



The Path Is Dirty Again

Ages 9-12



Chapter 1: By Monday Morning

There are leaves on the path.

A whole ridiculous parade of them.

Yanky stops beside the courtyard gate with his schoolbag on his shoulder. On Sunday, he and two other boys spent an hour helping clear that path. Mr. Adler supervised, supplied child-sized brushes, and handled anything sharp or unpleasant himself.

By the end, the stone edges looked crisp. The bench looked as if somebody finally remembered it lived in a garden.

Now the wind puts the tree back on the ground, one piece at a time.

Yanky nudges a leaf with his shoe.

"That is the last time I do it," he tells his brother.

"Do what?"

"Any of it."

His brother looks at the tree.

"You'll have to tell the leaves."

Yanky does not laugh.



Chapter 2: The Photograph That Lied

Mr. Adler took a photograph after Sunday's cleanup. The boys stood beside the bench holding their empty brushes. Their mothers liked the picture.

Yanky likes it too. He imagined the courtyard looking like that all week.

At home on Monday, Mama puts the little print on the kitchen shelf. Her plum tichel covers all her hair.

"It looks lovely."

"It doesn't look like that anymore."

"What happened?"

"Leaves. Dirt. The tree."

Mama studies the picture.

"It still shows what you did on Sunday."

"But we wasted an hour."

Mama doesn't argue immediately. She asks him to show her the path when they go out together later.

Yanky hopes she will see it and admit he is right.

Chapter 3: The Wrong Kind of Finished

That afternoon, the wind is lighter. Yanky walks through the courtyard with Mama and Mr. Adler, who is watering a planter.



"He worked hard on Sunday," Mama says. "He's disappointed the path doesn't stay clear."

Mr. Adler rests the watering can on the ground.

"I don't expect it to stay clear."

Yanky stares at him.

"Then why ask us?"

"It needs clearing. People use it. Then weather happens, and people use it again."

"So the job never ends."

"A job ends. The need returns. Those aren't the same."

Yanky looks down the path. A neighbor carries a bag through the gate. She doesn't know what it looked like before Sunday. She simply uses the path.

He wants the effort to leave a permanent mark. A clean path that needs cleaning feels like a mark rubbed out.

Chapter 4: An Hour Is Not Forever

Mr. Adler explains the actual plan. The adults care for the courtyard. Children can volunteer for a short supervised job when it suits their families. They aren't on permanent duty.

"You don't have to join next Sunday," he tells Yanky. "And you don't have to keep watching the path until then."



That is not the answer Yanky expects either.

"But if I don't, who does it?"

"I arrange the work. I ask for help. I handle what remains."

Mama nods.

"You helped for an hour. You didn't promise us a courtyard that never has another leaf."

Yanky picks at his bag strap.

"I wanted it to be finished."

"It was finished for Sunday," Mr. Adler says.

The leaves keep moving while they talk. None waits politely for Yanky to agree.

Chapter 5: Five Ordinary Minutes

On Wednesday, Yanky comes through with Tatty.

A large leaf catches beside the gate. Tatty opens the gate fully so they can pass. An older neighbor goes through after them and thanks him.

It is a tiny useful thing. Tatty doesn't solve every gate problem forever.

Yanky notices the bench. Someone sits there reading.

On Sunday, they cleared loose dirt from that seat. Today it still has room for a person and a book.



Not every part of their work disappears at once.

Some parts do. People use them anyway.

At home, his little brother spills his box of crayons onto the rug. Yanky helps him gather them because Mama asks him to, and because the crayons keep poking his foot.

"You'll spill them again," he says.

"Probably," his brother says cheerfully.

Yanky laughs despite himself.

He puts the last crayon in the box. It is an ordinary sort of finish.

Chapter 6: The Second Sunday

Before the next cleanup, Mama asks Yanky what he wants to do.

He wants to go. He also wants less than a whole hour, because he plans to visit his cousin afterward.

Mama checks with Mr. Adler. Half an hour works. Another adult and two older volunteers handle the rest.

Yanky helps sweep dry leaves from a clear section. Mr. Adler keeps the children away from the street and takes the full collection bags himself.

At the bench, Yanky spots a small bottle with a broken edge.

He leaves it alone and tells Mr. Adler. The adult handles it. Yanky doesn't have to collect every object to call his portion finished.



The path looks good again.

A breeze drops one yellow leaf onto the middle.

Yanky stares at it.

His friend Meir groans. "Already?"

"Already," Yanky says.

He keeps sweeping until his agreed time is up.

Then he returns the brush and leaves with Mama.

Another yellow leaf drops beneath the tree. It belongs to the next job, not a secret extension of this one.

Chapter 7: The Same Bench

On Monday, the bench has leaves beside it.

The path isn't Sunday's photograph. It is Monday's path.

Yanky stops to tighten his bag strap. His brother says, "You'll need another picture."

"No," Yanky says. "I know what we did."

Two younger children walk through with their mother, whose floral tichel covers all her hair. They use the clear middle, avoid the planter, and stop beside the bench to fix a shoe.

Nobody congratulates Yanky. Nobody knows to.



He watches them for a moment.

Then he goes on to school.

At home that afternoon, he sees the photograph on the shelf. Three boys, empty brushes, one newly cleared path.

He doesn't take it down.

He doesn't ask Mama to write STILL CLEAN underneath it.

He carries the picture to his desk and sets it beside the calendar. Next Sunday's square is still blank. He can decide about another half hour when Mama asks.