

The Number He Can Sign

Chapter 1: The Chart

The read-a-thon is the school's biggest thing every Cheshvan.

The rules are simple. You read books - real books, from the approved shelf or your own house. Sponsors pledge money to the charity fund for every page you read, a few cents a page, and the whole thing runs three weeks. Every boy gets a tally sheet on the first day, a grid of empty boxes for the numbers, and the sheet lives in your notebook and nobody initials it. Every Friday, the teacher collects the sheets, updates the chart in the front hallway - every boy's name, every boy's pages, in marker, biggest numbers at the top - and hands the sheets back without a word of checking, because there is nothing to check them against.

Lipa is a reader. Not a fast skimmer - a reader, the kind who walks past his house because the chapter ended wrong and he needs the next one. His father says he was born holding a book, which is not possible, and also explains a lot. Last year he read the whole approved shelf by midwinter, and the librarian started keeping a small pile behind the desk with his name on a sticky note, books she thought he would like, which he always did.

The first Friday, Lipa's number goes up fourth on the chart. The second Friday, second. Heshel is first - Heshel is always first at things like this, and he is a good sport about it, which makes it worse and better at the same time.

"You're going to catch me," Heshel says, reading the chart. "You're eighty behind and you read on the bus."

"I read everywhere," Lipa says, and it is true, and it is about to matter.

Chapter 2: Midnight Pages

Wednesday of the third week, Lipa is behind.

Not behind Heshel - behind his own week. There was a test Monday that ate Sunday's reading, and a wedding Tuesday - his cousin's, the whole family, dancing until his feet hurt - and now it is midnight and he has a book open and the pages are doing something pages do when you are tired: he is turning them, and his eyes are touching every line, and nothing is arriving.

He finishes the chapter. Forty pages. He puts the bookmark in and sits there, and tests it the way his father tests a latch: one pull. He tries to tell the empty room what happened in the chapter. The room gets nothing. There was a journey in it, he thinks, or an argument - the furniture of a chapter, with nobody home.

He thinks to himself, "I read that." Then he thinks the truer thing: "I turned that."

Nobody would know. That is the thing about the read-a-thon that nobody says out loud: the pledge form says pages read, and the only witness to a page is the person turning it. The teacher cannot check. The sponsors cannot check. Heshel, eighty pages ahead, cannot check.

Lipa writes the number on his tally sheet. Then he looks at what he wrote, and he does not sleep for a while. At one in the morning he gets up, turns the sheet face down on the desk, and goes back to bed, and that does not help either.

Chapter 3: The Arithmetic Nobody Checks

In the morning, the arithmetic is still there.

Forty pages. At the pledge rates his sponsors signed - his father, his uncle, two neighbors - the forty pages are worth a little over nine dollars to the charity fund. Real money, from real people, moving on his word.

He does the other arithmetic too, the chart kind. Claim the forty: he is forty behind Heshel with Thursday evening of reading ahead, which is catchable, which is first place. Don't claim them: he stays eighty back, and second place is where he probably finishes, and nobody would ever know the difference was forty midnight pages he turned without reading.

He thinks to himself, "It is nine dollars for the FUND. The fund. It is not even for me." Which is true, and is also, he notices, exactly the kind of true thing a person reaches for when the untrue thing wants something. He has watched himself do this before, in smaller coins - rounding a score, claiming a foul that was mostly ball - and every time, the reaching felt like reasoning. It never felt like reaching. That is what makes it dangerous, he thinks: it arrives dressed as the fairest person in the room.

At breakfast his father asks how the race is going, and Lipa says, "Second. Eighty back," and hears himself choose the real number for his father and the imaginary number for the chart, and the two versions of him sit in the kitchen together, not getting along.

Chapter 4: What He Could Sign

Lipa carries it for two days, and then he does the thing that settles it, and it is not a speech and not a principle. It is a picture.

He pictures his uncle - who pledged the most per page, who owns the hardware store and counts screws for a living, who once made a supplier wait forty minutes while he counted a shipment of washers because a box that says five hundred sometimes holds four-eighty - asking him, friendly, over the Friday table: "So the forty from Wednesday. Tell me about the chapter."

And Lipa pictures answering. Not lying - he would not get that far - just answering: what happened in it, who was in it, anything. And the picture has no sound in it, because there is nothing to say. He turned those pages the way you turn a doorknob in the dark: motion, no arrival.

He thinks to himself, "A number I would have to go quiet about is not my number. It does not matter that no one can check it. I can check it. I DID check it - that is what the sheet is for."

He takes out the tally sheet, crosses out the forty - one line through it, still readable, because erasing is for hiding and he is not hiding - and writes the true number for the week. His hand is steadier than it was at midnight. The page looks worse and he feels better, and he notices the trade is always exactly that direction: the record gets uglier, the person gets lighter.

Chapter 5: The Lower Number

Friday, the teacher collects the tally sheets and updates the hallway chart while the whole grade pretends not to watch from the water fountain.

Heshel: first, 1,340 pages. Lipa: second, 1,220. The gap is a hundred and twenty now, and the race is over, and everyone knows it, and there is a little rush of boys around the chart anyway, because there always is. Someone claps Lipa on the shoulder and says second is nothing to be embarrassed about, which is true and lands wrong anyway.

The teacher looks at Lipa's sheet twice. "Wednesday was a slow day," he says. It is not quite a question.

"I turned forty pages at midnight and didn't read them," Lipa says. "So they don't count."

The teacher nods slowly. "You know I couldn't have checked either way."

"That's why they don't count," Lipa says, and immediately feels like he said something bigger than he meant, so he adds, "My uncle counts screws. You can't hand him a bag and say there are probably screws in it."

The teacher laughs, and it is a real laugh, and he puts the number up exactly as written, and Lipa watches the marker make the small, true digits in second place.

Chapter 6: Second Place

Heshel wins the prize lunch, and he wins it like he does everything - he thanks the sponsors first, out loud, at the chart, before anyone asks.

To Lipa he says, quietly, "What happened to your week? Your numbers just stop."

So Lipa tells him. The midnight chapter. The turning without reading. The forty, crossed out.

Heshel is quiet a moment. Then he says, "So without the cross-out, it's eighty. Eighty I would have been worried about." And then, before Lipa can answer: "Huh." And then, because he is Heshel: "I'd like to think I'd have crossed it out too. I'd like to think it so much that I'm not sure it's true, which is suspicious." He grins. "You made second place expensive."

"It was nine dollars," Lipa says. "For the fund, sure. But the sponsors' nine dollars."

"The sponsors' nine dollars," Heshel agrees, and looks at the chart one more time, and Lipa can see him doing his own arithmetic, his own weeks, which is not Lipa's business and is somehow the best part of the whole morning.

Chapter 7: The Other Test

Two weeks later, the standard shows up somewhere new, which is how Lipa learns standards travel.

A history quiz comes back graded. The teacher marked an answer right that Lipa knows was incomplete - knows it, because he remembers writing the half-answer and meaning to come back to it and then the bell took the period. Two points. The quiz is a borderline grade, the points stand between him and a number his mother has been hoping for since the term started, and the teacher is already erasing the board and talking about next week's map work.

Nobody is likely to notice this either. The teacher graded fifty quizzes. He is not going to remember one half-answer.

Lipa's hand goes up before the negotiation in his head even starts. "This one wasn't complete," he says, when the teacher comes over. "I meant to come back to it and didn't."

The teacher looks at the answer, then at Lipa, then at the answer again, and takes the two points off without a speech, which Lipa appreciates more than any speech.

Two points off. His mother, when he tells her that night, looks at him for a long moment and then says there are many numbers she hopes for, and this one is not the highest of them, and does not explain, and does not need to. His father just says, "The sheet doesn't have moods," and passes the soup, and Lipa understands that this is what being known feels like.

Chapter 8: The Tally Sheet

The chart comes down in Kislev. The teacher takes it down himself, at the end of a Friday, and the hallway looks wider without it. The fund gets its money, every dollar attached to a page that somebody read or said they read.

Lipa keeps his tally sheet in the back of his notebook: the weeks, the numbers, and the forty with the one line through it, still readable, because erasing is for hiding.

Under it he has written nothing. He thought about writing something - every version sounded like a poster, and the point was never the poster. The point fits better in the doing: the next book on his night table starts at page one, and when midnight comes and the pages start turning without arriving, he puts the bookmark in earlier than he wants to, and writes down only what he read.

The sponsors never hear about any of it. His uncle reads the final letter from the fund at the Friday table and says, "Good pages," and hands it around, and Lipa passes it to his brother and says nothing, because the number was never the point and saying so would make it one.

Which is less. Which is his.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The only witness

From the story, who can check what "read" means in a read-a-thon? List every party - teacher, sponsors, rival - and what each one can and cannot verify. What is left when everyone's verification runs out?

Activity 2: The two arithmetics

Lipa does the money arithmetic and the chart arithmetic. Lay out both from the story. Why is the good cause - the fund - the strongest temptation rather than a defense? What does he notice about the true thing he reaches for?

Activity 3: The picture that settles it

Lipa settles the question by picturing his uncle asking one friendly question about the chapter. Why does a friendly question do what no rule could? What does the silence inside the picture tell him?

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

A reader turns 200 pages in a week: 160 read with attention, 40 skimmed at midnight. Sponsors pledge 25 cents per page. What does the fund receive if all 200 are claimed? If only the read pages are claimed? What is the price of the standard, in dollars, and what does the arithmetic NOT capture? Show your steps.

Activity 5: "Standards travel"

In Chapter 7, the read-a-thon standard reappears on a history quiz. From the story, what does it mean that standards travel? Why might the uncaught quiz error go unnoticed, and why does that not matter?

Activity 6: Draw the tally sheet

Draw Lipa's tally sheet: the weeks, the numbers, the forty with one line through it. Only what can be seen - no labels for feelings. Caption with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Masha's steps - a fictional case

A teen named Masha logs miles for a charity walk challenge; sponsors pledge per mile, counted on her own handwritten log. One rainy evening she marks a full loop she only half finished. Write: the moment she notices no one can check, the picture question she could ask herself (who could she not answer?), and the correction she makes on the log. One sentence each, with names.



Activity 8: Word grid

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

The eight words: LIPA, PAGES, CHART, COUNT, HONEST, POSTED, STANDARD, NUMBER.

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