

Three Names for It

Chapter 1: Monday

The cast list goes up on the bulletin board on Monday morning, on real paper, with the parts in order, and Sterna reads it the way everyone reads it - from the top.

The lead is Itty.

Sterna has to read it twice, because she wanted that part the way you want things you have already pictured: she has been practicing the big speech in front of the mirror since the auditions were announced, and her little sister, who is nine and honest, told her the middle part made her cry. Sterna had already picked out, in her head, which family seat in the audience she would aim the last line at. Her name is on the list - fourth down, a fine part, a real part.

Her chest tightens anyway, right under the top button.

Itty finds her by the water fountain, glowing and guilty, the way people are when their good news is your bad news. "I can't believe it," Itty says, and means it kindly.

"You're going to be great," Sterna says, and means it too, mostly, which somehow makes it worse.

She does what she always does. She goes quiet. She avoids the board. That night she lies awake replaying the audition, and she calls the whole thing, in her head, one word: upset.

Chapter 2: Wednesday

Wednesday is worse, and smaller.

A girl waves from the hall doorway, and it looks like her cousin, and Sterna waves back - big, warm, full-arm - at a total stranger. A stranger who waves back politely, confused, while half the grade watches.

Somebody laughs. Not cruelly. It does not matter.

At lunch she keeps her eyes on her food. Mousie asks if she's okay, and Sterna says "fine" in the voice that means the opposite, and Mousie, who has known her since they were nine, lets it go, which is the wrong favor. It is a favor that costs them both - Sterna will pay for it at midnight, and Mousie never even feels herself buying it - which is exactly what makes it the wrong one.

The chest does its thing - same spot, same tightness, top button. Sterna does her thing: quiet, avoids eye contact at lunch, and a long night of replaying the wave from four different angles, each worse than the last.

The replay has a director. It zooms in on the stranger's polite confusion, then on the laugh, then - the worst cut - on her own face, mid-wave, hopeful. By midnight she has watched it so many times she could draw it from memory, and the drawing would still be embarrassing.

Upset, she calls it. Same word. It is a big word, and she puts everything in it.

Chapter 3: Friday

On Friday she is at her locker when she hears Itty and Mousie around the corner, planning.

A walk, Shabbos afternoon, the long way past the pond. They are figuring out whose house to start from. There are two names in the plan, and neither of them is Sterna.

Itty's house first, then Mousie's, then the pond. They argue about the order for a full minute, happy, the way you argue when the argument does not matter.

They do not know she heard. She closes her locker softly, which is the politest door-slam in history, and the chest tightens - same spot, same button, third time in one week - and she does her remedy a third time.

That night, three replays run at once, and the strange thing is they all feel identical. A lost part, a stupid wave, a walk she was not asked on. One tightness. One word. Upset, upset, upset.

She tries her usual cures in order. She reads. The page sits there. She reorganizes her drawer. The drawer looks better; the chest does not. She tells herself it is all small, which is true and completely useless, because small things can still lean on the same button. Even the librarian's suitcase word from that afternoon has not landed yet - names take a night or two to move in.

Chapter 4: The Librarian

That Friday afternoon, hours before the night of three replays, Sterna volunteers in the library, as she does on Friday afternoons, stamping returns, which is a job with a rhythm, and the librarian has run the school library for nineteen years and misses nothing.

The stamp goes THUNK, the card goes in, the book goes on the cart. THUNK. It is the one job in school where her hands can be busy and her mind can be elsewhere, which this week means her mind has been at the board, in the hallway, and around the corner from her locker.

"That's the third sigh this week," the librarian says. "Same sigh each time. What is it?"

"I'm just upset," Sterna says. "About a few things."

"Upset is a suitcase word," the librarian says. "Everything gets thrown in, nothing gets found." She takes the stamp from Sterna's hand and sets it down, which means she is serious. "The body has one alarm bell for twenty different things. Tight chest, right? Same bell every time. But the names are different, and the names matter, because the next step depends on the name."

"It's the same feeling," Sterna says. "I checked. Three times."

"The chest is the same," the librarian agrees. "Now tell me the three things, and we'll name them properly."

So Sterna tells her, all three, in order, the way you empty a drawer onto a table. It takes a while. The librarian does not say "that's all?" and does not say "poor thing," which are the two

ways adults usually ruin this. She just sorts.

"Three different things," she says at last. "They rhyme in the chest. They are not the same."

Shabbos afternoon she sits on the porch with a book and does not look toward the pond road, except the three times she does. The names are still settling.

Chapter 5: The First Name

The part, it turns out, has a name: disappointed.

"Disappointed means you wanted something and it didn't happen," the librarian says. "It is allowed to hurt - you practiced a speech in the mirror for weeks. The step for disappointed is: let it hurt, don't rush it, and then ask what you still want."

What Sterna still wants, it turns out, is to act. Not the lead specifically - the stage itself, the work of it.

So on Monday she goes to the teacher directing the play and asks, out loud, "What should I work on for next time?" The teacher gives her two real notes - her big speech rushed, her listening on stage too polite - and the notes sting and help in equal measure, which is how real notes feel.

And she throws herself into the fourth part down, which has one good scene, and she decides to make it the scene people talk about on the way home. She starts that night, with the script and a pencil, marking where the character is angry and where she is only pretending to be. It is good work. It does not fix the ache, but the ache sits in the corner and watches instead of lying on top of her, and that turns out to be the difference that matters.

The hurt is still there. It just has somewhere to be.

Chapter 6: The Second Name

The wave has a different name: embarrassed.

"Embarrassed means everyone saw me slip," the librarian says. "It feels enormous, and in nineteen years of watching this school, it usually has the shortest shelf life in the store. Most audiences move on fast - I cannot promise yours will, but I would bet on it. You end up the only one still watching the replay."

The step for embarrassed is small: laugh once, on purpose, and move on.

It takes her a day to be brave enough. Brave is the wrong word - it takes her a day to believe the shelf-life thing could possibly be true.

So on Thursday, it is Perka who mentions the wave at lunch - Perka, who as far as Sterna can tell does not mean anything by it, and who Sterna guesses would be horrified to know the sentence has been keeping her up. Sterna's heart goes down the stairs first. Then she says, "That was me, full-arm, at a stranger," and does the wave again, bigger, and everyone laughs - with her, which is a completely different sound, and the whole thing deflates like a paper bag.

Shelf life, she writes in her notebook. Most audiences move on fast. She underlines most.

Chapter 7: The Third Name

The walk has the third name: left out.

"Left out is different from the other two," the librarian says. "Disappointed is about a thing. Embarrassed is about an audience. Left out is about a relationship, and relationships don't get fixed inside your own head. The step for left out is: say it. Early, plainly, without a court case."

So on Sunday - nine days after the Friday she heard it at her locker, nine nights of replays later - Sterna tells Mousie: "I heard you and Itty planning the Shabbos walk. I wanted to be asked. It pinched."

She has rehearsed the sentence for nine days, which is funny, because said out loud it takes under five seconds. In her head it had eight endings, most of them terrible.

Mousie is quiet for a second. "You're right," she says. "We were just talking and it turned into a plan, and we didn't think. I'm sorry." And then: "Next Shabbos. All three of us. I'm planning it this time so I can't forget you."

The pinch does not vanish - it leaves a small bruise, the way pinches do. But the saying-it worked, and the replay of the walk, which had run all nine nights, simply stops.

On the next Shabbos, the three of them walk the long way past the pond, and nobody mentions it, and the not-mentioning is its own kind of repair.

Chapter 8: The Bell

The chest tightens again on a Tuesday, three weeks later, in the middle of rehearsal, when the run-through of her scene goes flat and the teacher moves on without a note.

This time Sterna names it before the bell has finished ringing.

Small disappointed, she thinks. Not embarrassed - nobody laughed. Not left out - nothing was kept from me. I wanted it to go well and it didn't. The step is: let it hurt for one minute, then ask what I still want.

She wants the scene to work. She stays after, and asks for the note she was not given, and gets one - "stop apologizing with your shoulders" - and it stings and helps in equal measure. She writes it in the script margin, and the next run of the scene is better by exactly one note's worth.

Walking home, she does the week's accounting, the way the librarian taught her, out of habit now: the part still aches a little, the wave is a story she tells on herself, and the walk is a thing she said out loud that did not end a friendship but made one sturdier. Three feelings, three names, three steps. It does not make the week painless. It makes the week legible, and legible turns out to be most of what she ever needed.

Same chest. Same bell. Three names, three steps, and the names are the whole trick.

Eight activities

Activity 1: One bell, three events

List the three events of Sterna's week and the identical body signal each one triggers. What is Sterna's one-size remedy, and why does it fail all three times?

Activity 2: Suitcase word

The librarian calls "upset" a suitcase word: "Everything gets thrown in, nothing gets found." What does she mean? What does naming each event properly make possible that the suitcase word does not?

Activity 3: Match the name to the step

For each name - disappointed, embarrassed, left out - write what it means in the librarian's definitions and the step that fits it. Why can't disappointed be fixed the way embarrassed is fixed? Why can't left out be fixed inside your own head?

Activity 4: Shelf-life arithmetic (all numbers made up for practice)

A girl replays an embarrassing moment 4 times a night for 6 nights. Her classmates think about it once, for one day. How many total replays does she run? If laughing-it-off-on-purpose cuts her replaying to 2 nights, how many replays does the step save? What can't the arithmetic measure? Show your steps.

Activity 5: The laugh changes hands

Watch what changes when Sterna laughs on purpose in Chapter 6: who laughs, how it sounds, and what happens to the wave as a story. What evidence shows her own move changing the moment? Why does laughing on purpose work differently from being laughed at?

Activity 6: Draw the board

Draw the cast-list moment: the bulletin board, the crowd, Sterna reading from the top. Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Caption with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Perka's week - a made-up case

A teen named Perka has three hits in one week: her essay does not win the school contest, she trips on the stairs in front of the ninth grade, and her cousins plan a picnic without her. Name each one, and write the fitting next step for each, one sentence per step, with names. Then write which one needs saying out loud to another person.



Activity 8: Word grid

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

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

NAME, HURT, STEP, TELL, WANT, LEFT, SAME, NEXT. Which two words name the thing that stays the same all week and the thing that changes when the name is right?