



The Answer With a Tissue

Ages 12-15



Chapter 1: 1. Before the tears

Miriam has a good answer prepared.

She knows the answer is good because she writes it without a single cross-out. She uses ordinary words. She doesn't say "always" or "never." She doesn't accuse her sister of anything.

For three weeks, she and Chaya share the small desk in their bedroom. Chaya needs it from seven until half past seven for an assignment. Miriam needs half an hour too. Their arrangement is that Miriam takes her turn afterward.

Twice this week, half past seven becomes eight.

Tonight, Miriam waits until both girls put their books away. Then she begins.

"Could we keep the desk times we agree on? I can't start my work while your things are still there."

Chaya closes her folder.

"I have more work than you."

Miriam's good answer is suddenly too thin to hold what she wants to say.

"You don't know how much I have."

Her voice cracks on "much."

She reaches for a tissue and leaves the room.



Chapter 2: 2. A blank line

In the kitchen, Mama looks up from a shopping list. Her grey tichel is tucked neatly at the back.

"Do you need something?"

"Nothing. I'm just being silly."

Miriam takes a glass from the cupboard. She doesn't fill it.

Mama waits.

"I tried to ask about the desk," Miriam says. "Then I cried."

"What do you ask?"

Miriam repeats the sentence she prepares.

"That sounds like a question about an arrangement."

"It sounds like that when I say it here. In the room I sound like a baby who wants a turn."

Mama puts the list down.

Miriam wants her to say that Chaya is wrong. She also wants her to say that Miriam doesn't cry. Neither answer would describe the evening.

"Chaya stays calm," she says.

Mama looks at the glass still in Miriam's hand.

"Does a calm voice tell us how long she uses the desk?"



Miriam glances down.

"No."

"And does crying tell us that your request is unreasonable?"

That answer takes longer.

Chapter 3: 3. The trial she invents

The next evening, Miriam practices saying the sentence in the hall. Her eyes stay dry. Her voice sounds steady.

She tries it again, just to check.

By the fourth time, she is less interested in the desk than in proving she can discuss it without a tissue.

Chaya opens their bedroom door.

"Are you talking to yourself?"

"No."

Miriam hears the unnecessary lie as soon as it leaves her mouth.

"Yes. Practicing something."

"The desk?"

"Yes."

Chaya leans against the doorframe. "I don't want another argument tonight."



Miriam almost agrees to leave it. It is tempting to wait until she becomes the sort of person whose eyes never fill at the wrong time.

Instead, she asks Mama to help them talk after supper.

Not to decide before Chaya gets there. To help them look at the arrangement.

Chapter 4: 4. The kitchen table

At the table, Chaya explains that her new assignment takes longer than she expects. Miriam explains that she waits with her own books open on her bed.

"You can work there," Chaya says.

"Not the drawing part. It needs a flat table."

"You don't draw every night."

Miriam's throat tightens. She can feel the tears arriving. She presses the tissue beneath the edge of the table, where nobody can see it.

Mama notices her stop.

"Would you like a minute, or shall we keep going?"

Miriam looks at Chaya. Her sister's arms are folded, but her face isn't easy to read.

"A minute."

Nobody announces a winner during the minute.

Miriam drinks some water. She doesn't say she is fine.



When she is ready, she looks at her sister.

"I don't need the desk every night. I need to know when my turn starts on the nights I do."

A tear slips down her cheek. The sentence reaches the table anyway.

Chapter 5: 5. What the clock says

Mama asks them to describe the two late evenings, not every quarrel they can remember.

Chaya agrees that she goes past her time. She says she needs a longer turn on the nights before her assignment is due.

Miriam wants to say no immediately. Giving her more time might look as if the tears are a mistake Chaya can use.

Then she looks at the actual nights.

On one, Miriam doesn't need the desk. On the other, she has a drawing due too.

They make an arrangement that treats those nights differently. For the shared deadline, Mama offers the clear end of the dining-room table during the hour before supper. Miriam can use it then if she wants. The desk is hers afterward for the agreed half hour.



Chaya will tell her before beginning if she wants to ask for a change. A change needs an answer, not merely extra minutes.

It isn't everything Miriam first imagines. It gives her what she actually asks for: usable space and a turn she can plan around.

Chapter 6: 6. An answer, still

In their room, Chaya picks up the tissue box.

"I'll put this between the beds," she says.

Miriam feels a sharp little sting.

Chaya sees her face. "Not to make fun. It's on my side, and you keep reaching across."

"All right."

They put the box on the low cupboard. Miriam doesn't ask Chaya to promise never to sound impatient. Chaya doesn't ask her to promise never to cry.

On Thursday, Chaya asks for ten more minutes before her turn begins.

Miriam checks her work.

"Not tonight. I need to start on time."

Her voice trembles. Chaya looks disappointed.

"All right," she says.

Miriam's answer stays an answer.



Later, she sits at the desk with her drawing spread flat. A tissue lies beside the ruler. Neither one explains whether she is right about every disagreement.

For this evening, she has a place to work and a sister who puts her folder away when the clock reaches half past seven.