

The Borrowed Desk

Chapter 1: The Walkthrough

The school secretary is leaving for a week, and she is leaving the way she does everything - organized, unhurried, and thirty minutes later than she planned.

"Her mother is having an operation," the principal tells Malki on Friday morning, in the little office off the front hall. "You'll cover the desk during your free periods, the way we discussed. She wants to walk you through it herself."

Malki has run messages for this office for a year. She knows where the late-slip book lives, which drawer holds the bandages, how the dismissal binder is arranged. She assumes the walkthrough will take ten minutes.

It takes the whole lunch period.

The secretary opens the late-slip book and turns it sideways. "The slips are filed by exit door, not alphabetically." She points. "North door first, then the side door, then the main door. A girl signs out, I write the slip here, and when her ride comes, the slip is already where the door is."

Malki looks at the book. By door. It seems obviously worse.

"And the message pad stays on the left of the desk, not the right," the secretary goes on. "The teachers stand on the left when they come in. The supply list is taped inside the cabinet in pencil, because things move and pencil erases."

She says it all pleasantly, as if these are facts and not quirks. Malki writes nothing down, because she is sure she will remember.

"You'll do fine," the secretary says, gathering her bag. Then she stops, the way people stop when they are deciding whether to say the true thing. "The desk has its ways. You'll find them. When you find one you don't like - and you will - write it down for me instead of fixing it, would you? I'd rather come back to my own desk and a list of ideas than to a better desk I don't recognize."

Malki promises, the way you promise things you have not yet been tempted about.

Malki thinks to herself that the desk's ways could use some improvement, and that a week is a long time to leave a system unimproved.

Chapter 2: The Improvement

Monday is quiet. Malki signs out six girls, bands one scraped knee, and finds the music teacher's missing note in under a minute because the message pad is exactly where the teachers stand, exactly as advertised.

By her last free period, she has time, and the late-slip book is bothering her.

Alphabetical is how books work. She is careful about it - she copies the month's slips onto fresh pages, names in neat order, and it takes her forty minutes, and the result looks the way a book should look. The book makes sense.

She considers redoing the supply list in pen - the pencil strikes her as an admission of defeat - but the slips have eaten her free period.

On her way out she feels, she admits to herself, a small glow. The desk has been running one way for years, and in one afternoon she has made it better.

She does not think about why a woman who is so careful would file slips by door.

Chapter 3: North Door, Second Entry

Tuesday at eleven, a mother arrives at the front hall, apologetic and rushed. "I'm Goldi's mother - she's in the ninth grade, dentist. She signed out at the north door?"

Malki opens the late-slip book to G. There is no Goldi. She checks again, the whole G section, then the whole book, while the mother checks her watch and Malki's face heats up. The slip exists - the girl signed it herself, the school way, the full double name - and Malki is scanning G for a name that is sitting in B.

Right now there is a line forming.

The ninth-grade teacher, passing with a stack of workbooks, stops. "Try the door," she says mildly. "The book goes by door. People always say which door they parked at."

She finds the slip in four seconds, under north door, second entry: Brucha Goldi R., signed out 10:50. She hands the book back without any particular expression, which is somehow worse than a look.

"The doors," she says, once mother and daughter have gone, "are because of the buses. At three-thirty, every slip has to be where the crowd is. Nobody has time for alphabet at three-thirty. She set it up the year the dismissal got bad."

Malki spends her next free period copying the late slips back, door by door, onto fresh pages. It takes longer than the alphabetizing did.

Chapter 4: The Blue Notebook

That evening, Malki gets out a notebook - a plain one, with a blue cover - and writes at the top of the first page: THINGS THE DESK COULD DO BETTER.

Under it she writes her ideas. The supply list could be typed. The bandage drawer could be labeled. The dismissal binder could have tabs.

Then she closes the notebook and puts it in her bag, and makes herself a rule, said out loud to her bedroom ceiling because rules said out loud hold better: for the rest of the week, the desk runs the secretary's way. Every idea goes in the notebook. None of it goes on the desk.

"The desk isn't mine," she tells the ceiling. "I'm keeping it for someone."

Her sister, brushing her teeth across the hall, asks who she is talking to.

"A very sensible person," Malki says, and writes one more line in the notebook: find out WHY first, and puts a box around it.

Chapter 5: The Net

Wednesday tests her rule, and the rule holds.

A girl in the eleventh grade is signed out for a family simcha, and at two o'clock her note is nowhere - not in the binder, not on the pad. A year of running messages has taught Malki the desk's redundancies, the ones that used to seem like clutter: the secretary initials every dismissal note and writes the same initials, tiny, in the corner of that day's late-slip page. Malki checks today's page. The initials are there, dated and timed.

The note turns up in the eleventh-grade teacher's mailbox, where the girl herself was supposed to deliver it. The initials are what let Malki say, with a steady voice, "the note was approved at nine-forty; it's walking around the building; you're fine to go at two."

It is the one moment all week she feels the desk the way the secretary must feel it - not a pile of quirks but a net, every knot tied by some afternoon she never saw.

The girl's aunt, waiting by the main door, says, "The office here is very on top of things," and Malki nearly laughs. On top of things is a book filed by door and initials in a corner, and it works, she thinks to herself, because it grew out of the three-thirty crowd and not out of someone's idea of how a book should look.

She adds a line to the notebook that night: the clutter is load-bearing. She is not sure she has the words right, but she knows what she means.

Chapter 6: The Reasonable Face

Thursday brings the real temptation, and it arrives wearing a reasonable face.

The history teacher comes in for a bandage and stays to chat. "While you're running the place," she says, "you should move the dismissal binder to the front counter. Teachers have to lean across the desk for it. She's had it in that drawer forever and nobody knows why."

It is a genuinely good idea, and a week ago Malki would have moved the binder before the teacher finished the sentence.

"I'll write it down for her," Malki says. "It's her drawer."

"She'll never change it," the teacher predicts, cheerfully, and leaves with her bandage.

Malki writes it in the notebook - move dismissal binder to counter? (history teacher asks) - and discovers, writing it, that she no longer minds the secretary never changing it. That is the thing about the notebook: the ideas keep, she thinks to herself. An idea in a notebook is not lost. It is just waiting for the person whose idea it has to be.

She underlines that one twice, because it is the first line in the notebook that is not about the desk.

Chapter 7: The Handback

Friday, the secretary comes in before the first bell to take her desk back, and Malki hands it over the way you hand over a borrowed coat - brushed, buttoned, with nothing in the pockets that wasn't there before.

Then she hands over the notebook. "I didn't change anything," she says. "But I wrote down everything I wanted to change."

The secretary reads the whole list, standing, while the hall fills up outside. Malki watches her face and cannot read it.

"The bandage drawer," the secretary says finally. "Labeled. Yes. I should have done that in September." She flips a page. "The dismissal binder on the counter - no." She says it without dismissing it. "The counter is where parents stand. The binder has addresses in it. The drawer is why the drawer." She looks up. "That's the kind of thing you only know if you were here the year a grandfather read a class list over someone's shoulder."

Malki thinks of the late slips and nods before she can stop herself.

"By door," the secretary says, watching her. "You found out about the doors."

"Tuesday," Malki admits. "The hard way."

The secretary laughs - not at her, Malki is nearly sure - and tears the bandage-drawer line out of the notebook with great ceremony and sticks it to the cabinet. "The rest stays in the book," she says. "Come back and argue for them next week. Some of them will win."

Malki picks up her bag and then puts it down again, because there is one more true thing to say: "I fixed something Monday. By Tuesday I had un-fixed it. That is the whole story, but you should know it happened."

"I know," the secretary says, patting the late-slip book, and does not explain how she knows, and Malki decides she is allowed to keep that mystery.

Chapter 8: The Recipe Cards

That night, Malki's mother asks how the week was, and Malki says, "Educational," which makes her father look over his paper.

After supper she does one thing.

She goes to the kitchen drawer where her mother keeps the recipe cards - filed, famously and maddeningly, by no system anyone else can detect, not alphabetical, not by food type, not by anything - and she takes out the card she moved two weeks ago, when she was looking for the honey cake and decided, in passing, that the cards would make more sense her way.

Her mother has been looking for that honey cake card for two weeks - she said so twice, puzzled. Malki realizes where it is all at once, standing at the drawer, and is briefly very glad her mother is in the other room.

She puts the card back where her mother had it - between the kugel and the salmon, which is apparently where honey cake lives - she now suspects those are the two cards her mother makes most, the landmarks she navigates by.

Then she gets out her blue notebook, opens to a fresh page, and writes: ask about the recipe cards.

She underlines it once. Some of them, she thinks to herself, will win.

Eight activities

Activity 1: Remember the story

1. How are the late slips filed, and what does Malki do to them on Monday?
2. What happens on Tuesday when a mother comes for early pickup?
3. What rule does Malki make for herself, and what goes in the blue notebook?
4. What does the secretary decide about the dismissal binder, and why?

Activity 2: Fact or guess

1. The late-slip book is organized alphabetically when Malki arrives. Fact / Guess
2. Malki re-alphabetizes the late slips on Monday. Fact / Guess
3. The teacher says the door order exists because of dismissal crowds. Fact / Guess
4. The secretary refuses to consider any of Malki's ideas. Fact / Guess

Activity 3: Think and write

1. Malki's alphabetizing was neat, careful, and wrong. What was missing from her thinking?
2. "The clutter is load-bearing." What does Malki mean? Give an example from the story.
3. The history teacher says, "She'll never change it." Why does that stop bothering Malki?

Activity 4: Apply it - Tirza's week on the chore wheel

Malki's rule is: run the borrowed system the owner's way; write every improvement idea down for the owner instead of enacting it.

1. (a) Tirza borrows her camp bunk's chore wheel for one week while the bunk head is away. She sees three things she would change. Under Malki's rule, what does she do on day one, and what does she do with the three ideas? (b) The chore wheel has a rule Tirza thinks is silly: the

garbage person also stacks the chairs. What does the late-slip episode suggest Tirza should do before touching that rule?

2. Malki says, "An idea in a notebook is not lost. It is just waiting for the person whose idea it has to be." Explain in your own words.

3. When is it right to ignore Malki's rule and fix a borrowed system immediately?

Activity 5: Scrambled words (from the story)

1. LISPS
2. RINDEB
3. REWARD
4. RECOUNT

Activity 6: Word work

Match each word to its meaning from the story.

1. redundancy a. to make something into law or action
2. load-bearing b. carrying real weight; holding something up
3. enact c. an extra backup that seems unnecessary until it saves you
4. landmark d. a fixed point you navigate by

Activity 7: Word search

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

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S L I P S V W B F Y
N O T E B O O K R S
B I N D E R Q Z X J
C O U N T E R H U P
D O O R R S T C D E
D R A W E R K V W B
I N I T I A L S N O
B A N D A G E 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: SLIPS, NOTEBOOK, BINDER, COUNTER, DOOR, DRAWER, INITIALS, BANDAGE.

Activity 8: Your turn - a system that isn't yours

Think of one system in your life that belongs to someone else - a family kitchen, a class job, a club's way of doing things. Write five lines: what you would change, whose it is, and what you would want to learn before changing it.