GIVE ME A B

by

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Even before Sally stepped into the cubicle, Yetta Isaacs was ready to learn. She sat bolt upright, her wrinkled hands splayed across the primer, holding it open to the place.

Sally was itching to know why the dressmaker waited so many years to start her studies—in the twenties anyone might have bought low-heeled black oxfords like hers, but now, in 1948, no one under fifty thought of wearing them—Mr. Levy wouldn’t like her to pry. Instead of getting to the point, Sally asked, “How did you hear of the New World Academy?”

Mrs. Isaacs’ pale blue eyes widened behind her bifocals. “My neighbor told me. She saw an ad in the Freiheit. You know the ad?”

“No” was the wrong answer because Mr. Levy never wanted the pupils to find out that the tutors, all college girls like Sally, had no Yiddish and couldn’t read a Yiddish newspaper. He told them, “Any time a student wishes to converse in Yiddish, place a finger upon your lips and say, ‘We speak English here.’”

Mr. Levy had translated the primer into Yiddish and then transliterated the Yiddish into English characters, slipping the pages into loose-leaf notebooks which the tutors held beneath the worktables where the students couldn’t see.

“We’d better get on with our work,” Sally said.

Mr. Levy passed the cubicle right then and smiled approvingly. “Don’t waste the student’s time,” he always reminded the tutors. Sally wanted to stay on good terms with him. The job paid seventy cents an hour and kept her busy ten hours a week.

As Mrs. Isaacs read each sentence, Sally was careful to slip her forefinger down the notebook, line for line. Once she lost my place, and when the student asked the meaning of “He left the house,” she answered, “Die maydels klayde,” the girl’s dress.

While the tutors worked in their cubicles, Mr. Levy kept the books and signed up students from behind his large desk stained the same gloomy dark oak as our tables. The walls of his office, painted an institutional light green like the rest of the New World Academy, had only one decoration, a large reproduction of the Declaration of Independence.

“You’re quite patriotic,” Sally said during their first interview. The slim man looked at her sharply from behind his steel-rimmed spectacles, fastened the top button of his dark gray suit and continued to quiz her on uses of the conditional.

After hiring Sally, he said, “As a young immigrant, I studied accounting and English in night school. I did well, but many others did not. The problem lay in the classes. The brighter students could not move ahead quickly and the slower ones needed additional assistance. I decided to establish a school where students received individual attention. I chose the location carefully. Times Square—”

Sally thought of the whores, winos and pickpockets ten stories below and burst out, “But all the riffraff!”
The man nodded sagely. “Yes, but New World Academy is easy to reach. No matter which subway the student uses, all lines stop at Forty-Second Street.”

After Sally had been tutoring Mrs. Isaacs for seven weeks, the woman was still struggling through the chapter where Mrs. Smith sent her son Tommy to the market. Putting a finger under each word, Mrs. Isaacs bent over the book and recited “...corn, bread...” She looked up. “The boy buys bread in a grocery? That rotten white bread I wouldn’t give an enemy? They must be goyim.”

Sally stifled a laugh and tapped the text. “Just keep on reading.”

Mrs. Isaacs bent closer to the book. “Milk, raisins, bah-con--”

“Stop there. The word is bacon.”

“Bacon,” Mrs. Isaacs repeated.

“Do you know what bacon is?” Sally said. Mrs. Isaacs nodded. Sally pushed back from the table. “Use the word in a sentence.”

Mrs. Isaacs screwed up her face in concentration. “I’m bakin’ the bread.”

Sally bit her lip. “That’s not right. Are you sure you know what bacon is?” Mrs. Isaacs shook her head. Sally crouched over the table and whispered “Pork.”

“Aha! I knew it. Goyim.” Mrs. Isaacs looked triumphant. Sally pointed to the book. Mrs. Isaacs shrugged. “So okay, the little shaygetz shops for his mother. He’s a good boy. Like my son.” She fumbled in her purse, brought out a tired black leather wallet and flipped it open to a snapshot. “Here.”

Sally glanced at a picture of a man in his early thirties. “Nice. Let’s read.”

Two weeks later, Mrs. Isaacs was still stumbling through the shopping list. Why couldn’t the woman learn? She wasn’t stupid. Sally went to the college library and consulted books on teaching slow readers.

The next time Mrs. Isaacs came into the New World Academy, Sally waited until Mr. Levy, pale and perspiring, rushed to the men’s room down the hall, put her hands over the primer and told the older woman, “I think you’d do better with a book about adults living in the city.”

Several reminders later, Mrs. Isaacs brought in a primer that mirrored New York life, but she still inched ahead, learning little from one lesson to the next. In the meantime, enrollment at the New World Academy slumped, and her work week dropped from ten hours to five. Sally needed more pocket money.

The next time Mrs. Isaacs came in for her lesson, Sally waited until Mr. Levy rushed to the men’s room before saying, Sally said, “You’re not learning.”

The older woman drew back. “I need you to tell me I’m not learning? I know.”

“But you can.”

Mrs. Isaacs shook her head. “My grandson Jeffrey, he can learn. He’s only six and already he’s reading better than me, and I’m fifty-seven. “She sighed. “That’s why I started here. Jeffrey shouldn’t think his bubbe is a dummy.”

“All you need is a different method,” Sally assured her.

“No, I’m a dummy. Mr. Levy made up the method, and he’s an educated man. He showed me his diploma.”

“What diploma?”

She looked incredulous. “You never saw the one on the wall behind his desk?”

So that’s why Mr. Levy put up the Declaration of Independence. “You’re not a dummy. You just need a different technique, but Mr. Levy won’t let me use one.”
Mrs. Isaacs drew back. “So what can I do?”
“Let me teach you privately. In your own home. You won’t need to make the long trip from the Bronx to 42nd Street.”
“No schlepping from the Bronx. Hm.”
Sally warmed to the attack. “It will cost less money.”
Mrs. Isaacs leaned forward. “How less money?”
“Here you pay seven dollars an hour. I’ll charge only five. Twice a week, only ten dollars.”
Mrs. Isaacs drew a worn piece of paper from her purse. “My address for you to copy. Take the Pelham train to Elder Avenue. When you’re on the street and want to find my house, ask. Someone will tell. Come next Thursday at four.”
Sally was thrilled. She would earn more money in two hours with Mrs. Isaacs as in ten at the New World Academy.
They met in the kitchen. Mrs. Isaacs gestured to a plate of cookies on the table.
“Take. From my house no one should go hungry.”
Sally bit into one. “Delicious. Now let’s get to work. What do you want to do?”
“Enough with Tommy and white bread. I want to write the cleaning woman she shouldn’t come.” Sally must have looked perplexed for Mrs. Isaacs continued, “I don’t have so many customers I couldn’t clean.”
“Why don’t you just tell her not to come any more?”
“Say it to her face? I couldn’t. She’s a nice woman, working for me five years.”
Sally tore a sheet of paper from her loose-leaf book. “Let’s begin with the date.”
Mrs. Isaacs rummaged in a cupboard drawer and came up with a pencil. She looked at Sally expectantly. “The date,” Sally said, tapping the paper.
“So what’s the date?”
“March thirtieth.”
“How do I write March?”
Sally said, “You begin with a capital m, and then you write a-r-c-h.” Mrs. Isaacs sat motionless. “You do remember how to form an m, don’t you?”
“Remind me.”
Sally took up the pencil and, using her best Palmer script, formed the letter. “Now you do it.” Sally pushed the paper back to Mrs. Isaacs.
The dressmaker picked up the pencil and, breathing heavily, copied the letter. When she was finished, she handed the paper back to her.
“This is an n, Mrs. Isaacs. One hill. See, there are two hills in the m I made. You have to add another hill.”
Once again Mrs. Isaacs took up the pencil. Looking constantly at her example, she slowly shaped the letter. “There. Two hills.”
“Good. Now do an a.”
“I forget.” I made out an a, and Mrs. Isaacs copied it. The hour was up, and we had gone no further than the date. Sally told her to practice until the next lesson.
The next week Mrs. Isaacs brought out a blank sheet of paper and, looking confident, began to write March 30.
Sally stayed her hand. “Today is April fourth.”
“Oy vey. So learn me April fourth.”
“You know how to make an a, don’t you?” Mrs. Isaacs sighed. “Yes, you do.” Sally pointed to the a in March. “See? Here’s an a. Now write the a for me.”

Breathing heavily and glancing at the earlier date, Mrs. Isaacs slowly formed a lower-case a.

“That’s a small a. April is a proper noun, the name of a month. We need a capital.” Sally demonstrated.

Mrs. Isaacs formed a capital a. “So now?” Sally wrote out the rest of April. Mrs. Isaacs spent the remaining time copying it.

At the next lesson Sally had only to demonstrate a six, and the date was complete.

“Now for the letter itself. First, we write dear. You do remember how, don’t you?”

Mrs. Isaacs sat motionless. Sally didn’t wait for her to say she didn’t, but traced the letters onto the page. Mrs. Isaacs copied the letters and promised to practice.

Sally was happy to leave. These lessons with Mrs. Isaacs were trying her patience. She seemed to learn so slowly. There must be a better way to teach her.

Once again, Sally pored over texts. There were as many recipes for dealing with foreign-born students as there were authors. One technique would have had Mrs. Isaacs memorize words that rhymed, like bay, day and pay; another method involved looking at pictures and learning the words to go with them. Only one approach struck a chord: relate the new language to the old one and point out what the two had in common.

The next lesson began well. Mrs. Isaacs wrote the date, hesitating only on the number. She even managed the word dear. Sally beamed. Then she sat back and waited for praise.

“That’s terrific, Mrs. Isaacs. Now you have to add the cleaning woman’s name. What is it?”

“Betty.”

“Which letter do we begin with?”

Mrs. Isaacs smiled slily. “I should tell the teacher?”


Mrs. Isaacs looked confused for a minute. Then she brightened, said "aha" and made a lower-case f.

“No, Mrs. Isaacs, not an f, buh.”

“Don’t buh me. Tell me what to do.”

“You make a b, Mrs. Isaacs. Think of Yiddish. Think of Hebrew. This is like bais in Yiddish, beth in Hebrew.”

Mrs. Isaacs burst into tears. “Who knows from beth? My family was poor, and they put me to work when I was eight. I never learned beth.”

Sally was stunned. “How can that be? Jews revere schooling--”

Mrs. Isaacs shook her head. “In my family they only sent the boys. I didn’t learn then and I’m not learning now. I just remember the words you learned me.”

As the tears kept coming, Sally patted Mrs. Isaacs’ hand and stroked her hair. Sally felt helpless and, more than anything else, wanted to escape the older woman’s grief and shame. Sally hoped that someone else, someone with more skill and experience, could help the dressmaker realize that letters equal sounds and b was less elusive than she thought.