



The Red Pencil in Her Pocket

Every mistake in the room, a friend who stopped telling stories, and the difference between errors that matter and itches

For ages 12-15





Chapter 1

The Wrong Date

"Actually, it was 1948, not 1947."

Tehila said it before the poster paint had dried.

Mrs. Berger looked up from the class history display. Tehila was right - the date on the border was off by a year. It mattered; it went on the wall. The date was fixed, and Tehila felt the small warm satisfaction of a room made more accurate.

At lunch, Devora was telling a story about her aunt's shop.

"- and she sells a hundred rolls before nine in the morning -"

"She can't sell a hundred rolls before nine. The shop opens at eight."

Devora stopped. "It was an expression."





"It just doesn't make sense."

Devora finished her story in three sentences instead of ten, and the end, which was supposed to be funny, came out flat.

Tehila noticed. She didn't connect it to herself.

Chapter 2

The Smaller Room

By Thursday, Tehila's lunch table had a pattern.

Stories got shorter when she sat down. Baila started describing the plot of a book she was reading, saw Tehila listening, and said, "Never mind, I'll get it wrong anyway."

It was a joke, except Baila didn't quite smile.

That afternoon, her little sister was writing a letter at the kitchen table.





"It's 'Bubby and me,' not 'Bubby and I,'" Tehila said, leaning over.

Her sister put the pencil down and took the letter to her room.

Mama, wearing her gray tichel, watched this from the counter.

"Come here a minute," she said.

Chapter 3

The Sorting Question

"Was your sister's sentence hurting anyone?" Mama asked.

"It's wrong."

"I didn't ask if it was wrong. I asked who it was hurting."

Tehila opened her mouth and closed it.





"Some mistakes matter," Mama said. "The date on the display matters - it's going on the wall and people will learn from it. A safety rule matters. A mistake that changes what's fair matters. And then there are mistakes that just... itch. Bubby and me, in a letter to Bubby, who will love it either way."

"The itch is real."

"The itch is real," Mama agreed. "The question is whether scratching it costs more than it fixes."

Chapter 4

The Cost, Counted

That night, Tehila counted.

Devora's story, told flat. Baila's never mind. Her sister's letter, carried away to be finished alone. The book plot she'd never hear.





Every one of those conversations had contained a mistake she'd fixed. Every fix had cost something she hadn't meant to spend.

She had thought she was giving the room a gift - accuracy, free of charge.

Nobody had asked for it. That was the part she'd skipped. Devora hadn't asked. Baila hadn't asked. Her sister definitely hadn't asked.

Chapter 5

Letting One Go

On Friday, Devora was telling a story about the shop again.

"- and my uncle ate four bagels -"

Tehila knew the uncle in question. Four bagels was impossible. The number rose in her throat like a sneeze.





She let it go.

The story got better. It ended with the uncle asleep in a flour sack, which was certainly also exaggerated, and the whole table was laughing, and Tehila was laughing too, and the world did not split open.

It felt strange - like leaving a picture frame crooked for once.

It also felt, she admitted later, like putting down something heavy she hadn't needed to carry.

Chapter 6

The Ones That Matter

On Monday, Tehila spoke up twice.

Once, when a classmate copied a homework due date wrong - it mattered, the girl would have missed





the deadline. Tehila told her privately, and the girl was grateful.

Once, when a group dividing display costs made an addition error that would have left one girl paying double. That mattered too.

Both times, someone was actually helped.

The difference, Tehila realized, wasn't in the size of the mistake. It was in whether the person with the mistake was better off for the correction, or just smaller.

Chapter 7

The Apology

She found Baila at recess.

"Tell me the book plot," Tehila said.

"You'll tell me what I get wrong."





"I won't. And - I'm sorry about the other day. And the other other days. You tell good stories. I was treating them like worksheets."

Baila looked at her for a moment.

"The plot has a dragon," she said.

"I will believe every word about the dragon."

It was, Tehila thought, the easiest accuracy she had ever surrendered.

Chapter 8

The Pencil, Capped

The red pencil stayed in her pocket.

She still used it - on the poster, on the deadline, on the unfair addition, on her own essays most of all. Mrs. Berger said her eye for detail was a real strength when she aimed it at work.





Aim, Tehila thought, was the whole thing. A pencil pointed at the wall display was a tool. The same pencil pointed at a friend's story was just a sharp object.

On the walk home, Devora's uncle turned out to have eaten a fifth bagel, in the retelling.

Tehila didn't touch the pencil.

Some mistakes were the room's business. This one belonged to the story, and the story was better than the truth.

