



The Smooth Piece in Her Pocket

Ages 9-12



Chapter 1: An Empty Pocket

The little square isn't in Yocheved's pocket.

She checks the other pocket. Empty too.

Ten minutes from now, she is meant to read the opening paragraph at the girls' library afternoon. She has the paragraph. She has the table, the chair, and the teacher who knows she is nervous.

She doesn't have the small piece of soft corduroy Bubby made for her to hold.

Yocheved presses her hands together.

Without it, her hands don't know what to do.

"Ready?" Mrs. Gross asks from the doorway. Her brown sheitel covers her hair fully.

"No," Yocheved says.

It is the first entirely certain thing about the afternoon.

Chapter 2: The Right Side

The square has two sides. On one, her finger can follow the soft ridges. On the other, the cloth is smooth.

Bubby gave it to her when she noticed Yocheved twisting her sleeves during a difficult homework page. She asked if a little scrap of cloth might feel nicer to hold.



It does.

Yocheved doesn't believe the square controls what happens. It doesn't change tests or make other girls listen.

It gives her fingers somewhere familiar to go while the rest of her tries to begin.

She used it while practicing today's paragraph with Mama. Then she put it in her skirt pocket.

At least, she thinks she did.

Now she remembers changing skirts before leaving home.

The square sits in the other pocket, far from the library, being no use whatsoever.

Chapter 3: Before Anybody Comes

Mrs. Gross brings a chair beside Yocheved's table.

"Tell me."

Yocheved tells her.

"Could Mama bring it?"

"She is helping at your little sister's school. I don't think she can get here before we begin."

Yocheved stares at the paper.



"Then ask someone else to read."

Mrs. Gross doesn't argue. "You may change your mind about reading. Before you decide, is there anything else you want to try?"

The question leaves the decision where Yocheved can reach it.

She notices the edge of the paper. Her thumb keeps worrying one corner.

"Something to do with my hands."

Mrs. Gross brings a clean folded handkerchief from the school supply drawer. It isn't ridged. It doesn't have the same little stitch around the edge.

Yocheved holds it anyway.

Her stomach still jumps.

"It's not the same."

"No," Mrs. Gross agrees.

Chapter 4: Two Sentences

The younger girls haven't arrived yet. The room has three helpers and Mrs. Gross.

Yocheved asks to try the first two sentences to that little audience.

"Then I'll decide."

"All right."



She puts the paragraph flat on the table. She keeps the folded cloth in one hand, below the edge of the page where it won't cover words.

The first sentence comes out thin.

She pauses.

One of the helpers shifts a box, and Yocheved loses her place. For an instant, the empty pocket becomes an explanation for everything.

Then she sees the beginning of the next sentence.

She reads it.

The helpers nod. Nobody behaves as if something astonishing occurs. Two sentences enter a room and stay there.

Yocheved sits back.

"I want to do it," she says. "Will you sit near me?"

Mrs. Gross moves her chair to the agreed place.

Chapter 5: The Middle Word

The younger girls come in with their teacher. They settle into chairs and begin studying the book covers.

Yocheved's paragraph describes a library mouse who wants a book so large it needs its own shelf.

She reads the first sentence.



A child laughs at the mouse's ladder. Yocheved's hand grips the folded cloth. Her shoulders stay high.

In the middle, she says shelf instead of shelves.

She corrects it.

The familiar square cannot correct words even when it is present. Today, Yocheved does that part herself.

At the last line, she looks up. A little girl is waiting to see the mouse picture.

Yocheved lifts the book.

Mrs. Gross begins the next part. Yocheved sits beside her and turns the pages when asked.

Her hand unclenches only after the third page.

Chapter 6: The Other Skirt

At home, Mama asks about the reading. Her blue tichel covers all her hair.

Yocheved brings the other skirt from her drawer. The square is exactly where she remembers it now.

"I forgot it," she says. "I still read."

Mama listens to the whole account: the wanting to stop, the handkerchief, the two sentences, the wrong word.

"Do I have to stop using the square now?"



"Why?"

"Because I should manage without it."

Mama runs one finger over the corduroy.

"If it helps and you want it, you can use it. Today you discovered another way for a day when it isn't with you."

Yocheved likes that answer. She doesn't want today's reading to become an order to throw away something Bubby made with care.

At Bubby's next visit, she tells her what happened. Bubby's floral tichel covers all her hair as she listens.

"That square is a scrap from a cushion," Bubby says. "The cushion doesn't know how to read either."

Yocheved laughs.

She puts the square beside her schoolbag, where she can remember it.

Beside it, she sets a small clean handkerchief.

Neither promises her an easy afternoon. Both fit in her hand.