

The Right Table

Chapter 1: The Herald

Perri, sixteen, is the herald of her family, and has been since she could talk.

She is the one who announces the snow day, the one who runs in with the grade, the one who knows first and tells fastest. When the basement flooded in October, Perri had told three neighbors before her father had finished rolling up his sleeves. Her family loves this about her, mostly. Her mother says Perri was born with a mouthful of headlines.

In one week in December, two pieces of news arrive at their house at the same time.

The first is enormous: Chassi, her older sister, is getting engaged. It is fresh - it became official that morning - and the families are telling the grandparents on Sunday, together, in order. Until then, the news stays inside the family. Not because it is a secret, Chassi is careful to say. Because there is an order to joy.

The second news is Perri's own: her poem is accepted to the school's winter journal. Her name, printed, in a real book.

Two pieces of news. One hers, one not.

She manages both of them wrong.

Chapter 2: The Hint

At recess on Thursday, Ruti takes one look at Perri's face and says, "Something happened."

Ruti has been her best friend for eleven years and can read her like a poster.

"Nothing," Perri says, in a voice that would fool nobody. Then, because the news is pressing on the inside of her ribs: "Something nice. Soon. Ask me Sunday."

It takes Ruti four seconds. "Chassi's getting engaged."

Perri's face answers before her mouth can lie about it.

She spends the rest of recess begging Ruti not to say anything until Sunday - and Ruti promises, and means it, and even offers to let Perri supervise her not saying it, which is not a real offer but is the kind of thing eleven years of friendship buys you. The whole thing sits wrong in Perri's stomach all day. Because she did not tell, exactly. Except the hint was telling. A hint is just news wearing a coat.

Chapter 3: The Wrong Table

Thursday night, Perri comes home with her own news burning in her bag - the acceptance letter, folded in her notebook all day - and bursts into the kitchen with it at six o'clock.

The kitchen is already full. Not of people - of worry. Her grandmother is having tests this week, and her mother is at the table with the aunt who came over to coordinate, and the table is covered with the kind of lists a family makes when it is frightened and trying to be useful.

Perri stands in the doorway with the letter half out of her notebook, and she can see the lists from there - columns of names, arrows, somebody's handwriting getting faster and less legible, the way handwriting does when the hand is scared.

Her news lands in the middle of it and just lies there. Chassi is with the other family that evening, helping plan Sunday's visit.

"That's lovely, Perri," her mother says, in the voice of a woman holding up a heavier thing with both hands. "Tell me later?"

Perri takes her letter back upstairs, and the hurt is sharp and specific: not "my news is bad" but "I brought it to the wrong table at the wrong minute." The news did not change. The room did.

Chapter 4: Secondhand

So on Friday, Perri tells Ruti about the poem instead - first, fully, with the letter unfolded on the lunch table.

It feels wonderful for exactly one lunch period.

Ruti tells her sister the minute school lets out, because she is happy for Perri and happy things travel. Her sister mentions it to a neighbor right after - those two finish each other's sentences most days - and by afternoon the neighbor mentions it to Perri's mother in the grocery, in front of the fish counter: "Mazel tov on the journal! Perri must be over the moon."

Her mother, who knows there was a letter on Thursday and has heard nothing of it since - not the poem, not the page, not her daughter's face when it arrived - says something gracious, and buys the fish, and comes home.

The neighbor means well. Perri will say that to herself many times over Shabbos, because it is true and because it helps. Meaning well does not rewind a sentence, but it does keep the sentence from being the whole story.

Her mother is not angry. That is the worst part. Her mother is hurt in a small, precise way, and says so, plainly, at the kitchen table that night, the worry of the week temporarily set down.

"I wanted to hear it from you," her mother says. "First. Not from the fish counter."

Perri does not say "I tried Thursday." It is true and it is useless, because Thursday's table was the wrong table, and she is starting to understand that the table is part of the news.

Chapter 5: Whose

On Friday night, after candle-lighting, Chassi finds Perri doing the dishes with a face like a dropped souffle, and gets the whole week out of her in order.

"Okay," Chassi says. "Three questions. I ask them about every piece of news now, and I learned them the hard way, so you get them free." She dries a plate. "One: whose news is it? News belongs to the person it's about. You can hold someone's news the way you hold their Shabbos coat - carefully - but you never wear it out of the house. My engagement is mine. The poem is yours. You handled them backwards."

Perri nods, miserable.

"Two: who hears first? News has an order, the way a simcha has an order - family first, then the street. The people closest hear it from the person, not from the grocery. Three: what is the room already carrying? The same sentence is a gift at one table and a weight at another." Chassi hands her the plate. "It's not secrecy, Perri. Nobody is hiding anything. It's sequence and setting. News is perishable - where and when you serve it is part of what it is."

Chapter 6: The Holding

Sunday is harder than Perri expects and better.

The living room fills by twos and threes. Chassi sits on the arm of the sofa, too nervous to sit properly, and Perri's father does the telling because he is the father, and he gets exactly one sentence in before Perri's grandmother is crying the good kind and Perri's grandfather is standing up to dance by himself in the middle of the carpet, which is apparently a family tradition and not an emergency.

The families tell the grandparents, in order, in the afternoon, and the joy goes off like a slow, warm string of lights. Perri holds the news the whole time - holds it, the way you hold someone's good coat - and does not wear it out of the house once.

And here is what she did not expect: being trusted with the waiting is its own feeling. The news sits with her all day, warm, hers-to-carry-not-to-tell, and the carrying is a kind of closeness to Chassi that telling never gave her.

Earlier, while the room is still filling and the telling has not started, an aunt she barely knows corners her by the kugel and asks, in the voice aunts use, "So? Anything you want to tell me?" And Perri says, "There's always news somewhere," and smiles, and the aunt laughs and lets her pass. Perri walks away feeling six feet tall, which is what keeping a trust does to a person, it turns out.

On Sunday night, after the last aunt leaves, Chassi says, "Now. You can tell Ruti now."

So on Monday, Perri tells Ruti - fully, with the details, the way news deserves - and adds the sentence that makes it honest: "I knew since Thursday, and I hinted, which was telling - I owe you an apology for that part. After that I held it, because it wasn't my turn to tell. Chassi said I could carry it to you myself."

Ruti, who has known her eleven years, says, "That was the most grown-up thing you've ever said," and then makes her tell the whole story twice.

Chapter 7: The First Look

The journals arrive two weeks later, actual boxes of them, and the English teacher cuts the tape with her keys and girls crowd around like it is a simcha, which, for the twelve of them with pages in it, it is. Somebody reads somebody else's poem out loud in the hall, badly, on purpose, and it is the happiest noise the corridor has made all winter.

The poem looks even better in print than it did in the letter.

Perri's first instinct is the old one - run, burst, announce, wave it over her head at whoever is nearest.

She does the new thing instead.

She waits for a light table. She finds her mother Thursday night after supper, when the test results have come back clear - they have, baruch Hashem, the whole house has been breathing again since Tuesday - and the kitchen is calm and nobody is holding anything heavy.

"Is this a good minute?" Perri asks.

Her mother looks up. "It's a very good minute."

So Perri gives her the first look - the journal, the page, her name in print - and watches her mother read the poem twice, out loud, the second time slower. Her mother says, "I am keeping this copy forever," and it lands exactly the way news is supposed to land, because it was served at the right table.

The fish counter never gets a word of it.

Chapter 8: The Coat

In January, Ruti's family gets news - the good kind, the kind that travels - and Ruti tells Perri first, on a Tuesday, swearing her to nothing but asking her to wait until the family tells the grandparents on Thursday.

The old Perri would have spent two days vibrating.

The new Perri asks the three questions out of habit, standing at her locker: whose news is it - Ruti's family's, not mine. Who hears first - the grandparents, then everyone. What is the room carrying - I don't know yet, so I carry it gently and I check before I speak.

It is not easy. On Wednesday she nearly tells her sister - not Chassi, the younger one - and catches herself with the sentence already loaded, and turns it into "have you seen my gray tights," a real question with no news in it at all. The old Perri's redirects were hints, and a hint is news wearing a coat. This one is just tights.

She holds it for two days like a good Shabbos coat.

And on Thursday night, when Ruti's news goes public and half the grade is hearing it for the first time, Perri stands in the middle of the happy noise saying nothing new at all, and it is not a small feeling, it is a big one: she is the person people can tell things to.

She goes home, hangs up her own coat, and starts supper's salads, and when her mother asks how her day was, Perri says, "Good. Ruti's family had news. They'll tell everyone tonight," and lets the news belong to the people it belongs to.

Her mother slices tomatoes next to her and says, after a moment, "That's new."

"It's the coat thing," Perri says, and reaches for the cucumbers.

Eight activities

Activity 1: Handled backwards

From Chapters 2-4, list Perri's two mistakes - one with news that was not hers, one with news that was. What makes them the same mistake worn two ways?

Activity 2: A hint is news in a coat

Perri never says the words "Chassi is engaged," yet Ruti knows in four seconds. Explain the coat line: "A hint is just news wearing a coat." Why does "ask me Sunday" tell as much as telling?

Activity 3: The three questions

Write Chassi's three questions from memory of Chapter 5, with a one-line explanation of each. Why does she say they are "sequence and setting, not secrecy"? What is the Shabbos-coat comparison saying about holding someone else's news?

Activity 4: Travel arithmetic (all numbers made up for practice)

Perri tells 1 friend. That friend tells 1 sister, who tells 2 neighbors, who each tell 2 people. How many people have the news by the end? How many heard it directly from the source, and how many heard it secondhand? And what can the count never tell you: whether the person who deserved to hear it first was in the chain at all? Show your steps.

Activity 5: The fish counter

Perri's mother is not angry - she is "hurt in a small, precise way." From Chapter 4 and the repair in Chapter 7, explain what "I wanted to hear it from you. First." actually means. What does the first look in Chapter 7 restore that a simple apology could not?

Activity 6: Draw the full kitchen

Draw Thursday six o'clock: the covered lists, the two women talking low, Perri in the doorway with the folded letter. Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Caption with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Mushky's two news days - a made-up case

A teen named Mushky learns her cousin had a baby boy (the family tells the great-grandmother Friday, in person), and the same day wins the class raffle. For each piece of news, write whose it is, who hears first, and one room-check Mushky should do before speaking. One sentence per answer, with names.

Activity 8: Word grid

Find eight words left to right. Row/column numbering begins at 1.

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N E W S K V W B F Y
W A I T L M N O R S
R O O M A I Q Z X J
H E R S F Y G H U P
M I N E R S T C D E
T U R N X J K V W B
H O L D U P L M N O
A S K C 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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NEWS, WAIT, ROOM, HERS, MINE, TURN, HOLD, ASK. Which word names what Perri holds like a Shabbos coat, and which word names what it was not yet, on Thursday?