

The Seven Forty



Illustration coming soon

For ages 15-18



Chapter 1: The 7:40

Since September, the 7:40 is not a bus. It is a crowd with wheels.

The routes merged when the city redrew the lines - the old 12 and the old 5 are one route now - and every schoolgirl on the north side is on it, standing shoulder to shoulder with every office worker on the north side. There are notices at the stops explaining the new map. The map is clear. The map does not add a single seat.

Tuly, sixteen, gets on at the third stop and stands the whole way, one hand on the rail, her bag between her ankles, ruffled before the day begins. By the time the bus crosses the bridge, she has been apologized to by strangers four times, and it is not yet eight o'clock.

She knows this. She has known it for six weeks.

And every morning, at the stop, her mind fights it fresh.





Chapter 2: The Morning Argument

The argument is always different and always the same.

Maybe today it will be empty, says Monday's version. It is not.

They should add a bus, says Tuesday's. They should. They do not.

If I stand at the front of the stop, I will see it coming and somehow that will help, says Wednesday's. She sees it coming. It is full. Seeing it coming does not thin it.

If I give the driver a look, says a Thursday version, the city will feel it. The driver is a man with a thermos and forty passengers. He has not once been in charge of the route map.

By Thursday she is composing the complaint letter in her head again, the really good one, the one with the statistics. She has composed it forty times. It is an excellent letter. It has never been written down.

The bus is a fact. The argument is a second ride she takes on top of the first one, and it is the more exhausting of the two.





Chapter 3: The Tally

On Friday, waiting in the cold, Tuly notices the argument start up on schedule - maybe today - and for the first time she watches it happen instead of riding inside it.

That is a strange morning. The fight is still there, but she is standing a step to the side of it, looking at it. It looks, from a step to the side, like a wind-up toy. It winds itself up every morning at the stop and runs down by school.

In her notebook, in the margin of her history notes, she starts a tally. Not a judgment. Data. Mornings she spent re-fighting the bus: four this week. Mornings she spent doing anything else: one.

Four to one. The daily argument is winning the week, and the week is only five days long.

The tally is not flattering. It is also not a verdict. It is a mirror, and mirrors are allowed.





Chapter 4: Her Aunt's Morning

Her aunt takes the same bus to work, three stops later, and has taken it since the merger.

On Sunday, at the family table, Tuly asks her how she stands it.

"I don't stand it," her aunt says. "I ride it." She says it without a speech, between soup and dessert. "I argued with the 7:40 for a month. Excellent arguments. The bus never once heard me. So now, every morning, I decide again."

"Again? Not once?"

"Once doesn't hold," her aunt says. "I wish it did. Every morning the argument shows up at the stop before the bus does, and every morning I choose again: this is the bus, what's my plan for it? Some mornings I choose late. Some mornings I choose with bad grace.

The choosing still counts."

Her own plan is unglamorous: she boards at the second stop for the seat, and she keeps her shopping list in her pocket for standing days, and she has opinions about which door to stand near. She has had these opinions for months. They are not bitterness. They are logistics.

She does not say she loves the bus. Tuly has ridden beside her. She does not love the bus.





Chapter 5: The Plans Get Tested

The real options are not secret. Tuly writes them down, because a plan on paper is harder to argue with than a plan in the fog.

The 7:20 exists. It has seats. It costs twenty minutes of sleep, which is real money.

The route starts two stops back. Boarding at the second stop instead of the third means eight extra minutes walking, and usually - not always - a seat.

Standing days can carry something: the review cards fit in her coat pocket, and a crowded bus is twenty minutes she was going to spend standing anyway.

She tests them one week at a time, like a scientist with one subject. The 7:20 week, she learns, is wonderful at the bus door and terrible at ten at night, when the earlier alarm comes collecting. So: 7:20 on test days only. The second-stop week is better - eight minutes of walking she does not mind, in exchange for usually a seat. So: the earlier stop on review mornings, when the cards matter most. Cards in the pocket every day, because cards weigh nothing.

The plan is not heroic. That is how she knows it is real.

Some mornings the argument still shows up at the stop before the bus does. She notices it - there it is - and chooses again. The noticing is the whole job. The bus has never once required her to enjoy it.





Chapter 6: The Rainy Morning

In November, it rains, and the 7:40 is late, and when it comes it is so full that the driver shakes his head at the stop.

The argument arrives instantly, delighted. Now look at this. Now you have proof.

Tuly stands in the rain and feels the whole thing wind itself up - the injustice, the letter, the statistics. She lets it wind. Then she does the only move she has: she notices it, names it plainly - re-fighting, again - and asks the real question instead. What is the plan for this morning?

The plan for this morning is: hood up, walk to the second stop, catch the next one from the front of the line. The walk is fifteen wet minutes. Her socks do not survive. She arrives at school wet and on time, and not spent - and "not spent" turns out to be a thing you can feel, the way you feel a stone gone from your shoe.

The difference, she thinks, shaking off her hood, is not the rain and not the bus. It is which ride she skips: the second one, the one in her head.





Chapter 7: The Letter

In December, Tuly writes the complaint letter. Once. On paper.

It is shorter than the forty in her head and better, because it fits on one page and asks for one thing: a second bus at school hours. She looks up the address, mails it, and gets an answer in three weeks - a polite form letter, printed, with a real signature at the bottom.

Ridership is reviewed twice a year. No additions are planned this year. The signature is from a person whose job is answering letters, not adding buses, and Tuly finds she cannot even be angry at the letter. It told her the truth.

The answer is no. The fact stays.

Tuly files the letter in her folder and finds she is not even angry.

The real letter was doing something. The forty imaginary ones were only re-fighting dressed up as doing something. She does not compose another imaginary one. She doesn't have to - she already mailed the best one.





Chapter 8: The Earlier Stop

In January, the mornings are dark, and Tuly waits at the second stop with her hood up and her cards in her pocket, and the 7:40 comes already half full, which is why she is here.

A girl from the younger grades is at the stop too, fighting the bus out loud to no one. "It's impossible. Every single day. I can't believe this is the bus now."

Tuly hears her own voice from October, word for word, the same statistics and everything. She does not give a speech. She is sixteen, not eighty, and she remembers exactly how much a speech would have helped her in October, which is none.

"The 7:20 has seats," she says, when the girl stops for air. "If you can do the earlier alarm."

The bus comes. They get on. It is crowded, and it is just a bus. Tuly finds the rail, takes out her cards, and starts with the presidents.

