

The Tape on the Bedroom Floor

Chapter 1: The Five Fifty-Two Fight

The fight on Monday starts at 5:52. Blima knows this because she looks at the clock in the middle of it, which is strange in a fight.

Rikki is at the mirror with the good scarf, which is Blima's scarf, and Blima is at the desk with Rikki's math folder under her elbow, on Blima's half of the desk, which is the only half.

"I need the mirror," Blima says.

"I need to look like a person," Rikki says, "before the bus." The bus is always tomorrow.

"Your folder is in my light."

"Your light is the whole room," Rikki says.

It goes exactly like that, with the lines barely moved around, until their mother calls up the stairs that soup is on, and then it stops the way it always stops, with the door not quite slammed - slamming is a whole conversation with their mother.

At the table Blima thinks to herself: we had this fight yesterday. Yesterday it was the scarf too, or the mirror, or the chair, and it was 5:52 or 5:51, and she cannot stop thinking about that.

Fights are supposed to be about something. This one seems to be about a time of day.

Chapter 2: The Room

They have shared the room since Rikki was born, which is fourteen years, and for most of those years it was fine. Blima wants to be fair about this. It was fine last year, when Rikki was in eighth grade and home by four, and did her homework at the kitchen table with a sleeve of crackers, and was done and showered and in a good mood by the time Blima came up at six.

What changed is Elul. Rikki started ninth grade, and ninth grade gets out at five, and the bus drops her at 5:25, and she comes up the stairs at 5:30 so hungry she is almost crying, into the room where Blima, in twelfth grade and needing the desk from 5:30 to 6:30, is sitting in the only light.

So now there are two of them, and one mirror, and one desk, and one good scarf, because Rikki's has been missing since Sukkos and she will not replace it, and the same thirty minutes, like a wheel going around.

Blima is seventeen. She is old enough to know that "my sister has become impossible" is a thing people say, and that it is usually not quite true. The problem is that the other explanation - that a clock is doing this to them - sounds crazy.

Chapter 3: Being Nice

The first thing Blima tries is being nice. She decides it Tuesday night, in writing, because she is the kind of person who decides things in writing: I will simply be nicer.

Wednesday she is nicer. She lets Rikki have the mirror first. She moves her books to the floor, which is a big deal, because the floor is where things go to be stepped on. At 5:50 Rikki says, "Are you sick?" which is not a thank-you, but nothing catches fire, and Blima goes to bed feeling like a person who has solved something.

Thursday she is nicer until 5:47. Then Rikki eats the last of the wafers Blima was saving, the ones on the dresser with the napkin under them that everyone knows means saving, and Blima hears her own voice say, "Oh, sure, help yourself," in a tone that could strip paint, and they are off, the usual lines, the mirror, the folder, the light.

The problem with deciding to be nice, Blima writes in the notebook that night, is that nice is a mood, and 5:45 is a fact. A mood loses to a fact most days.

She is starting to think the notebook has been asking the wrong question, and that is a bigger thought than she expected to have on a Thursday.

Chapter 4: The Tape

The second thing Blima tries is the tape.

She gets the idea from a story at the Shabbos table, about cousins who divided their room with tape and lived like neighbors. It sounds clean. It sounds fair. The next Tuesday night she unrolls masking tape down the middle of the room - desk on her side, mirror on Rikki's, door exactly on the border.

It lasts two days, and they are the two worst days in the history of the room.

Everything becomes a border case. Rikki's sleeve is on Blima's side. Blima's chair crosses the line when she stands up. "Your laundry basket is touching the tape," Rikki says, in a voice like a border guard, and Blima answers in the same voice, and their mother comes to the doorway and looks at the tape, and looks at them, and says, "This is what we're doing now?" and leaves, which is worse than a speech.

Thursday night she sits looking at the silver line on the floor. The tape treats the room like the problem is that there is a Rikki in it. She thinks to herself: the tape didn't make us fight less. It gave us a whole new subject.

She does not pull it up. It stays down as evidence, and they step over it.

Chapter 5: The Tally

The third thing Blima tries is counting.

She keeps a tally in the notebook. Every Saturday night, when Shabbos is out, she writes down that week's fights from memory - the day, the time each one started, what it was about. Three

weeks of Saturday nights.

She gets a pattern so clean it is almost funny. Fourteen fights in three weeks. Twelve of the fourteen start between 5:45 and 6:15. Eleven of the fourteen have all three of the same ingredients: somebody is hungry, there is one shared object - the mirror, the scarf, the desk, the chair - and there is one deadline hanging over it, homework or bus or shower before nine. And on Shabbos, when there is no bus and no homework and nobody is hungry because the day is built around meals, they do not fight at all. Three Shabbosim, zero fights. They sit on the couch and talk for two hours. Rikki laughs at something Blima says.

Blima stares at the tally. It looks less like a record of two impossible people and more like a recipe. Hunger, plus one object, plus a clock, at the same half hour, makes this exact soup.

She writes at the bottom of the page: the picture isn't broken. The frame is.

Then she sits with that, because it is either the most useful thing she has ever written or completely wrong. She decides to test it the way you test anything: change the frame, and see if the picture changes.

Chapter 6: Three Changes

She does not announce a new era. She changes three things, one at a time, with days between them, and watches what each one does.

The plate. Starting Sunday, Blima cuts up an apple and puts out crackers and cheese at 5:25, before she opens a book, so the food is already on the dresser when Rikki comes up the stairs starving. It takes four minutes. Her mother, asked, says it is fine and also, looking at Blima sideways, "Who are you and what have you done with my daughter," which is as close as her mother gets to applause.

The schedule. On Wednesday evening, after supper, when nobody is fighting, Blima writes the desk schedule on a sheet of paper and tapes it to the door: who gets the desk, 5:30 to 6:00 and 6:00 to 6:30, alternating days, with Thursday night free for whoever has the test. She hangs a pencil on a string beside the door, because a schedule you cannot sign is a suggestion. Written and agreed in a quiet hour - not at 5:52 on any day, which is the worst negotiating hour in the world. Blima's own hour shrinks with it; on the days the first slot is Rikki's, she moves the reading that does not need the desk to the kitchen table after supper, and it moves easier than she expected.

The hooks. On Thursday evening her father puts up two hooks on the wall, two baskets under them, one landing spot each, so a coat and a bag stop hitting the floor in the middle of the room and becoming tonight's border incident. The baskets cost almost nothing.

The plate works first: by Tuesday the 5:52 fight is gone, because nobody comes up the stairs starving. The schedule holds: Thursday's desk argument lasts twenty seconds, not twenty minutes. The hooks take longest to prove it: the floor stops producing border incidents, one coat at a time.

None of it is interesting. That is the point. Nothing about an apple slice is a personality.

Chapter 7: Six of Seven

The first full week, they have two fights. Six evenings out of seven, none.

She keeps the tally going, because honest is honest: the frame is not magic. Wednesday they fight anyway, because Rikki's day was terrible and the apple is not a time machine. But the fight is shorter, and it ends at the plate - Rikki takes a cracker in the middle of a sentence, and the sentence does not survive the cracker.

The other fight is on Sunday morning, and at the next Saturday-night entry it gets a tally mark like any other - leaving it out would cook the evidence - with two words beside it: out of pattern. No clock pressure on a Sunday morning, no hunger, one object at most. The frame did not produce it; Blima did. She is sharp about the missing scarf, sharper than the scarf deserves, and she knows it while she is saying it. That one is hers.

She finds Rikki downstairs and says, "I was sharp about the scarf and I'm sorry," and does not add anything after it, which is the hardest part. Rikki shrugs, but she is looking at Blima, or Blima thinks she is, and the shrug looks more like a door than a wall.

The next week is better. Seven evenings out of seven, no fight. Blima does not trust it yet. She keeps counting.

Chapter 8: The Tape Comes Up

At the end of the third week of the new setup, on a Sunday afternoon, Blima gets down on the floor with her fingernail and starts peeling up the tape.

It has been down six weeks. It comes up in pieces, and she has to work at the edges, and Rikki comes in halfway through and stands watching.

"You're taking it up," Rikki says.

"It was a bad idea," Blima says. "Also your sleeve is on my side."

Rikki laughs. Then Rikki goes to the door, takes the pencil off the string where it hangs, and writes herself into the Tuesday desk slot, 6:00 to 6:30, in small letters, without being asked. Nobody told her to use the schedule. She just uses it, the way you use a chair.

The tally stays on the inside of the door, next to the schedule. Blima does not take it down. It is not a trophy; it is a reminder of what the evidence said, the week she stopped trying to win the 5:52 fight and moved the furniture instead.

She writes next week's schedule in the good pen, hangs the pencil back on its string, and gets up off the floor.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The tally

What four facts does Blima's tally turn up? (Count them: the total, the window, the ingredients, the Shabbos pattern.) Which one does the most to change her mind, and why?

Activity 2: Mood versus fact

"Nice is a mood, and 5:45 is a fact." What does Blima mean, and what did Thursday's wafer fight prove? Find the line where she nearly solves the problem with niceness and say why it could not hold.

Activity 3: The tape

The tape is the most logical-sounding fix in the story, and it produces "the two worst days in the history of the room." Why does dividing the room fail? What is the difference between a fix that manages two people and a fix that treats one of them as the problem?

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

A pair of sisters fights 15 times in 3 weeks. 13 of the fights happen inside one 30-minute window. 10 of the 15 have the same three ingredients. They change the setup, and the next week has fights on only 2 of 7 evenings. (a) What fraction of the original fights were inside the window? (b) How many fight-free evenings did the first new week have? (c) Why is the Shabbos pattern - zero fights - stronger evidence than any single number here? Show your steps.

Activity 5: The Sunday fight

The Sunday-morning scarf fight gets a tally mark "like any other," with two words beside it: out of pattern. Why would leaving it out "cook the evidence"? And what does Blima's bare apology - "I was sharp about the scarf and I'm sorry," with nothing added after it - show about what a frame fix cannot do?

Activity 6: Draw the door

Draw the inside of the bedroom door at the end of the story: the tally sheet, the written schedule, the pencil on its string. Only what can be seen. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Etty's kitchen table - a made-up case

A teen named Etty and her brother fight every evening over the kitchen table where they both do homework - his elbows, her papers, one lamp. Write the tally Etty keeps (three invented facts like Blima's), the one change she tries first, and the sentence she writes at the bottom of her page. One sentence each, with names.

Activity 8: Word grid

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

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

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The eight words: FRAME, SISTER, DESK, TALLY, HOOKS, MIRROR, SCHEDULE, HUNGRY. Which word names the thing Blima changes instead of herself, and which word names the evidence that changes her mind?