



Leave Mrs. Grumble on the Stage

Ages 9-12



Chapter 1: A Very Successful Scowl

At Monday rehearsal, the entire class laughs when Toby opens the door.

She hasn't even said her line.

That is how good her scowl is.

She steps into the cardboard shop, adjusts the empty basket on her arm, and points at the pretend shopkeeper.

"That pear looks at me in a most disrespectful way."

Behind the scenery, someone makes a squeaking noise. Mrs. Feld holds up a hand so the girls can hear the next line.

Toby keeps a straight face. Mrs. Grumble never laughs.

She complains about pears, doors, weather, and the position of a bench. In the last scene, the shopkeeper finally gets Mrs. Grumble to listen. Toby knows that scene by heart.

Toby loves playing her. She loves the enormous empty basket and the way she can make one eyebrow seem angry with the other.

At dismissal, her friend Dini calls across the corridor.

"Mrs. Grumble! Your bag is showing disrespect to the floor!"

Toby laughs.

For now.



Chapter 2: The Corridor Version

On Tuesday, Toby asks a girl to move her chair so she can reach her desk.

"Yes, Mrs. Grumble."

Two girls laugh.

On Wednesday, she says the window is hard to open.

"Mrs. Grumble complains about the weather!"

She isn't complaining about the weather. The window handle sticks.

At lunch, Dini puts an orange on the table.

"Does this look at you disrespectfully?"

Toby gives the scowl. Everybody laughs. The joke is fun again for ten seconds.

Then she wants to ask if someone has a spare pencil.

She decides not to.

A pencil might turn into another pear. Anything she says might turn into something.

By afternoon, she has a headache and a pencil with no point.



Chapter 3: The Ordinary Complaint

During rehearsal, Mrs. Feld asks her to speak louder on the last line. Her charcoal sheitel covers her hair fully; she wears a small hat over it.

Toby says the line.

Mrs. Feld nods. "Good. Again, from your entrance."

Toby steps out of the shop. Dini, who manages the pretend fruit, whispers, "Not enough grumble today."

Toby drops the basket onto the rug.

"Can you please stop?"

The girls nearest her go quiet.

Dini looks startled. "I mean the play."

"You mean it all day."

Mrs. Feld comes over.

Toby's face feels hot. Now she really does look like Mrs. Grumble: standing beside a basket, upset with everyone.

That makes her even more upset.

"Perhaps somebody else should do the part," she says.

She immediately wants to take that back.

But everyone hears it.



Chapter 4: Without the Basket

Mrs. Feld calls a short break and asks Toby to sit beside her, away from the other girls.

"Do you want to give up the part?"

Toby twists the edge of her sleeve.

"I want them to stop saying it when I'm not in the play."

"Those are different requests."

"If I ask them to stop, they think I'm grumbling."

Mrs. Feld listens while Toby explains the chair, the window, the orange, and the pencil.

"Does Dini know the joke isn't fun for you anymore?"

"I laugh sometimes."

"Then tell her clearly. I'll also speak to the class about keeping character names in rehearsals. You shouldn't have to defend ordinary requests."

Toby looks at the basket on the rug.

She doesn't hate Mrs. Grumble. Mrs. Grumble has the best lines.

"Can I still do the eyebrow?"

Mrs. Feld smiles. "During your part, certainly."



Chapter 5: A Rule Dini Can Hear

After rehearsal, Toby finds Dini beside the coat hooks.

"I like the jokes in the play," she says. "I don't like being called Mrs. Grumble in the corridor. Please call me Toby outside rehearsal."

Dini bites her lip.

"You do the face at lunch."

"I know. I made it confusing. But I don't want it anymore."

"I don't mean anything bad."

"I know. I still want you to stop."

It is the hardest sentence Toby says all week. Harder than the long one about the bench and the pears and the unsuitable cloud.

Dini pulls her coat off its hook.

"All right."

She doesn't smile.

Toby doesn't ask her to smile. She puts on her own coat. They walk downstairs together, quieter than usual.

At home, Toby tells Mama, whose plum tichel covers all her hair.

"Perhaps I spoiled the fun."

Mama hands her a piece of bread from the supper tray.



"Was it still fun for you?"

Toby shakes her head.

"Then the joke needed to change. Not your name."

Chapter 6: The Pear Escapes

On performance day, Toby waits behind the cardboard shop.

The audience is the girls' younger class, their teachers, and the mothers invited by the school. Toby spots Mama sitting near the back.

She is nervous about her first entrance. She is more nervous about Monday.

Mrs. Feld speaks quietly to the girls before the curtain opens.

"The characters belong to the play. Afterward, use each other's real names."

Dini sets the pear in place.

It rolls off the counter.

Both girls watch it land beside Toby's shoe.

Dini bends to retrieve it, then stops.

"Can I say something as the fruit helper?"

Toby nods.

"Your pear is attempting to leave the show."

Toby laughs. "Bring it back. It still owes me a disrespectful look."



Dini returns the pear.

When Toby walks through the shop door, the younger girls begin laughing before her first line. She gives them the scowl. She lets the eyebrow do its work.

For seven minutes, Mrs. Grumble has the room.

Then Toby bows with the other girls.

Chapter 7: Her Own Name

On Monday, a girl at the water fountain calls, "Mrs. Grumble!"

Toby's hand tightens around her cup.

"Toby, outside the play," she says.

The girl rolls her eyes. "I know."

"Then use it."

Toby isn't especially calm. Her voice is sharper than she intends. She still gets to ask.

Dini reaches the fountain.

"Toby, do you want to sit with us at lunch?"

The other girl steps aside.



Later, Toby tells Mrs. Feld about the fountain. The teacher says she'll follow up, as she promised. Toby doesn't have to keep handling it alone if the nickname keeps returning.

At lunch, Dini borrows Toby's eraser. They argue about whether the soup has too many carrots. Nobody turns Toby's answer into a line from the play.

When their table asks about the pear falling, Toby tells that story herself.

"Are you doing the eyebrow?" Dini asks.

Toby considers it.

"Not today."

Dini nods and finishes her soup.

The basket is back in the school cupboard. The part is finished. The funny story can wait.

Toby reaches across the table for her eraser and begins telling Dini something completely unfunny about tomorrow's homework.

Dini listens.