

The Trouble She Unwinds



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Borrowing

On Thursday afternoon, Zeldy needs to address a thank-you envelope nicely.

Her aunt sent a gift, and her mother asked her to write the card before supper, and Zeldy is sixteen and particular about envelopes.

Tatty's fountain pen sits in its cup on his desk, the good one, the one that writes like the ink is doing you a favor. The rule about the pen is one word long: ask. It is not a harsh rule. Tatty lends the pen all the time, when asked - for birthday cards, for forms, once for a neighbor's get-well poster that needed a steady hand. Asking is the whole rule. Tatty is at work.

"It will take four minutes," Zeldy tells herself, out loud, to the empty study. "Four minutes is not really borrowing."

The pen writes beautifully. The envelope comes out beautiful. Four minutes is exactly how long it takes, and the whole thing would have been fine, except that the doorbell rings while the ink is still drying.





Chapter 2: The Pocket

It is the neighbor with a parcel that went to the wrong house, and there is signing, and a discussion about whether the bakery on the corner has changed hands, and Zeldy's hands are full. The pen goes into her cardigan pocket for one minute.

One minute becomes the evening. That is what minutes do when you are not watching them.

She clears the table. She finishes her history review. She goes to bed. The cardigan goes over the chair, the way cardigans do, and the pen rides in the pocket like a passenger nobody paid for.





Chapter 3: The Wash

On Friday, her mother does the laundry, and Zeldy, helping, loads the machine without checking the pockets, because she is sixteen and pockets are for tissues. Her mother asks once, from the folding table, "Everything out of the cardigan?" and Zeldy says yes, because she believes it. It is the last true thing she says that week.

The machine does what machines do.

When it stops, there is ink on the inside of the drum, a blue streak down her brother's white shirt, and a fountain pen at the bottom of the load like a small drowned animal. The cardigan sleeve is spotted beyond rescue.

Zeldy stands in the laundry room with the dead pen dripping on the floor, and she makes the fourth choice of the chain, though she will not call it that until Sunday: she says nothing. She dries the pen on a towel and hides it in her drawer. The cardigan is hers, so it hides itself. Her brother's shirt goes back on the folding table, blue streak and all, and she lets it.





Chapter 4: The Search

On Sunday, Tatty needs the pen.

The lease papers for the apartment have to be signed and taken to the lawyer on Monday, and Tatty signs papers with the fountain pen, the way his father did. He opens the drawer. He checks the cup twice, the way you check a cup when the thing in it cannot really be gone.

"Zeldy," he calls, in the ordinary voice. "Have you seen my pen?"

And here is the fifth link, the one that has a door still open in it:

Zeldy says, "No, Tatty."

The house turns itself over for an hour. The coat closet. The drawer again. The shelf with the good stationery, though the pen has never once lived there. Tatty decides he must have left it at the office, and says so in the voice of a man blaming himself politely. Her little brother, who is eight and draws on everything, gets a sharp voice he did not earn - "Did you take it for your drawings?" - and says no with his eyes already wet, and Zeldy stands in the kitchen doorway with a glass of water she cannot drink, and says nothing again.

The trouble is three days old now, and it has stopped being about a pen.





Chapter 5: The Map

That night Zeldy does not eat, and her mother finds her pushing rice around the plate.

Her mother does not pull the story out of her. Zeldy asks the question herself, because the question has been sitting in her throat since the doorway: "If a trouble gets big, how do you find where it started?"

Her mother tells her what her own grandfather used to say at his workbench, when a repair went wrong and the piece could not be un-broken: you unwind it. Link by link, backward, until you reach a link that can still move.





Zelda takes a page and draws the chain the way her mother describes it - five boxes, four arrows, in order, no skipping. Borrowed without asking. Pocket instead of the cup. The wash. Said nothing Friday. Said nothing Sunday.

She looks at the page for a long time. It is not a long page. That is the strangest part - the trouble fills the whole house, and its whole map fits in five boxes.

The first three boxes are sealed. She cannot un-borrow, un-pocket, or un-wash. The two silence boxes are the same link, running twice. And that link is not sealed - it is happening right now, which means it can stop right now.

"The earliest open link," her mother says. "That's the one that gets changed. Not the last one. Not the loudest one."





Chapter 6: The Telling

Zeldy finds Tatty at his desk, still looking in the drawer as if the pen might have changed its mind.

Her mouth prepares a softer sentence first - maybe it fell somewhere, maybe it got mixed into things - and she lets that sentence go. It is a sixth link, and she does not have to add it.

"Tatty. I borrowed the pen on Thursday without asking. I put it in my pocket. It went through the wash on Friday. I knew Friday, when the shirt came out blue, and I didn't say. I knew Sunday, when you searched, and I didn't say."

Tatty is quiet for a moment. He does not pretend it is nothing, because it is not nothing.

"I am angry about the pen," he says. "I am more upset about the doorway. You stood there and watched me search the whole house, and your brother got a sharp voice he did not earn."

"I know," says Zeldy. "That's next."





She has told the truth, the whole of it, in order, in four sentences.

The room is still standing. Tatty is still at the desk. Nothing has become unbroken, and nothing new has broken, and after three days of the other thing, that feels like air.

The lease papers, it turns out, do not require a fountain pen. They get signed with an ordinary pen on Monday, and the lawyer's office does not notice, and the world does not end. The pen itself goes on Tatty's desk for inspection first, because a drowned pen is a shop question, not a drawer question. On Monday, Tatty takes it to the pen shop, and the man there says the nib is bent but the pen can be cleaned and fitted new for less than a new one. Tatty pays the shop. Zeldy repays him in four babysitting installments, agreed out loud and written on the kitchen calendar, because a number on the calendar is a finished link.

Her brother's shirt goes through the stain treatment twice. A faint shadow stays, and her brother declares it acceptable - it shows where the pen went.





Chapter 7: The Brother

Tatty gets to the rug first. On Sunday evening, he sits down beside the tower and says his own piece. "I used a sharp voice on you today for something you didn't do. That was mine, not yours. I'm sorry." A grown-up says it plainly, the way he expects his children to say it.

When Zeldy comes down with her page, her brother greets her with the news. "Tatty already said sorry. Now it's your turn."

"The pen was me," Zeldy says, sitting down on the rug. "You got a sharp voice for my link. I'm sorry."

He considers this with the seriousness of a judge. "What's a link?"

She shows him the page. Five boxes, four arrows. He traces them with one finger, backward, the way she learned to.

"Okay," he says, in the direct way of eight-year-olds. "Can I see the dead pen?"

She brings it. He holds it like a museum. He wants to know if the wash hurt it, and Zeldy says probably not, it is a pen, and he says good, because he would not like to be washed, and the tower gets finished with no engineering whatsoever.





Chapter 8: The Cup

On Tuesday, the pen comes home from the shop, and Zeldy puts it into the cup on Tatty's desk. She checks twice that it is really in the cup. That is allowed - checking is free.

On her own desk she tapes a small card, in her own handwriting, for an audience of one: Ask first. Pens live in cups. And when a link is open, close it today.

Then she goes to set the table, because it is Tuesday, and supper does not set itself.

