

I'm Fine

Chapter 1: The Girl Who Runs Things

If a baby is born in the neighborhood, Tzilla knows by nine in the morning, and by nine-fifteen there is a chart.

Meals for the new mother, two weeks, name and day and what you're bringing, no three kugels in a row. Notes for the girl who missed a week of school - Tzilla invented the chain, one girl photocopies, one girl delivers, nobody does both. Rides for the seventh-grade production mothers. The gemach list for Shabbos guests. Tzilla is a tenth-grader, and her mother says she was born forty years old - and means it as a compliment, mostly.

She is not showing off. That is the true thing about her, and everyone knows it: she likes the work itself, the pan in her hands, the list settling into order. She likes being the person you call.

In Teves, on a wet Tuesday, she comes down the front steps of the school with her bag and three other girls' photocopies, misses the last step, and goes down hard on her right ankle.

By Thursday the doctor has said the words: bad sprain, crutches, six weeks, no weight on it, and elevating, which is a word that turns out to mean sitting still.

Tzilla nods at all of it. She is already reorganizing the meal chart in her head, because with six weeks of sitting she can finally get ahead of everything.

She has understood nothing.

Chapter 2: I'm Fine

The first week is a master class in a two-word sentence.

Can I carry your bag? I'm fine. Do you want the elevator key? I'm fine - the steps are good exercise for the other leg. Should the girls bring over the notes? I'm fine, honestly, it's just a sprain. Her mother, at the door with her coat on: Let me drive you. I'm FINE, Ma, the bus comes to the corner.

She is not fine, in ways she files under Not The Point. The bus is a catastrophe on crutches, and she arrives at school with her arms shaking. Carrying her own bag means hopping, and hopping means the photocopies scatter twice. On Wednesday she insists on supervising the soup delivery for the new baby on Cedar Street, because the chart is hers, and a container slides off her arm and soup goes across a neighbor's front walk, and she stands there on one leg, in the cold, apologizing to a walk.

The girls keep asking. She keeps saying the sentence. It is such a small sentence, she thinks to herself. Two words. It costs nothing.

She does not yet know what it costs.

Chapter 3: The Chart on the Floor

It is Chaykie who finally stops asking, and somehow that is worse.

Chaykie is her best friend since they were nine - the one who carries the other half of every chart, who knows where the gemach list lives, who has spent three years being the person Tzilla does everything with. For one week she asks, every day, and gets the sentence. The second week she stops asking. She still sits with Tzilla. She still laughs at her jokes. But something in her has stepped back a pace, the way you step back from a door that keeps being closed in your face, and Tzilla feels the pace like a draft.

On the second Friday it comes out, and it comes out sideways, the way true things do.

The class has made a chart - Tzilla's own format, the girls learned it from her - with meals and notes and rides for Tzilla's family for the next two weeks. They present it proudly, a little nervously, thirty names already signed.

And Tzilla, who means to be gracious, says: "That's so sweet. Really. But we're fine - my mother has it under control. Give it to someone who really needs it."

The room goes quiet in a particular way. Chaykie picks the chart up off the desk, folds it once, and puts it in her bag, and says, "Okay," in a voice with nothing left in it, and that is the moment Tzilla first wonders whether the sentence is worth what it buys.

Chapter 4: The Audience

She asks her mother that night, straight out, because her mother is the kind you can ask: "Why did the room go quiet? I was being GRACIOUS."

Her mother thinks about it longer than Tzilla expects.

"Were you?" she says finally. "Or were you declining thirty gifts in one sentence, in front of the thirty people who wrapped them?" She lets that sit. "Tzillala, listen to me. You have given Chaykie three years of everything - rides, notes, soup, your whole self. This month she offered you one bag, one ride, one arm on the stairs, and you handed her back two words. A person you never let give you anything stops being your friend, you know. She becomes your audience. She watches you be wonderful. That's all that's left for her."

"Accepting feels like taking," Tzilla says, and her voice is smaller than she likes.

"It IS taking," her mother says. "That's why it's hard. Giving keeps you in charge - you choose, you arrange, you're the capable one. Receiving puts you in somebody's hands. For a girl who runs things, that's the most expensive thing there is." She kisses the top of Tzilla's head. "It's also the only thing that lets people love you back. Think about which one you want your friends for."

Tzilla lies in bed with her ankle on a pillow, and thinks to herself: it was never humility. It was control wearing humility's coat. The sentence was never small. It was a wall, and I was calling it a window.

Chapter 5: One Real Ask

She decides to treat it like a skill, because skills are what she trusts, and skills have reps.

Rule: one real ask a day. Not a dramatic one. A real one - the kind that costs the two words their meaning.

Day one: she lets Chaykie carry her bag, and says thank you, and does not say the sentence, and the hallway does not fall down. Day two: she calls the notes chain - HER chain - and asks the twelfth-grade girl to add her to the delivery list, and the girl says "Finally!" so warmly that Tzilla has to look out the window. Day three is the hard one: she asks the neighbor across the street - a mother of three who drives her own daughter to the same school every morning - for a ride, out loud, with her mouth, and the neighbor acts like Tzilla has given HER something, which is so backwards that Tzilla thinks about it the whole ride.

Each ask weighs more than the bag ever did. She writes that in her planner, because it is true and she does not want to un-know it later: giving costs effort. Asking costs pride. They are not the same currency, and she has been rich in one and bankrupt in the other her whole life.

The chart comes back out of Chaykie's bag. It is a little creased from being folded. Thirty names become thirty-one, because Tzilla signs her own family at the top - receiving first, the way you'd frame the first dollar of a business.

Chapter 6: What the Givers Look Like

The thing that astonishes her is the joy.

She had imagined receiving as a drain on people - her needs, siphoning their days. Instead the class moves into the chart like a room they'd been locked out of. Girls fight, gently, over who gets to bring the supper. The twelfth-grader who does the notes starts adding jokes in the margins, because now the notes are FOR somebody. Chaykie stops stepping back. She steps all the way in - bag, arm, stairs, the whole unglamorous daily cargo of a friend on crutches - and she is happier than Tzilla has seen her in months. It turns out an ask is a kind of trust - you hand somebody the chance to matter to you. And Tzilla understands, watching her friend, that she is looking at herself. At what SHE must look like to other people when they finally let her in.

So this is what I look like from the other side, she thinks to herself. No wonder I like it. The wonder is that I never let anyone else have it.

It spreads, the way these things spread. Her mother, who learned the sentence before Tzilla did, lets the neighbor's daughter come in and fold laundry on Thursday, and is startled by her own Thursday's new lightness. The two of them don't discuss it. Some things you just watch happen in your own house and quietly record.

Chapter 7: The Handover

The real test is not the bag or the rides. It is the meal chart - the first one, hers, the thing that made her her.

The new-mother season does not pause for her ankle, and by the third week there are two charts running and a third needed, and Tzilla cannot drive, cannot carry, cannot stand in anyone's kitchen organizing pans. Old Tzilla would have run it from a chair, calling instructions down a hallway, supervising every pan by proxy.

New Tzilla does the thing that costs more: she hands it over for real.

She teaches Chaykie the whole system in one evening - the kugel spacing rule, the no-one-does-two-days-running rule, the call-the-mother-first rule - and then she does the hardest rep of the whole six weeks: she stops. She does not check. When a pan gets forgotten on the second Thursday, she lets Chaykie find it and fix it, because a mistake fixed by the new owner teaches more than a supervisor preventing it ever could, and because the chart was never really hers. It was the neighborhood's. She was just the one holding it.

"You're not even a little bit worried?" Chaykie asks, half-teasing, after the charts all close out fine.

"I was," Tzilla says. "Then I watched you do it. Now I'm something better than worried." She thinks about it. "Useful in a new way. I'll get back to you on what it's called."

Chapter 8: Off the Crutches

The six weeks end the way winter weeks do - suddenly, on an ordinary morning, the doctor says walk, and she walks.

Old Tzilla is waiting at the first doorway, of course, with the sentence loaded. The neighbor across the street pulls up alongside the bus stop that first morning back, her daughter already buckled in back, window down: "Ride?" And Tzilla's mouth opens to say the two words, because her ankle is fine now and the sentence is technically true, and she hears her mother: think about which one you want your friends for.

"Yes," she says. "Thanks."

It is not about the ride. Her ankle could have done the bus standing on its head. It is about the neighbor driving away a little taller, the way givers do, and about Tzilla learning to be as good at that taller-making as she is at soup.

At school, she finds Chaykie at the lockers, and she does not make a speech, because speeches are not her currency. She hands her a folded page - a fresh chart, clean, for the baby due next month one street over, two names already signed at the top: TZILLA and CHAYKIE, co-coordinators, because some things you don't hand back once you've learned to share them.

"Split it with me?" Tzilla says.

And Chaykie, who has been waiting three years and six weeks to be asked for exactly this, takes the page and says, "Finally."

Eight activities

Activity 1: Remember the story

1. What are three things Tzilla runs before her accident?
2. What does "I'm fine" cost her in the first week - name two concrete prices.
3. What does her mother say about giving, control, and audience?
4. What is her one-real-ask rule, and what are her first three asks?

Activity 2: Fact or guess

1. Tzilla accepts the elevator key in the first week. Fact / Guess
2. The class's chart for Tzilla's family already has thirty names signed. Fact / Guess
3. Tzilla keeps checking the meal charts after handing them to Chaykie. Fact / Guess
4. Her mother eventually accepts help herself. Fact / Guess

Activity 3: Think and write

1. "Giving keeps you in charge. Receiving puts you in somebody's hands." Why is receiving more expensive for a girl who runs things?
2. "Giving costs effort. Asking costs pride." Explain the two currencies in your own words.
3. The neighbor drives away "a little taller" after Tzilla accepts the ride. How does accepting a gift give something to the giver?

Activity 4: Apply it - Hindi's recital

1. Hindi is organizing the grade's Chanukah recital alone and says no to every offer of help - not from pride, she says, but because "it's faster alone." (a) Using the story, name two things her "no" is really costing, and (b) write the first one-real-ask she could make tomorrow.
2. Tzilla says receiving is a skill with reps. Why does treating it as a skill work better than deciding to "be more humble"?
3. Think of someone who never lets anyone give them anything. What might they be protecting?

Activity 5: Scrambled words (from the story)

1. KSA
2. NIEF
3. DREI
4. TOSEN

Activity 6: Word work

Match each word to its meaning from the story.

1. reps
 2. audience
 3. handover
 4. creased
- a. giving the whole job, not just the work b. folded - the chart that came back out of the bag c. small repeated practices of a skill d. someone who watches but is never let in

Activity 7: Word search

Find the eight words hidden in the grid. All words run left to right.

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C R U T C H E S F Y
F I N E L M N O R S
A S K E A I Q Z X J
C A R R Y Y G H U P
C H A R T S T C D E
R I D E X J K V W B
N O T E S P L M N O
T R U S T E A I Q Z
X J K V W B F Y G H
U P L M N O R S T C
  
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The eight words: CRUTCHES, FINE, ASK, CARRY, CHART, RIDE, NOTES, TRUST.

Activity 8: Your turn - one real ask

Write five lines: name one thing you currently refuse help with (and the sentence you use to refuse it), then script your own "one real ask" for this week - who you will ask, for exactly what, and what you will say instead of "I'm fine" when they say yes.