

The Nine O'Clock Answer



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: Two Summers in an Envelope

The notice on the shul corkboard says: MOVING SALE, and under it, in smaller letters, sewing machine, cabinet model, good condition.

Devoiry reads it twice. She has two summers of babysitting money in an envelope in her sock drawer, two hundred and forty dollars in tens and twenties, counted so often the bills lie flat. Her aunt taught her to sew on a machine just like this one, and by last winter the neighbors were bringing her their hems, cash in an envelope of their own. Hand-hemming pays slow and machine work pays by the piece, and she means to take alterations all next year and come out of twelfth grade with more than she started. She has been watching the want ads since Pesach.

The Kraindys are moving to be near their married daughter, and everyone is selling something.

"Go after supper," Mommy says. "And Devoiry - money you saved for five months deserves five minutes of thinking."

"I'll think for ten," Devoiry says.





Chapter 2: The Right-Looking One

The machine sits on the Kraindys' porch between a lamp and a box of seforim, and it is beautiful. Wood cabinet, steel works, a motor under the side plate, the kind of machine that outlives its owner and gets sold again. Devoiry has wanted exactly this since her aunt let her run the first seam.

Mrs. Kraindy is happy to show it. "My mother's," she says. "Sews like new. Two hundred twenty, and I should tell you, two people are coming tonight to look at it. First one with the money takes it."

Devoiry's heart does the thing hearts do. This is it. The exact machine, at the exact price, three blocks from her house, the week she decided to start.

"Can I try it?" she says.

"Of course," says Mrs. Kraindy, and threads it.





Chapter 3: What the Seam Says

Devoiry sews a line on the scrap cotton Mrs. Kraindy gives her. The line is clean.

Then she does what two summers of watching her aunt sew taught her to do: she folds the scrap in four, the thickness of a waistband, and sews that.

The machine skips. Twice in six inches, the stitch jumps, and the top thread loops loose underneath. She sews another line, same thing.

She puts her hand on the motor casing. It is warm, and the sale started ten minutes ago.

"Thick fabric?" she says.

"It needs oil," says Mrs. Kraindy quickly. "It's been sitting. My mother oiled it every month; I've been packing boxes instead. A little oil and it's perfect." She says it kindly, and she may believe it, and she also glances at the street, where the two people could be arriving any minute.

Devoiry looks at the skipped stitches and feels the envelope against her hip, in her skirt pocket, where she brought it. Just in case, she had told herself. Knowing all along it was not just in case.





Chapter 4: The Want and the Porch Light

The want is very loud.

It says: two hundred twenty is less than you have. It says: a little oil. It says: if you walk away to think, one of the two people buys it in the next hour and you spend the next year hemming by hand, remembering this porch.

The worry is quieter, and it is specific. A machine that skips on waistband thickness is a machine that skips on paying work. A warm motor after ten minutes might mean nothing at all - and might be the first sentence of something. She does not know what is wrong. She knows she does not know, and that the person selling does not know either, whatever she believes.

"I want it," Devoiry thinks to herself. "The want is real. It's two summers and a plan for next year. But the want can't tell me if this machine sews, or if I can afford it. The want picks what I'm aiming at. It doesn't get to hold the money."

She could buy it and hope. She could walk away and sulk. Neither one uses the part of her that counted the money into the envelope.

"Mrs. Kraindy," she says, "I want to buy this machine. I can't buy it tonight."





Chapter 5: The Bounded Pause

Mrs. Kraindy's face does a small thing.

"Not because I don't love it," Devoiry says. "Because the seam skipped on thick fabric, and I don't know what that means, and it's too much money to spend on not-knowing. Here's what I'm asking.

Give me until nine tomorrow morning. Tonight I'll ask the repair shop on the avenue what a skip like that means. At nine I'll come back, and if you're willing, we wheel it over for his look, and right after the look you get my answer - I'll either buy it or tell you why, to your face, no disappearing. If you sell it before nine, I'll be sorry and I'll understand."

Mrs. Kraindy looks at her for a long moment. "That's the most polite no I've heard all week."

"It's not a no," Devoiry says. "It's a yes with a condition inside it. Nine o'clock."

"Nine o'clock," Mrs. Kraindy agrees, "but I am not holding off anyone with cash. If they come with two hundred twenty tonight, it goes."

"That's fair," Devoiry says, and means it, and hates it a little, which is how you know the wanting is still in there.





Chapter 6: What the Pause Is For

The repair shop is three windows down from the bakery, and the man there has fixed machines since before Devoiry was born. She brings no machine, only her sentence.

"Skips on four layers," she says. "Clean on one. Motor warm after ten minutes."

He wipes his hands. "Could be the needle. Dollar-fifty, sews like new. Could be the timing belt. Ninety dollars with the labor. Could be the motor, and then you're talking about whether the machine is worth the repair." He shrugs. "From a sentence, nobody knows. From ten minutes with the machine, I can tell you what I see - and I tell you the price of the fix before I touch anything."

"So a person who buys it without the ten minutes is buying one of three machines," Devoiry says. "The dollar-fifty one, the ninety-dollar one, or the maybe-not-worth-it one."

"That's what she's buying," he says. "Tell the seller to wheel it over. It's two blocks. I'll look in the morning, first thing - the looking costs nothing."





Goldy walks her home and says the friend thing: "It'll be gone.
Someone always comes with cash."

"Maybe," Devoiry says. "If it's gone, I'm out a machine I didn't check.
If it's there, I find out which of the three it is - and then the budget
and I decide."

Later at home, Mommy asks the one question that matters. "And at
nine tomorrow, what makes you walk away?"

"If the check says needle, I buy at two twenty," Devoiry says. "If it
says belt, the total is three hundred and ten, and my envelope is
two forty - so I tell her what I can pay with the belt counted in, and
if she can't take it, I walk. A dying motor, I walk either way. And
whatever the answer is, I tell her to her face, like I promised."

Mommy hears the whole of it - the envelope, the belt, the
walk-away lines. "That's a plan with its eyes open," she says. "Go at
nine with my blessing. And Devoiry - if anything about it feels
different in the morning, different is a reason to phone home, not
to push through."

She is not calm about any of it. She checks the clock four times
before bed. The pause is not peace. It is just a fence around the
money.





Chapter 7: Nine O'Clock

At nine in the morning, as agreed, Devoiry is on the porch, and the machine is still there.

Mrs. Kraindy looks like she slept on the decision and woke up tired of it. "Nobody came," she says. "The two people went to a different sale. So. You came back, like you said."

They wheel it to the avenue together, cabinet and all, Devoiry steering, Mrs. Kraindy holding the cord.

The repairman takes twelve minutes. He sews, he opens the side plate, he sews again. "Timing belt, near certain - worn smooth. Ninety dollars with the labor, ready Tuesday. The motor sounds right to me, and if I'm wrong about that, you bring it back and we talk before you pay another dollar. Under the belt, it's a good machine. Under a good belt, it's a very good machine."





Chapter 8: The Real Machine

Devoiry does the arithmetic on the porch rail, on the back of the want ad.

Two hundred twenty, plus ninety, is three hundred and ten. Her envelope is two hundred and forty. She says it out loud, to the machine's owner, not as a tragedy, just as the fact that now runs the conversation.

"I can't pay two hundred twenty for a machine that needs ninety dollars of work," Devoiry says. "A hundred and fifty is what I can pay, because a hundred and fifty plus the belt is the two hundred forty I actually have. If you can't take it, I'll walk away glad I checked, and you'll sell it to someone the belt doesn't scare."





Mrs. Kraindy looks at the machine, and at the street, and at the girl who came back at nine exactly. "A hundred and fifty," she says. "Not a prize for coming back - that's just what the machine is worth now that we both know what's inside it. Somebody else would have found the belt after they paid me, and I'd have spent the year being the woman who sold them a lemon."

Devoiry counts a hundred and fifty out of the envelope, tens and twenties lying flat. Ninety stays for the repair, and the envelope is empty to the dollar. Her drawer at home already holds the thread and needles her aunt gave her when she started; the first paid hems will buy the first yard of lining. She does not mind. An empty envelope around a real machine beats a full one around a maybe. On Tuesday, she picks the machine up from the shop, and at home she sews the first seam on four layers of denim from an old skirt.

The stitch line is straight and even, every single one landing.

She runs her finger along the seam. Then she takes the want ad off her wall, writes SOLD across it, and pins it inside the cabinet, where the next owner will find it in forty years.

