

The Clean No

Chapter 1: The Ask

The shul's youth director catches Sara-Lee after the girls' group on a Tuesday, and she does not waste words.

"The head counselor graduates in June. I want you to take the group for next term - planning, running, the whole thing. You're the only one I'm asking." She smiles. "Think about it. Not too long."

Sara-Lee walks home with the compliment sitting warm in her chest, the way it is supposed to, and by the corner it has started to itch.

She tries the term on, the way you try on a coat two sizes small. Sunday planning, an hour, if nothing runs over - and things run over. Tuesday nights at the shul. Being the address for twelve girls and their mothers and their birthday weeks and their fights. She loves that group. She has loved it since eighth grade, when the head counselor then - a twelfth-grader with endless patience - made her feel like the room had been waiting for her. That is exactly the problem. She knows what the job looks like when somebody does it with a full tank, and the girls should have THAT, not the version that comes in already tired.

Because she can already hear the term the way it would actually sound. Eleventh-grade finals. The tzedakah project she already runs, which eats two evenings a week and deserves them. Her little brothers on Thursdays. The group deserves a head who shows up with a full tank, and Sara-Lee knows her own gauge: the needle is not near full.

The honest sentence is right there: I can't give it what it needs. It is six words. It feels like pushing someone down the front steps.

Chapter 2: The Shape of a Fake No

At supper, she practices out loud, and what comes out first is not the honest sentence.

"I could say I have a thing on Tuesdays," she tells her mother. "Or that we're busy that whole season. Something general."

"Something untrue," her mother says, passing the salad. Her father looks up from his soup but says nothing, which in this house means keep going, we are listening.

"Something KIND," Sara-Lee says. "A real no is so - flat. An excuse has padding on it."

Her mother considers this. "An excuse is a loan," she says finally. "It makes today softer and next month harder, and you're still paying it off when you've forgotten what it bought." She says it mildly, the way she says most things that turn out to be load-bearing.

Sara-Lee pokes her chicken. "Can I tell her next Wednesday?" she says, to the air. That part, at least, is honest: she has not said yes, and she has not said no, and the youth director gave her room.

Chapter 3: The Interest Comes Due

On Monday she gets to watch somebody else's loan come due, and it is not fun to watch.

A classmate has been dodging the trip committee for two weeks. "I can't do Thursdays," she told them, with a face full of regret. "Family thing. Every Thursday, all year."

On Monday, the committee chair announces, pleased, that they have moved the planning meetings to Wednesday so she can make it. And the classmate - Sara-Lee watches it happen in real time - says, "Oh. Wednesdays are actually -" and stops, because the well is dry, because you cannot have a family thing every day of the week, and in the small silence everybody at the table does the arithmetic and politely pretends not to.

She ends up on the committee. She does the work sulkily and badly, which is worse than not doing it - late lists, half-made signs, a face that says she is serving a sentence. The chair stops assigning her anything that matters, quietly, the way you stop lending to somebody who returns things dented. Nobody says a word about the family thing. Everybody remembers it.

And the chair, who is not stupid, will never ask her first again.

The excuse bought her two soft weeks, Sara-Lee thinks to herself, and cost her the next two years of being asked. That is a terrible interest rate.

Chapter 4: The Model

On Tuesday night there is a knock at the kitchen door - the dinner committee's new chair, returning a serving spoon and making her yearly ask in person - and Sara-Lee, doing dishes, hears the whole thing.

It is a big ask. Sara-Lee knows because her mother chaired the dinner two years ago and has been asked every year since, and every year Sara-Lee has wondered how you turn down something that big without making it weird.

Here is how her mother does it. Sara-Lee slows down on the platter she is drying, and listens with her whole head.

"I can't take it on this year," she says, warmly, without a pause to search. "It would get the version of me that's left over, and the dinner deserves better than that. Ask me next year - I mean that, it's not a brush-off."

Then she listens a moment and laughs. "Then I'm in good company. Put me down for the raffle table on the night - one table, one night, that I can give with a whole heart."

She closes the door and catches Sara-Lee staring.

"That's it?" Sara-Lee says. "No excuse? No 'we might be away'?"

"There's nothing wrong with my reason," her mother says, drying her hands. "So I don't need to hide it inside a better-sounding one. The reason IS the respectable version." She hangs up the towel. "And I gave them the piece I could actually do well. A no with a real yes inside it is a whole sentence. A no by itself can be one too - but if you have a true yes, offer it."

Chapter 5: The Gauge

Sara-Lee goes to her room and does the thing she should have done at the corner, which is to count.

Not her feelings - her hours. She makes four columns on the back of a math sheet, because feelings lie and arithmetic mostly doesn't. Finals: what they take, and this is the term they take double. The tzedakah project: two evenings, and it is hers and she is not putting it down - forty families are counting on a system she built and nobody else fully knows. Thursdays: brothers, non-negotiable, her mother works late. Shabbos: off the table, obviously and gladly. What is left, honestly, on a tired week in February, for twelve eighth-grade girls who deserve somebody's best?

The answer is the same answer the gauge gave her on the walk home. What is left is the left-over version. The group would get the scraps of her - late plans, borrowed ideas, a head who is counting minutes - and she would spend the term feeling guilty about a thing she volunteered for, which is the most useless guilt there is.

She writes the honest sentence on an index card, because it is six words and she does not trust herself not to pad it: I can't give it what it needs.

Under it she writes her mother's second line: the piece I CAN do. She thinks for a minute and writes that too.

Chapter 6: Wednesday

"I can't give it what it needs," Sara-Lee says. "Not the whole thing, not this term. If I take it, the group gets what's left over of me, and the girls deserve the real version."

The youth director is quiet for a second, and Sara-Lee's stomach does the thing stomachs do.

"Do you know," the director says, "that is the first straight answer I have gotten all month? Everyone else says yes and vanishes, or gives me a reason I can tell is a reason-shaped pillow." She taps her pen. "All right. I won't pretend I'm not sorry. What CAN you give it?"

"The handover," Sara-Lee says, because she has it written down. "Pick the new head now - whoever you were going to ask second - and I'll run the first two meetings of the term with her. Two meetings, fully planned, and then I'm out clean, and she's not starting from a cold room."

The director looks at her for a long moment. "That," she says, "is a better offer than half the yeses I get. Done."

Chapter 7: The Handover

The rest of it goes the way honest things go, which is: plainer than feared, and better.

The director asks the tenth-grader she had almost asked first, who says yes - an actual yes, with room in it. You can hear the difference, Sara-Lee thinks, the way you can hear the difference between a full glass and a half one when you set it down. Sara-Lee plans the two meetings the way she would have planned a year: an opener, a game that is not babyish, a fifteen-minute chevruta-style discussion that actually lands. At the second meeting, she puts the new head up front for the second half and stands at the back, and watches the girls adjust in about ninety seconds, the way girls do. Afterward the new head walks her to the door with her notebook full, and says, "Nobody's ever handed me something this - ready." Sara-Lee nearly says it was nothing, and then doesn't, because it wasn't nothing; it was exactly the two meetings she promised, done with a whole heart, and she is allowed to have done them well.

On her way out, the director stops her.

"I want you to know something," she says. "The reason you were my first ask is the same reason you just said no. You know what a job costs." She caps her pen. "Next term, when your finals are done, I'm coming back. A straight no from you is worth more than a padded yes from anyone else - it means when you do say yes, I can build on it."

Sara-Lee walks home lighter than she has felt since the ask. The no did not close the door. The no, she thinks to herself, IS what the door is made of.

Chapter 8: The Line She Draws Herself

Two weeks later, a classmate waves her down in the hall with a clipboard: the end-of-term mesibah needs people, and she is holding the sign-up like a subpoena.

"We need you for everything," she says cheerfully. "Food, setup, the program, cleanup."

Old Sara-Lee would have said "sure, whatever you need" and spent June paying for it - chasing tablecloths during finals, resenting a party she helped build, and calling it chessed. New Sara-Lee looks at the clipboard and thinks for exactly one breath.

"Food and the program would get the left-over version of me," she says. "Setup and the decorations list I can do properly - all of it, on time, no chasing. Put me there."

"That's it?"

"That's the real yes," Sara-Lee says. "It holds."

The classmate writes her name in the setup column, and Sara-Lee watches her draw the little line under it that closes the box, and thinks: that line is the whole story. You draw it yourself, around what you can truly give, and then what is inside the line is solid all the way through.

She does setup for the mesibah in June, all of it, on time, no chasing. It goes well. Nobody is surprised.

Eight activities

Activity 1: Remember the story

1. What does the youth director ask Sara-Lee, and what is Sara-Lee's honest answer?
2. What happens to the classmate who dodged the trip committee with a "family thing"?
3. How does Sara-Lee's mother decline the dinner committee, and what does she offer instead?
4. What bounded yes does Sara-Lee offer the director, and how does it go?

Activity 2: Fact or guess

1. Sara-Lee tells the youth director she is too busy for anything at all. Fact / Guess
2. The committee chair moves the meetings to Wednesday so the classmate can attend. Fact / Guess
3. Sara-Lee's mother gives the dinner committee a detailed excuse. Fact / Guess
4. The director says she will ask Sara-Lee again next term. Fact / Guess

Activity 3: Think and write

1. "An excuse is a loan." Explain the loan: what does it buy, and what is the interest?
2. The mother says, "There's nothing wrong with my reason, so I don't need to hide it inside a better-sounding one." What makes a reason respectable, in the story's terms?
3. "A straight no from you is worth more than a padded yes." Why can a director build on a straight no?

Activity 4: Apply it - Kaylie's two asks

1. Kaylie is asked to (a) head the decoration committee for the school dinner the same month as her play's dress rehearsals, and (b) bake one cake for it. Write Kaylie's clean no for (a) with her mother's two-part shape: the true reason in one sentence, then the real partial yes. Why does (b) belong in the sentence?
2. Kaylie's friend says, "Just tell her your grandmother is visiting." Give two costs of that version, from the story.
3. When IS it right not to give a reason at all? One or two sentences.

Activity 5: Scrambled words (from the story)

1. SEXCUE
2. RETM
3. GAGUE
4. DAPDED

Activity 6: Word work

Match each word to its meaning from the story.

1. padded a. the true state of how much you can take on
2. gauge b. softened with something untrue to make it land gently
3. loan c. something that makes today softer and costs you later
4. handover d. passing a role to the next person properly

Activity 7: Word search

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

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H O N E S T W B F Y
E X C U S E N O R S
C H A I R I Q Z X J
T E R M F Y G H U P
A S K E D S T C D E
G R O U P J K V W B
G A U G E P L M N O
H A N D O V E R 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: HONEST, EXCUSE, CHAIR, TERM, ASKED, GROUP, GAUGE, HANDOVER.

Activity 8: Your turn - the sentence you owe

Think of one thing you are currently saying a padded yes or a padded no to. Write five lines: the clean sentence (true reason, one breath), and - if you have one - the real partial yes that could go inside it.