

The Flat Week



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: Closing Night

On closing night, the props table runs like a kitchen.

Temima, sixteen, has run it for eight weeks. She knows that the crown lives on the second hook, that the basket with the pretend challah rolls goes out in scene three, that the letter prop has to be folded twice or it will not fit in the apron pocket. The younger girls call her the props general, and she pretends to mind.

For eight weeks, every Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday evening has had a job in it. Rehearsal at seven. Setup at six-thirty. Her bag packed by six.

At the end of the last show, the cast takes its bow, and the audience stands, and Temima holds the last crown against her chest backstage and grins until her face hurts.

The director shakes every crew girl's hand. "Eight weeks," she says. "You should be proud."

Temima is. She counts the props back into the bins, all forty-one pieces, in the order her own checklist says, and the last bin lid clicks shut like the end of something. She goes home singing the cast song, all of it, at the winter street, and does not care who hears.





Chapter 2: The Empty Tuesday

The next Tuesday, there is no rehearsal.

Temima knows this. It is not a surprise. The play is over; everyone said so.

Still, at six o'clock she finds herself standing in the kitchen with her bag in her hand.

"Nowhere to go," Mama says, not unkindly.

"Nowhere to go," Temima agrees.

She unpacks the bag, slowly, like it belongs to someone else.

She sits down to her homework, and it takes twice as long as it should. The math is not hard. It is just that every problem has to be started twice, because the first time she is only looking at it.

She starts a book - the good one, the one she saved for after the play - and reads the same page three times, and puts it down.

At nine o'clock she goes to bed, tired, though nothing has happened all day. Being tired from nothing is its own strange kind of tired.

Tomorrow will feel normal, she thinks.





Chapter 3: The Flat Week

Tomorrow does not feel normal. Neither does the next day.

The week goes by in a kind of grey. Not sad, exactly. Flat. Things that usually sound good do not sound good.

On Wednesday, her friend asks her to walk to the library after school, and Temima says no. Her friend raises an eyebrow - Temima is the one who usually asks - and Temima cannot say why she said it. No sounded easier than yes. That is all.

On Thursday - rehearsal day, except it is not - she naps after school and wakes up groggy, with her mouth dry, no less flat than before.

The house is quiet. A month of Thursdays, the house was never quiet at this hour; she was already gone, bag on shoulder, calling goodbye.

On Friday, she helps with the cooking because it is Friday. She peels what needs peeling. Even the cinnamon smell does not do its usual work.

I should wait until I feel like myself again, she thinks. Then I'll do things.

It seems like a reasonable plan. It is a plan to wait.





Chapter 4: Her Sister's Month

Her older sister comes home for Shabbos from seminary, and over the soup, Temima says, "The week was flat," and explains.

Her sister nods like a person reading a familiar map.

"After my play, I waited a month," she says. "I waited to feel like it before I did anything. You know what came first, every single day?

Nothing. The feeling never once came first."

"So what did you do?"

"Eventually? I did things before I felt like it. Small things, at a set time. Not fun things, not fix-my-life things. Small ones. The doing went first, and the feeling came after, like a camper who's tired of walking."

"And if the feeling doesn't come?"

"Then you did a small thing, and it was still yours," her sister says. "But mine always came. Late, every time. It is not a first-in-line kind of feeling." She shrugs. "I wasted a month learning that. You can have it for free."

Temima pushes the soup around her bowl.

Do it before I feel like it, she thinks. That is backwards.

But the waiting week is backwards too, and she knows it.





Chapter 5: The List of Small Things

On Saturday night, Temima takes the sticky notes from the drawer.

The rules, from her sister: the thing has to be small - twenty minutes, not a project. It has to be hers - a thing she values, not a chore in a costume. And it has to have a time, because a thing with no time is a wish.

She writes five.

Sketch the old set from memory, twenty minutes, no erasing allowed. Walk to the library and take out one book - one, not a stack. Bake the good cinnamon knots, the ones with the twist. Sort the ribbon box, the small one, not the closet. Teach her little brother the paper-crown fold from the play.

She puts one on each day, at four-thirty, on the note by her bed.

Four-thirty because that is when the flat part of the afternoon starts, and because a thing with no time is a wish.

Twenty minutes, she thinks. Even flat can do twenty minutes.





Chapter 6: The First Three Days

On Monday at four-thirty, Temima sits down to sketch the set.

She does not feel like it. She checks the clock twice, hoping it is wrong. It is not wrong. The clock says four-thirty, so she sits, and she pulls the paper toward her, and she starts with the flats at the back of the stage.

The sketch comes out stiff and wrong, the trees like brooms, the painted window crooked. Twenty minutes later she stops. It is still flat, the afternoon, the page, all of it. That is fine. The rule was never feel better by four-fifty. The rule was do it at four-thirty. She writes "Monday: done" on the corner of the note, and the two words are the best-looking part of the evening.

On Tuesday, she bakes the cinnamon knots. Her hands remember before her mood does - the dough knows how thin, the filling knows how much. Somewhere between the rolling and the twisting, she hums one line of the cast song, and catches herself, and keeps humming anyway. The knots come out lopsided and excellent. Her little brother eats three.

On Wednesday, she walks to the library in the cold and takes out one book, and the librarian asks about the play, and Temima talks about the crown and the letter prop for ten minutes, and the walk home is shorter than the walk there.





Chapter 7: The Color Check

On Thursday - rehearsal day, except it is not - Temima looks back at the week.

Monday was flat, and she sketched anyway. Tuesday had twenty humming minutes in it. Wednesday had a whole conversation.

The week is not the rehearsal weeks. Nothing is the rehearsal weeks - she suspects nothing will be, until the next big thing, and that is all right. But it has color in it again, here and there, like the first dots of paint on the set boards, before the trees look like trees.

She does not feel the way she felt on closing night. She feels like a person with a four-thirty, which turns out to be a much more useful feeling.

She notices the order, too. The feeling did not show up on Sunday and send her to the sketchbook. The feeling arrived on Tuesday, late, after the doing, like a camper who is tired of walking.

It was never going to come first, she thinks. That was the thing to know.





Chapter 8: Shabbos Afternoon

On Shabbos afternoon, her little brother wanders into the kitchen, bored, and asks what the paper on her bed is.

"Nothing," Temima says. Then: "Actually, something."

She takes a sheet of paper and shows him the fold from the play - over, under, the tuck that makes the points stand up. His first crown comes out lopsided, with one point flopped over like a sleeping ear.

He puts it on anyway and marches around the kitchen.

"Again," he says.

"Again," Temima agrees, and reaches for another sheet. Outside, the Shabbos afternoon goes on quietly. On her bed, the sticky note waits for Sunday, and Sunday already has a thing in it.

