

The Morning After That Hasn't Happened

Chapter 1: Green Across the Board

Two weeks before the walk, Sheindel's planning board is a thing of beauty.

Route: mapped, measured, approved - ten miles, out through the park loop and back, marshaled crossings at the two big roads. Water: three stations, donated by the same family that donates every year. Permissions: signed. The class lists: two hundred and eleven girls, sorted by grade, each grade with two student marshals. Sponsors: counted. Rain date: reserved. Every row on the board has a name next to it, and every name has a check, and the checks are the deep, restful green of a job being done well.

This is the first year the school has let students run the walk at all - it used to belong to the office - and the handover came with one line from the principal that Sheindel has taped to the top of the board: "The walk's only real rule is that everyone who leaves comes back." She reads it every planning meeting, and the committee nods every time, and the board stays green.

It is Freida, her co-chair, who says the thing that starts it, looking at all that green: "We're going to be great." And Sheindel, to her own surprise, hears herself answer: "That's exactly what's bothering me."

She has run smaller things - a bake table, a grade's gift collection, the lobby's charity drive - and every one of them went wrong in a place the plan never mentioned. The bake table's change box. The collection's duplicate envelopes. She has a superstition now, if you can call a scar a superstition: a plan that contains no surprises has simply not announced where they are.

Freida waits for more, gets nothing, and does the thing a good co-chair does: she doesn't argue the feeling, she asks for its schedule. "How long has the board been bothering you?"

"Since Tuesday," Sheindel admits. "Every check that's ever gone wrong on me was green once."

Chapter 2: The Meeting After the Meeting

She cannot name the bother for two days. It is not a forgotten item - she has checked the board against last year's file twice. It is the board itself, the greenness of it. The board lists everything they THOUGHT of. It cannot list what they haven't.

She brings it to Tatty at the Friday table, because Tatty runs a store and has opinions about plans, and Tatty gives her the thing the whole next week turns on. "In business we do it before a big season," he says. "You imagine it's the morning after, and the thing flopped. Not might flop. Flopped - it's done, it happened, everyone's disappointed. Then you go around the table and everyone has to say why. Out loud, like they're reporting the news. You'd be amazed what people know and don't say when the plan is still alive and everyone's being polite about it."

"A failure rehearsal," Sheindel says.

"A failure rehearsal," Tatty agrees. "Cheap. One hour, no equipment. The only cost is it feels like bad manners, and you have to push through that part."

Chapter 3: Bad Manners

The committee does not love it. That needs saying plainly, because it is the part everyone skips when they retell it.

Six girls around the classroom table after school, all of them tired, all of them green-across-the-board, and Sheindel says: "It's the morning after. The walk flopped. Two hundred girls, and it went badly. I want each of you to tell me why - like you're reporting it, not predicting it."

The silence is exactly as long as she feared. "That's - morbid," says the water-stations girl, half laughing. "We're going to jinx it."

"We're not predicting it," Sheindel says. "We're interviewing it. There's a difference: a prediction you can argue with, and arguing wastes the hour. A report you can only contribute to. Nobody's allowed to say 'that won't happen' - the rule of the game is it already happened. You can only say how." She waits. "And one more rule, the important one: nobody's hole makes them stupid. Every hole we find tonight is a hole that isn't in the day anymore. Finding them is the winning, not the losing."

Freida goes first, because co-chairs exist for moments like this. "Fine. Morning after. It flopped because - the fast walkers finished in under two hours and the slow ones took almost four, and the marshals didn't know whether to wait or go home, and three girls walked the last mile alone, and that was the part in the newsletter."

The table goes quiet in a different way.

Chapter 4: Three Holes

Once it starts, it does not stop. That is the thing Tatty said would happen: everyone knows something.

The water girl, still half-defensive, hears herself say: "Since we're reporting - the water stations are where they are because the donor family lives near the park gates. Nobody checked where the girls will actually be thirsty. Mile three, mile six, mile eight - we placed them at gate one, gate one, and gate two. It flopped because the middle four miles had nothing."

The headcount hole comes from the quietest girl on the committee, who has clearly been carrying it for weeks: "It flopped because we don't actually know how we'd know. Two hundred and eleven girls leave in the morning. Who counts two hundred and eleven girls coming back? The grade marshals count their own grades - but what does a marshal do when her count is short? There's no answer to that on the board. I checked. There's just - green."

Sheindel writes all three on the board, over the green, in the red marker, and the red looks like relief: the sweep plan (a named marshal whose whole job is the last walkers, walking last on

purpose), the stations moved to miles three, six, and eight (the donor family happily re-points - they never cared about gates, they cared about the walk), and the checkpoint protocol: each marshal counts at miles three, six, eight, and the finish; a short count goes to Sheindel immediately; and one girl - the quiet one, who asks for it - owns the master count. Every hole gets a name and a fix before anyone is allowed to leave.

Chapter 5: The Item Everyone Skips

They are packing up - tired, virtuous, done - when Sheindel reads the last index card, the one she almost did not bring.

"One more. This is the one I wanted to skip, because it means admitting the seniors' map is in nobody's hands but theirs, and mine - which according to the rules is exactly why we can't skip it." She puts it on the table. "It flopped because everyone assumed everyone knows the route. The seniors do; they've walked it since ninth grade. The new girls don't. The transfer girls and the ninth-graders walked ten miles in a park they'd never seen, following girls who stopped noticing the turns years ago, and at the far fork the front of the walk went left and a clump of younger girls went right, and nobody noticed for two miles."

The committee stares at her. "That's - specific," someone says.

"I walk that park every Sunday," Sheindel says. "I've gone right at that fork twice, and I know the park. The rule of the exercise is the item you most want to skip is the one the exercise exists for. So: route markers at every fork, and a marshal AT the far fork, and the route card goes home the week before, so nobody's map is a senior's memory."

Chapter 6: The Fixes

The fixes take a week, and they are, every one of them, boring. That is how Sheindel knows they are real.

The sweep marshal turns out to be the easiest job to fill and the hardest to explain: you walk last, on purpose, at the speed of the slowest girl, and your fun is that nobody's fun costs them a mile alone. Three girls volunteer inside an hour, which does not surprise Sheindel at all - the jobs that look like sacrifice fill fastest when you describe them honestly.

The water stations move; the donor family adopts mile six with the enthusiasm of people being given a real job. The checkpoint protocol gets a page of its own and a drill at the last committee meeting - each marshal practices the short-count sentence, out loud, once, because a sentence you have never said is a sentence you will not say when it matters. The route cards go home. The far fork gets a sign, a marshal, and - Freida's addition, from her own near-miss as a ninth-grader - a second sign fifty feet BEFORE the fork, because a sign at the fork itself is a sign you read after you've chosen.

Chapter 7: The Day

The day comes, and here is what the day does: it tests the one thing the premortem did not imagine.

The route is fine - the far fork claims nobody, and the marshal there reports the particular boredom of a job done right. The sweep works; the last walkers come in singing, forty minutes behind the front, with the sweep marshal teaching them the song. The checkpoints count, and the counts hold.

It is the water. The delivery for mile six - the donor family's own van - breaks down across town at nine in the morning, and the station stands empty at ten, with two hundred girls walking toward it. And this is where Sheindel learns what the failure rehearsal was actually for, because the committee does not freeze and does not scatter. The checkpoint page has names on it; the marshals carry the count by hand and the messages by foot - marshals at miles three and eight are told to double their pours; the mile-six station becomes a sign - WATER MOVED - TWO MILES TO WATER, YOU'RE ALMOST THERE - with the sweep marshal carrying two cases in a borrowed wagon for the girls who need it now. Nobody is thrilled. Everybody is fine. The newsletter, had there been one, would have had nothing to report, which is the definition of success.

"It wasn't on any card," Freida says afterward, almost offended. "The van. We interviewed the failure for two hours and nobody said the van."

"The cards were never going to catch the actual thing," Sheindel says. "They taught us how to catch. Different skill."

Chapter 8: The Page for Next Year

The morning after, the real one, the committee meets one last time to write it all down for next year's chairs - the school's new rule, since the walk belongs to the students now.

They write the route and the checkpoint protocol and the donor family's name. They write the van story, because it is funny now, and because next year's committee should know the thing you rehearse is the catching, not the catch. And at the top of the first page, before anything else, Sheindel writes the line that has to greet whoever opens the file: BEFORE YOU PLAN ANYTHING ELSE - hold the failure rehearsal. It is the morning after. It flopped. Everyone says why. The item you most want to skip is the one the exercise exists for.

Then she thinks about the principal's rule, taped to the top of her board all spring - everyone who leaves comes back - and writes one more line, the one the season taught her: the plan is not the green board. The plan is what you do in the hour you spend imagining the board lying to you.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The board's blind spot

Sheindel's problem is that "the board lists everything they THOUGHT of. It cannot list what they haven't." In your own words, why can't a checklist protect against this - and what does the premortem use instead of a checklist? Two or three sentences.

Activity 2: The two rules

State the premortem's two rules as the story gives them. Why does "it already happened" change what people say? Why is the skippable item the most important one? Short answers.

Activity 3: Order the repair

Put these in the story's order, and say why the order matters: (a) the checkpoint drill and the practiced short-count sentence; (b) the failure rehearsal; (c) the van breaks down; (d) three holes get names and fixes; (e) the page for next year's chairs. One sentence on why the order matters.

Activity 4: The walk math - a made-up set of numbers

The numbers in this activity are made up for practice. 211 girls walk 10 miles. Without a sweep, the fastest finish in about 2 hours and the slowest in about 4, with the last mile walked alone by about 3 girls. Water drunk averages 1 cup per girl at each station she passes. (a) With stations at miles 3, 6, and 8, how many cups should the committee plan for, plus a 10% margin? (b) A marshal counts her grade at 4 checkpoints. If each count takes 2 minutes and the 4 grades report to 1 master counter, who handles the reports one at a time, how long after the last girl passes a checkpoint can the committee KNOW everyone is accounted for? Show your steps.

Activity 5: "The cards taught us how to catch. Different skill."

The premortem never imagined the van, yet the committee handled it in minutes. In your own words, what is the difference between catching and the catch - and why is rehearsing the first worth more than guessing the second? Two or three sentences.

Activity 6: Draw the far fork

Draw the far fork as Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 give it: the route, the wrong turn, the signs, and the marshal. Only what the story tells you. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Mindel's production - a fictional case

A girl named Mindel is chairing her school's production scenery crew, with everything on schedule and two weeks to go. Write the sentence she uses to open her crew's failure rehearsal, the one skippable item her crew most needs to say, and the rule she makes about how holes are received. One sentence each, with names.



Activity 8: Word grid

Find the eight words in the grid. They all go left to right, one per row.

W A L K E R S F G H
P L A N V W F G H U
F L O P W F G H U P
S W E E P G H U P M
S T A T I O N P M N
M I L E S U P M N O
R O U T E P M N O R
H E A D C O U N T S
G H U P M N O R S T
H U P M N O R S T D

The eight words: WALKERS, PLAN, FLOP, SWEEP, STATION, MILES, ROUTE, HEADCOUNT. Which word names the imaginary event the committee interviews, and which word names the job invented so nobody walks alone?