

The Notice on the Maple

Chapter 1: The Notice

The notice is white, taped to the trunk at eye height, and it says the tree comes down Tuesday. Chayala reads it twice on her way in from school on Wednesday. The maple in front of their house is older than the street. Her mother says it was a grown tree already when the houses were new, and Chayala has never once walked past it without looking up, because the tree tells her the season before the calendar does - the first buds, the first red leaf, the day the birds come back to argue in the high branches.

In third grade she pressed one of its leaves into a notebook with tape, a red one, the first of that year, and wrote the date under it in round pencil letters. The notebook is gone, but the habit stayed: she still notes the first red leaf every year, to herself, the way other people note birthdays.

Her window is level with its middle. She has done homework beside that window for six years. In the winter the branches make black handwriting over the sky. In the summer the leaves put green shadows on her desk that move when the wind does, and she has read whole chapters to the sound of them.

The notice says the city will remove the tree on Tuesday, between eight and four. It says the word remove, which is a clean word for a loud thing.

Chapter 2: The Report

The letter under the notice explains, and her mother has already read it twice - once at the counter, and once out loud to her father, slowly, the way you read something you are hoping will change its mind. It does not change its mind. Two arborists examined the maple in the spring, after the neighbor at number six reported a limb down in a storm. There is rot inside the trunk - the tree is hollow in a way that does not show from the street, and a limb over the sidewalk could come down on its own, in wind or in stillness. The strip between the sidewalk and the curb belongs to the city, and the city removes trees it judges unsafe. The decision is made.

"Can't someone check again?" Chayala asks at supper.

Her mother does not say don't be silly. "Two someones checked," she says. "One of them grew up on this street. He did not enjoy writing the report."

Her father puts it the plainest. "A falling limb is not an opinion," he says. "It's a limb."

The fact is settled. Chayala hears that it is settled. Settled does not feel the way she expected. It feels like the sidewalk has already changed.

Chapter 3: What the Tree Is For

In her room, Chayala makes the list she makes when something is too big to hold - not a list of tasks, a list of what the thing is for. She has made these lists since she was ten, on the back of old homework sheets, and they have never once fixed anything. That is not what they are for either. They are for holding the thing steady so she can look at it.

The branch at her window, which tells her the season first. The shade over the front steps, where packages sit cool in the summer. The birds' morning argument, which she has never once slept through and never once wanted to. The shape of the trunk against the sky, which she knows the way she knows a face. The particular cool of the air when you pass under it in July. The way the whole street looks like a street that has been there a long time, because of it.

She says the settled part out loud, because out loud is where facts hold still. "The tree comes down Tuesday. I can't change it." It costs something to say it flat, and she lets it cost. Her mother, at the door with the laundry basket, hears her say it and does not ask her to be reasonable about loving a tree. She does not say it is only a tree, because it is not only a tree, and they both know it.

"Settled is settled," her mother says. "What isn't settled is what we do with the week."

Chapter 4: The Still-to-Choose

The second list is longer than Chayala expects, once she starts it.

A drawing. She can draw the tree from her window before Tuesday - her own eyes, her own hands, a record nobody gives or takes.

The wood. If the family asks, the crew will sometimes leave a section of trunk instead of chipping it all. Her father asks the foreman on Thursday, because the asking is an adult's job, and the answer is yes - one section, if someone is home to take it. Her mother is home Tuesdays. It is arranged, politely, with the right person, the way things get arranged.

The seeds. Every year the maple drops its keys - the spinning seeds - over the lawn and the gutter, and every year her little sister throws handfuls of them into the air to watch them helicopter down, and pockets the best ones, and finds them in the wash. She can gather them. She can pot them. Most will not sprout, which is a thing seeds do, not a reason to pot none.

The light. Her room has never had morning sun. It is about to. She does not have to enjoy that. She is allowed to use it anyway, later, when she is ready - her plant cuttings have been leggy and pale on that sill for a year, reaching past the shade for a sun they could see and not reach.

Chapter 5: The Drawing

On Sunday, Chayala sits at her window with her good pencil and draws the tree.

It is harder than it looks. She sharpens the pencil twice in the first hour. The eraser works harder than the pencil does, and the page goes gray at the edges from it. The branches do not branch the way her hand wants them to - they split lower and crookeder, and the trunk leans a

little toward the street, which she has never once noticed in six years of looking. Drawing it is a way of finally seeing it. She wishes she had drawn it years ago, and then she stops wishing that, because years ago is settled too.

Her little sister, who is eight, watches from the bed.

"Does drawing it keep it?"

"No," Chayala says. "It keeps the looking."

Her sister considers this, and asks for a turn with the pencil, and her tree is round like a lollipop, and it is also true.

Chapter 6: Tuesday

On Tuesday - no school, a grading day, and her mother home anyway, as she is on Tuesdays - the crew comes at eight, and Chayala and her sister watch from the window, because looking away will not keep it either.

Her sister has never watched a tree come down before, and she watches this one the way you watch a campfire - from the window, with her knees pulled up, saying almost nothing.

The work is loud and fast and strangely careful. One man goes up in a lift with a saw, and the limbs come down roped, in pieces, lowered like something being rescued instead of taken, and the chipper eats the small branches with a sound like a very angry rain. Her sister counts the pieces under her breath and loses count at forty. By eleven the trunk stands alone like a sentence with all its words taken off. When the trunk sections come down, the inside shows.

The hollow is big as a barrel.

The arborist on site - the one who grew up on the street - sees them at the window and comes over, and he is not cheerful about it, which helps. "It was time," he says, and shows them the core. "See how little was holding it up."

Chayala has been arguing with the fact in her head for six days, in small ways, without admitting it. The arborist lets her touch the core - it comes away soft, like wet cork, under her thumb. A thing you can push your thumb into was not going to hold a limb over a sidewalk. Her hands understand it before her head finishes.

Seeing the hollow ends the argument. It does not make her glad. It just ends it.

By four, the street is bare and bright, and the promised section of trunk sits by the fence, heavy as a secret.

Chapter 7: The Keys

Before the crew rakes the lawn clean, Chayala fills a pocket with maple keys from the fallen small branches - the little spinning seeds, green-brown, joined in pairs.

She pots six of them in the old flowerpots from the side of the house, in real soil, not wishful soil. Her grandfather grows tomatoes in buckets on his porch and knows everything there is to

know about seeds, which is to say: he knows that most of them do nothing, and he plants anyway, every year, in real soil. When she was small he let her press the seeds in herself, one knuckle deep, and he never once promised her a sprout. He promised her that checking the pots was allowed, every day, as many times as she liked. Most of hers will not sprout. That is what seeds do, and it is why she plants six and not one.

The trunk section needs a year to dry before it can become anything. A bench is the leading idea - a bench for the garden, from the tree that shaded the steps. Her father says a year is a good length of time to decide what a tree should be next. Nobody rushes the wood.

Chapter 8: The Light

On Wednesday morning, Chayala's room is bright in a way it has never been. The sun comes in at eight and lands on the floorboards like it pays rent.

She does not have to love it. She finds, over breakfast, that she does not hate it either, which surprises her, and she lets it be a surprise and not a verdict.

That evening she writes the date on six pot sticks, presses one into each pot, and sets the pots in a row along the middle of the windowsill, in the new light, where the branches used to be. She waters them before supper, and checks the soil with one finger, the way her grandfather checks his tomatoes - not because the finger knows anything yet, but because tending is a thing you do, not a thing you feel.

The leggy plant cuttings move off the dim end of the sill that evening, and take the sunny end, and they look startled, all pale stems and small leaves, like guests who arrived before the invitation. They will green up in a week. She is not glad about the sun. She is using it anyway, which is a different thing, and hers.

Then she goes down to set the table, because it is Wednesday, and supper does not set itself.

Eight activities

Activity 1: Sequence

Order: A. The notice goes up on the maple. B. The letter explains the rot and the decision. C. Chayala says the settled part out loud. D. She makes the still-to-choose list. E. She draws the tree with her sister. F. The crew comes, and the hollow shows. G. She pots six maple keys in the new light. Which step turns the story - and what would the story be without it?

Activity 2: Settled or still to choose?

Label S (settled - it cannot be changed now) or C (still to choose).

1. The rot inside the trunk.
2. Who owns the strip by the curb.
3. The removal day.

4. Whether to draw the tree.
5. What the trunk section becomes.
6. The potted seeds. Careful: feelings about the settled items are real and allowed. Settled means unchangeable, not unimportant.

Activity 3: The two lists

Write Chayala's two lists from the story - three settled things and four still-to-choose things. Who shows her the hollow core, and why does seeing it end the argument in her head? What does her mother mean by "Settled is settled. What isn't settled is what we do with the week"?

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

Suppose Chayala pots 6 keys and 2 sprout - what fraction sprout? Suppose the trunk section is 120 centimeters long and a bench seat needs 100 - how much is left over? The notice goes up Wednesday and the tree comes down the next Tuesday - how many days are between them?

Activity 5: Two sentences, two jobs

Quote "Can't someone check again?" and "The tree comes down Tuesday. I can't change it." What job is each sentence doing? Note: the first question is fair to ask once - two arborists did check. When does asking again stop being a question and start being a way of not saying the second sentence?

Activity 6: Draw the window

Draw Chayala's window before Tuesday: the branches, the notice on the trunk, the desk. Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Faces and poses are your choice. Caption with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Settled and still to choose - planning for a fictional case

A teen named Toba learns that the empty lot where the neighborhood children have played for years has been sold, and building starts next month. Write her settled list (two things), her still-to-choose list (three things), one person she could talk with, and one useful action. One sentence each, with names.



Activity 8: Word grid

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

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

SETTLED, CHOICE, TUESDAY, SEEDS, TRUNK, LIGHT, HOLLOW, DRAW. Which word names what the arborist found inside the trunk, and which word names what the seeds are for?