

The Long Column

Chapter 1: Two Yeses

The letters come four days apart, in June, in actual envelopes, and Riva opens both at the kitchen table.

The first is from the bakery owner, who owns the bakery on the corner, where Riva has worked two Sundays a month since midwinter. It says: full summer job, six days a week, real wages, start July first. The bakery owner writes at the bottom, in pen, "You are the only girl I am offering this to."

The second is from the art intensive - three weeks, July, the program Riva applied to in April and then tried not to think about, because thinking about it felt like counting unhatched things. Accepted. There is a fee, and the fee has a number, and the number is not small.

Riva, sixteen, holds one letter in each hand like a scale.

She has wanted the program since she was nine and drew on the back of receipts. The application took her three weeks in April: an essay she rewrote four times, and the drawing she finally submitted - her mother's hands kneading, done from life at the kitchen table on a Thursday, flour and all. She mailed the envelope and then made herself stop thinking about it.

She has wanted her own earned money since approximately forever. And the bakery is not theoretical. She has worked the counter two Sundays a month since midwinter; the bakery owner taught her the register herself, standing at her shoulder the first morning, and by the third Sunday she was trusted with the key to the till drawer, which is a thing the bakery owner does not hand out like samples.

The weeks are the same weeks.

Chapter 2: The Kitchen Vote

Supper becomes a vote, the way suppers do.

Her mother says a girl who can earn should earn - it is not a small thing, standing on your own feet at sixteen. Her older sister says the program, obviously, you cannot put a price on a door opening. Her father asks what the fee is and then asks what the wages are, and writes nothing down, and says "both good" in the tone of a man who is glad the decision is not his.

Nobody is wrong. That is the problem.

After supper, Riva does what she always does when she is stuck: she collects more opinions. Shevy, on her front steps, says program, obviously, "Riva, it's your whole THING." Her brother says take the money, art you can do on Sundays. Her friend from class says she would give anything for the bakery job, "the SMELL alone, Riva," which is not analysis, however many times she repeats it.

By Friday, Riva has eleven opinions and is further from a decision than when she had none. She lines the opinions up in her head on the walk home and notices something uncomfortable: she argues with the ones that say job, and she shops among the ones that say program. She is not collecting votes. She is collecting permission, and she cannot even decide which side she wants permission for.

Chapter 3: The Neighbor's Porch

Her neighbor, next door, kept the books for a business for forty years, and her porch faces Riva's steps, and on Thursday afternoon she watches Riva explain the whole thing to the mailman, who did not ask.

"Come sit," her neighbor says.

Riva sits. She explains. It takes a while, because she explains both sides and then all eleven opinions.

Her neighbor rocks and lets her finish. This is the woman who once told Riva's mother that a ledger is just a diary that doesn't lie, and Riva has been half afraid of her for eleven years, the way you are afraid of people who will absolutely tell you the truth.

Then she says, "You're collecting votes for a decision only you can make. Stop. Go home and put both sides on paper - the costs and the gains, short and long, money and not-money. Your own paper, your own boxes, nobody's form. Then decide. And then write down what would change your mind."

"What would change my mind?"

"So you'll know it was a decision," her neighbor says, "and not a mood. Moods don't have conditions. Decisions do."

Chapter 4: Her Own Boxes

Riva takes a sheet of paper and folds it twice, the long way and the short way, and makes her own structure.

Down the left: JOB. Down the right: PROGRAM. Across the top: COST, GAIN. And then, because her neighbor said short and long, she draws a line across the middle and writes SHORT - THIS SUMMER above it and LONG - AFTER below it. And in the corner, small: money is not the only currency.

She starts with a list of every true thing she knows, and then sorts each line into its box. She fills the boxes Thursday evening and Friday morning, in pencil, crossing out, and by Friday afternoon the boxes are full and the pencil goes away for Shabbos. The rule she makes for herself is: only true things. Not "the job is boring" - it isn't. Not "the program guarantees my future" - it doesn't.

The only-true-things rule costs her some lines she loved. She writes "JOB: I would be good at it" and crosses it out, because she would work hard at the program too, and a thing that goes in

every box belongs in none. She writes "PROGRAM: glamorous" and crosses that out even faster - three weeks of charcoal and critique is not glamour, and she knows it, and the knowing is a little disappointing.

Under JOB, SHORT: the wages - the whole summer's worth, every week of it - written as a number; standing all day; the smell of bread, which is genuinely a gain; the bakery owner trusting her with the register. Under JOB, LONG: a full summer of savings toward seminary; "reliable" becoming a thing people know about her; but the drawing hand going quiet for a summer, maybe longer.

Under PROGRAM, SHORT: the fee; three weeks - three weeks, not the summer, and the paper says so plainly - of work, hard work, real critique - she writes "they will tell me what is wrong with my drawings, and it will hurt, and it is a GAIN." Under PROGRAM, LONG: teachers. A portfolio. Other girls who draw. The word "student of" someone serious.

Chapter 5: What the Paper Shows

On Friday afternoon, before Shabbos, Riva looks at the paper and sees the thing she could not see while it was all in her head.

The short boxes are even. Money one way, growth the other, a fair fight.

The long boxes are not even. The job's long column is good - savings, a name for reliability - but it is thin, and she has to work to fill it. The program's long column keeps growing: teachers, portfolio, a door toward the thing she has wanted since she was nine. She is not padding it. Every line is true. There is simply more of it.

I keep adding to one side, she thinks, and defending the other. That is the answer, and it has been the answer since the envelopes.

She notices something else. The job's long column is not gone - it is postponed. The bakery owner is not moving anywhere. Bakeries outlast summers.

She takes the paper to the kitchen and shows her mother, not to ask - to show. Her mother reads every box twice, the way she reads recipes, and says, "The wages box is the one I'd feel. But I am not the one holding the pencil." She slides the paper back across the table. "Write your conditions, Riv. Then tell me what you decided."

It is the first time her mother has handed the decision back to her as hers. She takes the paper upstairs and sits with the pencil over the bottom of the page for a long minute, and then she writes.

Chapter 6: The Conditions

Riva decides: the program.

Then, right there, with time still before candle-lighting, she does her neighbor's last step, the one that felt strange, and writes at the bottom of the paper, in pen this time:

"This would change my mind: if the fee meant borrowing - the job wins. If I had no other way to earn anything this whole year - the job wins. If the long columns were even - the job wins, because money in hand is real and doors are only maybe. None of these is true. So: the program."

She reads it twice. It still looks true, which is new for her - last winter she decided to quit the choir and un-decided it three times before Pesach, each time sure, each time at a different hour. This one looks the same at midnight as at noon, because it is not a feeling. It has conditions, like a decision. It is a plan she can stand on.

The cost is real, and she names it to the paper too: a summer of wages, unearned. The bakery owner's offer, declined. The smell of bread, six days a week.

Loss, written down, where she can see it. It stays a loss. It just stops being invisible.

Chapter 7: The Two Answers

On Sunday morning, Riva walks to the bakery before it opens, because a no like this should be early and face to face.

"Your offer is the best one I've ever gotten, and I'm not taking it. I got into the art intensive - three weeks, in the middle of the summer - and you need somebody for the whole summer, not most of one. It costs me real money to say no to you, and I want you to know I counted it."

The bakery owner wipes her hands on a cloth and looks at her for a long moment.

"When I was seventeen," the bakery owner says, "somebody counted what it cost to say yes to me, and chose me anyway, and I have run this bakery for thirty years on that memory. Go draw. And Riva - bakeries outlast summers. Come see me in Elul."

The program form is simpler. On Monday, she signs it, fills the fee envelope, and walks it to the office herself, in the June heat, before she can start collecting new opinions. The office secretary stamps it RECEIVED, and the stamp sound is so ordinary that Riva stands there a moment, waiting for the ground to notice what she just did. The ground declines. She walks home lighter anyway.

Chapter 8: The First Line

The first morning of the intensive is a Tuesday, and the room smells like paint and nobody knows anybody, and the teacher puts a plaster hand on the table and says, "Draw what you see, not what you know."

The girl at the next table has drawn the hand three times already and erased it three times, and is chewing her pencil like it owes her money. Riva likes her immediately, the way you like anyone who is losing the same fight you are about to start.

Riva opens her new sketchbook. Tucked inside the front cover is the folded paper, creased now, pencil smudged. She takes it out one more time and reads the bottom, the pen lines: the conditions.

None of them is true. The fee is paid without borrowing. The year has other earning in it. The long columns were not even.

She puts the paper away, and she draws the first line - wrong, and then less wrong, and she is exactly where the long column said she would be.

Eight activities

Activity 1: Eleven opinions

Riva collects eleven opinions and ends further from a decision. From Chapters 2 and 3, explain why collecting votes fails for this kind of choice. What makes a decision "only yours to make," and what still belongs to parents or teachers?

Activity 2: The eight cells

Draw Riva's paper structure from Chapter 4: the two sides, the cost-and-gain columns, the middle line that splits short from long - eight cells in all - and the small corner note. What does each dimension catch that a plain pros-and-cons list would miss?

Activity 3: Short and long

From the story, what goes in the SHORT boxes and what goes in the LONG boxes? Why are the short boxes "a fair fight" while the long boxes decide it? What does Riva notice about her own pencil before she notices the answer?

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

A summer job pays 900. A program costs 400 and runs the same weeks. A girl also earns 250 tutoring in the same year, either way. What does choosing the program cost her, in money, all-in? If the program cost 1300 instead, what changes - and which of Riva's written conditions does that touch? Show your steps.

Activity 5: Decision or mood?

Her neighbor says moods don't have conditions and decisions do. Using Riva's Chapter 6 lines, explain what the "what would change my mind" list does that a pros-and-cons list alone cannot. Why does a decision with conditions "look the same at midnight as at noon"?

Activity 6: Draw the scale

Draw Riva at the kitchen table holding one letter in each hand "like a scale." Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Caption with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Henka's Elul - a made-up case

A teen named Henka is offered a paid helper job at a sewing studio for Elul, and in the same week, her school announces a three-week head-start course in the subject she struggles with - same weeks, course has a fee. Build her paper (both sides, short and long): use the facts the prompt gives, and mark anything you add as your own guess - possibilities and unknowns go in the boxes AS possibilities and unknowns, not as certainties. Write her conditions line, and let her decide either way. With names.

Activity 8: Word grid

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

P	L	A	N	K	V	W	B	F	Y
C	O	S	T	L	M	N	O	R	S
G	A	I	N	A	I	Q	Z	X	J
L	O	N	G	F	Y	G	H	U	P
S	I	D	E	R	S	T	C	D	E
M	I	N	D	X	J	K	V	W	B
J	O	B	H	U	P	L	M	N	O
L	I	S	T	D	E	A	I	Q	Z
X	J	K	V	W	B	F	Y	G	H
U	P	L	M	N	O	R	S	T	C

PLAN, COST, GAIN, LONG, SIDE, MIND, JOB, LIST. Which word names what separates a decision from a mood, and which word names the column that decides Riva's choice?