

What the Sorry Names

Chapter 1: The Cards

Heritage day is the twelfth grade's whole morning.

Every girl brings something from her family's table - a recipe, a serving spoon, a story written out on an index card - and the gym becomes a museum of kitchens. Menucha brings her mother's honey cake in a tin. Rifky brings the recipe box.

The box is the thing people stop at. It is a shoe box covered in shelf paper, and inside are recipe cards in two handwritings: a spidery old one, slanted left, and a round clear one. The spidery one is Rifky's Bubby's hand, long ago. The round one is Bubby too, writing now. Some of the old cards are the only copies. Bubby cooked from memory and wrote down only what her own mother made her write down, and some of those cards survived two moves and a flood.

Rifky tells this to every girl who stops, and she tells it well - the flood story gets a hand gesture. She keeps the box on the table's edge nearest the wall, careful girl, and she turns each card over once an hour so the light does not sit too long on any one side.

Menucha stops twice. Once for the story, and once, later, because her water bottle is sweating and she wants to move it away from the display before she goes to find a paper towel. The bottle has been sitting beside her mother's honey cake tin all morning - the two display tables, her family's and Rifky's, stand side by side - leaving a wet ring on the paper tablecloth, and the ring has been bothering her in the back of her mind for an hour.

She should have left the bottle alone.

Chapter 2: The Spill

Menucha reaches across the display to shift her bottle to the floor.

The cap is not on all the way. She knows the kind of cap that clicks - this one clicks - and she did not click it that morning because she was late, and the bottle tips, and a cup of water goes across the table in one fast sheet.

It gets six cards. Four of them are the spidery handwriting.

The ink does that thing ink does - the words bleed sideways off their lines, and Bubby's mother's measurements run into each other like the card is crying. One card - the one with the cracked corner - curls as it drinks the water, and the crack opens a little wider, and Menucha will see that crack when she tries to fall asleep for weeks.

Rifky is there in two seconds, lifting cards, and her hands are careful and quick, and Morah brings the good paper towels from the teachers' room, and a girl Menucha barely knows holds each wet card flat while Rifky blots, and Menucha is standing there saying it.

"I'm so sorry. Rifky, I'm so sorry. I am SO sorry."

Rifky does not look up. She says, "I know," in a voice like a closed door, and keeps lifting cards. Menucha offers money. She does not know why - there is nothing to buy; that is the whole point of the cards - but the offer is out before she can stop it, and Rifky looks up for the first time and says, "It's fine," in the same closed voice, and turns back to the cards.

Chapter 3: What Else Is There

All afternoon, Menucha carries the good feeling of having apologized and the bad feeling of nothing being fixed, and the two feelings do not cancel out. They just sit there, both.

She tells her mother at supper, fairly: "I said sorry right away. I said it three times. I offered to pay. What else is there?"

Her little brother pipes up that maybe a fourth sorry would have done it, and her mother gives him the look, and he goes back to his soup.

Her mother does not answer fast, which with her mother means an answer is being chosen. "Replay the sentence for me," her mother says finally. "Exactly."

Menucha replays it. I'm so sorry. Rifky, I'm so sorry. I am SO sorry.

"Now count," her mother says, "what the sentence names."

Menucha thinks to herself, "It names ME. Three times. It does not name the cards. It does not name the cap I did not click. It does not name anything that changed, because nothing has." She thinks about the money offer and her ears get hot, hours late.

She thinks one more thing, and she does not like it at all: "I wanted the sorry to end it. The sorry was for ME."

That night she lies awake and replays Rifky's "I know," and she understands it properly for the first time. Rifky did know Menucha was sorry. Sorry was never the missing piece.

Chapter 4: The Inventory

In the morning, Menucha does not apologize again. She asks a question instead.

"Can you tell me what the six cards were? Not to make it better. I want to know what I broke."

Rifky looks at her for a long moment. Then she lists them, and Menucha writes the list down, because a person who asks that question has to be willing to carry the answer.

Two cards are fine to lose - they are the round copies, and Bubby has them in her head still. Three Bubby can re-dictate, slowly: the honey cake, which is funny and awful, given the tin; the gefilte fish her mother made her write down in the old country; and the potato kugel with the pepper measurement nobody else makes right. And one - a spice cake with a cracked corner - Bubby does not fully remember, and never will.

"So," Menucha says, and her voice is steadier than she feels. "Six cards. Two already have copies. Three you can re-dictate - the honey cake, the fish, the kugel. And the spice cake is a

gap that stays a gap."

Rifky nods. "The spice cake stays a gap," she agrees.

Chapter 5: The Second Sorry

Menucha waits until after class, and this time the sorry has names.

"Rifky. I am sorry I knocked water across six of your Bubby's cards because I did not click my cap and I reached across your display instead of walking around it. I am sorry four of them were the old handwriting, including the spice cake that can't be redone. I am sorry I offered you money, like it was a thing a store sells. Here is what changes: my bottle stays in my bag during any display, and I walk around tables, and I will re-copy the three cards with your Bubby myself if she will have me - or stand back entirely if you would rather do it. What would actually help?"

It is not smooth. She reads the cap part off her hand, where she wrote it so she would not skip it. She does not say "but," anywhere, which is the part she practiced in front of the bathroom mirror, because a "but" would turn it back into an excuse.

Rifky is quiet for a moment. Then she says, "Bubby would like the company, actually. She dictates slow."

It is not forgiveness. Menucha notices that she notices, and lets it be what it is. She goes home lighter anyway, and she is honest enough with herself to name why: this time the sorry was not for her.

Chapter 6: Sunday Dictation

Bubby's kitchen table is small and round and there is a lace cloth under the card supplies.

Bubby dictates the way she warned: slow, with pauses to argue with herself. "A cup of sugar.

No - a scant cup. My mother said a scant cup and a scant cup is what goes on the card."

Menucha writes scant cup. Her handwriting is neither spidery nor round, and Bubby says that is right - "It should look like today on the card. The card should tell the truth about who copied it."

It takes three Sundays for three cards, because Bubby also feeds her, and because some measurements come with stories and the stories are not skippable. The second Sunday it is the fish, and Bubby stops twice in the middle to stand up and show her with two hands how her mother packed the jars, and Menucha writes the instruction down and then, on the draft, writes the hand motion too, so she will not lose it before the real card.

On the third Sunday, Menucha asks about the spice cake, careful. Bubby shakes her head. "I remember the corner was cracked. I remember cinnamon, and I remember my mother called it the company cake. The amounts are gone. A girl can guess, but a guess is not the card." She pats Menucha's hand. "We leave it a gap. Some things you apologize for by not pretending."

Menucha writes that down too, on the back of her own hand, because her paper is full.

Chapter 7: Not on a Schedule

November comes. Menucha and Rifky are fine.

That is the honest word: fine. They work together on the winter party committee without friction. Rifky smiles politely at Menucha's jokes, which is new and careful, and sits next to her never, which is different from before. At the committee table Rifky passes her the stapler like a person, and Menucha takes it like a person, and nobody watching would know there was ever water on a table between them, and Menucha knows anyway.

Menucha notices herself waiting for it to finish repairing, like a pot coming to a boil, and she catches the waiting and stops it, because waiting for Rifky's warmth is just the water bottle again - reaching across somebody else's table for her own comfort.

She tells her mother: "It might come back. It might not. That part is hers."

"And your part?" her mother asks.

"My part was the cap, and the naming, and the Sundays. My part is done and stays done, whatever her part does."

Her mother nods slowly. "And if it never warms back up?"

"Then it never warms back up," Menucha says, and finds she means it, which is the strangest part - she expected the sentence to hurt coming out, and it comes out level, like a card laid flat to dry.

Chapter 8: The Honey Cake Card

In December, Rifky stops her after class.

"Bubby's making the honey cake for my cousin's sheva brachos, and she wants the new card - the one you copied - but she also wants the tin recipe. Yours. Your mother's."

Menucha copies it that night, on a fresh card, in her plain new handwriting. She checks it twice - once against her mother's card and once against the tin's lid, where her mother penciled the oven note years ago. She writes the oven note on the card too, because a card should hold the whole truth.

She gives it to Rifky in the morning, in a plastic sleeve, with her water bottle zipped deep in her bag where it now always lives.

Rifky reads it right there, and smiles - the first one aimed at Menucha since heritage day - and says, "Bubby's going to ask why this card is in your handwriting. I'm going to tell her."

Menucha thinks to herself, "She is going to tell her the whole thing, and that is right. The card tells the truth about who copied it."

Eight activities

Activity 1: Count what it names

From the story, write Menucha's first apology and her second apology side by side. What does each one name - people, objects, causes, changes? What does the first one protect, and what does the second one carry?

Activity 2: The money offer

Why does Menucha offer money for cards that money cannot replace? What is the offer really trying to end? When a repair offer is about the apologizer's comfort, how can the wronged person tell?

Activity 3: The inventory comes first

Before her second apology, Menucha asks Rifky to list the six cards - "not to make it better. I want to know what I broke." Why must the inventory come BEFORE the apology? What happens to a sorry that skips it?

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

A complete repair has 4 parts: name the harm, name the cause, name the change, do the repair the wronged person chooses. Each loud "I'm sorry" adds 0 parts. If someone says sorry 5 times and then does 3 of the 4 parts - names the harm, names the cause, and names the change - how many parts are done? Which part is still missing, and what does the arithmetic NOT capture?

Activity 5: "Her part is hers"

Menucha stops waiting for Rifky's warmth and calls the waiting "reaching across somebody else's table." What does she mean? What is the difference between repairing something and being owed forgiveness for repairing it?

Activity 6: Draw the table

Draw Bubby's kitchen table during dictation: the lace cloth, the card supplies, the slow careful work. Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Caption with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Faiga's brother's binder - a fictional case

A teen named Faiga borrows her brother's new binder without asking, rips the cover badly, and says "I'm sorry!" four times while offering her allowance. Write: the inventory question she should ask first, the specified apology (harm, cause, change), and one thing she might say to learn what repair he actually wants. One sentence each, with names.



Activity 8: Word grid

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

The eight words: MENUCHA, RIFKY, CARDS, SPILL, SORRY, BUBBY, COPIED, REPAIR.

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