

CHAPTER 1

The Calendar That Wasn't Hers

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On the second Tuesday of January, at 9:47 at night, Claire Madden sat on her kitchen floor with her back against the dishwasher and counted.

She had not planned to count. She had planned to do the dishes. But the dishwasher was loaded, the soap was in its little door, and her phone had buzzed twice while she stood there, and both buzzes were requests. Nadia wanted to know if Claire could look over the seating chart for her wedding “when she had a sec.” Her brother Eddie wanted to know if she was up. Claire knew what that meant. Eddie was never up at ten unless he needed something.

She put the phone face down on the tile and looked at the ceiling. Then, because she was the kind of person who made lists when she felt trapped, she pulled a pad from the drawer and started writing down every request she had received that week.

By the end she had fourteen.

Cover Tamsin's afternoon phones on Monday. Bring cupcakes for Dev's birthday. Pick up Mr. Okafor's prescription. Take the minutes at the Alder Street Neighbors meeting, again. Redo the shipping forecast for Greg, who had already approved the first version. Call her mother, which was not a request but was expected daily and might as well have been. A group gift for a colleague she barely knew. A Saturday morning to help Jo move a couch. Review a résumé for a friend of a friend. And so on down the page.

She read the list twice. Then she did something she had never done. She went back through it and wrote one word beside each item: yes or no.

Thirteen yeses. One no. The no was to a charity phone call, and she had hung up feeling guilty about it for an hour.

The audit

Claire's list was the beginning of what this book will call a Yes Ledger, and it is worth explaining why it works.

Most of us have a poor sense of how much we have agreed to. Requests arrive one at a time, in small sizes, in the middle of other things. Each yes feels light. Nobody ever hands us the bill for all of them at once, so we never see the total.

When Claire added up the time, she found nineteen hours. These were not hours she had planned to spend. They were

hours that had been quietly taken from the part of the week she thought of as hers: the evenings, the weekend mornings, the lunch break she ate over a keyboard. Nineteen hours is nearly half of a full-time work week, and she had given it away in sentences like “sure, no problem” and “of course, happy to.”

She did not feel generous. She felt like a grocery store whose shelves were being emptied by people who never paid.

Here is the first idea of this book, and it is plain enough to fit on a sticky note: every yes is also a no. When you agree to cover Tamsin’s phones, you are declining whatever else you might have done with that afternoon. When you agree to take the minutes, you are saying no to the evening that those minutes will eat. The no is not stated, so it feels as though it does not exist. But it is there, and it is usually aimed at yourself.

Why it feels fine until it doesn’t

A habit of constant yes does not announce itself as a problem. It looks like a good personality. People say you are dependable, easy to work with, a lifesaver. Those words are real rewards, and rewards are how habits stay alive.

The trouble shows up sideways. Claire noticed hers in small things. She had stopped reading for pleasure. She had a Saturday morning walk she kept promising herself and had not taken since October. Her apartment was clean in the places

visitors could see and chaotic in the closet where she shoved things she had no time for. And she felt a low, constant irritation that she did not like to look at directly, the way you avoid pressing a bruise.

That irritation is worth taking seriously. Resentment is often the first honest signal that your yeses have outrun your wishes. It is not proof that you are a bad person. It is data.

The shape of a week

Claire sat on the floor a while longer. She thought about the nineteen hours, and about something she had told Priya, her oldest friend, over coffee a few weeks before. Priya had asked what Claire did for herself, and Claire had said, “I’m kind of waiting for things to calm down.”

Priya had not said anything. She had only raised one eyebrow and stirred her coffee.

Waiting for things to calm down is the oldest plan in the world, and it has a flaw. Things do not calm down, because the supply of requests is not limited by anyone’s capacity. It is limited only by how many people know you will say yes. A reliable yes is a resource, and resources get used. Every week is as busy as the one before it, because the people around you are adjusting to your pattern, not yours to theirs.

This is not a criticism of those people. Most of them are not scheming. Tamsin is not plotting to ruin Claire's afternoon. She is just busy, and Claire is available, and available people get asked. The pattern is the problem, and the pattern is something Claire made, which means it is something Claire can change.

What she did next

Claire was not ready, that night, to say no to anyone. She was only ready to look. That is where almost everyone starts, and it is enough.

She tore the page off the pad and stuck it to the refrigerator with a magnet shaped like a lemon. Then she picked up her phone, read Eddie's message, and typed back, "Kind of tired. Can it wait till tomorrow?"

It was not a no. It was barely a maybe. But it was the first time in months she had answered a request with a fact about herself instead of an agreement, and she noticed that her heart was beating faster than the message deserved.