

The Coffee Can of Screws

Chapter 1: Wednesday at Four

Every Wednesday at four, Shimshon drags the bike stand onto the driveway, and the block knows it.

The stand is a metal clamp on legs. Next to it goes a toolbox with a spares box inside, a coffee can, and a ticket pad on the bench, and by five past there are three bikes on the grass and three boys watching like it is a show.

Gedalya has been watching for two years, from closer every year. He is sixteen. He knows the rhythm by heart: Shimshon writes the ticket - name, and what hurts - clamps the bike, and talks to the kid while he works, not about the bike. The little screws go into the coffee can, every one, the moment they come off.

The last bike today is Akiva's brakes. Shimshon reads the ticket out loud - "Akiva. Back brake feels sleepy" - and says, "Sleepy. That is exactly the word for it," like a boy who wrote a good answer. He loosens the cable, centers the pads, and says, without looking up, "My father took the job out of town. We move in less than two weeks."

The driveway goes quiet. Akiva, who is nine and whose brakes are being adjusted, says, "Who's going to do my brakes?"

"That's the question," Shimshon says. He spins the wheel, checks the pad, and looks at Gedalya for a long moment. "You've watched two years. Do you want the stand?"

Gedalya says yes before the sentence is all the way out. He has wanted the stand since he was fourteen. What he says is, "I know the rhythm," which is true, and what he thinks is, I have some ideas, which is also true, and is the whole trouble.

Shimshon finishes the brakes and makes Akiva squeeze the lever himself to feel the difference. The test lap is one standing-up lap of the driveway - the sign of a happy brake.

Chapter 2: The Card

The handover happens the next Wednesday, in one hour, because that is all the packing leaves.

Shimshon gives him an index card with five rules, written small.

One: every bike gets a ticket - name, and what hurts, in the kid's own words. Two: one bike on the stand. Three: no promised times - you say "leave it and I'll look," and you never promise a time. Four: screws live in the coffee can. Five: brakes, tires, chains. No gears.

"Gears is where it goes wrong," Shimshon says. "Everything else on this card is where it went wrong."

Gedalya nods. He is reading the card and half hearing - in his head he is already improving the stand: a clipboard, a real sign-up sheet, promised pickup times so kids stop hovering, and gears, because how hard can gears be.

Shimshon holds out the coffee can. "Screws live here."

"Because you'll lose them in the grass," Gedalya says.

"Because I lost one in the grass," Shimshon says, and does not explain, and the moving van takes him the next Sunday.

Chapter 3: The Old Way

The first Wednesday alone, Gedalya runs it by the card.

It feels slow. The tickets feel slow - kids describe what hurts in nine words when two would do. One writes "my tire is tired," which takes three questions to decode as a slow leak, and the slow leak takes twenty minutes because the tube has to come out and the water bucket, it turns out, lives under the porch. One bike on the stand feels slow, with four bikes waiting on the grass and the sun going. When a boy named Sruli asks if Gedalya can look at his gears, which skip, Gedalya says, "Brakes, tires, chains," and the boy's face falls, and Gedalya feels about four inches tall saying it.

By six he has done four bikes, right, with no drama. The tickets kept the order straight when three kids all claimed to be first. The can held every screw. He goes in for supper thinking: it works, and it is still just a habit. Habits are not reasons.

His father asks how the stand went, and Gedalya says, "Fine," in the tone that means a plan is forming, and his father, who knows that tone, says only, "The card first," and passes the chicken.

Chapter 4: The Improvements

The second Wednesday, Gedalya improves things.

He promises times. "Leave it - ready by five." It feels good to say. It sounds like a real business. He takes Sruli's gear job, because the skipping is probably just a cable, and a cable is a screw, and a screw is something he knows. And he puts two bikes on, one clamped, one flipped on its handlebars, because the line is long and the sun is short.

For forty minutes it is magnificent. He is a machine. He does a brake job and a tire job at the same time, finds the gear cable, backs out the little anchor bolt that holds it - and sets the bolt on the bench, not in the can - and the skipping stops, mostly.

At ten to five, Akiva comes for his bike - the one Gedalya said would be ready at five, with the chain that needed cleaning and oiling. The chain is still off, hanging. The gear cable is soaking up the hour.

"Five, right?" Akiva says. "I'm riding with my father Sunday."

Chapter 5: The Little Screw

The chain goes back on at five-twenty, rushed, and for those twenty minutes Sruli's bike is the one he forgets. Then Gedalya reaches for the bench to tighten the anchor bolt and finish Sruli's gears, and the bolt is not on the bench.

It is not under the bench, or in the grass, or along the crack in the driveway. The bolt is gone, and with it the gear fix, because the cable hangs loose without its anchor, and Sruli's bike is worse than when it came - the brakes fine, the gears dead entirely now instead of skipping.

Akiva rides home at five-forty on a clean, oiled chain, and that part, at least, is right. Sruli walks his bike home, pushing it, not angry, which is somehow the worst version.

Gedalya sits on the bench with the coffee can in his lap. The can holds every screw from every bike today except the one that mattered, because he backed it out over the bench, before five, on a job the card told him not to take. He thinks to himself: the rule was not slow. I was.

He puts the stand away in the dark, and the wrench is heavier than it was at four.

Chapter 6: The Letter

Thursday night, Gedalya writes Shimshon a letter. It takes three drafts, because the first two explain.

The third one is short. "I broke four rules on Wednesday - promised times, gears, two bikes at once, and a bolt outside the can. The two that sent the bill were the promise and the gears. You said every rule is where it went wrong. Will you tell me? I am not asking so I can argue. I am asking so the stand gets them back."

The answer comes the next week, on a folded sheet, in handwriting that leans like it is walking fast.

"The can: a screw fell in the grass on a brake job, and I finished the job without it, and the brake held for one day. One day. Nothing happened, except that I still think about it. No promised times: a boy waited in my driveway until dark for a five o'clock I gave him, and his mother came looking, and I was the one who had made a nine-year-old wait in the dark. No gears: I never learned them. A stand that does some things well beats a stand that does everything badly. You already know about one bike on the stand, I heard from my mother."

Gedalya reads it twice. Every rule is a scar, and the scars have names and times of day.

Chapter 7: A Month of the Old Way

Gedalya runs the stand the old way for a month. He tells Sruli what the card says - brakes, tires, chains - and offers the brake check free. Sruli takes it, which is its own small repair.

And the system shows him what it is for. The tickets stop being slow and start being the line - kids check the pad instead of arguing who is first, and "what hurts, in your own words" turns out to be the best diagnostic tool he owns. One ticket says "it clicks when I turn left," and

Gedalya checks the crank: a loose bolt, one minute with the wrench. The ticket said it better than he would have. One bike on the stand means one set of eyes on one job. The can eats every screw and gives them all back.

The toolbox's spares box earns its keep one afternoon. A seat-post bolt rolls off the bench - straight into the grass, gone, the exact way Shimshon's went - and Gedalya checks the spares box in the toolbox, labeled in Shimshon's hand, and there is a bolt the same thread. The seat is tight in a minute instead of a walk to the hardware store. He starts to understand: the can keeps the job's screws, the box keeps the stand's, and nothing small gets trusted to grass.

Nobody waits in the dark, because nobody is promised a time. Kids leave their bikes and go play, and the bike is done or it is honestly not done.

He does fewer bikes each Wednesday than his best day in his head. He finishes every single one he starts.

Chapter 8: The Pad by the Gate

After a month of the old way, Gedalya sees a real problem, and it is not one the card covers: the waiting kids crowd the stand to tell him what hurts, and the telling takes the time.

He thinks about it for three days. Then he nails a second ticket pad to the gate post, with a pencil stub and a tin tray below it, and a note on top: write your own ticket - name, and what hurts - and leave it in the tray.

Wednesday, the pad fills itself. The kids write tickets while they wait, the tickets stack in the tray in the order they arrive, and Gedalya pulls from the bottom of the stack, oldest first. The crowd at the stand becomes a line at the gate, and the afternoon holds six bikes instead of four.

The second Wednesday, two little kids draw what hurts instead of writing it - a wheel, with a frown - and the tickets work anyway - the pad does not grade spelling. By the third Wednesday the big kids are teaching the little kids the system, which is how Gedalya knows it is real: a rule other people teach is a rule that lives.

He does not write to Shimshon about it first. He runs it three Wednesdays, until he is sure it is the stand's idea and not just his, and then he writes one sentence: "Second pad, on the gate, kids write their own tickets. It came from your card, not instead of it."

The answer comes fast for a boy learning out of town. It says: "That's yours now."

Gedalya puts the letter in the toolbox, under the wrench, where the card already lives, and goes out to the driveway, because it is Wednesday at four.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The five rules

List the five rules on Shimshon's card. For each one, name the scar behind it from the letter - what actually happened, to whom. Which rules have no letter story, and how does Gedalya learn those?

Activity 2: "Habits are not reasons"

After the first Wednesday, Gedalya thinks, "it works, and it is still just a habit. Habits are not reasons." Is he right that a habit is not a reason? What does the letter give him that the habit could not?

Activity 3: The magnificent forty minutes

In Chapter 4, "for forty minutes it is magnificent," and Gedalya breaks four rules that afternoon. Find the exact moment it turns, and name the two broken rules that created the collision - the two bills that came due together. Why do those two cost more together than apart?

Activity 4: Stand arithmetic (all numbers made up for practice)

A stand runs 2 hours a week. The old way finishes 5 bikes a week, every one of them done right. A hurry way finishes 7 bikes a week, but 1 bike in 7 comes back worse, and each comeback costs 30 minutes of the next session plus one walk home. (a) In 4 weeks, how many bikes does each way finish? (b) Counting each repair whenever it happens, even into week 5, how many comeback-minutes does the hurry way spend? (c) What does the hurry way actually gain, and what else would you want to know before choosing? Show your steps.

Activity 5: "A stand that does some things well"

Shimshon's letter says a stand that does some things well beats a stand that does everything badly. What is the difference between an honest limit and a lack of ambition? How does the no-gears rule end up protecting Sruli, the very boy it turns away?

Activity 6: Draw the driveway

Draw the Wednesday driveway at the end of the story: the stand, the bench, the coffee can, the toolbox, the pad on the gate post with its note and the tin tray below it. Only what can be seen. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Nechemia's kiosk - a fictional case

A teen named Nechemia takes over his school's canteen kiosk from a graduating boy who hands him a card with three rules: count the drawer twice, no tabs for anyone, close at the bell even mid-line. Write the rule Nechemia is most tempted to break, the scar he imagines behind it before he breaks anything, and the sentence he writes to the graduate after a month. One sentence each, with names.

Activity 8: Word grid

Find eight words left to right. Row/column numbering begins at 1.

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T I C K E T W B F Y
B R A K E S N O R S
S C R E W S Q Z X J
S T A N D Y G H U P
P R O M I S E C D E
L E T T E R K V W B
R U L E S P L M N O
W R E N C H 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: TICKET, BRAKES, SCREWS, STAND, PROMISE, LETTER, RULES, WRENCH. Which word names the thing that is a scar, five times over, and which word names what Gedalya earns the right to improve?