

The Nine Pages

Chapter 1: The Two O'Clock Door

On Shabbos afternoon at two, the side room of the shul belongs to twelve girls between nine and eleven, and the room runs on Aidel.

It has run on Aidel for two years. She is seventeen, and the group is hers: she knows where everything is, because she put it there.

The closet door sticks. The latch gives if you lift the handle a little and go left. The loud games live at the start, when the room has energy to burn. The quiet games live at the end, when mothers are due in twenty minutes. The snacks sit on the middle shelf in bags of twelve, because twelve is the number that matters. Sari and Peshy do not sit together, because they love each other the way a match loves a candle.

None of this is written anywhere. It does not need to be. It is all in Aidel's head, and Aidel is always there.

The song sheets live behind the second shelf of the bookcase, and the three songs that always work are the ones she starts before anyone suggests something else. When a new girl comes - one came in the fall, one the winter before - Aidel is the one who knows to put her next to a talker, not a starrer.

The coordinator looks in at three and watches the room hum. "I never worry about this hour," she says. "You know that, yes?"

Aidel knows. She likes being the hour nobody worries about.

Chapter 2: Nothing to Write

The cousin's bar mitzvah is out of town, the whole family invited, Thursday night to Sunday. Aidel's mother mentions it at supper on a Sunday, and Aidel's first thought is not the trip. It is the group.

"I'll tell the coordinator tomorrow," she says. "It's one week. Matti can open up."

She tells the coordinator at school on Monday morning - the coordinator teaches the older grades - and the coordinator says, "Fine. Write it down for her?"

"There is nothing to write," Aidel says. "It's all the usual. Games, snacks at three, songs at the end. Matti's watched me a hundred times."

The coordinator nods slowly, the way people nod when they are deciding whether to push. She does not push. "One week," she says. "Tell Matti the latch sticks."

That evening Aidel does the whole handoff in her head and finds it takes eleven seconds. Games, snacks, songs, latch sticks. She thinks to herself: see, there is nothing to write. She is seventeen, and she has never once missed a Shabbos with the group.

At supper on Wednesday, her mother asks the only question that matters. "Does Matti know about the latch?"

"I'll tell her," Aidel says. "Tomorrow, at recess. Latch, games, snacks, songs. It's a two-minute conversation."

"Write it down anyway," her mother says, and serves the soup, and the conversation moves to her brother's spelling test, and the writing-down never happens.

Chapter 3: The Usual

She catches Matti at recess on Thursday.

"Lift the handle a little and go left," Aidel says. "Start loud, end quiet. Snacks at three, middle shelf, take one bag. Sari and Peshy, opposite sides of the circle."

"Sari and Peshy, opposite sides," Matti repeats. "Aidel. I've watched you do this for two years."

That is true, and it is the thing that lets Aidel stop. Matti has watched two years of smooth afternoons. She has watched the latch give a hundred times without ever lifting it herself.

"You'll be great," Aidel says, and means it, and means also, underneath, it's one week, how bad can it be.

Thursday night in the car, her little brother asks what the girls will do without her. "The usual," Aidel says. "Matti knows the usual."

She says it out loud the way you say a thing you want to be true. The usual turns out to be a place, and the place is her head, and her head is going to be two hundred miles away.

Chapter 4: Away

The bar mitzvah is warm and loud and full of cousins, and Aidel is happy in it, mostly.

Shabbos afternoon, after the meal, the little cousins run their own loud game in the basement, and Aidel watches them for a minute. At two-thirty she looks at the clock on the wall. Back home, right now, twelve girls are in the side room, and Matti is lifting the handle and going left.

She pictures it going fine. There is no reason it should not; it is all the usual.

At three she looks at the clock again, and thinks: snacks. A bag of twelve, middle shelf. She has a picture in her mind of the shelf so clear she could draw it, and it occurs to her, for the first time, that the picture is only in her mind.

She watches the little cousins argue about whose turn holds the ball, and she thinks, without meaning to: Sari and Peshy. Opposite sides. Matti knows that one. What she does not know is everything Aidel did not say, because Aidel did not know she knew it.

At the meal, her uncle runs the cousins' bench from his head, with twelve small facts nobody else holds. The table teases him: he has never written anything down in his life. "Why would I write it down?" he says, expansive. "I'm always here." Aidel laughs with everyone. It takes her

until the soup is cleared to hear it.

Then her cousin calls her into the game, and she goes, and the afternoon closes over the thought like water.

Chapter 5: The Report

Matti finds her at the school doors on Monday, and Matti's face says it before Matti does.

"The latch wouldn't give," Matti says. "I lifted and pulled. The caretaker got it in the end - he was in the building for the men anyway - but that was twenty minutes, and the girls were already wild. The snacks were shut in the closet, Aidel. The closet I couldn't open. We played statues for an hour. Sari and Peshy sat together because I forgot there was a reason, and it went the way it goes. Two girls walked home at three."

"The song sheets? Never found. We sang the one song everybody knows, twice. The second time even the little ones were mouthing it."

She takes a breath. "You make it look like nothing. It is not nothing."

Aidel's first sentence is ready in her mouth: I told you the usual. She does not say it. She stands in the hallway and thinks to herself: I told her the usual. The usual was eleven seconds long. The usual was two years, and I gave her eleven seconds of it.

"It's not your fault," Aidel says. "It's mine. You got everything I had, and what I had was nothing you could hold."

Chapter 6: The Nine Pages

Now, Monday night, Aidel writes like it is a job.

Page one: the latch. Lift the handle and go left. If it won't give, don't force it - the caretaker is in the building for the men anyway, and here is when he's around. Page two: the games, in ladders. Three loud for the start, three medium for the middle, three quiet for the end, and what each one needs. Page three: the snacks. Middle shelf, bags of twelve, take one, and the girl who can't have peanuts sits where she can reach the plain ones first.

Page four: seating. Sari and Peshy, opposite sides, and the why, because a leader who knows the why doesn't need to remember the rule. Page five: the rain plan. Page six: what to do when someone cries. Page seven: the song sheets, behind the second shelf of the bookcase, and the three songs that always work. Page eight: the little questions girls actually ask, and honest short answers. Page nine: who to find when something is over her head - the coordinator's classroom, the shul office, the caretaker - because a leader should never have to guess.

The pages keep coming, the way the knowing keeps coming once you start unloading it: every page shows her two things she almost left in her head. By page nine she understands, finally, how much of the group was stored in exactly one place.

Twelve girls, two hours, nine pages. Last week, every one of these pages existed in exactly one skull, and the skull went to a bar mitzvah.

She thinks to herself: I didn't run the group well. I ran it in a way that only works when I'm in the room. Those are not the same thing.

Chapter 7: The Rotation

She brings the folder to the coordinator on Tuesday, in person, and lays out the whole plan.

"Four leaders," Aidel says. "Me, Matti, and two more from the class who already asked once and I said no, because saying no was easier than teaching. A rotation - each of us leads one Shabbos in four. The folder lives in the closet. The week's leader takes it home the Thursday before, reads it, asks me the questions it doesn't answer."

The coordinator reads page one, then page four, then looks up. "You wrote the why into the seating."

"A rule you understand survives a leader who's tired," Aidel says. "A rule you only remember dies the first busy week."

The coordinator taps the folder once, the way she taps things she is adopting. "Twelve girls just got four leaders instead of one." That is all she says, and it is the right size.

Then Aidel walks Matti through the folder, and Matti finds the holes. "All three loud games flopped, once," Matti says. "Last winter. You did that rhythm clapping game. Where's that page?"

It is not a page. It becomes page ten, and the folder gets better because someone who is not Aidel is allowed to write in it.

Chapter 8: The Week She Watches

The test comes three weeks later: Matti's turn, with the folder, and Aidel comes to the group as nothing. Not the leader. A pair of hands if asked.

Matti arrives at half past one and sets the chairs in the circle the way page four sketches it. She lifts the handle and goes left, first try, page one. The loud game runs. Snacks at three, one bag, the plain ones within reach. Sari on one side of the circle, Peshy on the other, and nobody had to remember why, because page four explains it and Matti read it Thursday.

At the door, a nine-year-old asks if Matti is the leader now. "This week I am," Matti says. "It's in the folder." Aidel loves the sentence.

It is not identical to Aidel's afternoons. Matti's middle game is one Aidel never uses - a guessing game with a ball - and the room likes it so much that two girls ask for it again next week. Aidel watches from the back and thinks to herself: the room is allowed to like someone else's way. That is what the folder is for. Not my way, on paper. A way, on paper, with room.

On Sunday, Aidel takes out her pencil and opens the folder to page two, and adds Matti's ball game to the ladder, and writes Matti's name next to it. Then she puts the folder back in the closet, on the middle shelf, where the next leader will find it.

Eight activities

Activity 1: Two different well-run groups

"She ran the group well" and "she ran it in a way that only works when she's in the room" are presented as different things. In your own words, what is the difference? Which one describes the first five chapters? Two or three sentences.

Activity 2: The eleven-second handoff

List four things Aidel knew in Chapter 1 that Matti did not have on the away Shabbos. For each, say where the knowledge lived (written anywhere, or only in Aidel's head). Then find the moment in Chapter 2 or 3 where Aidel could have changed that, and did not. Short answers, with chapter numbers.

Activity 3: Order the repair

Put these in the order the story does them, and explain why the order matters: (a) the folder is reviewed by another leader and improved; (b) Aidel writes the nine pages; (c) Matti leads while Aidel only watches; (d) the away week collapses; (e) the rotation of four leaders is agreed. One sentence on why the order matters.

Activity 4: The hours - a made-up set of numbers

The numbers in this activity are made up for practice. A group meets 44 Shabbos afternoons a year. One leader doing everything spends about 3 hours a week on it - prep, the two hours, and cleanup. (a) How many hours is that in a year? (b) With a rotation of 4 leaders, each leader covers 11 afternoons. If each turn costs that leader about 2.5 hours (less prep, because the folder exists), how many hours does each leader give in a year? (c) Writing the folder costs one long evening - 4 hours, once. In the first year, does the folder pay for itself in hours? Show your steps, and name one thing the hours do not measure.

Activity 5: "It is not nothing."

Matti says, "You make it look like nothing. It is not nothing." What is the "it"? Whose work made it look like nothing, and why did it look that way? Why is Matti the right person to say this line? Two or three sentences.

Activity 6: Draw the folder

Draw or outline the folder as the story builds it: nine pages, then ten. Label each page with its job, and mark the page that exists because Matti found a hole. Only what the story tells you. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Leila's welcome table - a fictional case

A teen named Leila runs the grade's welcome table for new students - she knows which teachers to introduce, which forms the office wants, where the spare schedules live, and which girls will walk a newcomer to lunch. It is all in her head. She is home sick the day a new girl arrives. Write the three pages she puts in her welcome folder afterward, the person she teaches it to, and one way she tests that the folder works. 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.

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

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The eight words: FOLDER, LEADER, GAMES, CLOSET, SNACKS, SONGS, LATCH, ROTATION.
Which word names the object that lets a group survive its leader, and which word names the system that gives twelve girls four leaders?