



The Rate They Never Name

Ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The Second Envelope

The envelope has Tzirel's name on it, spelled correctly this time. That is the good part.

Inside are four bills.

She counts them again under the worktable, where Mrs. Fried cannot see. Counting does not change anything. Neither does looking through the flap for a fifth bill.

Above her, the sewing machine stops.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes," Tzirel says.

The answer is out before she decides what it means.

Mrs. Fried reaches for the next skirt. Her dark tichel covers all her hair; a measuring tape hangs over the shoulders of her high-necked blouse. The alterations room is warm, and someone has balanced a fan on an empty shelf. It moves the corner of an order slip without moving much air.

Tzirel puts the envelope in her bag.

This is her second week at the shop. She is seventeen, and she wants the earnings for next year's school expenses. She also wants to be good at something outside a classroom.



So far, she is good at sorting orders, calling out which hems are ready, and remembering that Mrs. Stein needs the navy skirt by Wednesday. She is very good at smiling when she does not understand an arrangement.

"Same time Sunday?" Mrs. Fried asks.

Tzirel nods.

Then she sees the new stack of order slips.

Chapter 2: What Counts

At home, Mama sits beside the kitchen window, repairing the lining of her own winter coat. Her plain blue tichel is pinned securely at the back. Tzirel sets the envelope on the table.

"I thought it would be more."

"What rate did you agree on?"

That is a small question with a remarkably unpleasant answer.

"We didn't exactly."

Mama lowers the coat.

"She said she'd pay me while I learned. I said that sounded good."

"And the first envelope?"

"I thought that was just for the first week."

Mama turns the envelope over without opening it.



Tzirel wishes she would say Mrs. Fried is wrong. Then Tzirel can be angry instead of embarrassed.

"I can help you think through the conversation," Mama says. "We can't know what she meant without asking."

"But if I ask now, she'll think I only care about money."

Mama glances at the bag by the door. "You go there instead of doing other things. You are allowed to care what the work pays."

Tzirel opens her notebook. She writes Sunday through Thursday and fills in the hours she remembers. Three hours, two hours, three and a half. On Tuesday she goes in early because an order needs sorting. On Wednesday she stays late because Mrs. Fried is fitting a customer.

The minutes add up differently on paper. At the shop, each extra stretch seems too small to mention.

"I should have written this from the beginning," she says.

"You can start with what you remember. Mark the uncertain parts."

There are two uncertain parts. Tzirel wants to round them upward. She wants to round them downward more, so no one can accuse her of being difficult.

She writes a range instead.

Mama lifts her coat again. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"No. Maybe. Not into the room."

"I can wait nearby."



Tzirel draws a line beneath the total.

A line looks decisive. She does not feel decisive.

Chapter 3: Beside the Fitting Curtain

On Sunday, a customer is already waiting when Tzirel arrives.

The customer wants two hems finished before noon. Mrs. Fried is polite, but her foot taps below the table.

Tzirel hangs up her bag. She takes the order slips. She knows where the matching tickets belong.

The conversation can happen after the rush.

After the rush comes a fitting. After the fitting comes a delivery. Then Mrs. Fried offers Tzirel tea, and tea makes asking about money feel worse, not better.

"Mrs. Fried? Could we have ten minutes before I start the afternoon orders? About my hours and pay."

Mrs. Fried looks at her.

"Of course. Let me finish this pinning."

Tzirel sits on the spare stool. Her notebook is in her lap. She has rehearsed a calm, sensible opening that contains no accusation and no apology.

When Mrs. Fried sits down, Tzirel says, "I'm sorry."

She stops.



Mrs. Fried waits.

"Actually, I need to understand our arrangement. I thought the first envelope was a starting amount. I didn't ask what happens after that."

"I understood that I was giving you a fixed weekly amount for helping and learning," Mrs. Fried says. "Not an hourly wage."

Tzirel looks at the notebook.

There it is. Two arrangements in the same room, neither one spoken fully.

"I've been here more hours this week," she says. "And I'm doing orders while you're with customers. I like the work. But I need to know what I can earn if I keep coming."

Mrs. Fried takes the notebook when Tzirel offers it.

"Tuesday was that long?"

"I came early."

"You did. I forgot."

She reads down the page.

Tzirel finds herself defending Mrs. Fried in her head. The shop is small. Customers change their minds. Fabric costs money. The fan looks older than Tzirel.

None of that answers the question in the notebook.



"I can't offer you a large wage," Mrs. Fried says.

"What can you offer?"

Chapter 4: The Number on the Page

Mrs. Fried names an hourly amount for the order-desk work. It is more than Tzirel receives now, but less than the amount Tzirel hopes for.

"And the learning time?" Tzirel asks.

"If you want to come to the sewing lesson on Wednesday, that can be separate. It isn't a shift. You don't handle orders during it."

"Could I take time to think?"

"Certainly."

The word is so ordinary that Tzirel almost laughs. She has spent three nights imagining a door closing. Mrs. Fried is looking for her pencil.

They write down a possible schedule. Three paid afternoons, two hours each. The optional lesson is outside those hours. Tzirel does not need to attend it to keep the desk work.

"If there's a fitting at the end of my shift?" she asks.

Mrs. Fried looks up.

"Last Wednesday, I stayed. I didn't know whether I was supposed to."

"I'll ask whether you can stay. If you can, it's paid time. If you can't, I will take over."



Tzirel writes that too.

Then Mrs. Fried taps the old total.

"For the past two weeks, let's look at the time you spent working, separate from the lessons. I should have made this clearer."

They go through each afternoon. On one day, Tzirel spends most of an hour watching Mrs. Fried demonstrate a sleeve. On another, she sorts customer orders for the entire shift. They leave one uncertain half-hour marked, and Mrs. Fried checks her appointment book.

They agree on a top-up for the work already done. Mrs. Fried puts it in a fresh envelope.

Tzirel does not say, "You don't have to."

She nearly does.

Instead, she says, "Thank you for going through it with me."

Outside, Mama waits beside the bakery window.

"How did it go?"

"I didn't burst into flames."

"That's useful."

"I still don't know if I'll stay."

Mama steps away from the window. "Then we don't have to decide on the pavement."



Chapter 5: A Different Desk

That evening, Tzirel compares the offer with a notice from the neighborhood bookshop. The shop needs someone two afternoons a week to shelve books and help at the counter. Its stated rate is higher. The hours are longer.

She likes the alterations room. She likes the moment a customer tries on a skirt and stops tugging at it. She likes Mrs. Fried, who can find a crooked seam without making a person feel crooked.

She also wants to save enough by the end of the summer.

At the bookshop, the next afternoon, Mr. Rosen shows her the return shelf. His white shirt has a pencil mark near the pocket.

"Have you worked at a counter before?"

"An order desk. Two weeks."

Two weeks sounds small. Tzirel lets it be two weeks.

He explains the shifts and pay. She asks when payment happens. She asks who counts the hours. She asks whether she is expected to come during school holidays.

Mr. Rosen answers without appearing wounded.

Then he gives her a short paid trial shift, with its rate and hours written down before she begins. He shows her how the till works and stays beside her while she practices. The shop is quieter than the alterations room. It smells of paper instead of pressed cloth.



A customer asks for a book Tzirel has never heard of.

"I don't know that title," she says. "I'll ask Mr. Rosen."

She catches herself feeling almost cheerful about knowing less than everything.

At the end, Mr. Rosen offers her the two weekly shifts.

She asks for one evening to decide.

Chapter 6: Leaving Properly

Tzirel chooses the bookshop.

Saying it aloud is harder than choosing it on paper.

At Mrs. Fried's, she waits until the customer leaves.

"I've decided to take the bookshop job. It fits what I need to save. I'd like to finish this week here, if that helps you arrange someone else."

Mrs. Fried folds a length of lining.

"I'm sorry to lose you."

Tzirel's face gets hot. She wants to offer Sunday. Or one afternoon forever. Or to take less, which would undo the entire conversation.

"I like working here," she says. "I'm still choosing the other job."

Mrs. Fried sets down the lining.

"Both things can be true. Thursday can be your last shift."



They confirm the hours and the final payment. Tzirel asks whether Mrs. Fried would like a page explaining the ticket system she uses.

"Yes. That would be helpful. Do it during your shift."

On Thursday, Tzirel writes the page. She leaves spaces between the steps. She adds what to do when a ticket is missing, because a missing ticket is exactly when a person needs instructions.

Mrs. Fried reads it, checks the hours, and gives her the final envelope.

"Come say hello sometimes," she says.

Tzirel smiles. "I'd like that."

It is an invitation. Not a hidden shift.

Chapter 7: The First Entry

At the bookshop, Tzirel keeps her hours in a small ruled notebook. Mr. Rosen initials the total each week. On her second afternoon, a delivery arrives ten minutes before she is due to leave.

"Can you stay to help me check it?" he asks.

She thinks of Mama expecting her, and of the supper she has agreed to make.

"Not today. I can put this pile away before five."

"All right. I'll check the cartons."

She works until five. She closes the notebook.



At home, her younger sister asks whether she misses the sewing shop.

"Some parts."

"Then why did you leave?"

Tzirel rinses the rice. She considers giving the explanation she has prepared for grownups: the hours, the savings, the difference between learning and working.

"Because I found something that suits me better right now."

Her sister accepts that and asks where the larger saucepan is.

Later, Tzirel puts her newest envelope in the drawer beside the first two. She does not throw the old ones away. She keeps them folded together, not as proof that Mrs. Fried is unfair, and not as proof that she herself is foolish.

On the back of her hours notebook, she writes four questions for the next time someone offers her work.

What is the job?

What are the hours?

What does it pay?

When do we review the arrangement?

She looks at the last question, then adds a fifth.

Who do I ask when something changes?



The next morning, she takes the notebook to the bookshop. There are returns on the counter and three cartons still waiting to be checked.

She hangs up her bag and opens to a clean line.