



The Kitchen Rule



Nussbaum Mind

Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18





Chapter 1: The System

Exam week arrives the way it always arrives - the teachers stop teaching new things, the library fills up, and everyone begins speaking in chapters. Peri, seventeen, is ready for it. Her study system is a thing of beauty.

It is color-coded by subject, blocked by hour, taped to the wall above her desk. History is blue, math is green, literature is orange. There are checkboxes. Rutu, who studies beside her at the library, took one look at it and said it should be framed.

The system covers every subject and every hour. There is a fourteen-minute break every second evening, which Peri uses to review flashcards, because nobody is perfect. The system does not cover breakfast, because breakfast is flexible. It does not cover sleep, because sleep is negotiable. It does not cover water - there is a bottle on her desk, full, and it has been full since Monday.

The system includes everything except the person running it. Peri has not noticed this yet. The system certainly has no checkbox for noticing it.





Chapter 2: The Ordinary Signals

On Monday, the signals start, ordinary as mail.

Breakfast is a banana carried to the bus and mostly not eaten. Lunch is half a muffin eaten over notes. By four in the afternoon there is a headache, the dull kind that sits behind the eyes. Peri does not know why it is there. She does know it is four o'clock and she has barely eaten, so she stops and eats a proper supper early, because eating was due whether or not the headache was asking for it.

"After this chapter" is her usual answer to signals. Today she makes it: "Before the next chapter."

At the library, Rutty peels an orange and eats it in sections, slowly, like a person with nowhere more urgent to be. Her water bottle is empty by three - empty because she drank it. Peri looks at her own full one and drinks half of it on the spot, not as medicine, as maintenance.

"Have you eaten today?" Rutty asks. Not like a nurse. Like a friend who has watched the banana come home in the bag three days running.

"I'm eating early tonight," Peri says, and today it is true.





Chapter 3: The Signal That Keeps Talking

On Wednesday, a new signal arrives, and it does not behave like the ordinary ones.

The headache comes in the morning this time, before school. It stays through breakfast and through water. In review class, the letters on the board blur and drift, and Peri has to hold her page at arm's length to keep it still. Morah writes the dates on the board, and the last digit of 1648 will not hold its shape.

Ruty slides her own notes six inches to the left so Peri can see the date from a page that holds still, and does not make a thing of it. At lunch she asks, once, "Did you tell your mother?" and Peri says, "Tonight," and Rutu accepts that, because tonight is soon, and Rutu knows the kitchen rule exists even if she does not know what it says.

That night, the history block runs to one, and at ten o'clock Peri closes the book. She does the honest thinking she does with hard things. This headache is new. It has stayed two days. The letters drifting is new. None of that is hers to figure out alone, and none of it has to wait until she has tried every home answer first.

She knows the kitchen rule. Every kid in the house knows it, the way they know where the cups are. She follows it downstairs instead of back to the history block.





Chapter 4: The Kitchen Rule

The kitchen rule in Peri's house is her mother's, and it is short.

"Eat, drink, sleep. And if something is new, or keeps going, or worries you - you tell me. You don't have to fix anything first. You can eat your breakfast and tell me at the same time. One is maintenance. One is information."

Peri tells her the short true version. Headache since Wednesday morning. It stayed through breakfast and water. The board blurred today. She adds the five-hour nights and the theoretical meals, because the rule does not work on edited answers.

Her mother listens with her hands still. She asks the plain questions - how long, what makes it worse, does reading bring it on - and Peri watches her mother not say "five hours?" even once, which must cost her something.

Then her mother acts the same evening. "Tomorrow, if it comes at school, you go straight to the nurse. You don't wait to see whether lunch fixes it. And I'm calling the doctor tonight for an appointment."

It is a relief, it turns out, when a signal changes hands.





Chapter 5: The Adults

The doctor checks Peri on Friday. There are questions, a light in her eyes, a look at her ears and throat. Nothing alarming shows itself, and the doctor says so plainly, because plain is part of the job. When she hears about the drifting letters, she sends them to the eye doctor, because that is whose territory this is.

In the car on the way, her mother asks, "Don't you have glasses somewhere?"

"In my desk drawer," Peri says. "From last year."

The drawer, her mother points out mildly, is not where glasses do their work.





Her mother brings the old glasses - the pair that has lived in Peri's desk drawer for a year.

On Monday, the eye doctor examines Peri's eyes. She has Peri read the chart with one lens, then another, clicking through the frame.

She examines the old glasses too, turning them in the light. Then she gives her findings the way they arrived - one at a time.

"Today's exam shows these lenses no longer match your eyes," she says. "I'm prescribing new lenses. They'll be ready in a week, and you should wear them for schoolwork." She writes it down. "If the headaches keep coming once you're wearing them, you come back, and we look again. Your mother has my number."

She makes no promises about the headaches. She gives a plan, and a follow-up, and her number. On the way out, Peri's mother says thank you, and means several things by it. It is enough.





Chapter 6: The System, Repaired

Over the weekend, Peri repairs the study system. The subjects stay.
The person gets added.

Breakfast goes on the chart, blocked in like a subject, because a thing with a checkbox is a thing that happens. The water bottle gets filled the night before and set on top of her bag. Lights-out is eleven, and the history block ends at ten-thirty. Study breaks are for looking out the window at the far trees, because the eye doctor said close work needs far rests.

She writes every line herself. Her mother reads it at the kitchen table and nods once, and does not say she told her so, because the rule was never about being right. Rutu hears the revised edition at the library and approves the breakfast block most of all, on the grounds that a person who eats is better company by four o'clock.





Chapter 7: The Exam

The new lenses come the Monday after, and the history exam is Thursday of that week.

On Thursday morning, Peri eats breakfast sitting down - eggs, toast, the works, like a person who plans to use her head. She has slept eight hours. The new glasses are on her face, and when she opens the exam, the page holds still - every letter, every date, including the last digit of 1648. She notices it holding still, and takes one breath, and gets to work.

She answers the questions with the history she actually studied. It is not a triumphant morning. It is an ordinary exam, taken by a person whose breakfast, sleep, and lenses were all in place. That is what she was after the whole time.

"How was it?" Ruty asks on the way home.

"Readable," Peri says, which is the whole review.





Chapter 8: The Card

The study chart comes down after the last exam. In its place, Peri tapes a small card to the wall, in her own handwriting.

Eat. Drink. Sleep. New, or staying, or worrying: tell.

The chart had a hundred checkboxes, and not one of them ever made a page hold still. The card has four lines. It lives on the wall where the chart used to be, and it fits.

She packs her bag for tomorrow, and packs her lunch first.

