



The Paper Strip



Nussbaum Mind

Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18





Chapter 1: The Crack

The ball leaves Betzalel's bat higher than he expects.

It is late Sunday afternoon, and the lot behind the row of houses is empty. The other boys have gone home for supper. Betzalel stays for one more hit. He tosses the ball up himself, swings, and catches it on the side of the bat.

The ball goes sideways, over the low fence behind him.

There is a small sound, like a knuckle on a door. Then a crack.

Through the gap in the fence he can see the basement window of the house behind the lot. A line runs through the glass now, corner to corner.

He looks around. He sees no one. The back doors stay shut while he waits a full minute. Somewhere inside one of the houses a pot lid rattles, and that is the only sound.

"Maybe nobody saw," Betzalel thinks to himself. "Maybe nobody ever has to know."





He lets the thought stand for a moment, the way you let a guest stand in the doorway before you decide about them. It is a comfortable thought. It is also missing the only fact that matters, and he knows which fact that is: the window is broken, and he knows whose ball did it. The seeing was never the point.

Betzalel is seventeen. He picks up his bat, walks around the block to the Kanners' front steps, and knocks.

Mr. Kanner opens the door. He is still in his house slippers, and there is a newspaper folded under his arm, and Betzalel understands suddenly that this man was having an ordinary Sunday evening and the ordinary evening is now over.

"I broke your basement window just now. With a ball, from the lot. I came to tell you, and I'll pay for it."

Mr. Kanner looks at him for a moment, then goes inside and down. Betzalel stands on the steps and counts his own breaths.

Mr. Kanner comes back. "There is a crack. Corner to corner. I'll tape it tonight, so nobody touches that glass. The glazier comes Thursday. Come by after school."

That is all. It is not warm and it is not angry. It is a window, and it has a price, and the price already has an owner.





Chapter 2: The Number

On Thursday, Mr. Kanner has a paper from the glazier.

"Eighty-six dollars. New pane, new putty, his visit."

Betzalel has thirty-five dollars saved, in an envelope in his drawer, from helping at the hardware store last summer. He runs errands for a neighbor most weeks, and that is most of what he earns.

He does not say yes to anything yet.

"I want to bring you a plan I can actually carry," he says. "Can I tell you tomorrow?"

Mr. Kanner folds the glazier's paper in half. "Tomorrow," he says, as if a boy asking for one day to be sure of his word is a reasonable thing, because it is.





Chapter 3: The Kitchen Table

That night, Betzalel puts the number on the kitchen table in front of Tatty.

Tatty asks three questions. What do you earn? What do you need to keep? Is the plan yours?

The earnings: about ten dollars a week in errand money, plus the thirty-five saved. The needs: bus fare, and not much else this season. Betzalel does the arithmetic out loud. Thirty-five with the plan, when he presents it Friday. Eight-fifty a week for six weeks makes fifty-one. Together, eighty-six.

Tatty checks the arithmetic twice. Then he offers, once, to lend the whole difference so the thing is finished in a day.

Betzalel thinks about it. "Thank you. I want to pay it in the weeks. I want to feel it leave, every Thursday, until it's done. That's my choice for my window - not a rule for anybody else's."

"Then carry it like something you chose," Tatty says, "not something that was done to you." He has one condition, and he says it plainly. "If a week goes wrong, you tell Mr. Kanner by Thursday, the day itself. You don't skip and hope."





Chapter 4: The Paper Strip

On Friday after school, Betzalel brings the plan.

Mr. Kanner listens to all of it without hurry. Then he tears two strips from the same paper bag and writes the full terms on each, in pencil, in small square letters: the total, the first payment tonight, eight-fifty each Thursday for six weeks. One strip for each of them, so both records are complete.

"If a week goes wrong, you come and say so," he says. "I don't chase."

The thirty-five goes that evening, and handing it over feels like putting down something heavy and being lighter without it. On both strips, Mr. Kanner writes the first line: Friday's date, \$35.





The first Thursday is easy. The second is fine. Each time, he writes the date and the amount on both strips: Thursday's date, \$8.50, and the same again the next week. The record grows one labeled line at a time, and each line says the same thing: this boy said a number, and the number keeps arriving.

By the second week, Betzalel has a routine. The errand money comes in on Sunday or Monday. The eight-fifty goes into the envelope on Tuesday, before it can be mistaken for spending money. The envelope lives in the drawer, on top of his strip, so the record and the next payment are always in the same place. His little brother asks once why there is an envelope with a K on it. "It's a bill I'm paying," Betzalel says, and the word bill does not sting the way he expected it to.





Chapter 5: The Glove Week

The third Thursday is hard, and the reason is a glove.

It is in the sports shop window, on sale this week only, and Betzalel has wanted it since spring. On Wednesday he stands in front of the shop and does the arithmetic both ways. With the glove, the envelope is empty. With the envelope, the glove waits, and gloves do not wait well at sale prices.

He thinks about the strip in his drawer. It does not argue. It just says what is already true: three lines written, three lines kept.

He also thinks about what Mr. Kanner would do if the fourth line never came. Nothing, probably. He said he would not chase. The strip would just stop growing, and the man who tapes his own broken window on a Sunday night would know why, and Betzalel would know he knows.

The eight-fifty goes in the envelope. The glove stays in the window. Betzalel notes, honestly, that the wanting does not die. It just does not get fed, and on the third Thursday the strip gets its fourth labeled line: the date, \$8.50, same as the rest.





Chapter 6: The Short Week

The fourth Thursday, there is no envelope.

The neighbor's errand money is late, and the envelope is short by half. Betzalel could skip the visit. Mr. Kanner said he would not chase, and skipping is free.

Tatty's condition is not free. Neither is Mr. Kanner's sentence: if a week goes wrong, you come and say so.

Betzalel goes to the door that Thursday with empty hands.

"This week's is going to be late," he says. "I'm owed money on Sunday. I'll bring the full eight-fifty then."

"Sunday, then," says Mr. Kanner, and writes nothing yet.

On Sunday, Betzalel brings the envelope. Mr. Kanner writes on both strips: Week four, said Thursday, received Sunday. He does not make a face about the three days, and he does not pretend not to have noticed them.

Saying the late part on Thursday costs more than paying it on Sunday. Betzalel notes that for later, the way he notes a splinter.





Chapter 7: Paid

The sixth Thursday, the envelope holds the last eight-fifty.
Mr. Kanner writes the date, adds the columns on the strip, and
writes one word under them: PAID.

He folds the strip and hands it to Betzalel.

"Keep it."

"Don't you want it?"

"I have mine." Mr. Kanner taps his own strip, on the shelf by the door. "Some people pay faster when somebody is watching. You came before anybody watched, and you kept coming."

Then he reaches behind the door and holds out a ball. "This came over my fence a while back. Yours, I think."

It is the ball. There is a scuff on it from the window frame.

"Thank you," Betzalel says.

"Thank the glazier," says Mr. Kanner. "He did the window. You did the bill."





Chapter 8: The Far End

On Sunday afternoon, the boys are back in the lot. Betzael brings the scuffed ball.

Before they start, he knocks once more on the Kanners' door - not about money.

"Where can we set up so a missed ball can't reach your windows, or anybody's?"

Mr. Kanner walks the fence line with him and points to the far end of the lot, where the fence backs onto the windowless brick side wall of the old printing shop, with a hedge beyond it. "For my glass, that's the spot," he says. "Miss one there, it lands in the hedge or off brick. No gardens, no bicycles either. But the lot belongs to the shul on the corner, not to me - you want the caretaker's yes for where you play."





The caretaker comes out with them and looks the far end over: the brick wall, the hedge, the open run of lot between. "Far end only," he says. "Check for little kids cutting through before the first swing, and if the hedge is full of balls, you fish them out, you don't trample it." He says it to all the boys, and he chalks a line where the batter stands.

The boys set up inside the chalk. Betzalel shows them the line Mr. Kanner walked, and they check the lot before the first swing, and the game starts without argument.

A hit still goes wrong sometimes. Now it goes wrong into the hedge. Betzalel tosses the ball up, inside the caretaker's chalk, on the spot the window's owner checked, and hits it straight.

