

The Later List

Chapter 1: The Plan

On Sunday morning, Mirele makes a plan worthy of a general.

The midwinter exams are two weeks away. She has the kitchen table until noon - Mama is out with the little ones, the house is quiet - and she lays out the history review sheets like a ceremony. Fourteen pages. Three hours. Done by lunch, with time to spare.

She sharpens two pencils, because dull pencils are how good intentions die. She pours a glass of juice. She moves the salt and pepper off the table, because a study table is a serious thing. She sits down at eight fifty-five with the satisfied feeling of a person who has already, in some sense, finished.

By nine-ten, she has reviewed one page. The page is about the causes of the war, and she could not tell you one of them, because she has also been watching the clock, rearranging the pencils, and thinking about whether the juice was a mistake.

Chapter 2: The Busy Hour

Here is how the next hour goes.

Her sister Estee appears with a skirt and a loose hem and a hopeful face, and Mirele - who is good with a needle - threads it for her, because it takes only a minute. The minute takes eleven, because the thread splits twice.

Mama calls from the hall - she is back early - to ask whether the grocery list on the fridge includes flour. Mirele goes to check. It does not. She adds flour, and sugar, and while she is there, notices the list needs reorganizing entirely.

Her little brother sets up his puzzle at the other end of the table because the floor is cold, and Mirele reviews history with one eye and watches the puzzle with the other, and twice she hands him pieces he did not ask for. He accepts them the way little brothers accept help - with suspicion, then with demands for more. By the second round she is half sitting at his end of the table, and the history sheet is doing that thing where the words stay the same size but stop meaning anything.

Then the neighbor from downstairs knocks to return the kugel dish, and Mirele, who was raised right, stands at the door and hears the whole building's news, because you cannot take a dish and close a door in the same breath. Six minutes. She counts them afterward, and adds them to the bill.

At ten o'clock, she looks down at the review sheets.

Page one. Three lines underlined. One hour, gone, and she has been busy every minute of it.

Chapter 3: The Honest Count

Mirele sits with the waste of it for a minute.

The strange thing is how busy the hour felt. She never once stopped moving. She helped two people and a puzzle, and the grocery list is genuinely better organized.

And the review sheets - the actual job, the one the morning was for - have three lines underlined on page one.

I wasn't lazy, she thinks. That's the trap. I was busy. Busy and done are different countries.

She counts what the hour produced: one needle threaded, half of a hem started and abandoned, one grocery list reorganized, two puzzle pieces nobody asked for, three lines of history.

Five arrivals in one hour, every one of them obeyed mid-sentence - and the studying, the thing the hour was for, never gets beyond page one.

She is not angry. She is interested, which is better. How does a person be that busy and finish nothing?

She thinks about Bubby, who can come for Shabbos and, in one afternoon, produce a full meal and never once look hurried. Bubby does not do four things at once. Bubby does one thing, then the next thing, and somehow that is faster.

It feels unfair, that answer. It also feels true.

Chapter 4: Bubby's Kitchen

In the afternoon, Mirele goes to Bubby's, because it is Sunday and that is what Sundays are for. She brings the review sheets, more out of guilt than hope.

Bubby is braiding challah. She does not braid challah the way Mirele studied. She braids challah. The flour tin could fall over, and Bubby would finish the strand first.

Mirele tells her about the morning - the needle, the list, the puzzle, the three lines.

Bubby does not stop braiding. "One thing at a time," she says. "That's the whole secret, and everyone knows it, and nobody does it."

"I tried. Things kept arriving."

"Things always arrive," Bubby says. "Write them down for later, and they stop shouting. And your mind will wander even so - minds wander, that's not a crime, that's a mind. You notice, and you come back. The coming back is the exercise. People think the wandering is the failure. The wandering is nothing. Staying gone is the failure."

She pinches the end of the braid.

"Also," she says, "a timer. Even I use a timer, and I am eighty years old and made of patience."

Chapter 5: The Second Block

On Sunday night, Mirele sets up again, and this time the setup is different, because this time she knows what the enemy looks like. The enemy is not laziness. The enemy is arrivals.

One thing: the history review sheets. Everything else off the table, including the juice, which is a distraction wearing a costume.

A kitchen timer, set for forty minutes.

And next to the sheets, a plain piece of paper, labeled at the top: LATER.

Eight minutes in, her mind announces that she never answered Estee about Tuesday. She writes "Estee - Tuesday" on the later list, and comes back to page two.

Twelve minutes in, she remembers the letter she wants to write her cousin. On the list. Back.

Seventeen minutes in, she drifts into planning what she'll say at the family Chanukah party, and catches herself mid-speech, and laughs out loud, alone in the kitchen, and writes "party speech (apparently)" on the list, and comes back.

When the timer rings, she has reviewed seven pages.

She has also wandered five times. She counts them on the list, and here is the thing Bubby promised: five wanders, five returns. The returns are the reps. The hour does not need her to be a statue. It needs her to come back.

Chapter 6: The Week

Mirele runs the block every school night that week, and it is never once clean.

Monday, the timer rings while she is mid-wander about the exams themselves, and the return takes two full minutes.

Tuesday, she only wanders twice, and feels smug, and Wednesday wanders nine times to punish the smugness.

Wednesday night is the real test, because Wednesday night the party problem arrives for real - the midwinter class party, the centerpiece she half-offered to make last month, suddenly designs itself in her head mid-block, down to the ribbon color. Her hand actually reaches for a fresh sheet. The block has twenty minutes left.

She writes "centerpiece? - THINK after the timer" on the list, in capital letters, and the writing-down does what it always does: the idea stops shouting. It is not gone. It is scheduled. There is a difference, and the difference is the whole trick.

When the timer rings, she gives the centerpiece one honest minute, and the answer is no - she has exams, and the committee has eleven other girls. The list caught an obligation before the obligation caught her. She tells the committee girl at recess the next day, kindly, in one line, and feels only the good kind of sorry.

Thursday, Estee asks her how the studying is going, and Mirele says, "I wander every few minutes. I come back every few minutes. It's going great," and Estee looks at her like she has lost her mind, which is fair.

But the sheets are filling up. Fourteen pages, reviewed, underlined, with questions marked in the margins for the teacher - and the margins are where she can see it working, because a question you write down is a thing understood well enough to ask about.

On Friday, Mama asks how the week went, meaning the studying, and Mirele says, "I wandered about forty times and came back forty times," and Mama says that sounds exhausting, and Mirele says, "It was. It also worked."

The next week, on Sunday night, the timer jams - it is the little wind-up kind, and it stops at eleven minutes with its ticking gone, mid-block, a small domestic tragedy. Mirele almost calls it a sign. Instead she finishes the block by the kitchen clock, badly, checking it every four minutes, learning exactly how much quiet work the timer had been doing for her. The next day she borrows the spare wind-up timer from Bubby's kitchen drawer until hers is fixed. Tools get maintained. That is part of the deal.

The later list, meanwhile, has its own afterlife. Every evening, after the timer, she does one or two things off it. The letter to her cousin gets written. The party speech, mercifully, does not.

Chapter 7: The Exam Week

The history exam is on a Wednesday, and it is not a triumph scene.

The room is quiet and too warm, and someone's chair creaks every ninety seconds, and Mirele's mind, out of habit, offers her three wandering thoughts in the first ten minutes. She returns three times. Old reflex now.

Mirele does not float through it glowing. She works. Two of her margin questions show up, almost word for word, and she grins at the paper, which the proctor probably notices and does not comment on.

When the tests come back, the grade is good - not miraculous, good - and what Mirele feels looking at it is not pride exactly.

It is recognition. That grade is made of returns. Five a night, nine on the bad night, two on the smug night. Nothing about it is magic. Everything about it is repeatable.

Wander, return, she thinks. That's the whole machine.

On Friday, Estee corners her by the coats. The hem girl has a big test and a panic to match.

"Teach me the timer thing," Estee says. "Everyone says you cracked it."

Mirele almost says it is nothing. Instead she lends her sister the later list - the actual creased paper, with "Estee - Tuesday" crossed out at the top - and Estee laughs at seeing her own name filed away, and then goes quiet, reading the page like instructions.

"You wrote me down instead of answering me?"

"I wrote you down so I COULD answer you," Mirele says. "Saturday night. Kitchen. Timer on. The first block is the worst one, I'm not going to pretend."

She says it the way Bubby would: one thing, then the next thing.

Chapter 8: The Next Block

On Sunday, there is no exam coming, and Mirele sits down at the kitchen table anyway.

One thing: the book she has been meaning to read since her birthday, the thick one.

Timer: forty minutes. Later list: ready.

Midway through the first chapter, her mind wanders to the exams, to Bubby, to whether Estee ever finished the hem herself. She smiles, writes "ask Estee - hem" on the list, and turns back to the page.

The timer ticks. The house is quiet. One thing at a time is enough.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The busy hour

From the story, list everything Mirele's first hour produced. Then answer: how can a person be busy every minute and finish nothing? What is the difference between busy and done?

Activity 2: Arrived - obey or list?

For each thing that arrives during a study block, mark O (obey it now - it genuinely cannot wait) or L (later list). All are fictional.

1. You remember you never answered your sister about Tuesday.
2. The smoke alarm goes off.
3. You start planning a speech for a family party.
4. Your little brother asks for a drink of water.
5. You wonder whether the library book is due tomorrow.
6. A real emergency - someone is hurt. Then: what makes 4 different from 6, and what makes 1 different from 4?

Activity 3: The return is the rep

Bubby says, "People think the wandering is the failure. The wandering is nothing. Staying gone is the failure." Explain in your own words. What does Mirele count at the end of her block, and why does she count that and not the wanders?

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

A study block is 40 minutes. A girl wanders 5 times, and each wander costs 2 minutes before she returns. How many minutes of real work does she get? Her friend refuses to start because she "can't focus perfectly" - how many minutes does she get? Show your steps, and finish the sentence: "Five returns beat zero starts because ____."

Activity 5: The later list's afterlife

What happens to the items on Mirele's later list after the timer rings? Why does doing one or two of them afterward make the list work better the next day, rather than worse?

Activity 6: Draw the table

Draw Mirele's Sunday-night setup: the review sheets, the timer, the later list with its items, nothing else on the table. Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Caption with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Zissel's block - planning for a fictional case

A teen named Zissel sits down to practice her instrument for thirty minutes and keeps getting up - for a snack, to find her other sock, to check whether the mail came. Write her setup sentence (one thing, timer, list), two things she might write on her later list, and what "the return is the rep" looks like at minute twelve. One sentence each, with names.

Activity 8: Word grid

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

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

TIMER, THING, BACK, WANDER, BLOCK, LIST, DONE, PAGE. Which word names what attention does all by itself, and which word names the move that counts as the exercise?