

The Total She Calls Neutral



Nussbaum Mind

Illustration coming soon

Ages 12-15



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Chapter 1: Two invitations

The library writing afternoon and Bubby's embroidery afternoon occupy the same hours on Sunday.

Rochel has permission for either. Mama has checked the arrangements with the adults. Rochel must choose by Thursday so they know whom to expect.

At the library, Mrs. Klein will help a small girls' group write short descriptions of familiar places. At Bubby's, Rochel can work on the cloth border they have started together.

She wants the writing lesson. She also wants the long conversation that grows around Bubby's sewing basket.

"I'll compare them properly," she tells Mama.

She draws two columns. A list should be useful. This one becomes something more ambitious.

Chapter 2: A point for every good thing

Rochel gives the library a point for a shorter journey, a point for a new writing exercise and a point for meeting the girls.

She gives Bubby's afternoon a point for the border and a point for time together.

Three beats two.

She underlines the library total.



"The library wins," she tells her sister. "I didn't choose it because I like it. The numbers decided."

Her sister looks at the paper.

"Who put in the points?"

"I used good things about each one."

That seems a fair answer. Rochel hasn't given herself a secret extra ten points. She hasn't made Bubby's journey longer than it is. The addition is correct.

Chapter 3: The split journey

Later, Rochel notices she could have written the library's shorter journey as two separate benefits: less travelling and more time at home afterward.

That would make four points.

She could also split time with Bubby into talking, learning her stitch and hearing a family story. Bubby's total would rise too.

The hours haven't changed. The invitations haven't changed. A pencil could change the winner simply by breaking a sentence apart.

Rochel crosses out the extra lines before adding any points.

She doesn't want to invent a score that produces her favorite answer. She wants an answer that cannot be her fault if she later misses the other afternoon.

A larger number looks wonderfully able to carry that burden.



Chapter 4: What the columns leave out

Mama comes to clear space for supper. Her blue tichel covers her hair fully. Rochel moves the comparison sheet away from the plates.

"The totals are right," she says. "But I could make different totals."

Mama reads the headings.

"A shorter journey is a fact about these arrangements. How much it matters to you is another question."

"I gave everything one point so it would be neutral."

"Does that mean every item matters equally to you?"

Rochel looks at the point for meeting the girls. She sees classmates every day. She enjoys them, but that point doesn't mean the same to her as an uninterrupted afternoon with Bubby.

Her equal marks have hidden unequal wishes.

Chapter 5: A useful sheet again

They check the parts that cannot be decided by preference. Both afternoons remain permitted. The adult arrangements are settled. There is no way to attend both fully, and Rochel cannot move either host's plan.

Those facts stay at the top of her sheet.

Below them, she writes what attracts her to each choice without awarding a winner.



The writing exercise interests her because she has never tried describing one place in several different ways. The embroidery interests her less today, but the conversation with Bubby matters greatly.

Mama doesn't choose for her.

"The sheet can help you see what you're choosing between," she says. "It can't make missing the other one disappear."

Rochel leaves the columns open during supper. She doesn't need another calculation while eating.

Chapter 6: The answer she owns

After supper, Rochel chooses the library.

She wants the new lesson enough to miss this afternoon at Bubby's. That is her reason. It isn't a proof that writing is better than family time.

She asks Mama to give the answer through the arrangements they have already made. Then she speaks to Bubby during their usual conversation.

"I'm going to the library this Sunday. I'd like to finish the border with you another time, if you have an afternoon free."

Bubby is pleased about the lesson and sorry they won't sit together this week. She doesn't offer a replacement date immediately.

Rochel feels the missing afternoon become real.

She doesn't tell Bubby that a total forced her to go.



Chapter 7: A good hour with something absent

At the library, Rochel writes about the narrow cupboard beside their front door. Her first paragraph mostly lists coats. Mrs. Klein asks what a visitor would notice when opening it.

Rochel adds the crooked hook and the umbrella that leans across everybody else's things.

The exercise is interesting. One part is difficult. Neither fact settles whether the other afternoon would have been enjoyable too.

On the way home, she wonders what Bubby is sewing. She can miss that conversation without reopening the decision as a failed sum.

At home, the comparison sheet still has two columns. She keeps it for another choice, but crosses out the word NEUTRAL above the total.

Next time, she can use numbers where they measure something real. Her wishes will still need words, and her answer will still belong to her.