You don't have to prove I deserved not to be compared."

That takes Efrata a moment.





If the older sister has another achievement, the aunt's comparison is factually weaker. But even without one, an optional album request is still optional. Efrata cannot fix the choice by producing a better reason it is allowed.

"You don't want a list?"

"No. Just don't make one about why I'm worse."

Efrata nods.

The sister returns to her reading. She does not immediately ask to see the caption again.

Efrata goes to the shelf and checks that the page is ready for the album session. The caption needs no new sentence about either girl's character. She slips the approved version behind the drawing so Mama can check the two together before inserting them.





Chapter 8: Her Own Name Below It

On Sunday, Mama lays out the agreed album materials.

Bubby's caption and Efrata's drawing belong on one page. A cousin's photograph belongs on another, under the family permission already checked. There is no empty page labeled with the older sister's name.

She has not been assigned one.

Efrata shows Mama where the caption should sit. Mama checks it against Bubby's agreed version before placing it in the sleeve.

At the bottom, Efrata writes her first name as the maker of the drawing and page.

Her sister passes the table and stops.

"The cupboard still looks slightly crooked."

"Bubby said it was."

"Then you've got that right."

Efrata smiles.

She closes the album gently, with her page inside and no description of her sister beneath it.

