

The Story That Gets to Finish

Chapter 1: The Fast One

At Toiba's table, stories move fast, and Toiba is the reason.

She is sixteen, the older one, and she has the quickest ears in the house. Her mother starts, "So I get to the store, and the man at the counter -" and Toiba says, "- tells you they're out of it," and her mother laughs, because that is exactly what the man at the counter did.

Her sister Sura is thirteen and tells stories the long way, with the weather in them. "So in English, we were doing the thing with the paragraphs, and Leeba - wait, I forgot to say, it was raining -"

"- and Leeba forgot her paragraph," Toiba says, "so the teacher -"

"So the teacher let her read her sister's old one," Sura finishes, a little flat, "which is not where I was going."

Their mother says it is a gift, mostly. "You save us all ten minutes a day," she says, and she means it kindly, and it is true: suppers move, news travels, nobody has to hunt for the end of a sentence when Toiba is at the table carrying every thread at once.

It has been the shape of the family for years. Toiba is the fast one the way some people are the tall one: it is just the shape everyone got used to. Nobody asks the tall one whether the ceiling minds.

Chapter 2: Other People's Questions

At school it is the same weather. Miryam, her best friend, starts a sentence and Toiba lands it. A girl at the lunch table asks Miryam what the history essay is supposed to be about, and Toiba answers - she knows, she sits in the class, why make Miryam do the work?

Wednesday, in history, the teacher asks Miryam directly - "Miryam, what did you make of the chapter?" - and Toiba, two seats over, supplies the answer before Miryam has both elbows on the desk. The teacher moves on. The teacher always moves on; the answer was right.

Miryam does not make a thing of it. Miryam never makes a thing of anything. She just goes a little quieter every week, the way a lamp goes quieter when you turn it down one notch at a time, and because it is one notch at a time, nobody points at it. On the walk home, Toiba talks and Miryam hums, and the hum is shorter than it used to be.

The week it happens twice is the week Toiba sees it. Tuesday, Sura starts the story about the substitute and stops halfway. "Never mind," she says. "You tell it better anyway."

Thursday, the story about the bus. Same sentence. "Never mind. You tell it better anyway."

It is not an accusation. That is what makes it land. Sura says it the way you state a fact about the house: the door sticks, the fast one tells the stories.

Chapter 3: The Audit

Toiba lies in bed Thursday night and does something she is not in the habit of doing: she plays the week back and counts.

Four times, she finished a sentence that was not hers. Once, she answered a question aimed at Sura - their mother asked SURA how the test went, and Toiba said "fine" for her, because she knew it went fine. Two times, somebody started a story and stopped, and both times it was Sura, and both times Toiba's mouth had been open, mid-word, when the stopping happened.

She thinks to herself: when did anybody last tell me something I didn't already know?

She cannot remember. She can remember the opposite, though - last week, Miryam starting something on the walk, twice, and both times ending it herself with "nothing, forget it." At the time Toiba had been annoyed: don't start if it's nothing. Now she hears it differently. It was not nothing. It was something that needed more than half a sentence of runway, and there was never runway.

That is the answer, and it is worse than the question. People have stopped bringing her their news, because news is only fun to bring to someone who doesn't already say the ending. She is the fast one, and the fast one hears everything last.

Chapter 4: Two Small Rules

Friday, before the Shabbos meal, Toiba writes two rules on an index card and slips it into her pocket, where only she will see it.

One: count to three before your mouth opens. Two: one question before one answer.

The meal is agony for the first twenty minutes. Her mother describes the neighbor's new shelving - Toiba knows exactly where it is going, the words are stacked up in her mouth like shoppers at a door - and she counts, one, two, three, and her mother says it herself, better, with the detail about the brackets that Toiba did not know.

One, two, three. The brackets. She thinks to herself: I would have said the shelf. The shelf is not the story. The brackets are the story.

Her mother glances at her twice during the meal - the particular glance of a woman checking whether someone feels all right - and Toiba gives her the smile that means fine, and keeps her hands folded, and discovers that listening hard enough leaves you hungrier than talking ever did.

Sura starts a sentence about the bus and stops, out of habit, looking at Toiba's mouth.

"I don't know this one," Toiba says, which is true - the bus has a hundred stories. "What happened on the bus?"

Chapter 5: The Wrong Ending

Monday, walking home, Miryam starts the thing about her cousin's wedding - the seating, the drama, the aunt - and Toiba asks one question and then holds the three.

The answer is long. The answer has a detour through a dessert table and a torn hem. Twice, Toiba's mouth opens; twice, she closes it. And at the end, the story turns out to be about something else entirely - the cousin asked Miryam to be in the wedding party, and Miryam does not want to go, because the wedding is the same weekend as the class trip, and she has been carrying that for two weeks, saying it to no one, because there was never a space long enough to put it in.

Miryam talks the long way around - the dessert table, the torn hem, the aunt's system for seating divorced cousins - and Toiba learns the shape of a Miryam story, which is not a straight line but a spiral, and the spiral is the point, because the real thing sits in the middle of it where the fast version never arrives.

Toiba stands on the corner and thinks: I knew how this one ended, too. I was wrong. That is the whole cost, right there - not that I finish the stories. That I finish them wrong, and then I walk around with the wrong version of my best friend in my head.

"I didn't know the wedding was that same weekend," Toiba says.

"I know," Miryam says. "There wasn't a good moment." She says it kindly. It lands unkindly, the way true things do.

Chapter 6: Caught

She is not cured. Wednesday, their mother asks Sura about the history project, and Sura gets exactly four words out - "We had to pick -" and Toiba's mouth opens on its own: "- a person from the -"

She catches it. It is physical, like catching a glass. "Sorry," she says. "Go. A person from the -?"

"- from the chapter we chose ourselves," Sura says, and then she keeps going, because the sentence is still hers, and it turns out the project is not the textbook thing Toiba was about to say but an interview with their grandmother about the old neighborhood, which Sura is nervous about, because she has never interviewed anyone, and she says so, at the table, out loud.

Their mother says, "We can practice at the kitchen table." And they do, the next night, Sura asking, their grandmother answering - the old neighborhood comes out in pieces, the stairwell that smelled like bread, the cousins three flights up - and Toiba washes the dishes within earshot, not saying a single ending. Their grandmother, who has not been interviewed by anyone in fifty years, takes each question seriously in a way that makes Sura sit up straighter. Sura writes the questions herself first, in pencil, and reorders them twice. Twice she knows the answer before their grandmother gives it, because their grandmother's stories are family property. Both times she keeps it behind her teeth, and both times their grandmother's version turns out better, with a part she never knew.

It costs her something, the not-saying. She decides to be honest about that, at least to herself: the fast one does not stop being fast. She just stops letting the fast part drive.

Chapter 7: The Space

Friday night, the house is candlelit and unhurried, and Sura starts a story about choir tryouts. The old rhythm is right there: Toiba knows choir, she knows the tryouts, she knows the girl who runs them. The words queue up in her mouth like always. One, two, three.

Sura talks. It takes a while. There is a part about scales, and a part about the girl who runs the tryouts being intimidating, which is true, and then there is the part Toiba would never have gotten to, because it only comes out at the very end, in the quiet: Sura did not try out. She stood outside the room for ten minutes and went home, and she has been saying she tried out for a week, and it has been sitting on her like a schoolbag.

"I didn't know," Toiba says. She means: I would have finished that story wrong, too.

"I couldn't say it fast," Sura says. "It doesn't come out fast."

Their mother reaches over and squeezes Sura's hand. Nobody says it is silly to be frightened of a room. Nobody says she will definitely get in next year, either. The conversation about next year's tryouts happens slowly, at Sura's speed, with pauses in it big enough to carry things - who runs them, what the scales are for, whether their mother still has the notebook of songs from when she sang.

Chapter 8: Where the Story Goes

Three weeks later, at the Shabbos table, Sura starts a story about the bus.

It is the third bus story of the season. The old Toiba would have landed it by now - she knows the driver, she knows the corner, she knows the puddle. The index card went soft at the corners weeks ago; she rewrites it some Fridays still, out of respect for what it is teaching her to become, but mostly the three counts live in her hands now, in the folding of them. The new Toiba folds her hands and counts, one, two, three, and the story goes somewhere it has never gone. The driver's little boy, who waves from the front seat on Fridays, was not there this week. Sura asked about him. He is sick. Sura wants to make him a card - can Toiba help her think of what to write inside?

The story ends where Sura wants it to end, which is a place Toiba has never heard it go before.

"Sure," Toiba says. "Tell me about him first."

Eight activities

Activity 1: The two costs

In Chapter 2, Sura says, "Never mind. You tell it better anyway." In Chapter 5, Toiba discovers she has been walking around "with the wrong version of my best friend in my head." These are two different costs of the same habit. Explain each cost in your own words, and say which one the story treats as worse. Two or three sentences.

Activity 2: The audit numbers

In Chapter 3, Toiba counts her own supper. List the three things she counts (the finishes, the answered question, the stopped stories) with their numbers, and say whether the answered question is one of the finishes or separate. What question does she ask herself that she cannot answer? Short answers.

Activity 3: Order the repair

Put these in the story's order, and say why the order matters: (a) the index-card rules at the Shabbos meal; (b) Sura's choir story comes out in the space; (c) the bedtime audit; (d) Miryam's wedding-trip problem surfaces; (e) Toiba catches herself mid-sentence at the Wednesday table. One sentence on why the order matters.

Activity 4: Two suppers - a made-up set of numbers

The numbers in this activity are made up for practice. At one 30-minute supper, a girl counts: she finished other people's sentences 9 times and asked 2 questions. Two weeks later, at a 30-minute supper, she finishes 3 sentences and asks 7 questions. (a) What is her finishes-per-10-minutes rate at each supper? (b) What happens to her questions-per-10-minutes rate? (c) Her goal is zero finishes - is 3 a failure? Answer with the rates, and name one thing the numbers do not measure.

Activity 5: "It doesn't come out fast."

Sura says of her missed tryout, "I couldn't say it fast. It doesn't come out fast." What does she mean? What kinds of true things can only be said slowly? Why was Toiba's old speed a wall for exactly those things? Two or three sentences.

Activity 6: Draw the card

Draw Toiba's two rules as she carries them into the Shabbos meal - the index card, the two rules, and one moment from chapters 4-7 where a rule actually fires. Only what the story tells you. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Pearly's answers column - a fictional case

A girl named Pearly is the fastest reader in her class discussion group - she always knows where the story is going, and says so, and the group has gone quiet. Her teacher gives her a job: write the discussion's questions column - before each meeting, she writes three questions she does NOT know the answer to. Write what changes at the next two meetings, one sentence each, and the sentence Pearly writes at the top of her column. 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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L I S T E N W B F Y
P A U S E M N O R S
S T O R Y I Q Z X J
S I S T E R G H U P
F I N I S H T C D E
Q U I E T J K V W B
Q U E S T I O N N O
T A B L E 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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The eight words: LISTEN, PAUSE, STORY, SISTER, FINISH, QUIET, QUESTION, TABLE. Which word names what Toiba learns to do first, and which word names what Sura's story finally gets to do?