

Where the Letter Sleeps



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Letter

On Monday, the letter comes.

Bassie knows the envelope before the mailman is off the porch -

Fradie's round handwriting, the stamp crooked the way Fradie always sticks it, five hundred miles folded into a rectangle. Her best friend from camp, three summers running, now three states away.

She reads it at the kitchen table. She reads it again on the stairs.

She reads the good part out loud to Mama, the part about the camp song parody, and laughs again, harder. A camp joke is a different kind of funny.

Three summers of camp, and now Fradie is three states away, and the letters are how the friendship breathes. Bassie has them all, rubber-banded, in order, in her bottom drawer.

Then she puts the new one on her desk, open, next to the review sheets.

"For motivation," she tells herself.

Exams start in two weeks. The desk is supposed to belong to history this month.





Chapter 2: The Week It Eats

The letter does not stay in its corner.

Tuesday, mid-review, Bassie thinks of the perfect line for her reply - the one about the substitute teacher - and composes it in her head instead of reading the page. She composes it four times. It improves.

Wednesday, she rereads the parody part, just the parody part, and then the whole letter, because you can't reread a part.

Thursday, she checks the mail at noon, though the mail comes at eleven and nothing new could possibly be in it. She checks again at four. Nothing. She is somehow disappointed, though the letter she has is three days old and unread only twice that day.





Friday, she looks at her week.

Four study blocks. Pages reviewed: nine, of fourteen planned. Lines composed for the reply: dozens, in her head, unwritten. Rereads of the parody part: she has honestly lost count. The letter has been with her every day, all day, like a guest who will not take a hint.

And the reply - the actual reply, the point of the whole correspondence - does not exist, because you cannot write a proper letter in the stolen minutes between pages, so the letter-writing keeps not happening too. She is losing the studying AND the reply. The pull is costing her both.

I love this letter, she thinks. That's the problem. Nobody fights a thing they love.





Chapter 3: The Honest Look

On Friday night, Bassie does the math nobody wants to do.

The letters matter. Fradie matters. Five hundred miles is far, and the letters are the thread across it, and she would not trade them for anything - including, apparently, her history grade, which is exactly the trade she has been making.

But here is the thing she notices, turning the envelope over: it is not the reading that costs. Reading takes twenty minutes, once. It is the living-on-the-desk. The letter, open, in sight, is a doorbell that rings all afternoon.

She does not want fewer letters. She wants her desk back.

She tests the thought honestly, the way Tatty tests a melon. Could she write less often? She could. The friendship would thin, and the thinness would be real, and no exam is worth that. Could she write the same, but differently? That one, she thinks, is possible.

This isn't about stopping, she thinks. It's about where it sleeps.





Chapter 4: Tatty's Drawer

On Shabbos afternoon, she asks Tatty, who has written to the same old friend for thirty years, how he does it.

Tatty does not give a speech. He opens his desk drawer.

Inside: a neat stack of envelopes, rubber-banded, the current one on top. Closed. In the dark.

"Mail comes when it comes," he says. "I check it once a day, after supper. If it needs an answer, the answer gets Sunday. If I think of a line on Tuesday, I write the line on a card and the card goes in the drawer too."





"Doesn't the drawer feel like rejection?"

"To the letter?" Tatty says. "The letter doesn't know. To me? No. My friend gets better letters this way, not worse ones. Sunday me writes with a cup of tea and the whole week in him. Tuesday me writes in a panic, in the middle of things, and says nothing."

He closes the drawer.

"Where it sleeps," he says, "decides how loud it is. On the desk, it shouts. In the drawer, it waits. It's the same letter."

Bassie thinks about the rubber-banded stack in her own bottom drawer - three summers of Fradie, in order. Those letters never once interrupted anything. It is only the open one, the current one, that rings.





Chapter 5: The Design

On Saturday night, Bassie builds hers.

One: the letter sleeps in the desk drawer. Not on the desk. Not on the dresser, where she will see it from the desk. In the drawer, where it cannot ring.

Two: the mail gets checked once, at four o'clock. Once. The mailman comes at eleven; nothing she does before four changes that.

Three: replies get Sunday afternoon, after lunch, with tea, for as long as they take. A real time, not a stolen one.

Four: when a line for the reply arrives mid-week - and lines will arrive, she knows her own head - it goes on the card on her desk, and the card goes in the drawer, and she goes back to work.

She writes the four parts on an index card and tapes it inside the drawer, where only she will see it.

Not less letter, she writes at the bottom. A better address for it.





Chapter 6: The First Week

The design holds, and it is not effortless, and the story of the week is in the card.

Monday: the urge to check the mail at noon fires, as scheduled. She writes "mail - 4:00" on the card, though she knows when four o'clock is. The writing is the point. The urge, written, goes quiet.

Tuesday: the substitute-teacher line arrives, finally perfected, mid-history-page. She writes it on the card, one line, and puts the card in the drawer, and returns. The page gets read.

Wednesday: a new letter comes. She knows it is there from eleven o'clock on - the whole house knows the mailman - and the four hours until four o'clock are the hardest four of the week. She does not check. She writes "letter!! - 4:00" on the card, which helps more than it should.





At four, she reads it once, fully, sitting down, with her coat still on - and then puts it in the drawer to wait for Sunday, and the drawer, remarkably, does not buzz.

She notices, by Thursday, that the desk is quieter. Not emptier. Quieter. The history pages are just pages again, not pages with a doorbell in the corner.

Thursday night, she finishes the review sheets - all fourteen pages, three days ahead of her own schedule - and sits there a minute, surprised by the silence.

Friday, she tells Tatty the drawer works. Tatty nods like a man who has known something for thirty years, which he has.





Chapter 7: Sunday

On Sunday afternoon, Bassie writes back.

Tea. The card with the week's saved lines - six of them, including the substitute-teacher line, which is indeed perfect. Both letters, Fradie's old one and the new one, read slowly, answered properly, point by point.

It takes an hour and a half. Her hand aches. She covers four pages, front and back, and when she reads it over before sealing it, she laughs once at her own substitute-teacher line, which held up.

It is the best letter she has ever written, and she knows why, and the why is not talent.

The why is that a week of lines, saved instead of spent, plus one unhurried hour, beats seven days of composing in her head in the middle of other things.

The design did not cost the correspondence anything. It cost the desk nothing, either. That was the whole point of the design.





Chapter 8: Wednesday Again

The next Wednesday, another letter comes.

Bassie reads it at four, sitting down, once, fully - the parody this time is about the camp cook, and she laughs out loud twice.

Then she puts it in the drawer, where it will wait for Sunday.

She closes the drawer. She opens the review sheets. The page on the causes of the war gets her full attention, because nothing on the desk is ringing, and the letter, five hundred miles of her best friend, folded into a rectangle, sleeps in the dark and keeps.

