

Twelve Parcels on Tuesday

Chapter 1: The Route

The Tuesday route is twelve stops. Raya takes it over in the fall, the week the previous girl leaves for seminary, and the coordinator explains it the way she explains everything, standing by the parcels.

"Ring the bell. Hand it over yourself. Stay a minute." The coordinator taps the list. "The parcel is a supper tray and a book. The stay-a-minute is the point. Anyone can drive a tray."

Raya is sixteen and good at routes. She does the twelve stops in the order on the list, up the stairs with the parcel, ring, hand over, stay a minute - and the minute is never a minute. It is seven, eight, ten. The whole route takes nearly two and a half hours, and she is home in the dark with homework waiting.

The stops are all seniors, all housebound or nearly. Some have family in and out all day - the corner house has two daughters in rotation, and the parcels barely land before a granddaughter carries them in. Some have nobody until the aide comes at six. Raya learns the doors the way you learn anything weekly: which bells are loud, which doors open fast, which take the full slow minute with the chain.

She does not yet know which doors are which kind of house. The list does not say. The list is addresses, not lives.

In the third week, on the stairs of the third floor, with Golda's parcel in her arms and the clock past five, Raya does the arithmetic everyone does on stairs: the carrying takes fifty minutes of the two and a half hours. The rest is the stay-a-minute.

She stands there one more flight, thinking. Then she rings Golda's bell.

Chapter 2: The Knock-Drop

The experiment starts the next Tuesday, and Raya is honest enough to call it that in her notebook.

Knock, parcel on the mat, "It's Raya with your parcel!" - and go. No bell, no waiting for the door, no minute. The route takes fifty minutes. She is home by five, at her desk by five-ten, and she finishes her history outline before supper for the first time in a month.

The second knock-drop Tuesday, the coordinator stops her at school with the waiting list. Six names, seniors who signed up after the route filled. "Can the route take any more?"

The coordinator says the names slowly, the way she says everything that matters. One of them is a woman Raya's mother knows. One is a woman who taught half the neighborhood's girls to bake, thirty years ago. Six kitchens, six suppers a week, waiting for a route with room.

Raya does the math on the spot. Eighteen stops, knock-drop, is seventy-five minutes. It fits.

"All six," she says, and the coordinator writes it down, and that is the week Raya becomes, in the coordinator's words at the volunteers' table, "the girl who cleared the waiting list." Somebody claps. The numbers are real: eighteen parcels, eighteen kitchens that get supper, six names off a list that was going to wait until winter.

Her notebook has a chart now, times down the side, and the times are beautiful. She shows it to her mother, who says the thing mothers say: "That's wonderful, Raya." Her mother does not ask what the times measure.

Chapter 3: The Third Floor

It is Golda who breaks it, and she does not mean to, and she never knows she did.

The third-floor flat is the slowest stop on the route - three flights, no railing on the last one, and Golda is the slowest door, because Golda is eighty-six and walks with a frame. The knock-drop works there too: parcel on the mat, call up the stairs, gone.

The sixth week of knock-drops, Raya is halfway down the first flight when she hears the door open above her, and Golda's voice, not loud, mostly to herself: "Oh. It's here."

Just that. Oh, it's here. Like the parcel is the whole visit. Like the parcel is what came.

Raya keeps walking, because the route is the route, and the chart is waiting. But the sentence follows her down the stairs and into the street and all the way home, and it sits at her desk while she does her history outline, which takes longer than it should.

She tries to picture Golda. She cannot. She has delivered to Golda for nine weeks - three on the old route, six on the new - and she cannot picture her face, because for six weeks she has not once stood still long enough to see it. The only picture she has is from the street: a third-floor window with the light on, and a curtain that moves sometimes, and nothing behind it that she could describe to anyone.

She opens the notebook to the beautiful chart, and she looks at what the times measure, and she thinks to herself: the chart is perfect, and it measures the wrong thing.

Chapter 4: The Two Columns

Raya does not burn the chart. The chart is data, and data is not the enemy. She adds a column.

STOPS, the left column says. VISITS, says the right. She goes back through six weeks in memory and fills in both, and the left column climbs beautifully, twelve to eighteen, and the right column falls off a cliff, twelve to almost zero, and the two lines open like scissors from the same twelve, like they planned it.

The parcel is the excuse, she writes at the bottom. The visit is the delivery.

Then she sits with the hard part, because the easy version - go back to twelve stops, two and a half hours, waiting list grows again - throws away six real kitchens to save her conscience. The seniors on the waiting list did nothing wrong. The trays are not the problem. The trays are half

the point.

She takes out a fresh page and rules it into four lines. Which stops have family in and out all day. Which stops have nobody until six. Which stops are on the way to which. And what the route actually costs, in minutes, if the visits go back in where they belong. The pencil breaks twice. She keeps going.

She thinks about the coordinator's first sentence, standing by the parcels: anyone can drive a tray. And the plan comes together the way good plans do, in pencil, with crossings-out.

Chapter 5: The Plan in Pencil

She brings it to the coordinator on a Sunday, in person, with the chart.

"Quick drops where family is around," Raya says. "The corner house has two daughters in rotation - the parcel on the mat is fine there, her week is full. Protected visits where nobody is. Golda has an aide at six and otherwise nobody. That's not a drop. That was never a drop. The four protected stops are all women on their own all day."

The coordinator reads the chart, both columns, for a long minute.

"And the extra six stops?" she asks, because she is the coordinator, and the waiting list is hers to carry too.

"Split the route," Raya says. "Twelve and six. I'll take twelve with the protected visits built in - that's an hour and a half, it fits. The six go to a second volunteer, quick drops, half an hour. Everyone gets supper, nobody's week is empty because my chart needed to be beautiful."

"That's two volunteers for what you did alone."

"That's what it always cost," Raya says. "I was just not paying it."

The coordinator looks at her for another long minute, and then she does the thing Raya did not dare to hope for: she takes out her pencil, not to fix the plan, but to write a name against the six. "Feiga asked me last week if the route ever needs help."

Chapter 6: The First New Tuesday

The first new Tuesday, Raya does the twelve stops with the two-column chart folded in her pocket.

The eight quick drops take forty minutes - parcel, knock, a called hello, gone, and no guilt, because those houses are loud with grandchildren and the parcel is genuinely all they need from her.

The four protected stops take what they take. Golda is last, because the third floor is last, and Raya rings the doorbell and waits the long wait, and when Golda opens the door, slow with the frame, Raya hands her the parcel and says, "I have ten minutes. What's the book this week?"

Golda looks at her for a moment. Then she steps back from the door, which is the only invitation that matters, and says, "The book can wait. Sit."

They drink tea. Golda shows her the book from last week, finished and squared on the table - because books are what finish when Tuesdays are the only thing on the calendar. "You're the one who leaves them," Golda says, as if Raya has just been promoted from a weather event to a person.

It is eleven minutes. Raya's chart says eleven, in the right-hand column, and the route still ends by five-thirty.

Chapter 7: Feiga's Route

Feiga takes the six quick drops, and for two weeks it works the way the pencil said it would.

Then Feiga does what Raya did - she is sixteen too, and fast, and the chart is right there - and one Tuesday she mentions, proud, that she did all six in twenty minutes, "and I could probably take four more off your list if you want."

Raya hears herself say, "Walk me through the stops," and then she does the thing the coordinator did for her: she does not scold. She asks questions. Who's at the corner house during the day? Who has nobody until six? When did you last see any of their faces?

Feiga goes quiet, and then she says, "Oh," in a voice Raya recognizes from the stairs of the third floor, from her own mouth, and Raya thinks: good. Now she can learn it the cheap way, from my column, instead of the expensive way, from somebody's Tuesday.

It takes one walk of the route together, the next Tuesday, to sort the six. Feiga asks the questions herself by the third stop - who is here during the day, who opens fast, who has the loud house - and Raya answers the ones she knows and says "find out" to the rest.

They split Feiga's six the same way: four quick, two protected, under an hour.

Chapter 8: The Second Column

At the start of Teves, the coordinator asks Raya to write up the route for the next volunteer, because the route keeps growing, and volunteers keep being sixteen.

Raya writes it on one page. The route order. The stairs with no railing. Which doors are slow. And at the top, before any of that, the chart with the two columns, and one sentence:

Stops are what you count. Visits are what you deliver.

She makes two copies - one for the coordinator's folder, one for Feiga, who has started saying "stops and visits" like it is one word - and she keeps the original in her notebook, next to the old beautiful chart, the one that measured the wrong thing.

She does not throw the old one out. It is the map of how she learned.

Tuesday, she climbs the third-floor stairs with Golda's parcel, and rings the bell, and waits.

Eight activities

Activity 1: The two lines

Describe what Raya's two columns do across the six knock-drop weeks. Where do they split, and what does the gap show? Why is adding a column better than burning the chart?

Activity 2: "Oh. It's here."

Golda's three words change the whole route. What do they reveal that no number on the chart could? Why does Raya's inability to picture Golda's face matter more than any schedule fact?

Activity 3: The hard part

Raya rejects "the easy version" - going back to twelve stops. What would that have cost, and to whom? What does her actual plan protect that the easy version would have thrown away?

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

A route has 12 stops. Driving and carrying take 50 minutes; each stay-a-minute visit takes 8 minutes. (a) How long is the full-visit route? (b) A knock-drop route saves all the visit time - how long is it? (c) At the knock-drop pace, how many stops fit in 100 minutes, and what does that calculation leave out? Show your steps.

Activity 5: "I was just not paying it"

The coordinator notes the plan needs two volunteers for what Raya did alone. Raya answers, "That's what it always cost. I was just not paying it." Who was paying it during the knock-drop weeks, and in what currency?

Activity 6: Draw the chart

Draw Raya's chart with the two columns, STOPS and VISITS, across the nine weeks - the climbing line, the falling line, the split. Only what can be seen. Caption it with one line from the story.

Activity 7: Perri's tutoring log - a fictional case

A teen named Perri tutors two younger boys in reading and keeps a beautiful log of pages finished per session. She realizes she has stopped asking the boys what they thought of the stories - and that page counts are climbing while both boys have gone quiet. Write the column she adds, the sentence she writes at the bottom of the log, and one change she makes to the next session. One sentence each, with names.

Activity 8: Word grid

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

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

The eight words: PARCEL, ROUTE, VISITS, DOORBELL, TUESDAY, CHART, WINDOW, STAIRS.
Which word names what the left column counts better and better, and which word names what the right column finally measures?