

The Next Six Months



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Elective

In September, the advanced art elective was the thing Minda wanted most.

Two afternoons a week, the good room with the north windows, the June exhibition with the printed list of names. She had been the art girl since third grade - the one teachers asked to letter the posters, the one whose notebook covers got passed around.

She fought for her spot. There were twelve spots and thirty applications, and Morah Kagan chose her. In September, being chosen felt like a door opening. She bought the good sketchbook. She told her little sisters they could come to the exhibition in June and see her name in print.

Now it is December, and on Tuesday mornings she wakes up with the day already heavy. Nothing terrible is happening. That is what makes it so hard to explain. Morah Kagan is kind. The girls are friendly. The room still has the north windows. It is only that the work itself, the actual two hours of it, has gone flat and stubborn in her hands.

The work is not working. Her still lifes stall at "fine." The girls around her are getting visibly better, and she is getting visibly older. On the way out of the art wing, twice a week, she passes the newspaper room, where they are always laughing about headlines, and she walks a little slower.





Chapter 2: The Window

On Friday, the advisor sends around the semester letter. Students may switch electives in January, with the advisor's approval, where the other elective has room.

Avital, her best friend in the elective, reads it and shrugs. "Nobody switches in January."

"I couldn't anyway," Minda says. "I've put in three months."

The sentence comes out automatic, like a sneeze. She hears it after she says it, the way you hear a sneeze.

"So?" Avital says.

"So it would all be for nothing."

Avital lets it go. The letter goes home in Minda's bag, and sits there over Shabbos, and the sentence sits with it: it would all be for nothing. Three months of Tuesdays. The supplies Mama bought. The application essay she wrote about why art mattered to her. For nothing?





Chapter 3: Her Cousin's Question

Her cousin is in twelfth grade, and at the family Shabbos lunch she asks Minda how art is going, and Minda says "fine" in a voice that does not cover it.

Out on the porch afterward, it comes out - the heaviness, the stalling, the newspaper room, and the sentence: but I've put in three months.

Her cousin does not say stay and does not say leave. That, later, is the part Minda is most grateful for. She asks one question instead.

"Are the three months coming back if you stay?"

Minda blinks. "No."

"Then they're spent either way," her cousin says. She says it gently, because she can see it land hard. "Spent isn't the question. The question is the next six months. What do the next six months buy if you stay, and what do they buy if you switch? That's the whole check."

"It sounds cold when you say it."

"It's warm, actually," her cousin says. "I stayed with an elective for a year because of what I'd already put in. The year I put in because of the year I'd put in. Do the math on that. The check would have given me the year back."





Chapter 4: The Two Lists

On Saturday night, Minda makes two lists. Only the future is allowed on them.

Staying buys: the June exhibition, and her name on the printed list. The spring unit. She checks the syllabus - the spring is oils, which she has never liked. Six more months of Tuesday heaviness. The chance that it clicks - it might; she writes it down honestly, with a question mark.

Switching buys: the newspaper, if it has room. Two afternoons she already knows she likes the sound of. Telling Morah Kagan, which costs. No exhibition. The story she will have to tell herself, which is: I quit art.

She looks at the lists for a long time.

The staying column is mostly a museum of the past three months with one future item in it. The switching column is all future, and some of it is hard.

The three months are spent, she writes at the bottom. Both columns are already paid for. Which column do I want for the next six?





Chapter 5: The Pang Audit

Before she decides, Minda checks the loudest feeling, the one that says: you can't quit, you're the art girl.

She asks it what it is protecting.

The answer comes quietly: the picture of herself. Third-grade poster lettering. The notebook covers. Morah Kagan choosing her out of thirty. If she leaves, she is not the art girl anymore.

She lets that be real, because it is real. It is not, however, a future gain. It is a photograph, and photographs do not change if you stay in the room another six months.

You can miss being her, she writes, and still not want the next six months of this. Missing is a pang, not a verdict.

She decides. Then she does not announce it - she sleeps on it, twice, the way Tatty says you do with decisions that have a door that only opens one way. Both nights, the decision is still there in the morning, quiet and unapologetic. That, more than the lists, is what convinces her it is real.





Chapter 6: The Ask

On Tuesday, Minda stays after the elective.

"Morah Kagan, I want to switch to the newspaper in January. I worked the check honestly, and the next six months point there."

She braces for hurt. Morah Kagan looks at her for a moment, and what she says is: "Thank you for telling me to my face, in December, instead of disappearing in June."

The advisor approves the switch - the newspaper has room - and Morah Kagan asks one thing: finish the current still life by winter break, "so your term closes whole, not mid-brushstroke." Minda agrees. It is easier to finish a piece when it is the last one.

In the hallway, Avital is waiting, and Minda braces again, and Avital says, "I ran the check too. Mine says stay - I still love it, even the bad Tuesdays." They look at each other, two girls with the same tool and opposite answers, and it is all right.





Chapter 7: January

The newspaper room is smaller than it looks from the hallway, and louder, and nobody laughs at headlines on deadline because deadlines are serious.

Minda is the new one. She misspells two names in her first piece and learns the corrections column exists. She is slow. Her editor moves her commas around without asking, which stings for one afternoon and then stops stinging, because the sentences come back better.

She is also, on Tuesday afternoons, awake in a way she had forgotten about. At four o'clock she looks up and the afternoon is gone - not heavy, gone - and she has to pack up fast to make the late bus.

The art wing is one corridor over. Sometimes she hears the easels. The pang comes, on schedule, like a bill.

She pays it the new way: she names it. A pang is a photograph, not a verdict. Then she goes back to her paragraph, which is due at four, which is its own kind of brushstroke, except this one she wants to make.





Chapter 8: June

In June, the exhibition goes up in the lobby, and it is beautiful, and Minda goes to see it twice.

The first time is for herself. She goes early, before the crowd, with the program folded in her hand.

Avital's piece is the best one there, and Morah Kagan gets a line in the printed program, and there is a wall where her own name might have been. The pang does its work. She lets it. It is a real pang - she does not pretend it is small, because it is not small - and it passes, the way her cousin's math said it would, because it is about a photograph and not about the next six months.

The second time is for the paper, because the exhibition is news.

She stands in front of Avital's piece with her notebook open.

"One quote for the article," she says, when Avital comes over. "How does it feel?"

"Like a whole year," Avital says.

Minda writes it down, checks the spelling of the title twice, and goes to find Morah Kagan for the second quote.

