

The Fern He Doesn't Fix



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: Nine Days

Mr. Treitel hands Eviatar the key on a Sunday afternoon, along with a card covered in small handwriting.

"I leave tonight and come back the Tuesday after next," he says.

"Nine days. The plants are the only part of this I worry about."

Eviatar lives one floor below and has said hello to him in the stairwell for years. Last week Mr. Treitel asked whether he would look after his plants while he was away, and Eviatar said yes before he thought about it.

There are three plants. A fern hangs over the kitchen window. A jade plant sits on the bookshelf, and a lemon seedling stands in a clay pot near the balcony door.





The card says: Fern. Water only when the soil is dry down to your second knuckle. Dry, not looks dry. When you water, go slowly until water shows in the saucer, then empty the saucer. Jade. Nothing. Lemon. Quarter turn every other day. Below that, underlined twice:

Please do not repot, trim, or move anything. They sulk when I travel. This is normal.

"Normal," Eviatar says.

"They do it every time."

"Okay."

"I'm not reachable. Long flight, then a family house with no signal worth mentioning. Everything on the card is everything I know."

He closes Eviatar's hand around the key.

Eviatar goes downstairs thinking nine days is a short time. Plants cannot do much in nine days.





Chapter 2: Day Three

On Wednesday the fern has brown tips.

Eviatar notices them as soon as he opens the door. They were not there on Sunday. He stands in the kitchen with his shoes still on and looks at the narrow strip of dry leaf at the end of each frond.

He reads the card again.

He pushes his finger into the soil to the second knuckle. It is cool and a little damp.

Not dry.

The fern still looks thirsty. He knows he is allowed to water it, because the card says water it, and he knows the card says wait.

The two facts sit beside each other.

He fills a small glass at the tap and holds it over the pot.

Then he puts it down.

He writes on the back of his hand with a pen, because there is no paper nearby: Wed. Soil damp. No water.

The brown tips do not change while he stands there. He checks the jade, which looks fine, and gives the lemon its quarter turn.

On the stairs going down, he thinks about the fern again, and the brown tips come with him.





Chapter 3: A Good Idea

Eviatar's older sister is home that evening, eating cereal at the counter.

He explains the fern.

"Just water it," she says.

"The card says only if the top is dry."

"Is the top dry?"

"No."

"Then he's wrong. Look at the leaves."

"He's had that fern for years."

"And it's getting brown with you in charge." She says it lightly and does not mean to be unkind. "Cut off the ugly parts. Then it'll look like you did something."





Eviatar thinks about the underlined sentence on the card. Please do not trim.

"He said not to cut anything."

"He's not here."

"That's why I can't ask him."

His sister shrugs and goes back to her cereal.

Eviatar sits at the table with the card. There are things on it he can do and things he cannot do, and the line between them is clearer on paper than it feels with a brown leaf in front of him.

He can check the soil. He can water when it is dry. He can turn the lemon.

He cannot undo a cut.

He copies the card onto a clean page with two columns, Can do and Can't undo, and puts the page in his pocket.





Chapter 4: The Envelope

On Friday, one whole frond lies on the kitchen floor beneath the fern.

It has fallen off at the base. The soil is still damp, though the top has dried a little more.

Eviatar picks the frond up carefully. He has a short, bad moment of thinking that he did something wrong by looking at it.

Then he looks at what he actually did. Wednesday, checked the soil and waited. Thursday, checked, still damp. Today, one frond on the floor.

He does not know what caused it.

He cannot throw it away. If Mr. Treitel comes back and finds a missing frond, Eviatar would like him to know what happened to it.

He puts the frond in a clean envelope from the kitchen drawer, writes Friday morning, found on the floor, and sets the envelope on the counter beside the card.

Then he opens a clean page in his notebook and starts a log.

Wed: soil damp, no water. Thurs: same. Fri: one frond fell. Soil damp, top drier.

He leaves out guesses. He writes only what he saw and what he did.

The page looks small, but he can read it back and know exactly where he is.





Chapter 5: You're Killing It

Shua, a friend from his grade, comes upstairs on Saturday night to return a math notebook and ends up standing in the kitchen doorway.

"Is that the plant you're babysitting?"

"The fern."

"It looks bad."

"I know."

"Is it supposed to look like that?"

"Mr. Treitel says they sulk when he travels."

Shua leans over and touches a frond. A few brown flakes land on the counter.

"If it were mine, I'd move it. It's probably too dark in here."

"I'm not supposed to move anything."





"Not supposed to or not allowed?"

Eviatar hands him the card.

Shua reads it. "He wrote 'please.'"

"He wrote 'please' and underlined it twice."

"That's not an order. It's a request."

"It's still his plant."

Shua gives the card back.

"You're going to watch it get worse and do nothing?"

Eviatar thinks about it honestly.

"I'm going to do everything on the card. Then I'm going to write down what happens."

"That isn't doing anything."

"It's doing what I said I'd do."

Shua laughs, not unkindly, and finds his own way out.





Chapter 6: Dry at Last

On Monday, the soil is dry.

Eviatar pushes his finger down to the second knuckle and it comes out clean. He tries again in another spot, in case he missed a damp patch. Same.

He waters the fern slowly, a little at a time, until water appears in the saucer. The card says that is the sign it is enough.

He tips the saucer out in the sink so the pot does not sit in water.

The fern looks the same afterward, which he expected and is still disappointed by.

He gives the lemon its quarter turn. He checks the jade without touching it. He sits at the kitchen table and writes the log.

Mon: soil dry to the second knuckle, checked two places. Watered until saucer filled, emptied saucer. Lemon turned. No other change.

Then he reads the whole page from the top.

The page covers six days, Wednesday through Monday. Most of the lines say the same thing: checked, waited, turned. It is not a dramatic record. Nothing on the page says the fern will recover.

He closes the notebook.

There is one more day before Mr. Treitel is due back, and nothing on the card tells him what to do about that.





Chapter 7: The Tuesday After Next

Mr. Treitel knocks on Eviatar's door at ten at night.

He still has his coat on. His suitcase is in the hall.

"I didn't want to come in and disturb you. Just the key, if it's convenient."

Eviatar hands it over. Then he hands over the notebook page and the envelope too.

"There's a frond in there. It fell on Friday."

Mr. Treitel looks at the envelope for a moment, then at the page.

He reads it standing in the doorway, with his coat still on, all the way to the bottom.

"It didn't get watered until Monday?"

"The soil was damp until then. I checked in two places."





"Yes. That's what the card says."

"The tips went brown on Wednesday. I don't know why."

Mr. Treitel nods slowly.

"It did this last winter, next to the radiator. I moved it. Then I wasn't sure if moving it was the right thing."

Eviatar waits for more.

There is no more. Mr. Treitel folds the page once and puts it in his coat pocket with the envelope.

"Thank you. I'll look at it properly in the morning."

"Sure."

The door closes.

Eviatar does not know whether the fern will recover. He does not know whether anything he did, or did not do, made a difference.

He turns off the hall light.





Chapter 8: The Next Morning

On Wednesday, Eviatar finds a small bag hanging from his door handle.

It holds a jar of honey and a note in the small handwriting. The lemon seedling grew a new leaf. Thank you for the log. Come up after school if you want to see.

The note says nothing about the fern, either better or worse.

Eviatar reads the note twice.

He goes upstairs after school. Mr. Treitel opens the door with a pair of scissors in his hand and a newspaper spread across the table.

"Come see," he says.

The fern sits in the middle of the newspaper. Half of it is already trimmed. A pile of brown fronds lies beside it, and one small green curl pokes up near the base of the pot.

"That's new," Mr. Treitel says. "I think. I'm not sure."

Eviatar looks at it.

"I can't tell either."

Mr. Treitel snips another brown frond.

"Next time I travel, would you look after the plants again?"

"Yes," Eviatar says. "I'll bring a pen for the log."

