

The Driver's Column



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Sheet

The family on the corner brings home a new baby in the first week of school, and the class chesed coordinator asks for six weeks of suppers.

Zissy, who is seventeen and good at sheets, takes the job of roster. Three suppers a week: Sunday, Tuesday, Thursday, on the table by six-thirty. The class custom is two trays a day - a main and a soup-and-bread side - so the chart has two slots a day and a line for a name under each.

The slots fill. Girls sign for their mothers' famous things and their own decent things. Two girls who miss the chart entirely ask to be on a waiting list, and Zissy adds a waiting list at the bottom, because a sheet should hold everything true.

Gitti signs for the Thursday main.

"Every Thursday," she says. "Like clockwork."

It is a good choice for her, on paper. Gitti is the girl who brings the extra napkins without being asked, who stays to fold chairs when the program ends. Zissy writes her name in the Thursday line, and the sheet goes up on the class board, and the first Sunday's supper arrives on time, and the first Tuesday's too.





Chapter 2: The First Thursday

The first Thursday, no main dish comes. The soup and rolls arrive on time; the family stretches the side with eggs.

Zissy knows because the coordinator knows, because the new mother mentions it at the school gate on Friday, not complaining, just saying they managed fine with eggs.

On Friday, Gitti finds Zissy by the coat hooks before Zissy finds her.

"I am so sorry," Gitti says. "Something came up. Next week."

"Things happen," Zissy says. "One supper is the slot."

"Next week," Gitti says again, and means it, and does not say the part that would explain this week. Zissy writes a small note in the corner of the chart instead of a check: asked, sorry, reasons not given.





Chapter 3: The Second Thursday

The second Thursday, the tray comes at eight forty-five.

The family has already eaten. The new mother takes the tray with both hands and says all the right things, because she is kind.

On Friday, Gitti is waiting by the coat hooks again.

"I know," she says, before Zissy opens her mouth. "It was ready at six. My mother made it in the end. But the getting-it-there fell to me, and my day ran long, and then everything ran long."

Zissy just looks at her.

Gitti winces, and does not explain, and promises Thursday again with her eyes on the floor.

Zissy walks home thinking about the two Thursdays. Nothing about Gitti is a girl who does not care - this is the girl of the extra napkins, the folded chairs. And yet the corner house has had zero on-time mains in two Thursdays, and caring is not what the family eats. The sheet does not have a box for sorry. It has a box for trays.

"Something about the slot itself is wrong," Zissy thinks to herself. "I just can't see it from the sheet."





Chapter 4: Three Ways to Handle It

That evening, Zissy lays out her three ways, the way she lays out everything, in pencil.

Swap her out. The coordinator could do it quietly - tell Gitti the slot needs an earlier kitchen, put a waiting-list girl in, no announcement, no mark. It would work. It would also throw away a reliable pair of hands, and Zissy does not know yet why the hands are failing.

Manage it weekly. A reminder every Wednesday, a check every Thursday afternoon. Plenty of rosters run exactly this way, and it works. It also treats the symptom every week and never asks the question once.

Ask her. One question, out loud, with an exit in it. Ten uncomfortable minutes, and it might find a fix that keeps Gitti in.

Zissy brings all three to the coordinator on Sunday, because the corner house trusts the office's list, and the list is not hers to redesign alone.

The coordinator hears the three ways and nods at the third. "Ask.

But hear the whole answer before you redraw anything - and whatever sheet you draw, bring it back to me before you ask a single person. The family eats off my list. My name confirms it."





Chapter 5: The Question with an Exit

On Monday, in the school yard, Zissy asks it.

"Gitti. Is the slot wrong?"

Gitti looks at her.

"Not are you wrong," Zissy says. "The slot. The shape of it. Because you sign for things and you do them - I've sat next to you for two years. Except this one, twice, the same way."

It takes a minute. Gitti studies the pavement between them like it owes her money. Then it comes out.





She works in her uncle's bakery on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The shift ends at five-thirty, except when a baking run goes long, and Thursday runs go long. The first Thursday she got home at six-forty, and you cannot start a main dish at six-forty for a family that eats at six-thirty. The second Thursday her mother cooked out of pity, but the delivery waited for Gitti, and her day ran long, and everything after it ran long.

"I knew it would probably keep happening," she says. "I kept hoping hoping would fix it. And dropping the slot felt like saying I don't care about the baby."

"And here is the part that makes no sense," Gitti says. "My uncle drives me home on Thursdays in the bakery van. When the run behaves, we pass their corner at about six. Most Thursdays, I ride past that house with empty hands and a bad feeling."

Zissy looks at her. "You pass the house. Most weeks. At six."

"Don't," says Gitti. "I know how it sounds."





Chapter 6: The Driver Column

That night, Zissy looks at her chart and sees what the chart has been hiding.

Two trays a day, three days a week - six trays that have to travel. Some of the cooking families don't have a driver home at supper hour. Their trays reach the corner through favors: a brother's bicycle, a neighbor heading that way, once the coordinator herself. The sheet has a name in every slot and a small transportation problem taped to its back.

Zissy redraws the sheet. Next to each day's cooks, she adds a second column: GETTING IT THERE.

For Thursday she writes: the bakery van, leaving at five-fifty sharp. First porch at five-fifty-five for the main, the side-slot house at six-oh-three, corner house by six-ten, in time for the six-thirty table. The van passes there anyway. The driver is an adult who drives that route every week. The runner is Gitti.

On Tuesday, she brings the redrawn sheet to the coordinator first, as agreed. The coordinator checks the times against the bakery's real hours, and checks with the new mother that a six-ten knock suits the six-thirty table.





Then she sets two rules of her own, out loud: the runner waits up to ten minutes at a not-ready porch and reports any late arrival to Zissy the same evening; and trouble known by five-forty - the van, the driver, a porch that can't be reached - means the coordinator drives the route herself in her own car, because the meal deadline does not move. Trouble found after the van leaves gets phoned to her the moment it is known; she is the backup then too, and she decides how. She initials the sheet.

Then she asks, in order. To Gitti: "The slot is wrong, so I'm changing the slot. Thursday needs a runner for the van route, not a main dish. Will you ask your uncle if the van can make two stops? Trays ride flat on the rack. The van leaves at five-fifty sharp whether the run finished or not - that is his part of the agreement. Trouble you know about by five-forty, you tell me and the coordinator's car takes the route. Trouble after that, you phone her the moment you know."

Gitti asks that evening. Her uncle says yes, the way uncles say yes to small things: "Two stops? It's on the way. It's literally on the way. Five-fifty sharp, run or no run - you leave the flour where it lies."

Then, to the first girl on the waiting list: "Thursday's main is open. The ride is handled. Do you want it?"

She wants it. The Thursday side-slot girl, whose mother does not drive, hears she can keep cooking and shed the favor-chain delivery, and is so relieved it is almost funny.





Chapter 7: The Route

The third Thursday, the route runs for the first time.

The van leaves the bakery at five-fifty sharp with Gitti riding beside her uncle. First porch at five-fifty-five: the waiting-list girl's covered main. Second stop at six-oh-three: the side-slot girl's soup and a bag of rolls, trays flat on the rack. Corner house at six-ten. The tray is warm. The family eats at six-thirty, at their own table, at their own hour.

The fourth Thursday, the van's brakes fail their afternoon check at the bakery.

Gitti phones Zissy at five-thirty-five, ahead of the five-forty line, and the backup is already agreed: the coordinator takes her own car, runs the two porches herself, waits the ten minutes at the first porch when the main is not ready - her own rule, kept - and knocks at the corner at six-twenty-two, eight minutes before the table.

That night Gitti tells Zissy in one sentence: "The van died at the bakery, you heard about it by five-forty, the coordinator drove, and the family ate on time."

By the sixth Thursday, the coordinator stops asking how the sheet is going; the answer is boring, which is what a working sheet sounds like.





Chapter 8: The Column Stays

At the end of the six weeks, the class makes a small seuda for the new mother, and she says thank you to the whole roster, and means the trays, and does not know anything about columns. The baby sleeps through the speeches in a carrier, fists up, unimpressed.

Gitti finds Zissy afterward, by the coat hooks, where all their Thursdays have happened.

"How did you know to ask," Gitti says, "instead of just swapping me out?"

"The sheet needed your Thursdays," Zissy says, "not your soup. I almost didn't see it. You had to say the part about passing the house."

"I almost didn't say it," Gitti admits. "It sounded so bad out loud."

"It sounded like a route," says Zissy. "To a person with a sheet, it was the best sentence of the month."

Next month, a grandmother two blocks over comes home from surgery, and the coordinator prints a new roster. It has the usual columns for the day's cooks. It also has a second column, printed, official: GETTING IT THERE.

Gitti signs the Thursday route first, in pen.

